

FINDING THE AVANT-GARDE IN THE OLD-TIME:
JOHN COHEN IN THE AMERICAN FOLK REVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

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Finding the Avant-garde in the Old-time: John Cohen in the American Folk Revival
(Under the direction of Jeremy Grimshaw and Jocelyn Neal)

This thesis explores aesthetic developments in the American folk revival by examining the career of John Cohen. As a founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers, Cohen was an influential figure in the revival during the late '50s and early '60s. A significant aspect of Cohen's outlook was his extensive involvement with avant-garde movements in art and literature. The approaches Cohen encountered among New York artists and intellectuals provided a paradigm from which he could understand the rough-hewn aesthetic of old-time country music. This thesis examines Cohen's aesthetic by mapping his background and associations in art, photography, and folk music, giving special attention to the connections he saw between folk revivalism and the avant-garde. It then examines his work recording and promoting Roscoe Holcomb, a traditional singer from Daisy, Kentucky, to demonstrate the application of these ideas and connections.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1959, 47-year-old Roscoe Holcomb¹ of Daisy, Kentucky worked construction in the nearby town of Hazard. He recalled,

I come in from work one evening, poured concrete about all day. A little fellow was setting there on the porch with one of my first cousins and wanted me to play [him a song]. . . . I said, 'My hands are sore from pouring that concrete, and I'm tired.' [He said,] 'Well, you can play one.' . . . Anyhow, when I got started, he said, 'Wait, wait,'—he had one of those old crank-up tape recorders—said, 'Care for me to tape that?'²

The man on the porch was John Cohen, a New York-based photographer, painter, and folk-revivalist who had come to Kentucky to make field recordings and find material for his old-time country band, the New Lost City Ramblers. Cohen returned nearly every day for the next three weeks to record music and take photographs. Holcomb remembered, "If he wasn't there at the house whenever I come in from work, it wouldn't be but a few minutes and he'd be there. . . . I didn't expect anything to come of it, but a year later I got a copy of the record and a check in the mail. . . . He'd went back and cut a record."³

¹ The official spelling of his surname, as found among his family in Kentucky, is "Halcomb." His first recordings appeared on Folkways with the spelling "Holcomb," and the deviation was kept for presentation purposes. This thesis, whose discussion of Holcomb focuses on his interactions with the folk revival, uses the latter.

² Roscoe Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project no. 146: Roscoe Holcomb, Bluegrass Music*, New York Times Oral History Program (Glen Rock, New Jersey: Microfilming Corporation of America), 3.

³ Ibid., 3–4; Fred W. Luigart, Jr., "Roscoe Holcomb's Other World: Perry Folk Musician Finds Wide Audience," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 17, 1962.

This encounter—which for Holcomb, amounted to a simple interchange with an unannounced visitor—for Cohen, was something of an epiphany. Just a few months before traveling to Kentucky, Cohen had expressed his goals in promoting traditional music: “There is a side of us all which goes about trying to make the world over in our own image. There is another side—where one searches to encounter his own image in the world.”⁴ It seems he found this image in Roscoe Holcomb. He wrote, “At the first song he sang for me, with his guitar tuned like a banjo and his intense, fine voice, I was deeply moved, for I knew this was what I had been searching for—something that went right to my inner being, speaking directly to me.”⁵ In retrospect, Cohen explained, “Roscoe has become the embodiment of what I believe in.”⁶

What, exactly, was this remarkable quality that Cohen found in Roscoe Holcomb? Cohen described Holcomb’s music as possessing an artistic power, a sense of timelessness that conjured an archaic Gregorian modality while also possessing the immediacy of contemporary art. He said, “I was hearing the avant-garde and the ancient, sitting in the middle of eastern Kentucky.” This observation—which betrays a modernist’s sense of universality—seems fitting in view of Cohen’s background in New York. Since graduating art school at Yale in 1957, Cohen had lived in a loft on 3rd Avenue in Lower Manhattan, part of a dynamic community of downtown artists, poets, and musicians. He attended gallery openings with Abstract Expressionist painter Franz

⁴ John Cohen, liner notes to *The New Lost City Ramblers*, (Folkways Record FA 2396, 1958), 1.

⁵ John Cohen, liner notes to *Mountain Music of Kentucky* (Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40077, 1996), 29.

⁶ John Cohen, interview with the author, tape recording, Putnam Valley, New York, 7 October 2008; hereafter cited as Cohen Interview.

Kline, photographed artists at the Cedar Bar, visited the Artist's Club, and attended some of the earliest Happenings by Red Grooms and Claes Oldenburg. He became acquainted with the Beat poets while photographing Robert Frank's production of the film *Pull My Daisy* featuring Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Actively engaged in the folk scene, he photographed Woody Guthrie, wrote articles for the folk magazine *Sing Out!*, and co-founded the New Lost City Ramblers. In spite of the apparent dissimilarity among these interests, Cohen saw an aesthetic unity, claiming he found essentially the "same thing" in all of them. Regarding this overlap, he said, "I'm always impressed with the way those things piled up, because it represents the crossover of—well, not big history, but a big part of my history."⁷

This environment in New York provided the aesthetic backdrop for Cohen's perception of traditional music in Kentucky. He remembered, "Mountain musicians sang with a sharp edge to their voices. I met Roscoe Holcomb in Kentucky and his singing cut into me. Around the same time I was hanging out with Beat poets and Abstract Expressionist painters in New York. They and Roscoe had the same effect on me. They didn't seem so different from each other, out there wailing and putting their worlds together in unexpected ways."⁸

Cohen's embrace of avant-garde aesthetics and philosophies becomes even more significant when one considers his place in the folk revival. During the late '50s, his generation of revivalists emerged in what Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta have called

⁷ Cohen Interview.

⁸ John Cohen, *There Is No Eye: John Cohen Photographs*, (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2001), 15.

the “second wave” of the American folk revival, distinct from the “first wave” of earlier decades, which was dominated by overtly political figures such as Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax. Many among this “second wave” held a greater concern for folk authenticity and stylistic accuracy. They championed “traditional music for its own sake,” not simply as a tool for political change.⁹ Using the recordings of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* as their “bible,” these purists thought it inadequate to merely sing the songs of rural America; they sought to accurately reproduce the sound, aesthetic, and even physical appearance of old-time musicians from the depression-era rural South. The New Lost City Ramblers (founded by Cohen, Mike Seeger, and Tom Paley in 1958) were at the forefront of these developments. The *Little Sandy Review*, an influential independent folk-music magazine, called the Ramblers “staunch symbols of the preservation and continuation of old-time American musical customs,” asserting that they had been “the major influence in shaping city folk music.”¹⁰ A fanzine dedicated to the Ramblers, called *Gardylloo*, even surfaced in the Village. (It was alternately entitled *The Magazine of Folkiness*, or simply *The New Lost City Ramblers Appreciation Magazine*.) After the appearance of the Ramblers, other bands followed their lead, striving to present traditional music, along with its style and character, in the most authentic way possible.¹¹

⁹ Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the ‘30s to the ‘60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (August 1996): 501–43. See also Ronald Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Review of *The New Lost City Ramblers, Vol. 4*, by the New Lost City Ramblers, *Little Sandy Review* 22 (n.d. [ca. 1962]): 26–27.

¹¹ For a discussion on the influence of the Ramblers, see Pete Welding, “Crusaders for Old Time Music: The New Lost City Ramblers,” *Sing Out!* 11 no. 5 (December–January 1961–1962): 5–7, and Philip F. Gura, “Roots and Branches: Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers” [Parts 1 and 2], *The Old-Time Herald* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1999–2000): 26–33, and *The Old-Time Herald* 7, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 18–24.

In addition to performing the traditional music, the Ramblers sought to promote the old-time country musicians themselves. For example, after meeting Holcomb, Cohen arranged for him to perform at concerts and festivals across the country; he produced several LPs of his music and made a documentary film about him, *The High Lonesome Sound* (1963).

As seen above, Cohen saw traditional music as a means of personal discovery and self-definition, bearing relation to the exploratory aspects of avant-garde art and literature. Strong in these convictions, he was always eager to promote the aesthetics of old-time music. His ideas and enthusiasm became known throughout the revival as he wrote liner notes for numerous Folkways LPs (both of Holcomb and the Ramblers), contributed articles to the leading folk magazines, and participated in panel discussions at major folk festivals and concerts.¹² The influence of Cohen's aesthetic spread even further through his documentary work. His photographs appeared in *Sing Out!*, the *New York Times*, and *Esquire* magazine. (More recently, his photographs of the New York art and folk scenes have garnered considerable attention, appearing at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other venues across the country.) His documentary films of traditional music and art have frequently appeared at folk and film festivals throughout the U.S. and in Europe.¹³

¹² As an example of the latter, Cohen participated in a panel discussion while performing with Holcomb at the 1963 Monterey Folk Festival. He explained how playing traditional music could add a sense of personal exploration to one's "recreation," in that one could "re-create something within yourself that might not have existed before, or to bring it into existence." See John Cohen, panel discussion at the Monterey Folk Festival moderated by D. K. Wilgus, May 1963, "Peter Feldmann / First Monterey Folk Festival panel discussion on the Folk Music Revival, May 1963," AFC 2000/006, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress American Folklife Center.

¹³ For more information about Cohen's work as folk revivalist, documentary filmmaker, and photographer, see <http://www.johncohenworks.com/about/vitae.html>.

Much folk scholarship has discussed John Cohen's place in the revival, usually focusing on his work with the Ramblers. Important examples are Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta's "From the '30s to the '60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," Ronald Cohen's *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970*, and Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. Some scholars have discussed John Cohen's background in the avant-garde and its influence on his work: Philip Gura's "Roots and Branches: Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers" discusses John Cohen's background in its examination of the history and influence of the Ramblers; Ronald Cohen's "Singing Subversion: Folk Music and the Counterculture in the 1950s" explores the relationship between the folk revival and the counterculture (with emphasis on the Beat movement), including a short discussion of John Cohen and his avant-garde interests; and Peter Goldsmith's *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* discusses John Cohen's background in order to illuminate his relationship with Asch and Folkways Records. Scott Matthews' "John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky: Documentary Expression and the Image of Roscoe Holcomb During the Folk Revival" gives the most extensive coverage on Cohen thus far, including a consideration of his background in New York in relation to his documentary work with Holcomb in Kentucky. None of these projects, however, conduct a full investigation of Cohen's avant-garde associations and their influence on his revivalist outlook.

This thesis, which draws upon personal interviews with Cohen and others, attempts a more in-depth investigation of his aesthetic by mapping his background and associations in art, photography, and folk music, giving special attention to the

connections he saw between folk revivalism and the avant-garde. It then examines his work with Roscoe Holcomb—seen as the “embodiment” of his artistic goals—to demonstrate the application of these ideas and connections. The purpose of this study is two-fold: First, it illustrates an intriguing aesthetic crossover of an important folk revivalist. Second, its examination of Cohen acts as a lens through which one may consider broader aesthetic implications. By discussing the avant-garde connections among Cohen’s influential associates—Moe Asch, the Seeger family, Harry Smith, and others—it provides perspective into how this type of cross-fertilization may relate to developments in the wider revival.

CHAPTER 1

COHEN'S INTRODUCTION TO FOLK MUSIC AND THE AVANT-GARDE

In the course of his career, John Cohen worked under many labels: painter, folk revivalist, photographer, professor, documentary film-maker, musician. These various interests constantly straddled intellectual borders, whether between academic and artistic, urban and rural, commercial and authentic, visual and aural, or avant-garde and traditional. The contradictions and questions that arose among these apparent incongruities fed Cohen's intellectual and artistic drive.

Indications of these attitudes appear in Cohen's description of his teenage and college years. For example, when asked to name a work of art that most impressed him in his formative years, Cohen named Willem de Kooning's *Asheville*. He originally came across the painting while an art student at Yale in the mid-'50s under the Bauhaus painter Josef Albers, who advocated techniques of precise geometric abstraction. The painting's name, *Asheville*, refers to the rural North Carolina community just outside the progressive Black Mountain College, where Albers had invited de Kooning to teach in 1948. (Cohen, always enamored with the atmosphere of the rural south, had already visited Asheville while hitchhiking through Appalachia in 1951, the summer before entering art school: "I asked the police if I could sleep in the jail—they wouldn't allow it."¹⁴) De Kooning's

¹⁴ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 24.

painting, however, possessed a boldness that defied both its rural title and Albers' exacting aesthetic. Bright, uneven patches of orange and blue contrasted with areas of stark white, all being delineated and intersected by rough, gestural lines suggesting fragments of human form. Cohen was intrigued by the disturbing contradictions. "Even though it made sense, it didn't make sense—and everything Albers said made sense. It just made sense and then contradicted it It alluded to Mondrian's sense of cubist space, but then it did things that destroyed it. There was sometimes a very formal arrangement of colors, and then there would be all kinds of accidents. This was really exciting." De Kooning's wild textures and audacious style, through their internal incongruities, presented to Cohen a much-needed "counterpart" to the Albers-Yale establishment, and he was fascinated by the disparity.¹⁵

High School and Williams College

Just as Cohen relished the diversity of style in the rich fields of American art and music, he disdained the homogenizing effects of post-war American mass media. When Cohen began high school in the late '40s, his family had moved from working-class Queens to suburban Great Neck, Long Island. Here he developed interests in both folk music and art, seeing these pursuits as his "ticket out of the suburbs."¹⁶

Cohen's first significant exposure to folk music occurred when he was sixteen, working as a junior counselor at Turkey Point, a summer camp just north of New York City. (His parents, who were both raised on the Lower East Side as children of Russian-

¹⁵ Cohen Interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Jewish immigrants, had connections with the camp.) It was 1948, and the ranks of the folk revival had recently become heavily involved in the presidential campaign of the Progressive party's Henry Wallace. The resulting influx of folk-oriented counselors at Turkey Point sparked Cohen's curiosity. Woody Wachtel, a revivalist who had recently traveled to Kentucky to learn traditional banjo from Rufus Crisp, introduced Cohen to clawhammer banjo. Cohen first met Pete Seeger at an event later that summer. He acquired two albums of 78s while at Turkey Point: *Dust Bowl Ballads*, which was Woody Guthrie's first commercial album, and *Mountain Frolic*, an Alan Lomax reissue of early commercially-recorded folk musicians like Uncle Dave Macon and his Fruit Jar Drinkers.¹⁷ These records—which exposed this suburban teenager to stories of coal miners, sharecroppers, and “wand’ring workers”—became part of his “private rebellion” against suburban sensibilities by providing a way out of the mainstream. That summer, Cohen also heard gospel music from the kitchen workers at Turkey Point, all of whom had come from a rural town in South Carolina. They “would gather in the barn after work and sing songs like ‘Walk Around My Bedside, Lord.’” The music impressed him, and he enjoyed having direct contact with a Southern oral tradition. In the coming school year, Cohen began listening to the Library of Congress folk recordings and learned to play the guitar. He remembered his interest in folk music creating a certain amount of self-imposed social exile: “I was the only one in high-school who played guitar. It didn’t make me popular, it marked me as strange.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 22–23, 42.

