ew people would guess that driving across the country in a 35-foot Airstream motorhome—with a Beat Generation museum trailer in tow—was the result of an almost otherworldly vision, but many roads of Jerry Cimino's life have turned off the beaten track. Cimino, the owner of the Beat Museum in Monterey, California, has been touring much of the eastern coast of the US for several months this past fall, bringing to life the stories and history of the Beat Generation figures with presentations that combine historical artifacts with performance art.

Cimino was driving down to Maryland three years ago after a Beat conference in Lowell, Massachusetts when his vision unfolded: “I see this big white coach, like a private charter bus, and I’m in a bit of a trance following this big bus, and it flashed through my mind: I saw written on the back of this bus ‘On the Road with the Beat Museum.’ So I thought, yes, I could take the Beat Museum on the road, travel the country and tour with it.”

As with many ideas, there was a catalyst—a conversation Cimino had later on with a museum patron, who suggested that if Cimino really wanted to go on the road, the only way to do it was in an Airstream, and he told him to buy a used one and recondition it.

As Cimino puts it, “Yeah, that’s what I needed, an RV project. I’ve never owned one in my life and here I’m gonna buy one and rebuild it. But on a lark, after he left I keyed in Airstream RV for sale on Google and I’ll be damned if one didn’t pop up on Los Gatos that was not only exactly what I was looking for, but that had just been completely reconditioned with a brand new engine.”

The coach in question was a 1987 model 346, with a Chevy 454 gas engine. The owner was a retiree who’d owned it for 16 years, and though he’d received some stronger offers than Cimino’s, he sold it to him after hearing of why Cimino wanted the motorhome. “I was talking to him about it and I told him I wanted to buy the Airstream in order to spread the spirit of the Beats around the country. Now, he’d

Parked at a stop at Casino 66 in Albuquerque, NM. The Beatmobile travels the old Route 66 (now I-40) on a regular basis.
never even heard of the Beats, but he loved the idea that I wanted to use the Airstream to spread the spirit of something. I got a terrific deal on a beautiful machine because he liked what I was doing with it."

For those rusty with their Beat Generation history, the Beats were a group of writers, poets, artists, musicians and explorers of bohemian lifestyles new to the 1950s. Prominent among them were East Coasters Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, later collaborating with West Coasters like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder and Kenneth Rexroth. That mix was strongly stirred by Neal Cassady, a figure mythologized in Kerouac's "On the Road," and by most accounts, a man who measured up to his legend. Cassady's son, John Allen Cassady, is Cimino's partner in piloting the Airstream on their tour, and a raconteur who only had to sit in his living room to soak up living Beat history.

"John is named after Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg and his dad, Neal. He's got the inside scoop on Kerouac and the Beats and the 60s. He knew everybody from Jerry Garcia to Ken Kesey, the other Pranksters and Dead members and everybody who was in that scene. It's kind of a cross-generational bridge, and we enjoy enlightening America's youth on the subject," says Cimino.

Their show is a mini-Chautauqua, akin to that 19th-century traveling lecture, music and entertainment circuit. They travel to colleges, high schools, art festivals and other events, where they offer a living complement to Beat historical figures. "Our biggest crowds are at colleges," says Cimino. "Some of the colleges actually offer semester-long courses on the Beats. The English professors have a full class revolving around these writers, and we pull up and it's like school's out—like the circus came to town. The professors love it because in essence we are bringing alive something they are teaching. Everyone wants to hear the stories, they want to see the photos, and the Beats come alive for them, because we do a live performance with readings and musical accompaniment. We get hun-
The Beat Goes On

The trailer serves as both a Museum and Bookstore on wheels.

dreds of kids in the audience."

It's been a tangled time for Cimino, going from more than 25 years of corporate work at IBM and American Express to traveling the country with Neal Cassady's son regaling college students, but Cimino's interest in Kerouac dates back to his 20s. That interest was given further focus when he and his wife opened a coffeehouse bookstore in Monterey more than 15 years ago. Hoping to bring in customers, and knowing his penchant for things Beat, she suggested hosting a Beat event, and the 150 people in attendance far exceeded their expectations. Beat book signings and other events followed, and they put together a catalog of books and videotapes for sale on Beat topics.

All these rivers began to merge: "Then I registered Kerouac.com in 1995 and things took off from there. I always did the Beat stuff part-time, but I left the corporate world three years ago to really do something of my own. Kerouac.com was taking off and there was a growing interest in the various Beat worlds. I thought I could find a way to support and enhance my interest so I created what I called the Beat Museum at a space in downtown Monterey and it took off," Cimino says.

