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This poet dated Andy Warhol — now he has his own art show

By Barbara Hoffman



John Giorno

Tamara Beckwith/NY Post

He slept with Andy Warhol, supped with William S. Burroughs and saw Laurie Anderson, Patti Smith and countless others become superstars.

Now, at 80, John Giorno has a show of his own.

Opening Wednesday, “Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno” celebrates the poet, performer, activist and Buddhist through his own works and the lenses of his friends, including Rondinone, his husband. It’s such a massive outpouring of love, it takes 12 venues to contain it — including High Line Art, where a video by Michael Stipe will screen nightly from 7 to 11 p.m.

“John has a childlike curiosity,” the former REM frontman tells The Post. “I love how open he is.”

At his home on the Bowery, in the former YMCA where he’s lived for the past 53 years, Giorno radiates the serenity of someone who’s seen it all. He probably has.

“Over there, that was the heroin connection,” he says, pointing out a window at what’s now a gallery. “You’d find them on Sunday, guys shooting up in their cars. When the police came, they’d run into the old Prince Hotel. Sometimes, they’d jump into beds and hide under the covers!”

He was born in Brooklyn and went to James Madison High School, after Ruth Bader Ginsburg and before Bernie Sanders. At 14, told to “Go home and write a poem,” Giorno did, and found it “blissful.” He’s been writing ever since.

As a teenager, he went from bar to bar, just to see the artists and writers he worshiped: the San Remo, where Jack Kerouac hung out; the White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death (“Just to see his sweating head from behind was enough!”); the Cedar Tavern, watering hole of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell.

And then he met Warhol.

It was 1962, and the fright-wigged artist was still getting the hang of his Bolex movie camera when he turned it on Giorno, fast asleep. Enter “Sleep,” a five-hour-plus B&W classic that will be screening at the Swiss Institute.

Giorno remembers Warhol as shy, gentle and hooked on speed, which he calls “Andy’s drug of choice. It made him fearless.” Only after Warhol was shot, in 1968, years after they’d split up, did Giorno see fear in his eyes.

It was another artist boyfriend, Robert Rauschenberg, who encouraged him to find new ways to make poetry — his own and other people’s — accessible. Like “Dial-a-Poem,” which bowed at MoMA in 1970: Call a number, and you’d hear a short recorded poem written by a list of artists that included everyone from Anderson to Frank Zappa — Giorno collaborators all.

But it was Burroughs with whom he often shared supper. The “Naked Lunch” writer lived in Giorno’s building in what he called “the bunker.” Giorno, who now owns three lofts there, including Burroughs’, keeps the place pretty much as the writer left it, complete with his typewriter and a rifle that was turned into a floor lamp.

“We’d buy food on alternate days,” he recalls. “He’d buy chicken parts, cover them with strips of bacon and cook [them] for about 20 minutes.” And then he smiles. “We were usually drunk by then!”

“Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno” starts June 21; details at ILoveJohnGiorno.NYC.