

 Simon Fraser University Special Collections
and Rare Books

Finding Aid - Jack Spicer fonds (MsA 20)

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Jack Spicer fonds

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Summary information

Repository:	Simon Fraser University Special Collections and Rare Books
Title:	Jack Spicer fonds
ID:	MsA 20
Date:	[195?-1965?] (date of creation)
Physical description:	3 cm of textual records
Dates of creation, revision and deletion:	

Administrative history / Biographical sketch

Note

Jack Spicer (January 30, 1925 - August 17, 1965) was an American poet often identified with the San Francisco [Poetry] Renaissance. Spicer was born in Rhode Island and moved to Los Angeles at the age of 10 where he later attended the University of Redlands. He spent most of his writing life in San Francisco and spent the years 1945 to 1955 at the University of California, Berkeley, where he began writing, doing work as a research linguist, and publishing some poetry (though he disdained publishing). During this time he searched out fellow poets, but it was through his alliance with Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and Landis Everson that Spicer forged a new kind of poetry, and together they referred to their common work as the Berkeley Renaissance. The four, who were all gay, also educated younger poets in their circle about their "queer genealogy", Rimbaud, Lorca, and other gay writers. In 1954, Spicer co-founded the Six Gallery, the scene of the famous October 1955 reading that launched the West Coast Beat movement. In 1955, Spicer moved to New York and then to Boston, where he worked for a time in the Rare Book Room of Boston Public Library. He returned to San Francisco in 1956 and in 1957, Spicer ran a workshop called Poetry as Magic at San Francisco State College, which was attended by Duncan, Helen Adam, Joe Dunn, Jack Gilbert, and George Stanley. Spicer's view of the role of language in the process of writing poetry was probably the result of his knowledge of modern pre-Chomskian linguistics and his experience as a research linguist at Berkeley. In his legendary Vancouver lectures he elucidated his ideas on "transmissions" (dictations) from the outside, using the comparison of the poet as crystal set or radio receiving transmissions from outer space, or Martian transmissions. Although seemingly far-fetched, his view of language as "furniture", through which the transmissions negotiate their way, is grounded in the structuralist linguistics of Zellig Harris and Charles Hockett. (In fact, the poems of his final book, *Language*, refer to linguistic concepts such as morphemes and graphemes.) As such, Spicer is acknowledged as a precursor and early inspiration for the *Language*

poets. However, many working poets today list Spicer in their succession of precedent figures. Spicer died as a result of his alcoholism and his reputed last words to Robin Blaser were "My vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on." Since the posthumous publication of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (first published in 1975), his popularity and influence has steadily risen, affecting poetry throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. A collected works entitled *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, editors) was published by Wesleyan University Press in 2008.

Scope and content

The fonds consists of holograph manuscripts of poems collected in "Imaginary Elegies", "Language", and "The Book of Magazine Verse".

Notes

Title notes

Finding aids

Printed inventory available.

Other notes

- Publication status: published
 - Level of detail: Full
 - Status description: Published
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Access points

- Spicer, Jack (subject)
 - Textual record (documentary form)
 - Arts and culture (subject)
-

Series descriptions
