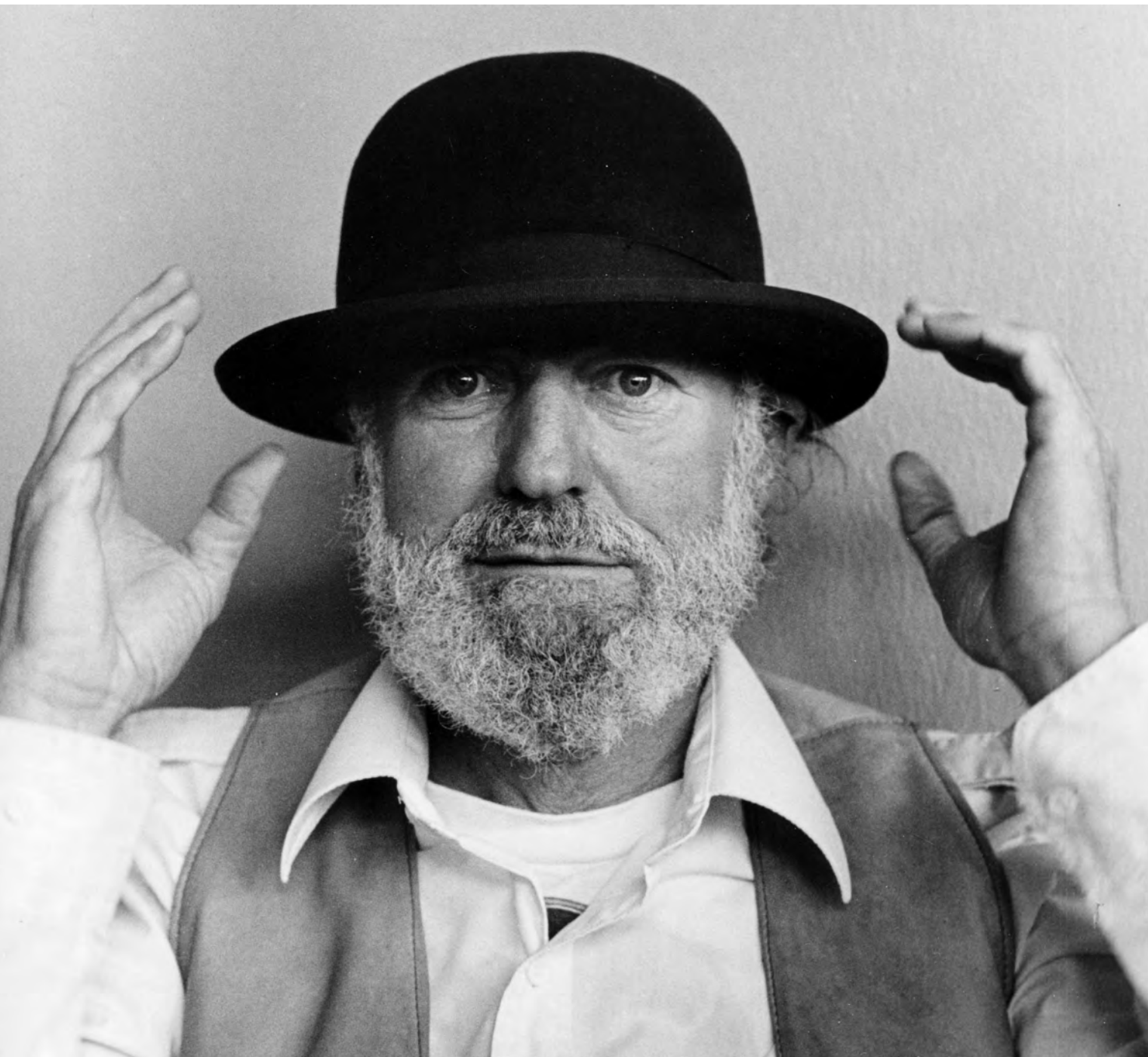


CHRISTOPHER FELVER

Ferlinghetti Bowler, 1981
archival photographic print



courtesy the artist

STEPHEN KESSLER

The Colossus of North Beach Lawrence Ferlinghetti's Enormous Imprint

Beard and fringe of white hair neatly trimmed for the occasion, bald dome shining in the Sunday afternoon light of his office windows above Columbus Avenue, Lawrence Ferlinghetti sat patiently at an empty desk, a mildly disconcerted look on his face, greeting a stream of well-wishers come to congratulate him on the sixtieth birthday of City Lights Books. Just outside the door in the poetry room, and downstairs on the ground floor, and spilling out onto the sidewalk and into Kerouac Alley in front of Vesuvio's, where a Latin jazz band was playing, swarms of visitors were browsing and milling in and around the store. The crowd was a mix of locals, longtime friends and patrons, and the usual summer tourists—it was June 23, and City Lights was throwing itself a party. Typical for this San Francisco institution and international landmark, it was a masterpiece of public and community relations. Ever since its founding in 1953 by Ferlinghetti and his business partner at the time, Peter Martin, City Lights has distinguished itself as one of the most remarkable cultural and commercial enterprises of our time. Quite apart from his important work as a poet, publisher, and painter, Ferlinghetti would be an extraordinary figure in American culture for the influence of his bookshop alone.

As a reader and writer residing in the greater Bay Area for some forty-five years, I have gotten to know the store, and its poet-founder, through a good part of its evolution from a tiny storefront with racks of paperbacks—it started out specializing in this new format for mass-market books—to its current three-story (including the basement), much-expanded emporium for all the best of what's in print, especially anything literary or political. Ferlinghetti's sensibility and signature are everywhere, from the layout of the bookcases to the historic photographs and posters on the walls to the hand-lettered signs the poet-painter posts from time to time to make his patrons feel at home and safe from the madness and distractions of the world outside—like, for example: HAVE A SEAT, READ A BOOK; BOOKS ARE TREES MADE IMMORTAL; and, perhaps my favorite, STASH YOUR CELL PHONE AND BE HERE NOW. Above in the windows or on the wall visible from the street are various signs or banners calling, in one form or another, for peace and justice. Seen from the outside, the building is a beacon of political dissidence; within, it is a haven of