

John Giorno Wants Your Body

by Justin Desmangles

Great Demon Kings: A Memoir of Poetry, Sex, Art, Death, and Enlightenment

By John Giorno

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Some people make their own luck. In the right place and at the right time because they are on their own clock. “Now Is the Time.” John Giorno was just such a person. Anointed by the sweat of Dylan Thomas, to hear him tell it in his newly published posthumous memoir *Great Demon Kings*, he followed a path to the ancients. The lyric poet as someone scooping out their insides and telling you how sensitive they are had mercifully been killed-off by Modernism. And it’s a good thing too, because otherwise a book of this kind, containing this kind of history would never have been written. The American running-style of literature — a style rooted in Blues, Ragtime and stride piano — conveys images of everything seemingly happening at once. Stories turn topsy-turvy in rapid succession and collide. Anecdotes cascade one into the other, tales interweave and spool like a movie projectionist slipping in an extra reel without explanation. The rhythmic tension in this style is taut yet supple, bending and snapping-back, never breaking. As James Brown would say, “Moving, grooving, doing it, you know, like a sex machine.” The left hand of James P. Johnson. It’s in Dos Passos *U.S.A.* and other Lost Generation writers influenced by the new thing in poetry. “Make it new” meant imitate the musical phrase and the new music was Jazz. West African polyrhythms on a Celtic tongue in Tennessee. Gatsby is a syncopated piano overheard where someone got killed. Satchmo’s grace notes falling like stars — flashing, flaring before a midnight sun.

Giorno adopts this running-style all throughout the pages of this book. He acquired it by way of the Beat Generation. They who had grafted it from Jack Kerouac’s masters Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Charlie Parker. Moving from one thing to another with no respite, no let up, not taking a breath. Running you out

to get to know your breathing and just how many breaths you take. Leaving you duly exhausted from their intensity of purpose, “exhilarated” in Bob Kaufman’s language.

The hero of the Blues comes up against adversity and uses verbal charms and linguistic talismans to get around the trouble. Shuts his mouth wide open and wonders will a match box hold his clothes. Employing a symmetry of what seems absurd to his enemy, an unseen window opens in time and the hero of the Blues slips away. *Giorno* makes his a continuous get away, careening through and laying down with a cultural Olympus of American art demi-gods and yes, demons. The demonic spew a venom that is ambrosia to his muse and he drinks it down with gusto. He in turn becomes lover and muse to the demons themselves. Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and the king of Hell himself William S. Burroughs.

Had *Giorno* never written a poem, published a book, or recorded an album, he would still be enshrined in the primers of artist’s history. He was Warhol’s first superstar, appearing in the movie *Sleep*. Warhol’s early films marked a dramatic, some would say traumatic break. Not only in the direction his own work would take, but the whole of cinema internationally. Opportunities to see this film today presented *as a film* are scant. Even the ethereal hustle of the internet has a tough time with this one. Six hours of a man sleeping. Step back MFA grads, the check is in the mail. But in the hey-day of New York’s cinema avatar Jonas Mekas and his Filmmakers' Cinematheque, this movie could be shown almost any night of the week. Right alongside Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*, Ron Rice’s *The Flower Thief*, John Cassavetes’s *Shadows*, or classics such as Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Warhol knew what was popping and he had an eye for talent. When he turned on the camera from the first, it was John *Giorno* he was focused on.

Warhol liked to stare, he liked to watch, to evaporate and observe without presence. A kind of forensic detective. What he discovered he harvested to a precise vision, images of America’s true religion. Money bleeding through. It was a vampirism that *Giorno* found toothsome, a quality later tasted in his relationship with Burroughs. If these guys needed their tanks filled-up, *Giorno* had the gas. If they needed their engine tuned, he supplied the tool. Warhol’s mother

had religion and the religious iconography he grew up around sharpened the wit of his eye. That which a culture worships, that which a culture adores, image counterpoints of sin and salvation. Even more money, even more blood.

The writing about Warhol in this book is tender, playful, romantic and above all revealing in its candor. Giorno was not afraid to learn from his mistakes and he made lots of them. Yearning for wisdom, Giorno made new ones, always learning. Always moving forward. The time spent with Warhol is some of the most touching and humorous in the book, the two young lovers teaching each other how to live. Buoyant like a game of tag, a lot of names float through and quick. There is no effacing it's a game, this art world business, where people come as equipped with roles to play. The size of these personalities is so big that even the background players are all-stars nowadays. Asked in an early local television interview at the Leo Castelli gallery how he responded to his detractors, Warhol answered "They're right." It takes an awfully bright person to create the illusion that they are dim. A lot of people thought Warhol was running on about two watts. He was in fact running on incredible amounts of speed, as were a great many people that surrounded him. Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana burn, flow, waft, pour and otherwise guide the reader through much of this book. Later mushrooms and LSD. In this mix it is how things get done. The original party people from way back, here to funk your head up. And it certainly took its toll with early deaths and suicides. There is much meditation on death and its meaning throughout this book. It is here that Giorno's breath gets hot and he starts getting into his own thing. Purely his own current. That same electric pulse you feel in his best performances. He's got an ear on the lost chord in these moments and the writing is his.