Also at summer camp in 1948, Cohen gained his first significant awareness of the visual arts. He remembered a young woman, attending the camp with Margot Mayo's American Square Dance Group, who gave him his first book of art history. "She was stimulating my interest in painting, saying it was more than just looking at the trees around you or the buildings in front of you, but there's a whole history. That was a very important step." He remembers with gratitude his father, who was a shoe salesman, later taking him into Manhattan to the Museum of Modern Art. Cohen was "very appreciative, because it was definitely out of his milieu to do that."¹⁹ During these high school years, Cohen himself began painting. He even received a few private art lessons, but "rebelled against the teacher who was hired, and mercilessly drew funny ears on top of his serious charcoal chiaroscuro rendering of a vase." Like a true modernist, Cohen shirked any boundaries imposed by the perceived establishment: "Whatever my idea of art was, I insisted that it would come from me."²⁰ His efforts in both art and folk music incorporated a non-conforming, individualistic approach.

The political commonalities between folk music and the avant-garde provide an evident connection between the two fields. Indeed, Cohen recalled that his family and social background had made him somewhat "predisposed" to leftist thinking. However, he harbored little interest in art or music's political aspects and avoided becoming actively engaged. Regarding the left-leaning attitudes of his associates during those years,

¹⁹ Cohen Interview.

²⁰ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 22.

he simply said, “I wasn’t shocked by it, because my parents were involved in local politics and their labor party, whatever that was.”²¹

After graduating high school, Cohen enrolled at Williams College in Massachusetts, attending for only one year before transferring to Yale. He found little of interest in the Williams College social scene and remembers spending most of his time drawing, hiking, practicing his banjo, and listening to the Library of Congress folk records at the school library. While playing guitar and banjo at the nearby Bennington College, he met Emily Mason. She introduced him to her mother, the abstract painter Alice Trumbull Mason. Here, Cohen first learned of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and the thriving Abstract Expressionist art movement in New York. In the years following, when in New York during the summers, Cohen and Emily Mason would go folk dancing in the city and would visit painters and artists she knew in the Lower East Side such as Ray Johnson and Richard Lippold. She took Cohen to the Artist’s Club, where he was fascinated by the in-depth discussions of symbolism, representation and purity in art.²²

A “decisive” moment for Cohen occurred during his first semester at Williams College, in the art history class that he had “begged to get into.” On an exam, he was asked to explain Erle Loran’s graphic analysis of a Cezanne composition. For his answer, Cohen decided to do his own analysis, “using Loran’s thinking.” He remembered the teacher’s feedback: “This is very good what you’ve done, but it’s not what Loran said. Zero.” The following semester, he studied art history with a younger instructor who, having just finished his dissertation on Kandinsky, encouraged Cohen to become fully

²¹ Cohen Interview.

²² Ibid.

engaged with the subject. Cohen saw the contrasting approaches of these two instructors as sending a subtle message that resonated with his individualistic leanings: “Modern art was alive, and regular art was—you know, you had to do what they tell you.”²³

Art School at Yale

Entering Yale’s art school in 1951, Cohen furthered his involvement in abstract art and folk music, while also finding new creative outlets. He respected the work and method of Albers, but also was intrigued by the “un-Albers” aesthetics of the Abstract Expressionists. It was during these years that he became “really hungry” to learn about newer developments in art by reading magazines and attending galleries. De Kooning had been a visiting artist at Yale the year before Cohen arrived, and Cohen noticed his influence in student paintings. Other visiting artists included Burgoyne Diller, Stuart Davis, and Conrad Macharelli, who was a friend of de Kooning’s and taught Cohen personally. Cohen saw the newer developments in New York as an opposite to Albers’ “supposedly ‘reigning’ philosophy” of formalism and geometry.²⁴

Tom Paley, a banjo player who knew Cohen from New York, was also at Yale, studying mathematics. Cohen and Paley organized hoots for Yale students throughout the mid-fifties and attended the Washington Square Sunday-afternoon sings in the city when they could. Paley was known in revivalist circles as a superb instrumentalist, and, in the late ‘40s, had done much to shift urban revivalists’ emphasis from English ballads or political songs toward early-20th-century country music. He would later become an

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

important collaborator with Cohen, as together they helped found the New Lost City Ramblers.²⁵

Another important influence in Cohen's life during his time at Yale was his employment at Camp Woodland in the Catskills during the summer. The camp was organized by Norman Studer, whose outlook combined progressive politics with his rural farming background in Ohio. Cohen was intrigued by Studer's approach to folklore, in which the camp would introduce children to folk culture through direct interaction with the locals. "Every week they'd have local musicians . . . [with] the button accordion, fiddle, and guitar, doing dances . . . I'm suddenly realizing there's a huge, rich tradition, not only of music and dance, but of farming, and people who knew how to cut shingles and do wood-cutting, and tanners . . . You got the sense that all the slate in the New York sidewalks, back then, all came from the Catskills, and all the tanning was done at this place called Tannersville. . . . There's a whole folk culture, and hundreds and hundreds of songs."²⁶ This reinforced for Cohen the ideal that folk communities were the life-blood of America, providing the raw materials—both physical and cultural—for the fulness of modern life. This type of first-person interaction provided Cohen a meaningful and effective way of learning the value of rural music and culture.

While at Yale, Cohen also began working in photography. His initial interest, as with his introduction to art, stemmed from his associations in folk music. In the early fifties he met, through the people at *Sing Out!* magazine, the Reverend Gary Davis, a

²⁵ Philip F. Gura, "Roots and Branches: Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers—Part 1," *The Old-Time Herald* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1999–2000): 28; Arthur Jordan Field, "Notes on the History of Folksinging in New York City," *Caravan* 15 (February–March 1959): 11–14.

²⁶ Cohen Interview.

southern-born Harlem folk-singer and guitarist. Cohen recorded some of Davis' songs in 1953. Herbert Matter, a photography professor at Yale who was making a film in Harlem about gospel music, had heard about Cohen's work with Davis and recruited him to record the film's sound. This work with Matter introduced Cohen to serious photography, prompting him to undertake his own excursions with the camera. He photographed around New Haven, being particularly interested in the ethnic diversity of the "Blacks, old Russian Jews, and Gypsies" around "the ghetto of Oak Street."²⁷

In his final years at Yale, Cohen developed another interest that incorporated the aesthetics of both visual arts and traditional culture. In an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, he saw an example of a pre-Columbian textile from Peru. He later wrote, "I wondered why the weaver had used a specific sequence of colors and why there were random interruptions to these patterns. The color series resembled music to me. I found myself in a dialog with a weaver who had lived 2,000 years ago about the choices she had made in this design."²⁸ The questions that arose from this dialog prompted Cohen to investigate further. He began studying the textiles and, beginning in 1956, took several field trips to the Andes to study and document Q'eros weaving, music, and culture. Perhaps, Cohen's interest in Peruvian textiles began with his association with Albers, who had traveled to Latin America many times to study the indigenous art, and whose wife, Anni, had exhibited her own hand-woven textiles at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949.²⁹ Even so, as with his other pursuits, this work studying textiles work soon bore the

²⁷ Ibid.; Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 25.

²⁸ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 56.

²⁹ Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 133–34.

stamp of his own distinctive approach, as he eventually studied and documented not only the art of weaving, but also the customs, spirituality, music, and social concerns of the Q'eros people.

By the time Cohen finished his studies at Yale in 1957, he had considerable experience in each of the major pursuits that would shape his life's work: modern art, folk music, and photography. These interests made an eclectic mix, but one which would find a suitable environment when he was able to "finally get out of academia" after graduation. Upon returning from a trip to Peru in the summer of 1957, he found a loft for rent in Lower Manhattan and moved in.³⁰

³⁰ Cohen Interview.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE NEW YORK ART SCENE

When John Cohen arrived at his new loft at 32 3rd Avenue, all he knew of the neighborhood was that rent was cheap and the photographer Robert Frank lived next door. He soon recognized, however, that he had entered a truly exceptional community. Cohen summarized his “prescribed world” of those years in Manhattan by describing a route he walked through the neighborhood most evenings—a route both geographical and intellectual. Immediately leaving his loft, he would pass by Earle Brown’s loft and Willem de Kooning’s studio, both on the same block. Walking down 10th street, he would pass by the cooperative galleries and often stopped at the Cedar Bar where the Abstract Expressionists gathered. Continuing on, he would visit the bookstores on 9th and 10th Streets, where he kept up with current literary trends. (Today, his bookshelf retains many of the books read during those years, including Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Gide, and Rimbaud.) Then walking past Washington Square and down MacDougal Street, he would arrive at Izzy Young’s Folklore Center, which served as a sort of nerve center for folk activities in Greenwich Village, selling books and records and producing concerts. Occasionally he would also stop by the Limelight, a coffee shop with an art photography gallery; this was where he had his first solo show.³¹

³¹ Cohen Interview. At that time, the Limelight was considered to be the only gallery in America devoted to art photography. See Cohen Interview.

Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art

One Cohen's most important connections in the New York art world was Herbert Matter, his former Yale photography teacher who lived and worked in New York. Herbert's wife, Mercedes Matter—daughter of the pioneering American abstract painter Arthur Carles—was an original member of the American Abstract Artists who later studied with Hans Hoffmann and established her own art school in 1964.³² The Matters became something of a “new family” for Cohen in the art world, and he would spend time with them at their apartment or attending events around town. Cohen was astounded by their personal connections with a wide array of influential artists, and felt he was “walking into, not only the old art world, but the new art world.” Their modest apartment housed works of Giacometti, Mondrian, and Kline, and they would speak casually of their friends, “Jackson” and “Bill” (Pollock and de Kooning). Cohen would often see Mercedes at the Cedar Bar, and photographed her socializing with artists such as Philip Guston, Jack Tworkov, and James Brooks.³³

Cohen's actual work as an artist painting and drawing in New York, especially when compared to his photography work, was relatively limited.³⁴ More significant was his personal involvement with the art community and its associated ideas. This atmosphere was perhaps best manifest at the gallery openings, which Cohen regularly

³² Perl, *New Art City*, 127, 146, 473–81.

³³ Cohen Interview; Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 24–25.

³⁴ Though there were a few notable developments: he attended Mercedes Matter's drawing classes with Guston, Tworkov, and Philip Pearlstein, and some of his drawings were included in a show at the Judson Memorial Church with works of Red Grooms, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg. See Cohen Interview.

attended. He relished the interactions among the various artists and critics: “Every three weeks, all of these little galleries would have openings . . . full of people all talking, and painters. . . . That was the block that I lived on.”³⁵ Actress Judith Malina described one of the openings in her diary: “Some wonderful painters have rented a large loft, painted it white, and hung hundreds of canvases in the bare rooms. We seek relief from the intense night heat outside, under the sign painted by Franz Kline. . . . I talk for a long time with John Cage about painting and music. . . . After the exhibit there’s a party at the Three Arts Club.”³⁶ According to historian Jed Perl, “Tenth Street, where many of the artists would be showing in the 1950s, was a village within a metropolis, and artists and writers who were lucky enough to at least temporarily solve the problem of how to pay the rent could go for days and weeks without setting foot outside their own sometimes over-stimulating neighborhood.”³⁷

Indeed, the area was a hotbed for new ideas, where “not only modern art, but also modern ideas had become virtually the air people breathed.”³⁸ In retrospect, Cohen wrote about the juxtaposition between this lively atmosphere of artistic innovation and the self-appointed poverty of loft-living. He followed his pursuits with a sort of post-Bohemian earnest: “Over the distance of time, those years on Third Avenue seem very exciting, but

³⁵ Cohen Interview.

³⁶ Perl, *New Art City*, 38.

³⁷ Ibid., 39. For further discussion of the importance of social connections in the development of the New York avant-garde art scene, see Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 19–42.

³⁸ Perl, *New Art City*, 22.

in reality it felt mostly desolate and run down. Still, I liked the sober seriousness of my daily life.”³⁹

One attitude of the Abstract Expressionists that resonated with Cohen’s own individualistic approach was their necessarily paradoxical relationship with the fine art tradition, rejecting it while at the same asserting their own place within its grand narrative. Perl describes it as a “no-romantic romantic” attitude, in which the painters were “on a romantic quest” seeking “a form of self expression that was abstract yet concrete, more-than-material yet grounded in the materials of art. And the fact that the romanticism of the New York School . . . involved a rejection of the very idea of romanticism only made that quest all the more romantic.”⁴⁰ Modernist contradictions between tradition and innovation permeated the aesthetic climate.

Questions of uniqueness and creativity loomed even larger at the end of the ‘50s, as the younger generation of artists developed into the Pop Art movement. Cohen remembered attending a music party in the Lower East Side when, growing bored, he slipped out to attend another party two floors below. Here, Red Grooms, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and others engaged in a “mock battle, decked out in lampshades, tablecloths, and wooden swords.” Cohen saw them as somehow “combin[ing] Dada with the outlook of Walker Evans.” In his initial reaction, he thought, “This is the kind of stuff I used to do as a little kid, but these guys are having fun doing it. Why is it art?” Cohen remained

³⁹ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 83.

⁴⁰ Perl, *New Art City*, 159–60.

involved with the artists in the coming months and years as these absurd events developed into the Happenings.⁴¹

Among the Pop artists, Cohen particularly admired Grooms, who he saw as “a sort of primitive Woody Guthrie.” Grooms’ work incorporated many of the gestural characteristics of Abstract Expressionism while making representational depictions of the city and daily life. Cohen saw Grooms as being “deliberately primitive in the middle of New York,” and, although Grooms certainly was intentional in his uninhibited style, Cohen “was fascinated because it didn’t feel so self-conscious. I felt like he really was primitive.” He saw a similar quality in the work of Lester Johnson.⁴²

There was, however, another side of Pop Art that Cohen found suspect. He became uneasy with some artists’ self-promotion, exaggerating the significance of what he saw as trivial works of art: “They were saying, ‘We have this earth-shaking exhibit.’ There’s only two people.” Cohen recounted the story of Allan Kaprow going to great lengths to acquire photographs of a Pop Art exhibit for the sole purpose of getting them published in Life Magazine to promote his work. Overall, while Cohen liked Pop Art for its celebration of an amateur “do-it-yourself” attitude, he became suspicious when its practitioners seemed to push excessively for personal success or undue publicity. Similar attitudes would arise in his views toward folk music and its commercialization.⁴³

⁴¹ Cohen Interview; Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 83.

⁴² Cohen Interview.

