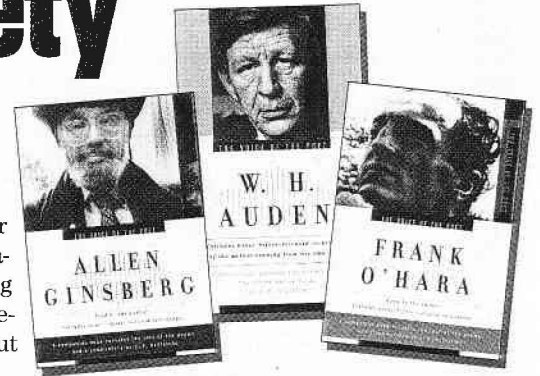


# Dead poets' society

Three great gay poets live again on spoken-word CDs that let you read along **By Michael Giltz**



**The Voice of the Poet series: Allen Ginsberg; W.H. Auden; and Frank O'Hara** ■ CDs with companion books containing text of featured poems and commentaries by J.D. McClatchy ■ Random House Audio ■ \$19.95 each

**P**oetry is the least necessary of the arts—until you start reading it. Then it becomes only as necessary as blood and oxygen. This is true even if you sit quietly in a corner and read to yourself, but poetry is meant to be heard, which is why “The Voice of the Poet” is such a welcome series, pairing CDs—each containing about an hour of

archival recordings of the author declaiming his work—with slim paperbacks presenting the text along with tidy scholarly essays, by celebrated poet J.D. McClatchy, about the respective authors.

The latest batch features three gay poets: Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, and W. H. Auden. McClatchy is direct about the sexuality of the first two but almost as circumspect about the third as Auden was himself. The only tip-offs to his gay leanings are references to Auden's living in Berlin with Christopher Isherwood, plunging into the “homosexual underworld,” and lifelong roommate Chester Kallman, the American poet.

The world of poets is small—even smaller if you focus on the gay ones. O'Hara showed one of his early pieces to Auden and in 1964 dedicated his witty, movie-soaked poem “Fantasy” to “the health of Allen Ginsberg.” It was only fair: In 1958 Ginsberg had dedicated “My Sad Self” to O'Hara, whose health was presumably not in question at the time.

According to McClatchy, O'Hara hated

the sound of his own voice and didn't enjoy public readings. No wonder, then, that his style is rather flat and affectless, fighting against the humor and vital drama of pieces like “Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!)” and “The Day Lady Died.”

Auden is as patrician as any British poet should be. He may have written about cornflakes or, in “The Common Life,” talked about “our roll-call of persons we would least like to go to bed with,” but his is the voice of the old man of letters, not the young rebel. (And, no, the poem from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is not heard in this series.)

Ginsberg is the best reader of the three. He loved to entertain, loved large crowds, and loved the sound of his own voice. All of “Howl” is here, and that landmark alone, far more arresting out loud than on the page, proves that the voice of the poet, whenever possible, should be heard. ■