Hagiographers of Warhol will want to pay careful attention to the sensitive portrait drawn of his mother. Giorno's acknowledgement of their unique ethnic heritage and its language is rendered with insights into their private world. She lived in the back you see, with her son taking up the front of the house. These were the days before the life of fortune and fame and flashy names. Warhol always brought home the bacon. It was partially his work ethic that allowed him to burn through people as he did. They were lazy as far as he could see. That drive is on display seeing him cast aside onlookers out his path to greet Marcel Duchamp arriving at *Americans 1963*, a breakthrough exhibit at the Museum of

Modern Art, Giorno literally hanging by his sleeve. Out one night at a poetry reading, Warhol quietly asked “Why are they so boring?” The poets were Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, the question echoed in Giorno’s mind. Why were they so boring? It was a question that he was driven to answer for the rest of his life in fresh, sometimes astounding ways. Giorno writes “It was clear that poetry was seventy-five years behind painting, sculpture, music, and dance. The golden age of poetry was just about to begin.” And begin it did.

Years later Giorno would say “When a poet is performing in front of an audience, he's talking to the audience, and every single word has to grab them. And most often, poets completely do not understand that. They have this great, wonderful, magnificent work, and they read it in front of an audience, and it's like showing radio over television or something.”

Giorno Poetry Systems was soon founded as a non-profit cultural organization and later became one of the most innovative record labels in America. The Black Arts movement had created Jihad Records, an attempt to amplify the role poetry could play in civic life, bringing about constructive change. The legendary Caedmon Records, inspired by Dylan Thomas’s tour of the United States, sought to deepen listeners aesthetic sensibilities. Giorno Poetry Systems found a way to braid together these two directions, these two impulses simultaneously. The record label would produce, record, and distribute albums featuring Miguel Algarín, Glenn Branca, Jayne Cortez, Jessica Hagedorn, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Lydia Lunch, Psychic TV, and many others who would otherwise not have been available to audiences off-of-the-page. Albums were given titles such as *Better an Old Demon Than a New God*, and *A Diamond Hidden in the Mouth of a Corpse*. Giorno himself was both activist-organizer and poet-performer, willing to go to extremes on stage and off to get his message across. And not be boring.

As things wound-down with Warhol, and after an Tangierian interlude with Brion Gysin, a new romance, this time with Robert Rauschenberg, bloomed in the incestuous gardens of his art circle. Rauschenberg, unlike Warhol, was not *out* in the sense of how we might think of that today. There was a front of being straight, so to speak, and the parameters of the social life the two would lead were much different. Rauschenberg further cultivated Giorno’s involvement in theatrical performance, experimental theater, dance, Happenings, and hybrid’s of

poetry and music. He introduced him to Bob Moog whose then new invention, the synthesizer, became a part of Giorno's growing arsenal. Rauschenberg also created original art for the cover of Giorno's first book, *Poems*.

The cross-pollination of disciplines in the arts in New York during the sixties produced an incandescent atmosphere. As the Jazz capitol of the world, the city was already steeped in exploring the theatrical possibilities of dance movement with poetry and improvised sound for at least three generations. Now with poets and writers getting into the act, holding their own festivals, building their own off-off-Broadway theaters, things were getting heated where before they had been left for dead cold. The inferno generated by all this activity became so caustic that wave after wave began to flee and by the next decade much of this activity had migrated to either the San Francisco Bay Area or Europe. Giorno remained very much a New Yorker and expanded his experimentation to one of the most successful conceptual pieces combining poetry and new technology. *Dial-a-Poem!* A massive phone bank of pre-recorded works by a veritable who's-who of the American avant-garde. Callers who dialed in would be treated to a recording of an original work, calling back as much as they liked. The project became so popular that the machinery broke down more than once. The basic idea made its way into general consciousness so fast that soon there was a dial-a-just-about-everything-you-can-think-of industry. Horoscopes, advice to lovelorn, legal help, amateur pornography, but unlike Giorno's art installation, all charged a fee.

Those wishing to make a quick study of just what sort of high-weirdness and serious fun Giorno was having in creating these experiments with sound poetry, music, and performance are hereby directed to "Everyone Is a Complete Disappointment" from the album *John Giorno & Anne Waldman*, released in 1977. It's the kind of gleeful, mischievous nihilism that disguises a much more willful desire to create one's own meanings for existence. The occasionally sardonic barbs are really just pushing the buttons on the joy-spring. If you can get with this, great; and if you can't, so what, it seems to say with a sly grin. Daring you to talk back.