Cimino bears witness to a collective sense of posterity the museum brings out in its patrons. "The very first day I opened the museum a guy walked in and gave me a record album that was worth at least $300. A Fantasy label, red-vinyl record, a first pressing, of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth, from the mid- to late-50s. I looked at it and said 'This thing's worth money,' but the guy said 'It's not about the money. I know you'll do something good with it. Other people will get enjoyment out of it and it's in a good place.' Somebody sends me something every week that they entrust to us."

The rolling version of the museum isn't housed in the Airstream itself, but in a trailer towed behind. Since the 345 was already restored, Cimino didn't want to alter it further to house the museum. He and Cassady sleep and cook in the Airstream many of the nights the tour is on the road. He's found the motorhome to sometimes be as much a source of excitement as the Beat exhibits. "It's such an attention-grabber wherever we go. People who don't recognize Kerouac recognize the Airstream, and they say 'what a beautiful machine!' I get people who come up to me and say 'Who was Kerouac and why do you have him in an Airstream?' The people who don't know Kerouac know the Airstream."

This tour, Cassady and Cimino's second, has seen over 6,000 miles a month behind the wheel of the big motorhome, a time characterized by long stretches of road punctuated by bursts of activity: "When John and I are sitting in the RV for three days straight just driving, it's monotonous and it's like 'when are we gonna get there?' But when we hit a town and we're there for three days and we do three shows, it's magnificent—it's like we're rock stars! Every 20 minutes somebody is honking at us as we're driving down the highway. Every other day, somebody literally follows us..."

I get people who come up to me and say 'Who was Kerouac and why do you have him in an Airstream?' The people who don't know Kerouac know the Airstream."
off the freeway when we stop to get gas or go to a rest area and asks us ‘Who are you guys and what are you doing?’”

Sharing the road with Neal Cassady’s son carries a road totem of its own. Neal Cassady was renowned for his prodigious exploits behind the wheel of any vehicle, big or small, a man who could have simultaneous running conversations with three different people, all the while hypothesizing about every sight on the road behind and the road ahead, making himself something to eat with one hand while driving around stalled cars in a blizzard at high speed with the other. Cimino remarks, “Neal had this wheel karma, and I don’t think John aspires to that, and I don’t think he feels he has a legacy to live up to in that regard. Now, how Neal might drive an Airstream would depend on if he owned it, or if he was taking it out for a joyride. If he didn’t care what kind of shape it came back in, he would have had a blast in it. Me as an owner, I drive it conservatively. But it’s a fine machine and it does well on the freeway. I’ve never owned an RV before, but the guy that I bought it from said that he’s driven a lot of big ones and this handles like a sports car in comparison. I often pass people on the highway—it’s not like you have to poke along at 45 miles an hour.”

Cimino actually stopped by Airstream headquarters in Ohio on
his tour, pitching that Airstream's prototype of the retro-looking aluminum motorhome due for model year 2007 should be loaned to the Beat Museum for a road trip. "I tried to convince them that they ought to give me that prototype, because I'm driving the county putting thousands of miles on my motorhome, and I could be their rolling billboard. I didn't get much traction on that. We even suggested an idea of a Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady line of RVs, but we didn't get mileage out of that either."

Cimino is mulling over what will happen to the tour, the museum and the Airstream as well. "I haven't decided what I'll do after the tour, with the Airstream or the museum. This is our second tour; we may have a third, fourth or fifth, depending on how things go. There are other possibilities for the Beat museum and the jury's out—I haven't decided what or when. It's in Monterey because that's where I live, but I consider moving it someplace more significant and I'm looking at that. And I doubt the Smithsonian is going to look for the Beat Museum on Wheels, but you never know. Even if I were to stop the tour, the Airstream is a great machine. Part of the reason I bought it is that I knew that if I ever needed or wanted to let it go, I would have no problem. It's not like you see many of these on the road."

Cimino sees some parallels in the status of Airstream and the status of the Beats, and it pleases him that he can be a part of both: "Both the Beats and Airstream are American originals," he says. "It resonates for me that the Airstream is an original—it's unique and has a cachet; they're a cut above. A lot of people know about them and love them. The Beats are similar. They are obviously American originals, they've loved and beloved by people who are aware of them. In that sense, there are many similarities that ring true to me."