⁴³ Ibid. Similar concerns were raised in art magazines of the day. See Perl, *New Art City*, 459–60.

Photography

In photography, Robert Frank and Walker Evans were important influences for Cohen. He met Frank through Herbert Matter at Yale—he recalled that “both were artist-photographers in retreat from the Swiss bourgeois life, and both were generous and encouraging to me”—and he met Evans through Frank in New York.⁴⁴ Cohen first knew of Evans’ work from the Library of Congress collections of depression-era FSA photographs, and he admired the photographer’s artistic portrayal of rural culture. Frank, with his seminal book *The Americans*, provided a less formal, more immediate view of rural America.⁴⁵ In 1957, Frank showed Cohen images from *The Americans* in “the stacks of photographs” he was organizing for the book’s publication. “Frank’s work,” wrote Cohen, “made me realize that art could be personal, biographical, even sentimental at the same time it was surreal. . . . It offered an alternative to the ‘classical’ notions of painting and art history that I had picked up at college. It suggested a sense of action where an artist might move through the world and make images from his own experience.”⁴⁶

During his time in Manhattan, photography became one of Cohen’s primary pursuits, with his work being published in *Esquire* and *Sing Out!* magazine. In his photography, Cohen sought to incorporate both Evans’ sense of formal organization and Frank’s ability to frame humanity in a dynamic, immediate way. His photographs catch chance moments, such as the artist Alfred Leslie unloading abstract paintings from a “U-

⁴⁴ Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 24.

⁴⁵ For more on the photography of Evans and Frank, see Leslie Baier, “Visions of Fascination and Despair: The Relationship Between Walker Evans and Robert Frank,” *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 55–63; and William Stott, “Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and the Landscape of Dissociation,” *ArtsCanada* 31 (December 1974): 83–89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 82; Cohen Interview.

Use-It” trailer; or Jack Kerouac listening intently, eyes closed, to a broadcast of his own voice emanating from a small radio set; or a group of young men sitting, listening to country music in an unpaved parking lot of dry weeds in Galax, Virginia.⁴⁷ These photographs seem to be asserting, more than anything else, the independent vitality and life of the subject. Of Cohen’s work, Greil Marcus wrote, “The picture exists outside of the photographer’s intentions, or even his or her desire.”⁴⁸ Regarding Cohen’s documentary photography of the New York art scene, the Metropolitan Museum of Art noted that his approach “illuminates the Beat-era maxim that the artist’s life and work are extensions of each other. . . . The pictures he made are less an objective documentation than a spirited collaboration with subjects who believed in erasing all boundaries between art and life.”⁴⁹

Pull My Daisy

In late 1958, Frank recruited Cohen to make still photographs of the production of his film *Pull My Daisy*. This film, based a scene from Kerouac’s never-produced play, *The Beat Generation*, depicts the Beat lifestyle by portraying a day in the life of Neal Cassady. It includes casual visits from poets and musicians and their irreverent, pseudo-philosophical interactions with a visiting bishop. The cast consisted mostly of poets, painters, and dancers, with Kerouac as narrator, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso as

⁴⁷ These photographs are found in Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 94, 116, 141.

⁴⁸ Greil Marcus, introduction to Cohen, *There Is No Eye*, 6

⁴⁹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, description of John Cohen’s photographs *Red Grooms’ ‘The Burning Building’* (1960) and *[Alan Ginsberg and Gregory Corso Seated on Floor in Conversation, During Filming of ‘Pull My Daisy’, New York City]* (1959), accessed online 23 October 2008, http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_of_Art/index.asp.

themselves, painter Larry Rivers as Cassady, and David Amram (who also composed the film's soundtrack) as a local jazz musician. Its improvisatory nature, lacking serious plot and action, led critic and filmmaker Jonas Mekas to name it "the only true beat film, if there is one."⁵⁰ Cohen admired Frank's cinematography, which carefully allowed for natural spontaneity. He felt that Frank "worked seriously composing his camera shots Sometimes it seemed as if he was tolerating the actors rather than directing them." This approach created a true-to-life sensibility that seemed to embody the Beat philosophy.⁵¹

Although Cohen's personal involvement with the Beat poets was relatively limited—after the filming of *Pull My Daisy*, he remained acquainted with the cast and would socialize whenever he saw them around town—he often heard Beat poetry at the coffee shops on MacDougal Street. A friend recommended that Cohen read Kerouac's *On the Road*, and it reminded him of the free writing style in Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*. He mentioned this to Kerouac, who replied, "Woody's just a folk singer. I'm a poet, like Rimbaud and Verlaine." For Cohen, this set up an intriguing paradox in literary aesthetics and class relations. Kerouac, who came from a working-class background, downplayed folk expression and aspired to become part of the literary pantheon, while Guthrie, the son of an upper-middle-class Oklahoma business owner, was happy to sing the songs of the common man.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jonas Mekas, *Film Culture* 21 (Summer 1960): 14.

⁵¹ John Cohen, "Is *Pull My Daisy* Holy?" *Photo-Eye Magazine*, 8 August 2008, accessed online 20 April 2009, http://www.photoeye.com/magazine/reviews/2008/05_21_pull_my_daisy.cfm.

⁵² Cohen Interview; Cohen, *There is no Eye*, 106, 118.

Modern Art and the Folk Aesthetic

It may seem that Cohen's interest with folk traditions would clash with his involvement in the avant-garde art scene. In actuality, one finds significant connections between the two arenas. Modernist artists had long fostered a fascination with the work of "primitive" peoples, from Picasso's African masks to Josef and Anni Algers's aforementioned studies of the abstract merits of indigenous Latin-American art and textiles. In 1933 the Museum of Modern Art displayed folk art in a show entitled "American Sources of Modern Art," noting a clear demonstration of the "fundamentals of art—rhythm, design, balance, proportion, which the folk artist feels instinctively." Throughout the '40s, Max Ernst, Wolfgang Paalen, and Barnett Newman all admired and collected indigenous American art.⁵³ Elaine de Kooning, abstract expressionist artist and critic, became intensely interested later in her career in the artistic characteristics of pre-historic cave painting, and made paintings of her own in a similar style.⁵⁴ Pollock's drip techniques were said to be inspired by sand paintings of the American Southwest, and the paintings were described by one of his contemporaries as being similar to Celtic traditional art, with its "undulating continuity where the relationship of parts ceases to be evident, where both beginning and end are carefully hidden."⁵⁵ Indeed, Pollock himself had at least a passing interest in folk expression. As a student of Thomas Hart Benton in the early '30s, he played the jaw harp in Benton's folk band.⁵⁶ Benton's artistic influence

⁵³ Perl, *New Art City*, 132–34.

⁵⁴ Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 33–34.

⁵⁵ Perl, *New Art City*, 132, 139.

⁵⁶ Erica Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 320.

appears in the rural thematic content of Pollock's paintings during that period. In the early '50s, when the Tibor de Nagy Gallery exhibited antique lace—draped over dowels and hung from the ceiling by Abstract Expressionist painter Alfred Leslie—Pollock “came twice and took great pleasure in the notion of *art anonyme*; the rhythms of swirl and crosshatch, even the highly conventionalized images of French eighteenth-century lace, with its peacocks, pheasants, roses, waterfalls, grottoes, pagodas, ruins, and costumed personages, delighted him.”⁵⁷

Cohen found many of his own aesthetic connections between folk culture and 20th-century developments in art. He saw the collages of Kurt Schwitters, the found art of Duchamp, the combines of Rauschenberg, and the later mixed-media work of Wesselman (who, for instance, installed an actual refrigerator door in his life-size painting of a kitchen) as all connected with the ideals of folk revivalism, taking artifacts from everyday life and examining them as objects of artistic value. Cohen recognized similar impulses in the work of Walker Evans, even viewing him as “the first Pop Artist, in the sense that he was a sophisticated mind looking at popular culture . . . artistically reporting on what the masses were doing.” Cohen later became intrigued by Bernd and Hilla Becher's 1960s photographic collections of industrial architecture—water-towers, coal tipples, and other structures—labeled as “Anonymous Sculptures.” The Bechers explained, “Through photography, we try to arrange these shapes and render them comparable,” seeking “to produce a more or less perfect chain of different forms and

⁵⁷ Perl, *New Art City*, 55.

shapes.” This work struck Cohen as a type of folk art; the images of useful structures facilitated aesthetic comparisons in design and structure.⁵⁸

Overall, the vibrant artistic expression of the Lower Manhattan scene helped shape Cohen’s view of the surrounding world. The Abstract Expressionists, the Pop Artists, the Beat poets, and art photographers like Robert Frank: all shared the ideal that everyday objects or occurrences—an artist’s reflexive gesture, a poet’s improvised utterance, or a casual moment caught on film—could be seen as legitimate artistic expression.

⁵⁸ Cohen interview; Bernd and Hilla Becher quoted in Gail Finney, *Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006): 55–56.

CHAPTER 3

IN THE REVIVAL

In the late '50s, when Cohen became especially active in the folk scene around Greenwich Village, the American folk revival was beginning a significant resurgence. The earlier wave of the revival, largely oriented around political activism, had gained momentum through the '40s and ended with the phenomenal success (and subsequent blacklist) of popular folk groups such as the Weavers around mid-century. Throughout the fifties, political pressure kept much folk-revival activity underground. The revival's second wave, which nevertheless incorporated many of the major players from the earlier wave, publicly emerged around the time the Kingston Trio's rendition of "Tom Dooley" hit the top of the charts in 1959. Many from this second wave of the revival distanced themselves from the politicized past, and folk-styled groups found widespread commercial success.⁵⁹ This new popular interest in folk music changed the dynamics of the revival. Naturally, some revivalists who had been involved in folk music throughout the '50s held a certain amount of disdain for young johnny-come-lately "folkniks" who suddenly invaded Greenwich Village as part of the folk boom. They saw the crass

⁵⁹ See Eyerman and Barretta, "From the '30s to the '60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States." In spite of this departure from political activism by many younger revivalists, politics remained significant in some areas of the revival. For example, Irwin Silber at *Sing Out!* magazine remained staunchly political throughout the '50s and beyond. Politics again took center stage in the mid-60s during the height of the civil rights movement and the escalating war in Vietnam, with *Broadside Magazine* and the "topical" folk-singers (such as Phil Ochs, Len Chandler, and Tom Paxton) receiving considerable attention.

opportunism of new performers as defiling the folk traditions they held sacred. One significant reaction to the commercialized heyday was a renewed concern for authenticity over commercialism in folk music.⁶⁰ Cohen emerged as an important player in this new movement. Whether through his meticulous performance style in the New Lost City Ramblers or his promotion of mountain musicians like Holcomb, Cohen worked tirelessly to bring what he saw as “authentic” traditional music to a wider audience.⁶¹

Cohen and Lomax

In many ways, Cohen’s work promoting unadulterated old-time country music contributed to the work already begun by other folklorists. Alan Lomax was perhaps the most important predecessor; his field recordings, stemming from the expeditions with his father beginning in the ‘30s, constituted a large portion of the Library of Congress folk-song collection, making him one of the most prominent folklorists in the field. Lomax’s career embodied many of the major currents of folk revivalism in the first half of the twentieth century: his influential body of folk-song publications—consisting of texts and transcriptions of traditional songs—contributed to the academic study of folklore; his association with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, union groups, and the Wallace campaign

⁶⁰ Peter Goldsmith accounts for this renewed interest in authenticity by noting that, once folk music became a popular hit, there was no longer such a need to secure an audience for the music. Earlier revivalists had been completely absorbed in their efforts to simply raise awareness and appreciation for folk music, and there was little room for worrying about the authenticity of one song or style over another. Also, the political affiliations of the older revivalists sought interracial and international unity, and thus would have avoided fragmentation into ethnic or racial divisions of authenticity. See Peter Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998): 291–92.

⁶¹ For more information on John Cohen’s role in this move toward greater authenticity, see his contributions to *Wasn’t That a Time!: Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival*, edited by Ronald D. Cohen (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995): 25–56, 177–85.

contributed greatly to the early folk revival's political pursuits; and his elevation—some consider it a “romanticization”—of the music led to a greater appreciation of folk music simply for its emotional, musical, and cultural merit.⁶²

A comparison between the attitudes of Cohen and Lomax reveals some of the continuities, developments, and divergences of the mid-century folk revival. Some aspects of this dynamic emerge in a pair of articles—the first by Lomax, and a reply by Cohen—published in the Summer 1959 issue of *Sing Out!* magazine. Lomax had recently returned from England, where he lived for most of the '50s to avoid political persecution. In his article, “The ‘Folkniks’—and the Songs they Sing,” he discussed the younger generation of New York urban folk-singers, their departure from the ideals of social reform, and their recently-commercialized ventures in folk music. He asserted that technical virtuosity alone was not adequate in a performance of a folk song, arguing that the popularizing “improvements” by urban folk-singers were untrue to the essence of the music. He then emphasized the need for performers to thoroughly study traditional music in order to learn how to express the emotional content and nuanced variation of the folk style.⁶³

Although many aspects of this argument aligned perfectly with Cohen's philosophy—eschewing commercialism for the sake of stylistic accuracy in folk expression—Cohen deliberately opposed the well-established collector in his response, published as “A Reply to Alan Lomax: In Defense of City Folksingers.” Instead of

⁶² For a concise overview of Lomax's career, see Ron Cohen, “Alan Lomax: Citizen Activist,” *ISAM Newsletter* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2002), accessed online 24 February 2009, <http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/cohen1.html>.

⁶³ Alan Lomax, “The ‘Folkniks’—and the Songs They Sing,” *Sing Out!* 9 no. 1 (Summer 1959): 26–29.

directly rejecting the *content* of the initial argument, however, Cohen rejected the *authority* of Lomax himself, and then redirected the content of the conversation toward issues that Lomax had neglected to address. He painted Lomax as out-of-touch with the current folk-song movement, pointing out what he considered to be Lomax's ignorant misappropriation of the newly-coined term "folknik." He rejected the overtly-political inclinations of the earlier revival, noting that the current movement was "far different than the social reform movement" that Lomax had done so much to support in earlier years. He claimed that Lomax, returning from a decade-long hiatus in England, now set himself up as a sort of "Holy Ghost" delivering truth from on high, and then countered that he and other younger folk-singers "are not looking for someone to lead us."⁶⁴

Cohen then described the more recent movement in folk music as being a sort of existential quest for self-awareness. He explained that, although the strict social limitations in rural folk societies created a sense of order that attracted urban folk-singers, a true sense of order was ultimately that which "we can make and find within ourselves. . . . There is no truth except that which we make for ourselves." For Cohen, folk music was not simply a powerful vehicle for emotional and cultural expression, it was a means of addressing the fundamental questions of existence. The intensity of the music came from "the struggle with the forces in the music itself—which become as real as any other problem of life. The nature of this intensity is reflective of the personality of

⁶⁴ John Cohen, "In Defense of City Folksingers," *Sing Out!* 9 no. 1 (Summer 1959): 32–33.

the singer.” Thus the music became a way to approach problems of personal meaning and self-definition.⁶⁵

From this interaction in the pages of *Sing Out!* it becomes clear that Cohen saw a new direction for folk revivalism—during the very months he was forming the Ramblers, embarking on field work in Kentucky, and developing relationships with New York’s avant-garde artists and intellectuals. Although Cohen promoted a similar brand of music as Lomax, he followed his own motives, different from the approaches of earlier folklorists. While he may not have completely opposed the academic, political, cultural, and musicological concerns of his predecessors, Cohen placed primary emphasis on using folk music as a means of exploring one’s self. These motives brought a new perspective to the table, though in retrospect, he recalls, “I wasn’t thinking in historical terms or anything. I was just trying to understand why I was playing this music and [why] the Ramblers were making a record. There was no precedent for it, but we didn’t think about the precedent. We were just writing about what we needed at the time.”⁶⁶

There was also a personal aspect to the rift between Cohen and Lomax. Cohen despised the condescending attitude of Lomax—who insisted on calling him “Johnny”—and resented it when Lomax would make rash assumptions about the influences and intentions of Cohen’s work. Cohen also disliked Lomax’s policy of copyrighting his arrangements of folk-songs; the Ramblers maintained the position that traditional songs

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33–34. For more on Cohen’s views toward finding personal meaning in traditional music, see John Cohen, liner notes to *The New Lost City Ramblers: Gone to the Country* (Folkways Records Album FA 2491, 1972), 2–3.

⁶⁶ Cohen Interview. Parallels can be seen between Cohen’s position in the folk world and what he was seeing in the art world. Much like the modern artist, forging his own path beyond those of his predecessors, Cohen rejected the authority of older folklorists and went his own way, while building upon many of the ideals and successes of his intellectual forebears.

should remain in the public domain. They once joked on stage, Cohen saying, “I hear that Alan Lomax has copyrighted every song in the English language and that he plans to copyright the English language itself!” To which Paley replied, “Yeah, well I’m going to copyright the name Alan Lomax, so whenever he goes to sign a check, he has to pay me!”⁶⁷

Modernism in the Revival

As Cohen separated himself from the older generation of revivalists, his diverse artistic interests led him to incorporate modernist ideas in his perceptions of traditional music. In retrospect, he wrote, “Now one thing must be said about the folk music world: there was and is almost no concern or appreciation for modern or abstract art there. It has always bothered me, because personally, I have always been deeply involved in those ideas of art.”⁶⁸ However, although the main body of folk revivalists and musicians may have not sympathized with modernist sensibilities, a number of the most influential personalities in the revival—many of whom became Cohen’s associates in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s—had significant contact and involvement with the avant-garde.

Through most of his adult life, Cohen had a close connection with the Seeger family. In addition to his prolonged work with Mike and his older half-brother Pete, Cohen married Penny Seeger, Mike’s younger sister, in 1963. Penny and Mike’s parents, Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford Seeger, had been extensively involved in modern

⁶⁷ Cohen Interview.

⁶⁸ John Cohen, liner notes to *Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four* (Harry Smith Archives and Revenant Records, 2000): 37–38.

composition, ethnomusicology, and folk revivalism. Crawford was well-known in modernist circles of the '20s and '30s for her progressive compositional style, and Seeger collaborated with her in writing his book about dissonant counterpoint. In 1935, when Seeger began working for the Resettlement Administration organizing rural music programs, the family became immersed in the Library of Congress folk recordings—what Crawford called the “live-and-kicking music of ‘unmusical’ America.” In the coming years, Crawford would collaborate with Alan Lomax, transcribing folk melodies for *Our Singing Country*, and *Folksong U.S.A.* She published several other folk songbooks before her death in 1952.⁶⁹ In the Seegers, Cohen recognized important connections between folk music and the avant-garde, noting, “They didn’t make the connections in my life, but they affirmed them.”⁷⁰

In her work transcribing folk materials, Crawford looked at the source material from the perspective of a modernist composer. Drawing upon the ideas of Béla Bartók, she recognized parallels between folk music and modern music in their common departure from the tonal laws and expressive excesses of 19th-century Romanticism. She wrote, “Curiously enough, there is part-singing widespread throughout the southeastern states, and has been for the past hundred years, which revels in these characteristics of ‘modern music.’” Bess Lomax described Crawford’s attitude toward the music: “She was completely excited by the coherence and elegance of the different musical systems that

⁶⁹ The biographical information in this paragraph, along with an in-depth exploration of Crawford’s musical life, is found in Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). After the initial reference to Ruth Crawford Seeger, this thesis follows Tick’s precedent by using simply her maiden name, “Crawford,” for subsequent references.

⁷⁰ Cohen Interview.

Father and Alan had recorded, by the complexity of American folk music. She was really aesthetically moved by this.” Crawford’s transcriptions and piano accompaniments capitalized on the modern characteristics of the source material. She often avoided the conclusive dominant-to-tonic cadence, in order to mimic the “keep-goingness” of traditional music-making, and she utilized many fourths, fifths, seconds, and sevenths to emulate the strident harmonies of country singers and instrumentalists.⁷¹ Cohen quipped that the arrangements were “unplayable because she was so accurate.”⁷² Overall, Crawford’s settings combined a modernist’s sense of individuality, sparseness of texture, and terse emotional expression with a folk traditionalist’s approach toward fidelity.

Cohen also saw significance in the relationship between the Seegers and Henry Cowell. Charles Seeger was Cowell’s composition teacher in Berkeley in the ‘20s, and the two men taught together at the New School for Social Research in the early ‘30s. During this time, Cowell found fame with his experimental techniques in composition and performance, pounding tone clusters with his forearm and creating novel effects by plucking, striking, and sweeping the strings inside the piano. Cowell’s experimental aesthetic also included the study of indigenous musics from around the globe.⁷³ As he famously said in 1952, “I want to live in the *whole world* of music!”⁷⁴

Charles Seeger once told Cohen of an intersection that occurred while Seeger and Cowell were teaching a course in World Music at the New School for Social Research in

⁷¹ Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 242, 248, and 331.

⁷² Cohen Interview.

⁷³ For a study of Cowell’s musical attitudes and development, see Michael Hicks, *Henry Cowell: Bohemian* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

1932. According to Cohen, the two musicians became friends with Thomas Hart Benton, who was painting a mural in the hall. When Benton heard what they were teaching as world music, he told them, “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t have any American folk music in there.” Seeger answered, “Well, there is no world-class American folk music.” In response, Benton played them a recently-released Doc Boggs record that he owned. This encounter made an impression on Seeger; he began attending Benton’s famous “Saturday Night” musical gatherings (the same group that Jackson Pollock had played with) and sang in a folk group with Benton for the inauguration of the mural. When Cohen later asked Pete Seeger about it, he remembered playing folk music with Benton when he would visit his father in New York.⁷⁵ The range of personalities that associated with Benton’s group constitutes an intriguing crossover of intellectual, musical, and artistic movements: the regionalist painter Benton, the future Abstract Expressionist painter Pollock, the experimental composer Cowell, the ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, and the popular folk revivalist Pete Seeger. Cohen delighted in this musical and artistic coincidence; in later years, he joked at a Berkeley folk concert that he would give a prize to whomever could name the folk band that included both Pete Seeger and Jackson Pollock.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Cohen Interview.

⁷⁶ Cohen Interview. On Seeger playing at the Benton mural unveiling, see Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 235–6. On Seeger and Cowell teaching at the New School, see Hicks, *Henry Cowell*, 125–27, 146–47.

The Little Sandy Review

Avant-garde tendencies also emerged among younger segments of the folk revival. In 1960, Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson began publishing a Minneapolis-based folk-music magazine called *The Little Sandy Review*, which closely monitored developments in the “purist” segments of the revival; they held non-commercialism and authenticity as primary indicators of excellence. *The Little Sandy Review* quickly gained notoriety in the folk revival for their hard-nosed approach, unequivocally condemning any popularizing “folkum” groups—The Limelitters, The Kingston Trio, and Peter, Paul, and Mary—while lauding the work of traditional musicians such as Roscoe Holcomb, Doc Boggs, Clarence Ashley, and Hobart Smith. They also praised urban revivalists who worked diligently to learn the traditional styles and aesthetics. Alan Lomax’s field recordings received ample attention, and the New Lost City Ramblers were lauded as having acquired “the most difficult-to-imitate flavor of the country musician,” with all its musical wildness and rural pathos.⁷⁷ Cohen eventually became associated with the *Little Sandy Review*, contributing “John Cohen’s Column” in the mid-60s.

A reader of *The Little Sandy Review* once praised the editors, noting that they were “consumed with avant-gardism.” The editors took pride in the comment, responding, “Does this mean we have made the grade as literary and critical beatniks? We always thought of ourselves as arch conservatives!”⁷⁸ In spite of their joking response, avant-garde sensibilities indeed emerge in the editors’ attitudes; they sought to set

⁷⁷ Review of *The New Lost City Ramblers, Vol. 3*, by the New Lost City Ramblers, *Little Sandy Review* 12 (n.d. [ca. 1961]): 25–26.

⁷⁸ Johnny Gottlieb [Letter to editors, with response from editors], *Little Sandy Review* 10 (n.d. [ca. 1961]): 34–35.

themselves apart from the mainstream, proud of their intellectual independence and integrity, while relying upon historical, artistic, and literary means to establish legitimacy. Apparently, the very title of their magazine pays homage to a modernist literary journal from earlier in the century, *The Little Review*, which fearlessly published controversial works by Ezra Pound and James Joyce, along with Dadaist art and poetry.

Both Pankake and Nelson, who met while students at the University of Minnesota, followed contemporary developments in literature, cinema, and the arts, and these broad interests informed their reviews.⁷⁹ In one such article, Pankake and Nelson compared folk musicians to various artists and film-makers. Musicians they liked were compared to contemporary cutting-edge artists or giants in art history, while those they disliked were compared to conservative contemporary artists. Holcomb was compared to Van Gogh, Orson Welles, and contemporary French film-makers Truffaut and Godard; Frank Proffitt to Rembrandt and D. W. Griffith; Hobart Smith to Michelangelo; Bob Dylan to Jackson Pollack and avant-garde film-maker Jonas Mekas; and Jean Ritchie to August Renoir. Harry Belafonte, on the other hand, was described as “a combination of Norman Rockwell, Stanley Kramer, and Cecil B. DeMille.”⁸⁰

Aspects of their avant-garde sensibility are also seen in their condescending view toward mainstream influences in the revival. In their review of Cohen’s release of his 1959 Kentucky recordings, they praised his work as unearthing some of the true, undefiled beauty of American culture, while noting that “to the sterile automatons of the

⁷⁹ Paul Nelson, “What ever happened to rock critic Paul Nelson?” interview by Steven Ward (March 6, 2000), *Rockcritics.com*, accessed 5 May 2009, <http://rockcriticsarchives.com/interviews/paulnelson/paulnelson.html>.

⁸⁰ Review of *First Five from Folk Legacy*, *Little Sandy Review* 23 (n.d. [ca. 1962]): 8.

Atomic age, the work of people like Cohen will naturally be valueless.”⁸¹ In their coverage of the 1961 Chicago Folk Festival, they lionized Holcomb and Libba Cotten for their combination of humility and aesthetic power, then denigrated the masses of youth who attended the festival:

Every guitar strumming girl seemed to be ecstatically belting out “Virgin Mary” in tones as close to Joan Baez’s as she could muster. Off in a corner, some of the higher echelon pickers were dazzling wide-eyed boys and girls with their fantastic, vacant-eyed guitar picking . . . No art or style, but plenty of razzle-dazzle. . . . Some of these kids could technically have played rings around many of the actual performers; but whatever they were playing (we couldn’t figure it out), it wasn’t folk music.⁸²

Contrasting their own discerning tastes with those of the broader public, the editors of the *Little Sandy Review* sought to distinguish themselves from the hoi polloi of the newly-popularized folk craze.

Moe Asch and Folkways Records

One of the most influential behind-the-scenes figures in the revival—and one who had numerous connections with the avant-garde—was Moe Asch, founder and director of Folkways Records. Cohen met Asch in early 1958, and the two men immediately found common ground in their views toward folk music. Their first conversation concerned Asch’s early recordings of Cisco Houston and Woody Guthrie. Cohen was impressed by the recording’s lively, spontaneous sound, and Asch explained how Houston and Guthrie had been playing in the bars on Eighth Avenue immediately before the recording,

⁸¹ Review of *Mountain Music of Kentucky*, by John Cohen, *Little Sandy Review* 2 (n.d. [ca. 1960]): 19.

⁸² “The First Annual University of Chicago Folk Festival,” *Little Sandy Review* 12 (n.d. [ca. 1961]): 5–6.

allowing them to be relaxed and ready to go. A short time later, Cohen approached Asch about recording the new group he had formed with Mike Seeger and Tom Paley because he felt they had been able to achieve a similar type of uninhibited atmosphere when performing together. Based only on Cohen's word and the reputation of the three men, Asch immediately agreed to record.⁸³

Over the coming years, Asch and Cohen developed a relationship of mutual respect, both personally and professionally. Asch spoke at Cohen's wedding in 1963 and was the godfather of their first daughter, Sonya. When Cohen produced the Folkways LP *Mountain Music of Kentucky* from his 1959 field trip, Asch gave him complete creative control. Asch engineered the sound for the first Ramblers record, and Cohen appreciated his true-to-life approach to sound recording, avoiding artificial equalization and filtering. When Cohen submitted the cover design for this record in 1958, Asch changed the coloring of the original design for the album's release. Cohen remembered, "I was not irritated. I was amused. I was sort of into randomness and chance, as long as it was not done for the purpose of high art or too self-consciously. If someone else had done it, I would have been furious. But I figured that Moe was pure at heart in his own way." Later, when Cohen was designing another album cover, he had a complicated idea and worried that it would be too avant-garde for publication. He discussed it with Asch, revealing his own "inner dialogue" and allowing Asch to comment and criticize. Of this interaction,

⁸³ Goldsmith, *Making People's Music*, 261.

Cohen said, “That was the kind of relationship we had. . . . There were only two or three other people in my life that I had that same kind of relationship with.”⁸⁴

One reason for this positive working relationship was Asch’s inclusive, idealistic view toward folk music that fit well with Cohen’s attitudes toward non-commercialism and authenticity. As something of a life calling, Asch had taken upon himself the impossible task of cataloguing the entire world of sound. He established a succession of record labels to accomplish his goal: Asch Records and Disc Records—neither of which lasted beyond the ‘40s—and Folkways, which he managed from its inception in 1948 until it was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution in 1985. The business model for Folkways Records reflected Asch’s documentary philosophy. He was willing to record almost anything he deemed unique, and as a matter of practice never dropped any title from his catalogue. He once quipped, “Just because the letter *J* is less popular than the letter *S*, you don’t take it out of the dictionary.”⁸⁵ The Folkways catalogue thus extended well beyond the folk, hillbilly, and blues titles that one would expect from the label. They released “ethnic” music from around the world, spoken word recordings of poetry and historical speech, children’s songs, avant-garde composition, and electronic music. He released LPs of everyday sounds, with titles including *Sounds of the Office* and *Sounds of the Junkyard*, featuring tracks such as “Old Electric Typewriter” and “Truck Unloading.”

Asch’s expansive views toward the artistic legitimacy of all recorded sound fit well with some avant-garde musicians and intellectuals. Paul Bowles—composer, music

⁸⁴ John Cohen, interview with Peter Goldsmith, tape recording, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collection, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸⁵ Richard Carlin, *Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2008), 10.

critic, and contributor to Charles Henri-Ford's avant-garde magazine *The View*—worked closely with Asch. In the mid-'40s, Disc Records released Bowles' *Night Without Sleep*, a cryptic album that demonstrated an avant-garde tendency toward abstraction and interdisciplinary crossover.⁸⁶ Bowles' literary and musical interests also included a fascination with world cultures. Historian Peter Goldsmith discussed Bowles' avant-garde views toward exotic musical cultures and how they interacted with Asch's philosophy:

The encounter with the culturally unfamiliar was for Bowles, other avant-gardists, and soon the emerging Beats . . . a way of casting off familiar cultural moorings in order to better explore their own unfettered mental activity. It was all grist for Asch. He would not have cared whether the apprehension of other cultures was used to build bridges between people or explore the dark edges of an individual's inner world. Whatever people made of it, there was only danger in withholding information about the unfamiliar from the public—not in making it available. The unlikely meeting of New York's avant-garde and the ostensibly 'timeless' music of the world's traditional populations made perfectly good sense to Asch. The former made use of the latter, and Asch made use of it all.⁸⁷

Bowles' approach, looking out toward unfamiliar cultures to better understand one's self, prefigured the attitudes Cohen developed in the late '50s.

Henry Cowell, who worked extensively for Asch writing ethnomusicological liner notes and producing the Folkways series, *Music of the World's People*, encouraged further connections between Asch the avant-garde. Disc Records released some of John Cage's prepared piano music in the '40s, and Folkways released *Indeterminacy* on LP in 1959. The latter record consisted of 90 one-minute stories read by Cage, arranged in random order, superimposed with David Tudor's seemingly unrelated performance of

⁸⁶ Goldsmith, *Making People's Music*, 205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

aleatoric piano music with electronics. Asch's inclusive philosophy found little problem with Cage's radical views towards the artistic legitimacy of random sound.⁸⁸

Peter Bartók provides another interesting modernist connection at Folkways Records. Son of the famous composer, Bartók worked extensively as a sound engineer for Asch throughout the '50s and arranged for the Folkways release of his father's field recordings and compositions. He engineered many of the Ramblers' albums, recording the musicians in a large hall with natural wood to provide a fitting performance space. It seems Bartók inherited some of his father's views toward folk authenticity and scientific accuracy, striving for a genuine, natural sound in recording.⁸⁹

Harry Smith and His Anthology

The most influential Folkways project by an avant-garde figure was Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, published as a three-volume, six-LP set in 1952. This enigmatic compilation, which soon gained a cult following in the underground folk scene of the '50s and '60s, consisted of reissues of commercially-recorded hillbilly and race records from the late '20s and early '30s. Smith later explained one of his primary criteria for inclusion: that the recording was peculiar, interesting, or "exotic in relation to what was considered to be the world culture of high class music."⁹⁰ This

⁸⁸ Ibid., 204–5, 281–82; John Holzaepfel, "David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Music, 1950–1959" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1994), 227–30; thanks to Michael Hicks for providing the latter reference.

⁸⁹ Cohen interview with Goldsmith. For information on the scientific and aesthetic views Peter Bartók inherited from his father, see Peter Bartók, *My Father* (Homosassa, Florida: Bartók Records, 2002).

⁹⁰ Harry Smith, "A Rare Interview with Harry Smith," interview by John Cohen, December 1968, *Sing Out!* 19, no. 1 (April–May 1969): 3.

selection process created an eclectic mix that must have sounded completely foreign and archaic to the average mid-century listener. Many revivalists latched on to these exotic sounds as a legitimate alternative, both to the white-washed mass-media of mainstream America and the politically-motivated folk-songs of the '40s revival. Guitarist John Fahey remembered the effect of the *Anthology* among his circle of folk enthusiasts in Washington DC: "Here was a guy . . . familiar with Sharp and Child, a guy who simply dispensed with popular liberal religious youth political folk music (didn't even mention the music of Pete Seeger and his ilk) but above all had the same merit list in his head that we had."⁹¹ Dave van Ronk explained the *Anthology*'s renown in Greenwich Village: "The *Anthology* was our bible. We all knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated. They say that in the 19th century British Parliament, when a member would begin to quote a classical author in Latin the entire House would rise in a body and finish the quote along with him. It was like that."⁹² Jon Pankake once even described the very purpose of the *Little Sandy Review* as "discussing the difference between the 'folk music' on the *Anthology* and the 'folk music' represented by the artists and albums of the recording industry."⁹³

The *Anthology*'s visual presentation—its packaging and liner notes—contributed to its archaic strangeness and mystery. The front cover of each volume showed a 17th-century print—from Robert Fludd's *History of the Microcosm and Macrocosm*—of a

⁹¹ John Fahey, liner notes to *Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four*, (Austin, Texas and New York: Revenant Records and The Harry Smith Archives, 2000), 82.

⁹² Dave van Ronk, liner notes to *Dave van Ronk: The Folkways Years 1959–61* SFW 40041 (Washington DC: Smithsonian/Folkways Records, 1991).

⁹³ Jon Pankake, "The Brotherhood of the Anthology," essay in booklet accompanying the reissue of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW 40090, 1997), 27.

celestial monochord being tuned by the hand of God. The monochord divides the intervals and proportions of two octaves, relating the musical divisions to the classical elements and the astrological signs of the cosmos. Greil Marcus wrote, “It was as if they had something to do with each other: as if Pythagoras, Fludd, and the likes of Jilson Setters, Ramblin’ Thomas, the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, Charlie Poole, and the North Carolina Ramblers, and Smith himself, were calling on the same gods.”⁹⁴ The *Anthology* was divided by genre into three volumes (Ballads, Social Music, and Songs) with each volume’s cover donning a specific color (red, green, and blue) pertaining to the classical elements of water, air, and fire. Smith planned but never finished a fourth volume, which was to be brown and correspond with earth.⁹⁵

In the accompanying handbook to the *Anthology*, each song was labeled in sequence, 1–84, with the numbers printed in an enormous sans-serif font that dominated the surrounding text. Smith seemed to be indicating a particular significance in the numbering. He later said, “The whole purpose is to have some kind of a series of things. Information as drawing and graphic designs can be located more quickly than it can be in books. . . . It’s like flipping quickly through, it’s a way of programming the mind, like a punch card of sort.”⁹⁶ Each track’s entry, in addition to discographic and bibliographic information, also included notes by Smith ranging from folkloric documentation to

⁹⁴ Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 2001): 93; originally published as *The Invisible Republic* (New York: H. Holt, 1997).

⁹⁵ Smith, *Sing Out!* interview, 6.

⁹⁶ Smith, *Sing Out!* interview, 9. Robert Cantwell described Smith’s organization as relating to Fludd’s 17th-century “memory theatre . . . whose aim was to present the entire cosmos of knowledge in the form of alchemical, astrological, and cabalistic symbols arranged in particular sequences on the terraces of a small circular amphitheater.” See Cantwell, *When We Were Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 205.

simple commentary. In the notes for Volume One, the ballads, Smith wrote synopses in the manner of tabloid headlines. His matter-of-fact tone of writing magnified the bizarre nature of the topic. For example, “MEDIEVAL WOMAN DEFEATS DEVIL DESPITE HUSBAND’S PRAYERS,” and “ZOOLOGIC MISCEGENY ACHIEVED IN MOUSE FROG NUPTUALS, RELATIVES APPROVE.” Smith’s presentation, in addition to providing scholarly information, embraced the music’s rich peculiarities.

Scattered throughout the *Anthology*’s handbook are collage-like clippings from old record catalogues and 19th-century engravings. Smith sought, not only to present authentic music of the ‘20s and ‘30s, but also to give the listener a visual glimpse into this strange, archaic world. Smith seems to have given considerable attention to the visual layout of the *Anthology*, even leaving his signature and date on the final product, thus stamping it as a legitimate work of art. These visual aspects were not lost on Cohen, who was studying at Yale art school when he bought the *Anthology* in 1952. “When the *Anthology* first came out . . . with that strange image of the hand of God tuning the celestial monochord, nobody paid attention. But I paid attention to that. I said, ‘What is he trying to tell us here?’”⁹⁷

By the early ‘60s, Cohen saw Smith’s *Anthology* as playing an essential role in the aesthetic developments of the revival. He considered Smith a “source and wellspring” from which others could build, writing that “Harry could be considered as the mystic and genius behind the ‘traditional folk music’ movement.” As evidence, he cited the appropriation of music and styles from the *Anthology* by a wide array of revivalists, from

⁹⁷ John Cohen, interview on *The Old, Weird America: Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music*, documentary film included in Rani Singh and Hal Willner, *The Harry Smith Project: Anthology of American Folk Music Revisited* (Los Angeles, California and New York: Shout Factory, 2006).

Joan Baez to Pete Seeger to Doc Watson.⁹⁸ More recently, Cohen considered Smith's influence as reaching even further, noting that his eccentric vision had been, in a strange way, more relevant to attitudes toward traditional music in the decades since the revival than the contributions of Alan Lomax.⁹⁹

Cohen also bore a personal fascination with Smith and his *Anthology*. He first met Smith in 1961 and later arranged an extended interview (published in *Sing Out!* in 1969) to better understand the collector's outlook. Much of Cohen's interest stemmed from Smith's unique background of artistic, anthropological, and mystic exploration.¹⁰⁰

Smith was initially known as an abstract filmmaker in Bay Area avant-garde circles of the '40s; he had developed a unique batik process of animation by printing ink directly on the film. Although extremely time-intensive—it took him years to complete a film of only several minutes—this process created rich, vibrant effects; his abstract geometric animations were shown as part of the Art in Cinema series at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.¹⁰¹

In addition to his artistic pursuits, Smith maintained a life-long interest in anthropology. As a teenager in the early '40s, he observed and documented Native American ceremonies; he later studied anthropology for five semesters at the University

⁹⁸ John Cohen, "John Cohen's Column," *Little Sandy Review* 29 (n. d. [ca. 1963]), 33–35.

⁹⁹ Cohen Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This and subsequent biographical information on Smith was gathered from several overlapping sources: P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 235–41, 243–58; Edward Sanders, liner notes to *Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four* (Austin, Texas and New York: Revenant Records and The Harry Smith Archives, 2000), 4–30; Harry Smith, *Sing Out!* interview; Paola Iglioni, *American Magus Harry Smith: A Modern Alchemist* (New York: Inanout Press, 1996).

of Washington.¹⁰² As an extension of his anthropological investigations, he developed his interest in record-collecting. WWII-related shellac shortages prompted the government to call for laminated records to be melted down for the war effort, and, though this put many records from the '20s and '30s in danger of destruction, it also brought the records out of people's attics, making them available to the scrupulous collector. In 1944, he put an ad in a local magazine, *The Record Changer*, looking for "Pre-1940 Race and Hillbilly Records," including Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Uncle Eck Dunford, Clarence Ashley, and Robert Johnson.¹⁰³ Smith later spoke of his collection: "I don't recall the exact number of records I had. I think it was two thousand records which had been cut down from twenty thousand at one point. They were so piled around that it was impossible. There was no way of listening to them, but you didn't want to skip anything that might be good."¹⁰⁴ When Smith moved to New York in 1951, he tried to sell the collection to Moe Asch, who, recognizing Smith's encyclopedic knowledge of the music, suggested that Smith himself prepare an anthology of the recordings for publication. Smith worked in the Folkways offices for several months compiling the notes and art for the *Anthology*. After its completion, he sold the record collection to the New York Public Library and moved on to other artistic and anthropological pursuits.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Sanders, liner notes to *Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four*, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Sing Out!* interview, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Goldsmith, 237–42. At the New York Public Library, Smith's collection exerted even more influence on the revival when Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger volunteered to catalogue the recordings. In the process, they smuggled records out in the evenings and made reference tapes. According to Cohen, "Those tapes provided a lot of source material for the New Lost City Ramblers when they started. . . . And then I would take those tapes, and I'd share them with people in California, who would pass them around so other people could hear them." See Cohen Interview.

Smith's interests in folk music, anthropology, and visual art all stemmed from a similar exploratory impulse. He sought to discern significant patterns by compiling series of visual and aural artifacts. In an interview with Cohen in 1969, he said:

The type of thinking that I applied to records, I still apply to other things like Seminole patchwork, or to Ukrainian Easter eggs. . . . Being as my essential interest in music was in the patterning that occurred in it (intuition or taste only being a guide to directions where this patterning might occur) it was just as well to collect some other object. I'm sure that if you could collect sufficient patchwork quilts from the same people who made the records, like Uncle Dave Macon or Sara Carter . . . you could figure out just about anything you can from the music. Everything could be figured out regarding their judgement in relation to certain intellectual processes. Like certain things sound good to a person in music, certain things look good to an eye. And at some level those two things are connected.¹⁰⁶

Smith's pursuits as a collector and documenter all seem to have utilized a process of reduction, paring down the external variations to reveal essential principles or elements. This attitude can be seen in the curious synopsis he provided for his first film, a three-minute abstraction: "Hand-drawn animation of dirty shapes—the history of the geologic period reduced to orgasm length."¹⁰⁷

Smith's reductionist philosophy relates to his life-long interest in hermetic philosophy and the occult, finding hidden truth through the patterns and correspondences of disparate elements. His parents were Theosophists, and his grandfather a Freemason. From the age of twelve he practiced hermetic alchemy, and its symbolism and imagery recurred throughout his artistic output. He also spent considerable time studying Kabbala,

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *Sing Out!* interview, 9–10.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 235.

with the Tree of Life diagram displayed prominently his films and artwork.¹⁰⁸ Regarding Smith's hermetic inclinations, film historian P. Adams Sitney wrote, "The hermetic artist is one who finds the purification, or the formal reduction, of his art coincident with his quest for a magical center that all arts, and all consciousnesses, share."¹⁰⁹ These hermetic ideals taught that all knowledge in the universe could be related by higher principles, if only enough information could be gathered, catalogued, and analyzed.