Giorno doesn't pull any punches in this book and he lands more than a few that will put some readers on the floor. The first T.K.O. is bound to be sex. Graphic sex and lots of it. Not everyone will care to see their art heroes depicted burbling a

mouth full of sperm, but the sperm being his, Giorno wants you to know. The dimensions of a canonical novelist's penis or the favored anal penetration of one of the world's greatest painters is not for everyone, to be sure. But let it be known at the outset that none of these passages are rendered with vulgarity, but rather as any other creative act in Giorno's quest. In fact, rather than a sheerly pornographic language, the sex is given empathy and it is the trust between the men having it that comes through more than any other element. Including, remarkably enough, an orgy in a subway bathroom at Prince street station with the young Keith Haring. He also lands a few jabs and an upper-cut to Allen Ginsberg, reprinting portions of a then controversial interview from the magazine *Gay Sunshine*, 1974, criticizing Ginsberg's public relations politics, manipulations and tactics. "Allen uses mantra to support ego." This coincided with Ginsberg winning the National Book Award for *The Fall of America*, an honor he shared that year with Adrienne Rich's masterpiece *Diving into the Wreck*. Giorno's relationship with Ginsberg remained a fertile one throughout their lifetime, though he felt unjustly excluded from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, now part of Naropa University, a school founded by Ginsberg along with poet Anne Waldman also in 1974.

But it is Giorno's lifelong and nurturing relationship with his close friend, the writer William S. Burroughs that really distinguishes this book. The least commercially popular of the Beat triumvirate completed by Ginsberg and Kerouac, likely because in the last analysis his message is so anti-White. Burroughs's routine evisceration of all things holy to the so-called White American doesn't end with a blunt dismissal of bourgeois consumer values or the military-industrial complex or his revulsion towards Christianity. Not by any means. The whole European-American Western civilization is regarded as a rancid, decaying putrid corpse to be torched and soon before it spreads anymore of its pestilence. To do that Burroughs cuts-up and cuts into just about every existing genre of American fiction, high and low, turning them out anew in the running-style adopted by the early Modernists from their affinity with Jazz and Blues. His most widely read book *Naked Lunch*, oscillates from the sounds of "metallic cocaine bebop" to Ellington's early composition "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo" and back again. The ultimate concerns are with the life of the mind and changing it to resemble a utopian ideal, one populated by gay, often drug addicted, pirates, cowboys,

private detectives and doctors on the make. But that is another matter. As far as Burroughs was concerned, literature as ritual magic and self-defense was the only answer to fighting back this morally debauched, sickly society of barking advertising men, pimps, pushers, and private-eyes up to no good. Giorno agreed whole heartedly. He may have found a different means in performance poetry and new technologies for casting off the yoke that intended to strangle them, true, but their critical perspective shared mostly common ground.

There are few people who had as positive and life-sustaining an effect on Burroughs as Giorno did. They were sexual intimates, yes, but much closer friends. The tenderness that emerges from a deep and abiding respect between human beings who trust one another with their lives is a strength beyond words. Nevertheless, Giorno finds those words when talking about his years living alongside side each other in the Bowery, where Burroughs rented his famous Bunker in the same building as Giorno's apartment, traveling the world performing and recording albums together, or just visiting the ageing writer at his final home in Lawrence, Kansas.

Like Burroughs, Giorno was a descendant of America's upper-middle class, and both were stabilized financially well into their adult lives by the considerable wealth of their parents. Otherwise lethal situations were neatly avoided with a monthly allowance, keeping them off the streets unless they really wanted to be there. Often, it was Burroughs who really did want to be there. Giorno is upfront about his access to wealth throughout this book. No shame in his game. Whatever material similarities they may have shared in their upbringing, their connection to each other was essentially spiritual. In fact, fundamentally so. Burroughs performance persona, beloved by international audiences throughout the last decades of his life, was as much Giorno's cultivation as it was his own. Appearing as a duo on countless bills around the world and in the United States, Giorno helped Burroughs craft a stage presence that in time became distinctly his own. In the end that was what paid the bills and the constant touring took a toll.

The picture of Burroughs that emerges is one that both harmonizes and contradicts the literary mask the world saw on stage and heard on record. His boyish delights in handling the heavy metal phallus of weapons is certainly familiar. The soft, yearning desire for shared love, a need that is finally fulfilled by

his gentle relationships with an extended family of cats and kittens, is less well known. The last words the revolutionary novelist would write in his journal stated any resolution to the violent conflict of his life was found in the experience of mutual love and affection with his cats and kittens. "Like I felt for Fletch and Ruski, Spooner and Calico. Pure love. What I feel for my cats, present and past. Love? What is it? Most natural painkiller there is. LOVE."

The chapters surrounding Burroughs death are the most harrowing in the book. Graciously, Giorno's intuitive response to the situation is miraculously balanced throughout. After the reader had earlier been treated to the arc and panorama of Giorno's religious devotions in Tibet and India, the wisdom gained there now reaches its full flower. There is considerable ugliness, especially with one or two of Burroughs hangers-on, but Giorno navigates the necessary and the needful with skill. Applying mystic beliefs and practices acquired through his own Buddhist discipline, Giorno guides the now dead Burroughs at the inception of the deceased's journey into *The Western Lands*. Though much of this will certainly be regarded as occult by some readers, I see no reason to doubt the veracity of what Giorno says in regards to these events (or any others in the book for that matter). It is the kind of denouement that suggests all roads were leading here, every moment however infinitesimal, was leading us here. A climax gathering of all themes, all motifs, great and small.

Any serious student of American art and literature in the late 20th century will want to read this book. If you don't you got a hole in your bucket.