Kim Jones returned to his hometown on Thursday with a Dior Men counter-culture couture collection inspired by Jack Kerouac's key novel 'On the Road', and feted by Grace Jones.
The bible of the Beat Generation, a term Kerouac actually invented, On the Road has been inspiring youths for over a half-century to search out their own individual zeitgeist. And his high-speed, jazzy prose was the well-spring for another smart, original and very likely influential collection for the house of Dior.

For fall 2022, a blend of college-kid Americana with a large dollop of French finesse, leavened with a dash of London street-style. Staged inside the giant glass-roofed Olympia show space, the show also marked Jones’ first catwalk event in London since 2003.

At first sight, the restless boozey bohemia of Kerouac and the pampered haute bourgeois youth of Christian Dior seem universes apart. But in Jones’ hands, the tandem managed to be symbiotic and mutually reinforcing and very cool.

“Kerouac actually wrote On the Road at precisely the same time, as Christian Dior was revolutionizing fashion and shocking people. So, it is kind of nice that this outsider perspective became so important with the Beat Movement. I found that very interesting that this was happening parallel to the evolution of the Christian Dior house,” Jones told FashionNetwork.com, in a pre-show preview.

Of French-Breton origin, Kerouac actually published his magnum opus in 1957, the same year that Dior died of a heart attack. Christian was patrician-born, yet he opened his own art gallery and immersed himself in the company of artists all his life. Kerouac’s dad’s family were potato farmers, but his talent led him to spend his life among the great Beat writers of his day – like Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Gregory Corso – and the great jazz musicians of that era – Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie.

Kerouac famously wrote the 250-page On the Road in 20 days, as his wife supplied him with Benzedrine, cigarettes, coffee and pea soup. Taping together strips of tracing paper so he could indulge in his speed writing sessions. Jones paid homage to that with a giant catwalk made of an exact copy of the book’s original draft, a huge roller unfurling the text.
Over which walked the first model – in a perfectly cut blazer; khaki shorts and a white cotton shirt covered with a marvelous collage of Kerouac book covers and mock Dior LPs. Like half the looks in the show, the dudes wore striped socks and urban hiking boots. He was followed by a hipster beatnik topped by a chunky Rasta beanie, purple sweater and brilliantly deconstructed trench, made into a sporty gilet and frock coat at the back.

Very much clothes for men on the move, intrepid explorers in stripped knits, pants cut-off at the ankles, club blazers and excellent two-tone shearling bombers. Covers from other novels like 'Big Sur' also appeared as prints mixed in with ideas from the Dior archive. A great hand-painted leather jacket starred the dust jacket of 'Visions of Cody'. The newer silhouette made often of Japanese denim, paired with photos of Kerouac in San Francisco.

All manner of American tailoring, and William Burroughs suit jackets with a bias cut, “which is very Dior,” smiled Jones, dressed collegially in a Balenciaga sweatshirt and Prada logo beanie.

“It’s as if you had a big suitcase when you went on your road-trip,” added the designer, the proud owner of an extensive collection of Kerouac first-editions; letters from the author to his mum depicting how he was going to write On the Road, and one from mum-to-son congratulating him on writing the path-breaking novel.

All these were displayed in an substantial installation in the Olympia, enjoyed by VIPs and scores of students from St Martins, Jones old alma mater.
“I thought it would be nice for them to see how you come with an idea for a collection and take it somewhere,” explained Jones.

“Many of the models in the show had actually read On the Road before they came in for casting. So, its influence still lives on. Plus, during the lockdown you dream of travel,” noted Jones, who read the book in his late teens, and like Kerouac undertook several road-trips across America.

“I’d quite like to be on one now!” laughed Jones, who worked with the Kerouac Foundation on this collection.

The night before, Dior hosted a party at 14 Cavendish, a beautiful Georgian mansion, which was a delightful shambles inside – all very Beat Generation with mid-century furniture; a wall of Beatnik news clippings; retro cocktails; live jazz band, and upstairs DJ Paul Doherty spinning Blue Note LPs. An ideal scene setter courtesy of ace event producer, Robin Scott Lawson.

Post-show on Thursday, over 1,000 guests enjoyed classic American cocktails like Old Fashioneds and Whisky Sours, and a driving DJ set from Princess Julia. Before the lights dimmed again and Grace Jones performed to an ecstatic reaction from the crowd.

The noise level reaching its highest pitch at another example of French and American culture meeting, ‘La Vie en Rose’. The signature song of Edith Piaf, it has been recorded by seven American singers, from Bing Crosby to Louis Armstrong.

French-American friendship at its best.