Smith's unique, mystical view toward the correlations found in art and collecting led Cohen to view the *Anthology* as "a statement of interrelationships" which opened avenues for new ways of looking at the music. In some ways, Smith's tendency toward classification harbors similarities to the ethnomusicological work of Alan Lomax (especially his Cantometrics developed in the '60s). However, instead of serving a purely anthropological purpose, Smith's work served as a means of aesthetic discovery. Goldsmith observed that Smith's exploration, like the Beats with whom he later became associated, "was a self-referential project. Smith was finally more interested in what patterns of cultural artifacts told him about himself than what they suggested about the people who produced them. . . . Collecting was an artistic endeavor for Smith, because the arrangement of the collected objects followed the dictates of his own idiosyncratic imagination. . . . Smith was surely among the first (perhaps with Paul Bowles) to directly

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *Sing Out!* interview, 6; Sanders, liner notes to *Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four*, 4–5, 24. For Smith's commentary on the Kabbalistic symbolism in his film *Heaven and Earth Magic*, see Harry Smith, lecture given 9 July 1988 at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poets, audio recording, Naropa Poetics Audio Archives, accessed online 3 May 2009, http://www.archive.org/details/naropa_harry_smith_lecture_on_heaven.

¹⁰⁹ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 238. For more information about the incorporation of ideas from hermeticism and alchemy into Smith's films, see Jamie Sexton, "Alchemical Transformations: The Abstract Films of Harry Smith," *Senses of Cinema* no. 36 (July–September 2005), accessed online 11 May 2009, <http://sensesofcinema.com>.

implicate folk music in an avant-garde artistic vision.”¹¹⁰ His mystic, avant-garde sensibilities provided new avenues toward finding personal and social meaning in traditional music.

In spite of Cohen’s comment that there was “almost no concern or appreciation for modern or abstract art” in the mainstream folk revival, he nevertheless associated with a small but influential community of folk enthusiasts who saw exciting possibilities in the philosophies and aesthetics of the avant-garde: Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, whose modernist attitudes toward composition and music theory carried over into their studies of folk music; the editors of the *Little Sandy Review*, whose enthusiasm for old-time music incorporated an avant-garde mindset, remaining mindful of contemporary developments in film, literature, and art; Moe Asch, whose inclusive Folkways catalogue placed *Sounds of the Junkyard* and Cage’s *Indeterminacy* alongside the music Roscoe Holcomb and the New Lost City Ramblers; and Harry Smith, whose unique vision combined the mystical, the artistic, and the anthropological all into one enigmatic *Anthology*. These cultural mediators explored new avenues in their promotion and presentation of the music, contributing to an expanded view toward the meaning and usage of folk music in modern life.

¹¹⁰ Goldsmith, 239.

CHAPTER 4

COHEN AND HOLCOMB

Cohen's discovery and promotion of Roscoe Holcomb became one of his most important contributions to the folk revival. After their initial encounter in 1959, Cohen arranged for Holcomb to appear at folk festivals and concerts in New York, Chicago, Newport, Washington D.C., and California; in 1965, he arranged a European tour. Cohen also produced several LPs of Holcomb's music and promoted him through published interviews and articles. From this exposure, Holcomb received critical acclaim for his strident vocal expression and his archaic, unusual banjo technique. Jon Pankake wrote, "Holcomb is the most moving, profound, and disturbing of any country singer in America," and Bob Dylan said he possessed "an untamed sense of control" that made him "one of the best."¹¹¹ From Cohen's oft-reproduced photographs, Holcomb's visual image became iconic; his wiry frame and gaunt, angular features personified, for many revivalists, the ideals of hardy resilience and folk asceticism.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Jon Pankake, "Country Music," *Sing Out!* 15, no. 4 (September 1965): 90; Bob Dylan, "Conversations with Bob Dylan," interview by John Cohen and Happy Traum (June and July 1968), *Sing Out!* 18, no. 4 (October/November 1968): 9.

¹¹² For an insightful analysis of Cohen's documentary work with Holcomb, see Scott Matthews, "John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky: Documentary Expression and the Image of Roscoe Halcomb During the Folk Revival," *Southern Spaces*, 6 August 2008, <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2008/matthews/1a.htm>.

Cohen's attitude of personal exploration was essential in his work with Holcomb.

A few months after their initial encounter in Kentucky, Cohen wrote an article in *Sing Out!* magazine describing the factors that had prompted his trip:

In May 1959, disgusted with the city, grey dirt, and second-hand folk music, curious about the Kentucky mountains, Elizabethan-like ballads, dulcimers, fierce banjo-playing, hillbilly music, bloody Harlan, mining songs and Merle Travis, feuding, moonshining, depressions and striking miners, I went to Kentucky in the disguise of a photographer and song collector. In truth I was a spy, trying to find out what it was in myself that had always sat up to the reports of sounds and a powerful atmosphere which emanated from that part of the country.¹¹³

In Cohen's view, raw Appalachian culture was seen as an antidote to the aesthetically blunting effects of modern society. Perhaps stemming from his direct contact with traditional cultures at Turkey Point and Camp Woodland, he felt that the best way to learn and benefit from the culture was to work with the people directly. However, Cohen not only wanted to seek out, study, record, and disseminate the traditional music (as Lomax had done); he sought meaningful personal interaction with the musicians to better understand his artistic curiosity, while presenting them in a way that would be sympathetic to their own background and aesthetic. He wrote, "If the city wants and needs folk music in its soul, then its exchange with country musicians must be a two-way affair. . . . We must be willing to understand their way of life and to respect them as people who have something to offer in their way."¹¹⁴

¹¹³ John Cohen, "Field Trip—Kentucky," *Sing Out!* 10, no. 2 (June–July 1960): 13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

A “No-Romantic” Romanticization of Mountain Culture

Cohen felt that Lomax’s presentation of folk music, with its “purple prose” and “pontificating,” made for an overly-romanticized view of traditional music and culture—an effect he wanted to avoid. When later asked about the possibility of a romanticized aspect to his own love of the country as a “suburban kid,” Cohen explained his lifestyle in rural Putnam County, New York where he had lived since 1965: “I split wood; I feed my fire. I have a garden. Last night, with my flashlight, I was cutting broccoli. I didn’t want it to become romantic, I wanted it to become real.”¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, the *Sing Out!* excerpt quoted above shows that Cohen indeed harbored his own brand of romanticization toward the country. This romanticization, combined with his aesthetic desire for “real” experience, made his personal interactions with rural culture more intense.

For example, while in eastern Kentucky in 1959, Cohen drove with two older musicians out “to a section of these mountains . . . which is generally feared by people in Hazard (who also have a fearful enough reputation themselves).” When they reached their destination, the home of an old fiddler, Cohen heard and recorded music of “the greatest type which I’ve only heard before in the Library of Congress.” Among the fiddler’s family, however, he also heard about “local murders, brothers killing brothers, wives killed by husbands, violent automobile accidents, snipings at coal operators, dirty dealing in coal contracting, moonshining, illegal hunting, etc. . . . All the while we were making all that nice old music.” Here Cohen came into personal contact with the

¹¹⁵ John Cohen, “The Image of American Music—A conversation with John Cohen,” interview by Barry Mazor, *No Depression*, (January–February 2002): 40; Cohen Interview.

elements which he had romanticized. He sensed a “certain spirit of this place is akin to Shakespeare’s England, with motivations coming from a sense of gallantry + duty primarily. People here are rugged individuals. . . . But still, there is something which isn’t yet clear—which I can’t get along with. Although there is real + warm love within families—there is something extremely opposite that—which manifests itself in feuds, shootings, cuttings, etc.” As historian Scott Matthews noted, “The cognitive dissonance caused by seeing ‘Merry England’ -in-Kentucky alongside explicit talk of familial violence only deepened the region’s allure and mystery for Cohen.”¹¹⁶ Much akin to the “no-romantic romantic” attitudes of the Abstract Expressionists, while Cohen rejected the romanticism of the older generation, he pursued his own romantic approach—one which he saw as being more valid. His encounter with the dissonant realities of Kentucky culture—along with his rejection of hyper-political and sugar-coated pastoral imagery—all added to the romantic fascination of his search for the culturally authentic.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Cohen’s quest for truth in traditional cultures was largely self-referential. Similar to the avant-garde explorations of the Beat poets, Paul Bowles, and Harry Smith, in Cohen’s exploration of disparate cultures, he sought a greater understanding of his own aesthetic disposition. He came to an early realization while a teenager on Long Island, when first hearing rural country music on distant AM radio stations in the evenings. Between the music, he often heard advertisements for a plastic tablecloth printed with an image of the Lord’s Supper. In his first reaction, he thought, “This was stuff that wouldn’t have been in my house . . . That’s cheap.” He soon

¹¹⁶ Quotes and analysis in Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky.”

realized, however, that “everybody whose music I liked owned a plastic tablecloth with the Lord’s Supper on it.”¹¹⁷ This led him to reevaluate his own values and outlook.

Aesthetic disparities necessitated a search for common ground, which in turn, helped him understand the core of his own artistic impulses.

For Cohen, Roscoe Holcomb was the most effective example of this disparity. His music affected Cohen “both emotionally and spiritually. I suddenly wanted to know what Roscoe had seen and experienced to be able to make that kind of music.”¹¹⁸ In spite of (or perhaps because of) their cultural differences, Cohen saw in Holcomb an ideal, both of the true artist—to which he himself aspired to—and “the existential hero of literature,” whose search for meaning in an atmosphere of cultural alienation created aesthetic power.¹¹⁹

Holcomb and Revivalist Perceptions

Holcomb’s background, attitudes, and lifestyle made him well-suited for Cohen’s admiration; he seemed to embody the ideals of non-commercialism and expressive individuality. Born in 1911 in an isolated hollow up Little Leatherwood Creek, Holcomb lived most of his life in the mountain community surrounding Daisy. He made his living working in the lumber mill, the coal mines, and various construction jobs. Until he met Cohen at the age of 47, Holcomb had performed almost exclusively for the residents of his own community and the surrounding area, playing for square dances, pie suppers,

¹¹⁷ Cohen, *No Depression* interview, 40.

¹¹⁸ John Cohen, “A Visitor’s Recollections,” in *Long Journey Home: Folklife in the South*, ed. Allen Tullos (*Southern Exposure*, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3, 1977), 116.

¹¹⁹ Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky.”

fiddling contests, local radio shows, and church meetings. His repertoire and style reflected this background, incorporating dance tunes, ballads, country blues, church songs, and Old Regular Baptist hymns.¹²⁰

Holcomb expressed a strong emotional connection to the traditional music, particularly with its themes of motherhood, love, death, spiritual redemption, and the difficulties of life. Having been raised in an Old Regular Baptist family, he often would choke up when performing hymns such as “Wandering Boy” and “The Village Churchyard.” Cohen noted, “This music was an immediate way for him to stay in contact with the old Baptist singing that he loved. . . . The emotion they released was very close to the surface.”¹²¹ Songs about motherhood were particularly important to Holcomb. He lived with his mother until her death around 1950 and often expressed a profound attachment with her. Thus, in his mountain community, Holcomb had a literal personal connection with, for example, the song describing the “old village churchyard . . . where my mother’s sleeping in the cold and silent ground.” In an interview with Cohen, Holcomb said, “And your mother’s love—you’ll never forget her smile; I don’t care if

¹²⁰ This and subsequent biographical information about Holcomb, unless otherwise noted, was compiled from the following overlapping sources: Roscoe Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*; Roscoe Holcomb, “Interview with Roscoe,” interview by John Cohen, published in liner notes to Roscoe Holcomb, *The High Lonesome Sound* (Folkways FA 2368, 1965), 1–4; Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky”; John Cohen, liner notes to Roscoe Holcomb, *The High Lonesome Sound* (Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 20560, 1998); John Cohen, liner notes to Roscoe Holcomb, *An Untamed Sense of Control* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40144, 2003); Interviews by the author with Holcomb’s extended family and acquaintances in Cornettsville, Daisy, and Hindman, Kentucky, tape recording, 11–13 June 2008 (Interviewees: Lee Sexton, Jean Ritchie, Fess Halcomb, Junior and Irene Shepherd, Marge Demsford, Jeanette Whitaker, Wanda Sexton, Reva Huff, Jim McCowan, Randy Wilson, and Sonny Houston).

¹²¹ Cohen, email correspondence with author, 23 January 2009. As an example, here is a transcript of Holcomb introducing an Old Regular Baptist hymn for an urban audience: “Here’s one of the Old Baptist song books that everybody sings back home. It’s a song that the old preacher leads and the rest follers (follows). . . . They get a way back on them spurs and have a memorial—get a bunch of good singers and the old preacher lining this out, and they get started singing ‘til it echoes over them valleys. Boy, it really goes good. I reckon I love them because my Daddy and Mother both gone to this Old Regular Baptist Church, and these are the only songs they ever sang. They are long but they are good.” See liner notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, 5.

you live to be a thousand years old. . . . Just like the song in the old songbook: There's none more true and tender than a mother to a boy. . . . She always thinks of him, same way I was with my mother as long as she lived. . . . That's the reason I love that song. . . . After she died it was a long time that I couldn't hardly sing it. It still touches me yet."¹²² In Cohen's view, Holcomb's hard life and non-commercialism allowed him to effectively present an oft-sentimentalized topic such as motherhood by imbuing it with an authentic emotional directness.¹²³

In some respects, however, Holcomb defied revivalist stereotypes. For example, many folk enthusiasts saw traditional Appalachian music-making as a cathartic release from the harsh realities of mountain life. Holcomb held a more pragmatic view toward the music. As a young man, he initially began playing for financial reasons: "Pretty hard times . . . so I asked God to give me something that I could do that I could make a little money. . . . I got hold of this old banjo."¹²⁴ As a laborer, Holcomb did not typically return from a hard day's work and "sing to the hills" to express his profound sorrow. He said, "You work five and six days a week on a job and then work at home on the weekends, you don't feel like playing any music." However, Holcomb was happy to play "when somebody comes around," and he often performed at church services.¹²⁵ Thus for Holcomb—in spite of his strong emotional connection to the traditional songs—music was meant to serve a useful purpose, whether it be social, religious, or financial.

¹²² Holcomb, "Interview with Roscoe," 4.

¹²³ For Cohen's views toward the legitimacy of sentimental topics in traditional music, see John Cohen, "The Revival," *Sing Out!* 11, no. 1 (February–March 1961): 21.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*, 4, 20.

Another revivalist stereotype for the authentic Appalachian singer was that of complete cultural isolation, of existing beyond the corrupting influence of mass-media. While it is true Holcomb only played what he called the “old songs,” he was not ignorant of newer developments. When he met Cohen in the late ‘50s, Holcomb was well aware of the rock and roll his stepchildren listened to on the radio. (He considered it to be “nothing but a beat,” although it did have “some good music in it.”) He enjoyed the bluegrass of Bill Monroe, regularly listened to the Grand Ole Opry, and even became a fan of Dolly Parton.¹²⁶

When comparing himself to the stars of country and bluegrass, Holcomb’s utilitarian outlook gave him reservations about his own commercial viability. He saw himself as a working man, not a professional musician; thus he never practiced his music and considered it most appropriate for local functions. Although Holcomb appreciated the admiration and recognition he received while touring and sought professional performance opportunities to help pay his bills, he openly admitted, “I don’t see why they haul me around like that. I can’t get it pictured out because I just don’t feel that I’m a good musician.”¹²⁷ Because he never made a priority of perfecting his musical style, it seems he never placed his own singing on par with that of the polished professionals. In one particularly telling comment, Holcomb revealed his practical approach toward music-making—and his awareness of commercial country music—with an allusion to a hit song

¹²⁶ Holcomb, “Interview with Roscoe,” 1; Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*, 9, 14.

¹²⁷ Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*, 21.

by honky-tonk star Lefty Frizzell: “They said, ‘Well Roscoe, there ain’t nobody that plays like you.’ I said, ‘You got the money, I got the time. That’s all I’m after, anyhow.’”¹²⁸

For Cohen, Holcomb’s practical approach to music-making portrayed a down-to-earth reality that defied commercialization. When performing for urban audiences, Holcomb typically began with an explanation of the difficulties of his life and background, excusing himself for his inability to sing as well as he would have hoped. A reviewer for a New Jersey newspaper once saw Holcomb joking backstage and, comparing it to his onstage demeanor, called him a phony. Cohen wrote, “This review hurt me deeply, and reminded me of the impossibility of my intentions in bringing Roscoe away from his home environment.”¹²⁹ He saw Holcomb’s personal simplicity and sincerity as incompatible with the distorted aesthetic requirements of the commercial folk revival.¹³⁰

Holcomb’s personality contrasted with the strength of his musical expression. Mike Seeger said, “His persona was so humble, in a way, and level with everybody—natural. . . . But that counters the intense emotion of his music. . . . There's something

¹²⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁹ Cohen, liner notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, 9.

¹³⁰ Holcomb’s loyalty to home and family also created a sense of social responsibility when he brought his music to the outside world. Well aware of the differences between his own upbringing and those of urban audiences, he sought to present the mountain culture in a positive light. Jean Ritchie, who grew up in Viper, Kentucky near Holcomb, often performed with Holcomb at folk-revival venues. She felt that herself and Holcomb had to “stand up” for their part of the country in the face of “Li’l Abner” stereotypes: “[Roscoe] would get up and play and he enjoyed it. . . . but at the same time, it kind of bothered him because he felt he had to be on his best behavior, and he couldn’t be himself. . . . We all felt that way. . . . We were just people like everybody else; we weren’t anything to be made fun of. . . . I tried to be as truthful and honest in my portrayal of Kentuckians as I could. People respected me for that. Rossie too.” See Jean Ritchie, interview with author, 12 June 2008. Also, perhaps stemming from his personal connection with the music, Holcomb felt a responsibility to pass the musical traditions to the next generation, even though his record sales and concert appearances never brought much money. In 1976, five years before his death, he said, “What are these old songs worth to me when I’m dead and gone? Sing them and let the young generation learn them [and] come up with it. . . . Ain’t no use holding something back if it needs to be put out.” See Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*, 21.

about Roscoe Holcomb that's of another world, in a way. He lived, seemingly, without hate, but there's always the ability to express emotion. . . . It was an amazing capacity that he had. It came with a certain amount of acceptance of everything as it is.”¹³¹ The juxtaposition strengthened the effect of Holcomb’s performances. As Cohen wrote, “It was always a revelation to witness such power emerge from an unobtrusive, complaining country man.”¹³²

These apparent contradictions added to the heroic qualities that Cohen and others saw in Holcomb. In hindsight, Cohen described Holcomb as “a man confronting the dilemma of his own existence. . . . Appalachian posture, hard work, hard life, broken health, coal mines, lumber mills, moonshine, and conflict between old and new ways all gave an edge of his music. . . . He never saw himself as important, and he was neither assertive nor ambitious. Yet there was something heroic and transcendent in his singing.”¹³³ As Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson wrote upon meeting Holcomb in 1961, “His feeling for people and his complete immersion in life give his conversation a sensitive, almost visionary quality. There is only one real topic of conversation with him, and that is the meaning of human experience. His every word is a reflection of his thoughtfulness and deep insight—he wouldn't know the meaning of ‘small talk.’ He speaks of the people of his region with the poeticism of a good writer, and he knows and understands their poverty, their violence, and their loneliness.”¹³⁴ Holcomb was seen as a man who was

¹³¹ Mike Seeger, interview with author, 14 May 2008.

¹³² Cohen, liner notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, 9.

¹³³ Cohen, liner notes to *The High Lonesome Sound* (1998), 2.

¹³⁴ “The First Annual University of Chicago Folk Festival,” *Little Sandy Review*, 12: 49–50.

unobtrusive while emotionally intense, unrefined while poetic, humble while standing upright in his tradition against the tide of modernity.

Finding the Avant-Garde in Holcomb

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Cohen's response to Holcomb was his background in the visual arts in New York. The aesthetics of contemporary art provided a rubric for understanding the eccentric intensity he heard in Holcomb's music.

Cohen related the rhythmic and textural structure in Holcomb's banjo style to the "overall" structure in painting. This type of structure relates to Paul Klee's teachings in the Bauhaus school—where the "dividual" nature of a painting's horizontal space can be broken into various "individual" units to create rhythm. Klee's 1929 *Highroad and Byroads* demonstrates this principle.¹³⁵ Cohen specifically related Holcomb's rhythm to the "overall" quality of Jackson Pollock's technique—which can be seen in the famous *Summertime: No. 9a* and in *Blue Poles: Number 11*. Each of these paintings establishes a horizontal rhythm through a series of vertical stimuli, whose repetition and variation create both a sense of unity and of diversity in the painting as a whole. The banjo rhythms in a work such as Holcomb's "Wayfaring Stranger" suggest a musical equivalence: the recurring off-beat pulse of the first string sets up a regular rhythmic framework, while the irregular interspersed strums create an organic ebb and flow whose fluctuations correspond with the vocal phrasing.¹³⁶ In terms of texture, Cohen described the perpetual

¹³⁵ Hajo Düchting, *Paul Klee: Painting and Music* (Munich, New York: Prestel, 1997), 35–36; Ann Temkin, "Paul Klee," in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, vol. 18 (New York: Grove's Dictionaries), 111.

¹³⁶ Cohen Interview; Holcomb's "Wayfaring Stranger" found on *Mountain Music of Kentucky* (SF CD 40077).

motion of Holcomb's banjo style as a "filigree . . . that was occasionally interrupted by the necessities of the melody. . . . The net result is a focus on energy over subject matter," which he saw as similar to the all-over effect of Pollock's style.¹³⁷

Avant-garde aesthetics also contributed to Cohen's definition of a work of art. For example, one of the novel aspects of Abstract Expressionism was the idea that the work of art is a record of a human gesture, documentary evidence of a physical occurrence. Painters such as Pollock and de Kooning concerned themselves with the physicality of the paint and its ability to communicate the artist's gesture on the canvas—complete with what some would consider to be "mistakes." This approach led to the descriptive term "action painting." As critic Harold Rosenberg noted, "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event."¹³⁸

Cohen recognized a similar quality in the recordings of Holcomb: "He spent very little time preparing or rehearsing for the song—maybe just enough time to find the comfortable position of frets and fingers, or working out the tuning that best fits the song. . . . Rarely during recording was there a second take, nor did he have any particular misgivings about 'bobbles' when he missed a note on guitar or banjo. As opposed to any quest for perfection, the recording became a document of the actuality of the moment."¹³⁹ It seems that Rosenberg's sentiment could be altered to apply to Holcomb's recording sessions: "What was to go on the tape was not a song, but an event."

¹³⁷ John Cohen, email correspondence with author, January 23, 2009.

¹³⁸ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22.

¹³⁹ John Cohen, liner notes to Roscoe Holcomb, *Close To Home* (Folkways Records FA 2374, 1975), 1.

The Abstract Expressionists fostered the idea that an unpolished, intuitive performance gives a true picture of the humanity and personality of the artist. According to Rosenberg, “The test of the new painting is its seriousness, and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's . . . experience. . . . A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. . . . The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”¹⁴⁰ Again, this relates to Cohen’s view toward Holcomb, that his raw presentation created a sense of artistic fidelity. Cohen wrote, “His music is a projection of his self, and a reflection of his experience with hard work, low wages, and his bond with Appalachian life.” Holcomb’s singing “may be full of errors in its lack of refinement, but as a human and artistic statement, it has a brutal reality.”¹⁴¹

Another parallel between Holcomb’s music and Abstract Expressionist painters lies in the nature of the artistic gesture. Franz Kline was one of Cohen’s closest acquaintances among the older generation of Abstract Expressionists. In an oft-repeated story about the origins of his style, Kline found inspiration observing the chance effects created when portions of ordinary pencil sketches were amplified by Willem de Kooning’s Bell-Opticon projector: “A 4-by-5 inch drawing of the rocking chair Franz had drawn . . . [when magnified against the wall,] loomed in gigantic black strokes which eradicated the image, the strokes expanding as entities themselves, unrelated to any

¹⁴⁰ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 23.

¹⁴¹ Cohen, liner notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, 3; John Cohen, liner notes to *The Music of Roscoe Holcomb and Wade Ward* (Folkways Records Album FA 2363, 1962), 2.

reality but that of their own existence.”¹⁴² From this point forward, Kline utilized raw, visceral black-and-white gestures, amplified to the point of abstraction, whose strength emanated primarily from their exaggerated size and rough-hewn presentation.

Similarly, Holcomb’s drawn-out vocal amplification and emotional intensity led Cohen to find startling new perspectives in familiar melodies: “For me, to hear Roscoe sing ‘On Top of Old Smokey’ completely annihilated the Burl Ives version and the group sing-along arrangements that followed. . . . Roscoe’s music was radical and avant-garde . . . and it put me in touch with another view of the music.” For Cohen, traditional texts were also transfigured and given new life through Holcomb’s unique expression. Holcomb’s songs were “more than just folk songs from an Appalachian songbag. Somebody else might sing the exact same song texts, but the meanings and associations might be different. . . . His style lifted the texts to another plane.”¹⁴³

Cohen’s involvement in Pop Art and the Happenings facilitated further aesthetic parallels. He attended and photographed Grooms’ Happening *Burning Building* in December, 1959. The crudely-constructed set for this production included a painted cardboard cutout of a fireman and a cardboard “burning building”—complete with flames and smoke made of red-painted canvas and black paper bags stuffed with paper. The action on stage consisted of seemingly unrelated absurdities. For example, characters dressed as firemen, wearing old overcoats and large cardboard hats, began the production with an impromptu dance: “Usually they linked arms and spun in an awkward Irish jig,

¹⁴² Quoted in Elaine de Kooning, *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 196.

¹⁴³ Cohen, liner notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, 6–7; Cohen, liner notes to *The High Lonesome Sound* (1998), 10–11.

pounding their heavy boots against the floor and laughing in a deep, harsh, mocking manner. . . . Frequently they would break out of the jig and, grunting loudly, pummel each other with the flour-filled socks they carried.”¹⁴⁴ In essence, *Burning Building* presented unsophisticated human activity in a deliberately unselfconscious fashion.

Similarly, Cohen saw a certain unselfconsciousness in Holcomb’s musical performances. He wrote, “For Roscoe, music seems to be a one-way proposition; he makes the music, and it leaves him. . . . There seems to be little concern of how it reaches the listener. Roscoe just gives it all he’s got.”¹⁴⁵ In this regard, Holcomb’s performances could be seen as a step beyond the Happenings with which Cohen had become involved. Instead of presenting deliberately unselfconscious human activity, it appeared Holcomb actually *was* unselfconscious in the honest presentation of his own humanity.

The ideal of the unselfconscious artist carried over into Cohen’s style of presentation in the New Lost City Ramblers. In their concerts, the Ramblers allowed an informal atmosphere. For example, they often engaged in banter and impromptu jokes while tuning and retuning their instruments. This demeanor was essential to their

¹⁴⁴ Cohen Interview; Michael Kirby, ed., *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1965), 118–33.

¹⁴⁵ John Cohen, “John Cohen’s Column,” *Little Sandy Review* 28: 45–49.

philosophy of presenting old-time music in its original spirit. The music retained its “straightforward vitality” by not being formalized or “prettied up.”¹⁴⁶

This unselfconsciousness in performance relates to the aforementioned notion of “erasing all boundaries between art and life,” which appears as a common thread throughout all of the movements with which Cohen was involved during these years. From the Abstract Expressionists to the Beat poets to the Happenings, artists sought aesthetic veracity by breaking down the self-conscious posturing of established artistic conventions. For Cohen, the raw immediacy and “straightforward directness” of traditional music—especially the music of Holcomb—exemplified this ideal.¹⁴⁷

The High Lonesome Sound

Shortly after his 1959 trip to Kentucky, Cohen compiled his recordings and photographs to produce a Folkways LP, *Mountain Music of Kentucky*. Holcomb’s music featured prominently on the record and his image was used for the cover. The release garnered considerable critical attention; the San Francisco Chronicle called it “one of the greatest records in the entire literature of American folk song,” and the Little Sandy Review hailed it as a work revealing “insight into the human experience,” lauding

¹⁴⁶ John Cohen, liner notes to *The New Lost City Ramblers* (Folkways Records FA 2396, 1958), 2. This deliberate unselfconsciousness was sometimes misunderstood by audiences. One reader of the folk magazine *Caravan* wrote a letter to the editor regarding the Ramblers’ “looseness” on stage at Carnegie Hall, criticizing their demeanor and excessive tuning. They “did entirely too much wandering about the stage and seemed very haphazard about the whole thing.” He felt they should have put more effort in to their presentation, saying that “a well-presented concert can make mediocre material more enjoyable.” To Cohen and the Ramblers, however, a superficial dressing-up of “mediocre material” represented precisely what was wrong with the current folk revival. See Irwin Lutzky, [Letter to the editor], *Caravan* 14 (December–January 1958): 27. Cohen once said, “It’s so funny seeing articles now saying the New Lost City Ramblers typified the folk revival. Like hell. We opposed the folk revival. It was a desecration of what we loved.” See Eddie Dean, “City Lights: John Cohen,” *Washington City Paper* 21, No. 48 (Nov. 30–Dec. 6, 2001), accessed online 23 October 2008, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/display.php?id=22891>.

