

## Big Sur

*“The more ups and downs, the more joy I feel. The greater the fear, the greater the happiness I feel.”*

— Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur*

Sundance veteran Michael Polish (Twin Falls Idaho, Jackpot, Northfork) returns to Sundance this year with a film that explores a couple of quite legendary landscapes, one exterior and one interior.

“*Big Sur*,” the film in question, follows legendary “beat” icon Jack Kerouac as he attempts to relocate his muse on the Big Sur coastline of California during a three-week period in the late summer of 1960. Life could be and had been a lot better for Jack. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and his inability to adequately process the fame that came with the publication in 1957 of his then seminal and genre-busting novel “*On the Road*” had sent him on a downward spiral.

Another novel, “*Big Sur*,” would emerge from this timeframe and it is from that work that filmmaker Polish would adapt his screenplay. Although in the novel, the real life characters Neal Cassady, Billie Dabney, Carolyn Cassady, Phillip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Lew Welch, and Kerouac himself would all be given pseudonyms, in the film their actual names survive.

With Ferlinghetti, poet and owner of the renowned City Lights Bookstore in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco, offering Kerouac use of his backwoods cabin up the Bixby Creek drainage on the Big Sur coast, it was thought that maybe Jack could get his act back together and be able to write in his celebrated passionate bop-prosody style once again.

Finding serenity and recognizing the stunning beauty where this deeply forested and mountainous coastline meets the sea initially comes easily for the troubled writer but whatever revelations he experiences are quite transitory and are no match for his horde of inner demons. Redemption, as most always was the case in his lifelong search for “*Satori*,” a Japanese Buddhist term for “awakening,” eludes him once again.

So he gives the coast the slip and ends up back in San Francisco and North Beach where he hooks up with his longtime brother-in-arms Neal Cassady and, as the plot thickens, Cassady’s mistress Billie. Neal, the “holy goof” and muse to the beat generation as a whole and Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac in particular, has long found abstinence in any form to be quite distasteful. And, there, you see, is the rub.

Soon Jack is back on the wining and dining and general debauchery circuit. A graduate *summa cum laude* from the sex, drugs, and jazz music school of his times, Kerouac reverts to a similar downward spiral not unlike the one that tormented him prior to coming west from New York. How these monastic and highly immoderate dichotomies wage war is fascinating.

The principal cast has Jean-Marc Barr as Kerouac, Josh Lucas as Neal Cassady, Kate Bosworth as Billie, Radha Mitchell as Carolyn Cassady, and Anthony Edwards as Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The poets of the San Francisco Renaissance are portrayed by Balthazar Getty as Michael McClure, Patrick Fischler as Lew Welch, and Henry Thomas as Phillip Whalen.

Filmed for the most part around Monterey County, California, including Big Sur, where many of the events in the novel take place, there's little doubt that filmmaker Michael Polish had plenty of opportunity to work his magic. Spending so much time dealing with madness, however, had to have some effect on the person closest to Kerouac's inner turmoil.

I guess maybe it takes one madman to know another. Or as Kerouac said in *On the Road*, "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars."