

San Francisco's City Lights Celebrates 25 Years

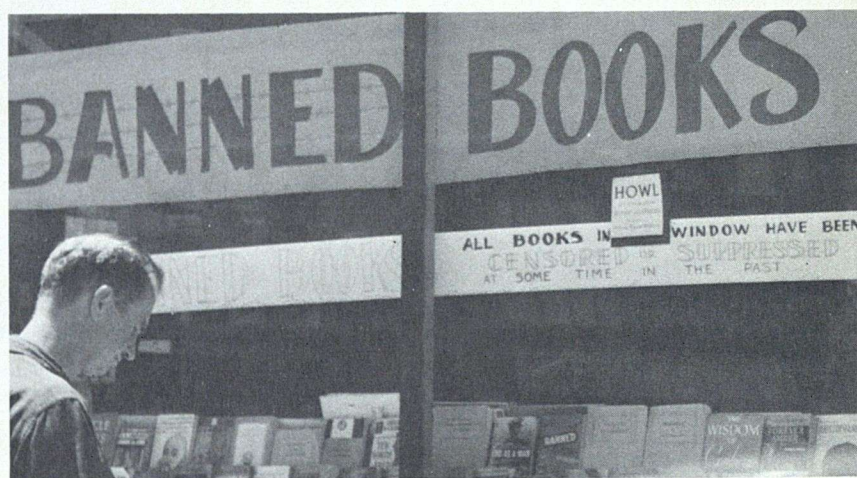
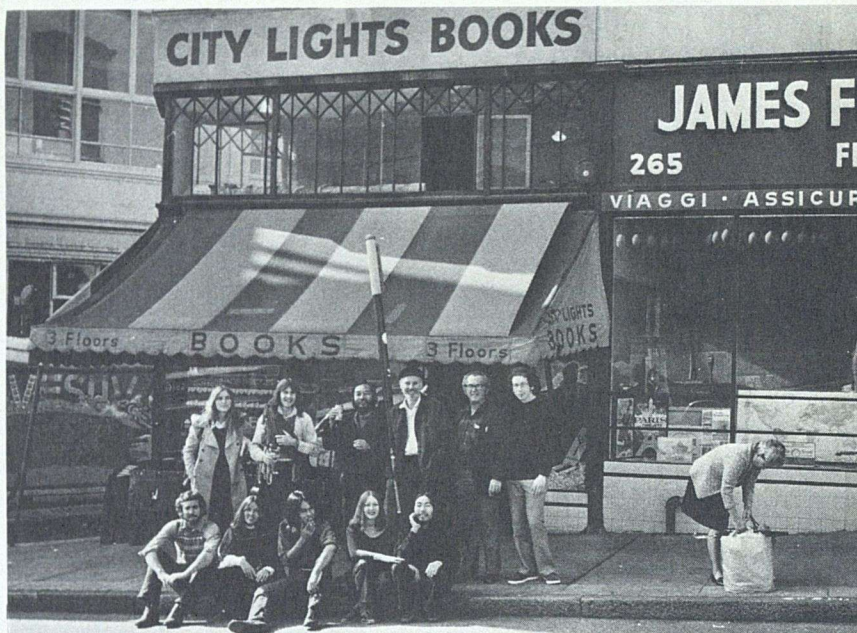
by Patricia Holt

THIS year the bookseller/publisher firm of City Lights Books of San Francisco celebrates its 25th anniversary, an occasion for many in the West to reflect upon the historical effect of this famed small press on publishing as both industry and cause célèbre.

Established in 1953 with a \$500 nest egg supplied by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City Lights was one of the first paperback bookstores to open its doors at a time when serious readers of San Francisco's North Beach scene were desperate for inexpensive classical and experimental literature. Like Cody's in Berkeley and Kepler's in Palo Alto (with which Ferlinghetti once ran joint ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle*), City Lights was regarded with some hostility by the more traditional hardcover booksellers in the area, but not by the soon-to-be-called "Beat Generation": "As soon as we got the door open we literally couldn't get it closed," Ferlinghetti told *PW* in a recent conversation.

Open until midnight seven days a week, the store quickly became a central focus for many of the poets of North Beach. "In the tradition of booksellers and unpublished poets everywhere," Ferlinghetti began publishing out of the cellar office, first his own work—"Pictures of a Gone World," which is still in print—then books by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Michael McClure, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Diane Di Prima, Neal Cassidy and, later, Charles Bukowski, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts, Huey Newton, Stefan Brecht (son of Bertold) and even love poems by Karl Marx and "Thoughts of Jerry Brown."

In those days North Beach was not the center of topless joints and nude-encounter massage parlors that it later became; it was a multidimensional collection of such places as the Jazz Workshop, Hungry i, Coexistence Bagel Shop and The Scene coffee house and bar, where a scruffy-looking bunch of poets led by "Big Daddy" Eric Nord read aloud in back rooms, warning the straight society of the '50s and



At top, the store and its staff in 1975; today, for the first time in its 25-year history, City Lights has expanded by 600 sq. ft. into an adjacent space. The bottom picture, taken in 1958, demonstrates one instance when the store used its windows to take a political stand

the House Un-American Activities Committee about the bomb, the Cold War and the Silent Generation. For them, City Lights was the end of Jack Kerouac's road, and every poet from the basements of Greenwich Village to the bistros of the Left Bank knew it. But it

was not until the mid-'50s, when police arrested Shigeyoshi (Shig) Murao, Ferlinghetti's lifelong friend and partner, for selling copies of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which they identified as obscene literature, that the world was to discover City Lights as the leader of

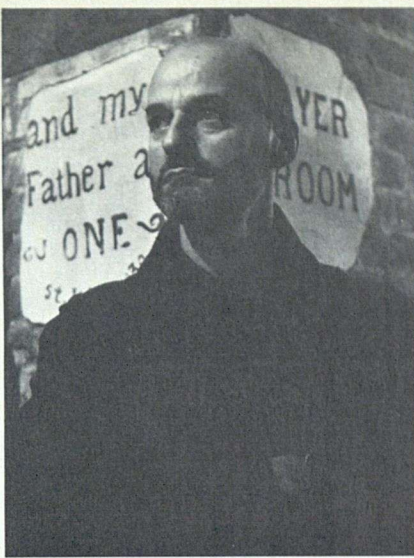
both a literary and a political movement.

Looking awfully straight themselves, Ferlinghetti and Murao accompanied San Francisco criminal lawyer Jake Ehrlich to a series of courtroom scenes in which they insisted that judgment be rendered on the basis of esthetic quality. It was there, Ferlinghetti recalls today, "that the question of 'social redeeming value' first emerged to set legal precedent that would determine the rights of many future writers and artists to claim protection under the First Amendment." Other "obscenity trials"—for Lenore Kandel's "Love Poems" in the '60s and for "Zap Comics" in the '70s—kept *City Lights* in the headlines and incidentally boosted sales of the books, with "Howl," for example, now up to half a million copies in print. At the same time, however, there were better moments—the National Book Award in Poetry, for one, awarded in 1974 to Ginsberg's "The Fall of America."

It is something of a tradition at *City Lights* for the best of the list (now 75 titles) or parts of it to be collected in a continuing journal, and this year *City Lights Journal No. 4* presents some delightful—if ironic—surprises. Recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act are FBI documents on Ferlinghetti (whom J. Edgar Hoover called a "Beatnik Rabble Rouser" and "a mental case"), Ginsberg (whose "emotional instability" and "antipathy toward good order" were also recorded) and actress Jane Fonda, about whom it was suggested a fictitious letter be sent to the press that would "cause her embarrassment and detract from her status with the general public." Ferlinghetti, as always adopting the publicity-conscious-yet-publicity-shy stance of his calling, says of such FBI attention, "Poets should always be so honored."

But new things are in the offing for *City Lights*—first, a 600 sq. ft. addition to the store which has allowed Ferlinghetti (Shig Murao left last year due to ill health) to expand all categories with particular attention to one of his greatest interests, European literature. His real dream, he says, is to stock the store entirely with paperback poetry from all over the world, a process that would probably burst *City Lights*'s seams but would be "quite a collection," he says with some understatement.

The publishing list is expanding, too, in some cases far away from poetry: "Zelda: Frontier Life in America," an original new play set for production in St. Clements Church Theater in New York City this November, will be published this fall. "Big League Poets," a photographic satire of literary "greats" seen through a baseball motif and employing outrageous puns (Homer de-



Historic occasions and visitors at City Lights: (left) Lawrence Ferlinghetti at a basement poetry reading during the Beat era; (center, l. to r.) playwright Michael McClure, singer Bob Dylan and poet Allen Ginsberg frequently visited the store; and (below) a packed courtroom at the "Howl" trial, with Ferlinghetti (l.) and partner Shigeyoshi Murao awaiting the verdict

picted as a great "Centaur-Fielder"), is also scheduled for the fall.

Other forthcoming books are a long-awaited collection of interviews and prose by Allen Ginsburg and, finally, a book that probably only Ferlinghetti himself could write, "Literary San

Francisco," a photographic history with text by Ferlinghetti covering subject matter ranging from Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson and Mark Twain to the years of the Beats, the "revolutionary" writing of the '60s, and the present. □