¹⁴⁷ John Cohen, liner notes to *The New Lost City Ramblers* (Folkways Records FA 2396, 1958).

Cohen's photographs and extensive liner notes as providing "a model for future such documentaries." Robert Shelton reviewed the LP—along with a handful of other folk collections—in a New York Times article, prominently displaying Holcomb's now-iconic image and mentioning that Holcomb deserved "to be heard in person at some of the big Eastern folk festivals."¹⁴⁸

Although Cohen's culturally sensitive, personal approach toward documentation received much critical praise, he felt that mere audio tracks, photographs, and liner notes were insufficient to fully convey the emotional and spiritual meaning he found in his interactions with Holcomb and his community. In 1961, he brought Holcomb north to Chicago and New York to appear for urban audiences, but still felt a certain dissatisfaction in the means of portrayal, as Holcomb was taken out of his element to be presented on an urban stage. While driving through Appalachia in 1961, he realized that his own experience in Kentucky had been shaped by "the hills, the countryside, and the look of the people when I heard this music." Since his previous attempts at documentation had not fully incorporated these aspects, he decided to make a film "to bring sound and image together" in an attempt to capture and portray the atmosphere and culture that gave Holcomb's music its strength.¹⁴⁹

So in August 1962, Cohen traveled yet again to eastern Kentucky, this time with a movie camera and an assistant, Joel Agee (son of the author James Agee). "We were there six weeks, sleeping on the floor of a lumber camp. We had one air mattress. One night he

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in liner notes to *Mountain Music of Kentucky*; Review of *Mountain Music of Kentucky*, by John Cohen, *Little Sandy Review* 2, 17–18; Robert Shelton, "Art of Folk Song in Festival Form," *New York Times*, April 24, 1960, X14.

¹⁴⁹ John Cohen, "Naming the High Lonesome Sound," *Bluegrass Unlimited* 30, no. 6 (December 1995), 44; Cohen, "A Visitor's Recollections," 117.

got the air mattress, and one night I got it.”¹⁵⁰ The two men filmed Holcomb, his family, local coal miners, church services, and community events in and around Hazard.

Before making this film—released in 1963 as *The High Lonesome Sound*—Cohen had almost no experience filming (although he had observed and photographed Frank’s production of *Pull My Daisy*). “I was unaware of film grammar, which was very fortunate, because I didn’t shoot cutaways, I didn’t think of close-ups versus this and that. None of that training, none of that vocabulary, therefore none of that framework to work against. I was just trying to get the sound and picture together in a strange way.”¹⁵¹ In this attempt to visually and aurally document the relationships between traditional music and mountain culture, Cohen informally assumed the role of anthropologist, folklorist, and ethnomusicologist. However, in reference to these scholarly approaches, he said, “I’m dealing with the same questions that they are, but through my own terms. So that the ‘ist’ that I end up being, the way I settle it on myself, is I’m an artist—back to my very beginning.”¹⁵² Cohen allowed his artistic inclinations to direct him more than any documentary or ethnographic approach because he felt that giving an aesthetic understanding of the mountain culture was the best means of portrayal. “The film I did about him, it has its own life. Intuitively, it’s one of the best things I ever did because people understand Roscoe and they understand American music through that setting. Not through Lomax; not through the folk-song movement.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ John Cohen, transcript of *Remembering the High Lonesome*, produced by Tom Davenport and Barry Dornfeld, accessed online 25 April 2009, <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,42>.

¹⁵¹ Cohen, quoted in Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky.”

¹⁵² John Cohen, quoted in Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 253.

¹⁵³ Cohen Interview.

The cinematic style of *The High Lonesome Sound* demonstrates important aspects of Cohen's attitudes toward the relationship between art and life. A desire for reality over romanticization led him to attempt to portray mountain culture in an accurate, personal way. To accomplish this, he allowed a primitive, do-it-yourself atmosphere to dominate the film. The shaky hand-held camera shots and unusual framing led one reviewer to describe the film as having "an intense amateurish quality which adds to its impact."¹⁵⁴ The film's informal quality also adds a sense of intimacy. In the scene of the Old Regular Baptist church meeting, Cohen casually filmed individual faces among the congregation—some contemplative, some bored, some penitent, some asleep. When filming a front-porch performance of Holcomb's "Across the Rocky Mountain," he moved in from behind Holcomb, panning from the back of his head toward the mountain landscape. It almost seems that Cohen sought to capture the Appalachian scene from inside Holcomb's head. For the closing scene, the camera peered past a blurry coat rack to focus on Holcomb singing in his living room from an old hymnbook, thus giving the impression that Holcomb sang simply for himself while the viewer secretly looked in.

The impact of Cohen's aesthetic philosophies becomes even more clear when one compares *The High Lonesome Sound* an earlier documentary film on folk music: *To Hear Your Banjo Play* (1947), directed by Irving Lerner and Willard Van Dyke with story and dialogue by Alan Lomax. First of all, the earlier film worked from the perspective of the city. After a musical introduction with Pete Seeger on banjo, the voice of Lomax asks Seeger, "What's that funny-lookin' guitar you're playin'?" To introduce folk music to a

¹⁵⁴ Keith K. Cunningham, review of *The High Lonesome Sound* by John Cohen and Patricia Jaffe, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 90 No. 356 (April–June 1977), 251.

broader audience, Lomax emphasized its peculiarity when compared to modern city life. In contrast, Cohen did not even mention the city, simply introducing Holcomb as “an unemployed construction worker” and presenting the music as a natural extension of everyday life. *To Hear Your Banjo Play* also tended to present traditional music as anonymous folk expression instead of the product of individual people and circumstances. For example, Pete Seeger, as narrator, introduces one musician simply as “an old friend of mine down in Virginia.” The man sits in front of his house plucking banjo, his facial expressions almost completely obscured by the broad rim of his straw hat. “He can’t read music, you know. He learns by ear. Some old tune. A tune that made feet pat in pioneer days.” This banjo-player seems more an archetype than an actual person. As the camera shows his tapping feet and darkened face, Seeger asks, “What’s he thinkin’ about? Maybe about the picnic last Saturday and the square dance.” Contrast this to Cohen’s full-screen close-up shots of Holcomb’s contemplative expressions, with voiceover by Holcomb himself, explaining the almost-supernatural power that music exerts upon humanity. Lomax’s film ends with Seeger playing banjo and singing for the American Square Dance Group in New York. Cohen’s film concludes with Holcomb singing an old Baptist hymn alone in his living room, then laying back on his couch, gazing toward the heavens in personal meditation.

When comparing the two films in 1977, reviewer Keith K. Cunningham wrote that Cohen’s film “generated a unique sense of verisimilitude because Cohen . . . obviously worked without a script and photographed everything he saw,” while the earlier film “gave the impression that the chief importance of the music was as fodder for

the New York City movements.”¹⁵⁵ This contrast between Lomax’s and Cohen’s approach—the former produced during the first wave of the American folk revival, and the latter at the height of its second wave—emphasizes the aesthetic changes that had taken place. Instead of focusing on the popularization and dissemination of the “people’s songs,” Cohen’s artistic inclinations led him to seek aesthetic depth and beauty in the harsh realities of mountain culture. In the words of Scott Matthews, *The High Lonesome Sound* documented mountain culture “as an aesthetic rather than a political phenomenon. . . . Cohen created a romantic figure by portraying Halcomb as the introspective and solitary creative genius maintaining his unique, seemingly avant-garde . . . musical style in the face of daunting pressures and obstacles.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Cunningham, review of *The High Lonesome Sound*, 250.

¹⁵⁶ Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky.”

CONCLUSION

This thesis, in its examination of John Cohen's background and work, has shown an aesthetic cross-fertilization from New York's avant-garde movements to the folk revival. Cohen's involvement with artists and intellectuals provided a fresh paradigm from which he could view traditional music and culture. Additionally, its investigation of Cohen's personal and professional associations—with Harry Smith, Moe Asch, the editors of the *Little Sandy Review*, and the Seegers—has shown that similar impulses existed among other influential revivalists.

Cohen's work with Holcomb effectively demonstrates this crossover. Holcomb came to represent the "embodiment" of Cohen's artistic goals; he bridged the worlds of Cohen's heterogeneous aesthetic. As Cohen related the rough-hewn aesthetic of Holcomb's music to that of avant-garde art, he not only found meaningful parallels in form and gesture, but placed a renewed focus on the human elements of the music. From this perspective, he was able to address existential questions of spiritual and personal meaning. Also, in the peculiar styles of old-time country music, Cohen saw a means of addressing the perennial modernist quandary: how to explore individual expression without severing one's self from the wellspring of artistic tradition. In this respect, traditional music like Holcomb's was not so different from the aesthetic explorations of the Abstract Expressionists, the Pop Artists, Robert Frank, the Beat poets, or Harry Smith.

The eccentricities Cohen found in their work guided his search for personal discovery, while their orientation within art or folk traditions provided an aesthetic anchor.¹⁵⁷

This discussion of the influence of the avant-garde art world in Cohen's aesthetic should not be construed, however, as being some sort of "secret history" of the revival of old-time country music, or that all the revivalists were in some way closet art critics. For example, Mike Seeger and Ralph Rinzler—whose contributions and influence in the revival of old-time country and bluegrass music can hardly be overestimated—seem to have had no serious interest in avant-garde developments.¹⁵⁸ With their expertise in and mastery of old-time country music, Seeger and Rinzler approached the music on its own terms, focusing on its intrinsic merit as a viable artistic tradition. Indeed, Cohen himself pointed out that his avant-garde background was simply "one of the contributions" he made to the Ramblers, one which combined with those of the other members.¹⁵⁹

Future research can explore the relation of Cohen's avant-garde aesthetic to later developments in folk-rock and the counter-culture. Indeed, in a retrospective article published in *Sing Out!* in 1970, Cohen mentioned that Holcomb was admired by rock musicians such as Eric Clapton and Jim Morrison, and that Holcomb's music appeared in Michelangelo Antonioni's counter-cultural film, *Zabriskie Point* alongside the Grateful Dead. He discussed Bob Dylan's interest in North Carolina ballad-singer Dillard Chandler, and explained that Clarence Ashley's "Coo Coo Bird" had been performed by

¹⁵⁷ Regarding this phenomenon, Cohen said, "If you don't have the limits of the tradition, then you're wandering out in the fields with nowhere to go—just anywhere to go—and you just end up nowhere." See John Cohen, panel discussion at the Monterey Folk Festival.

¹⁵⁸ Cohen Interview; Cohen interview with Goldsmith.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Janis Joplin and Taj Mahal. Cohen summarized this phenomenon by quoting Kenneth Rexroth, who wrote, “Today one of the principal foundation stones, perhaps the cornerstone, of the counter-culture is the American folksong.”¹⁶⁰

Perhaps Cohen’s adherence to strict fidelity in traditional music, paradoxically, helped emancipate its stylistic attributes into other areas of American musical culture. He placed emphasis on the music’s subtle attributes—the vocal styles, timbral qualities, and aesthetic attitudes—seeing them as essential in conveying not only the music’s emotion, but the very core of the performer’s personality. These attributes could then conceivably be distilled and used within the context of other musical styles. This idea may help explain the many folk-rock and roots musicians of the later ‘60s who, instead of faithfully reproducing the old songs, emulated traditional music’s less-tangible attributes—vocal delivery, persona, nuance of performance style, and philosophical approach—in their own original songs and performance styles.¹⁶¹

Cohen’s avant-garde outlook incorporated a search for aesthetic veracity, for an art that pertains to real life. Hence, he sought to meet the musicians on their own terms.

¹⁶⁰ John Cohen, “Roscoe Holcomb at Zabriskie Point,” *Sing Out* 20, no. 1 (September–October 1970): 21.

¹⁶¹ Possible avenues in this research might include Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia, and Ry Cooder. Relevant connections in Dylan’s career include his admiration of the Ramblers, his interactions with Cohen in his early years in New York, the connections he found between his own music and the art of Red Grooms, and his desire to incorporate the subtle characteristics of traditional music into his own songwriting. See Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume I* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 236, 238, 244, 269–70, 285–88; Cohen Interview; Cohen, *There is No Eye*, 172; and Cohen, *Wasn’t That a Time!*, 181, 183. Jerry Garcia and Ry Cooder learned from the Ramblers’ records and performances in the early ‘60s, and incorporated many country influences into their rock explorations. See Cohen Interview and Blair Jackson, *Garcia: An American Life* (New York: Viking, 1999), 38–39.

As he wrote in 1960, “If we feel a desire towards their outlook on music, we must be willing to understand their way of life and to respect them as people who have something to offer in their way.”¹⁶²

How, then, did Cohen’s artistic outlook fit with the attitudes and lifestyle in eastern Kentucky? How did Holcomb’s life change when, upon returning from his construction job one summer afternoon in 1959, he met this “little fellow” on his porch with a tape recorder? Holcomb clearly held a utilitarian view toward music-making, yet it remains difficult to measure exactly how much tangible benefit he received from his association with Cohen. Undoubtedly, he found far more recognition—even among his fellow Kentuckians—than he would have received had Cohen never recorded him. Nevertheless, in spite of widespread admiration among folk enthusiasts, Holcomb lived the remainder of his life in poverty. The money from his modest record sales and festival appearances was not enough to maintain a sufficient income, and his poor health kept him from working regularly. Furthermore, Cohen’s anti-commercial sentiments led him to value spiritual and artistic success more highly than financial success; he felt that “to change [Holcomb’s] life or his relationship to his community on our account . . . would be misleading and wrong.”¹⁶³ Even if Cohen had tried to convince Holcomb to give up labor and make his living as a professional singer, it seems doubtful Holcomb would have complied. After all, Holcomb had ignored numerous suggestions—from Bill Monroe and others—to quit work and sing professionally full-time.¹⁶⁴ Still, some residents around

¹⁶² Cohen, “Field Trip—Kentucky,” 13.

¹⁶³ Cohen, liner notes to *The High Lonesome Sound* (1965), 5.

¹⁶⁴ Holcomb, *The Appalachian Oral History Project*, 2, 7, 21.

Daisy feel Holcomb was taken advantage of by “those men in New York.” From these residents’ perspective, if Holcomb could be taken around the world to perform his music, he should have received at least enough money to live comfortably at home.¹⁶⁵ Thus, although Cohen’s culturally sensitive approach has found favor with many folk enthusiasts both within Appalachia and elsewhere, his artistic idealization of the non-commercial “country” aesthetic seems to have found incompatibilities with some of the very people whose simple pragmatism it elevated.

¹⁶⁵ Interviews by the author with Holcomb’s extended family and acquaintances, 11–13 June 2008.

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