

# blind



## Remembering John Cohen

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- **by Bill Shapiro**

**The photographer who captured old time American musicians leaves behind an astonishing legacy.**

For a time in the late '50s, when Robert Frank was making his way in New York's East Village, then a tight-knit neighborhood of artists and writers, his neighbor was a skinny musician-photographer. The two became friends and when Frank began filming *Pull My Daisy*, his unconventional movie stills about the Beat Generation, he enlisted his neighbor to shoot the stills.

That neighbor was John Cohen, who died on September 16 at 87, exactly a week after Frank passed away. Cohen became something of a legend in his own right, an incredibly prolific artist—a photographer and musician, yes, but also a filmmaker folklorist, and renowned music preservationist—whose legacy is so broad that it's almost hard to define.



*Grandma Davis & Family, Roaring River, North Carolina, 1961*  
© John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*

Both the music world and photography world claim Cohen for their own. He's celebrated for his ambitious music preservation efforts, and he traveled through America's Appalachia region, and also Peru, capturing remarkable field recordings of

local musicians; in fact, NASA included a Peruvian wedding song he taped in 1964 on a recording it sent into space. Closer to home, his own band, The New Lost City Ramblers, played for 50 years and influenced a wide swath of American musicians, from jazz greats to the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia.



*Charlie Higgins, Galax, Virginia, 1961* © John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*

At the same time, he was a photography professor 25 years, and his photographs are collected by many of the most hallowed art institutions in America: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, among many others. Cohen not only shot Jack Kerouac and the rest of the Beat Elite (some of those pictures were published in *Life*), but he also photographed Woody Guthrie, Elizabeth Cotten, Muddy Waters, as well as artists Josef Albers and Red Grooms. Of his 2001 monograph, *There Is No Eye*, which includes many of these early

images, Patti Smith said, “One could say that the treasures of the earth may be found between the eyes of John Cohen.”

Most famously, perhaps, he shot Bob Dylan. His picture from 1962, the year Dylan’s first album came out—showing an impossibly young Dylan, cigarette in mouth, back against a wall—is positively iconic. Later (and at Dylan’s request), he photographed the musician at Cohen’s own farm in upstate New York; some of those pictures appear on Dylan’s “Self Portrait” album.

While Cohen’s photos of the kids who would become kings are fascinating to look at, it was his trips through rural Appalachia—America’s long-struggling coal-mining country—and the South that produced more emotionally riveting work. Cohen made a few trips in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, hoping to find and record old time string musicians. These trips, sometimes in a van, sometimes by bus, exposed the New Yorker to a world he could hardly have imagined, and his photographs capture that sense of wide-eyed wonder.



*Alice Gerrard, Marge Ostrow & Mike Seeger, New York, New York, 1959 © John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road**

At the time, however, not everyone saw it the way he did. When Cohen returned to New York, he once wrote, “I carried my eastern Kentucky photographs to Southerner Harold Hays.” Hays was the visionary editor of *Esquire*, a magazine that

had previously published Cohen’s work. Given Hays’s Southern roots, Cohen expected to find a sympathetic audience. “He was not impressed and rejected the photos, explaining that *Esquire* would be interested only ‘if the people were really dirty and starving.’”



*Alice Gerrard & Hazel Dickens*  
© John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*

I was fortunate to speak with Cohen just before he died. He was about to publish a book of his work from that very period called *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*. The book is spectacular, offering scenes of an America long since left behind. The pictures show the old time musicians just where Cohen found them: on the rickety front porch of a shack, in a barely furnished living room, on the small stages of worn-out bars. The images are so intimate you can almost hear the music.



*Farmers at auction, Galax, Virginia, 1961*  
© John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*

When I asked Cohen what he'd been trying to capture in the pictures that appear in *Speed Bumps*, he said, "Everything that I was seeing for the first time. These were scenes that looked like old FSA photographs." He told me that he went to visit one musician, and as he approached the house, he saw, "The porch, two chairs, and a couple of tea cups. That's all. It was evocative of a life."

Cohen's camera also pulled back from the musicians themselves, allowing us to see farmers at a rural outdoor auction, the passion of local preachers, backstage signs warning singers not to cuss, how the audience dressed up for a performance. (Cohen also followed some of the banjo and guitar players to their appearances in high school gyms, small recording studios, and even the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee.)

Remarkably, many of the pictures in *Speed Bumps* have never been seen before: Cohen had put them in his basement, where they sat, forgotten, for

60 years. What was it like to go through the pictures he hadn't laid eyes on for more than half a century? The old photographs, he told me, "said so much to me that I couldn't see back then—the people around the music, the people listening to it, responding to it. There was this sense of history."

**By Bill Shapiro**

*Bill Shapiro is the former editor of Life magazine, and the co-author of the recently published book *What We Keep*.*

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*Dale Poe & Uncle Charlie Higgins, Galax, Virginia*  
© John Cohen in *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*