

Bob Kaufman  
1925-1986

Bob Kaufman was born in New Orleans in 1925 to a German Jewish father and a black Catholic mother. He was one of thirteen children. As a child, Kaufman took part in both Catholic and Jewish religious services; he was also exposed to the voodoo beliefs of his maternal grandmother (Poets.org). As a young man, he joined the U.S. Merchant Marines.

Kaufman was a jazz-inspired street poet who adhered to an oral tradition—he proclaimed his poetry in coffee houses and on the streets, seldom writing his poems down (“Bob Kaufman”). Much of his published work survives by way of his wife Eileen, who wrote his poems down as he conceived them (Knight). He was a Beat poet, and founder of the journal *Beatitude*, with Allen Ginsberg and others. According to the writer Raymond Foye, Kaufman is the person who coined the term “beatnik,” which, according Merriam-Webster, is a person who participated in a social movement of the 1950s and early 1960s which stressed artistic self-expression and the rejection of the mores of conventional society. His life was filled with a great deal of suffering: in San Francisco, he was the target of beatings and harassment by the city police, and his years living in New York were filled with poverty, addiction and imprisonment (Foye).

His poetry made use of jazz syncopation and meter. The critic Raymond Foye wrote about him, “Adapting the harmonic complexities and spontaneous invention of bebop to poetic euphony, [pleasing to the ear, especially through a harmonious combination of words and meter] he became the quintessential jazz poet” (Foye). Poet Jack Micheline said about Kaufman, “I found his work to be essentially improvisational, and was at its best when accompanied by a jazz musician” (Winans). Kaufman said of his own work, “My head is a bony guitar, strung with tongues, plucked by fingers & nails” (Kaufman).

During an eventful, sometimes troubled life, Kaufman ran afoul of the law, was imprisoned, underwent electroshock therapy, and suffered from drug addiction. He was included in the movie *The Flower Thief* (1960) about the San Francisco Beat movement. When John F Kennedy was assassinated, Kaufman took a personal vow of silence and did not speak until the end of the Vietnam War (“Bob Kaufman”).

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"Believe, Believe"

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<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/55715>