
The Telegraph

John Cohen, musician, photographer and archivist who championed the music of the southern states of America – obituary

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John Cohen in New York in 1962 CREDIT: David Gahr/Getty Images

John Cohen, who has died aged 87, was a guitarist, banjo player, singer, photographer and archivist who was seen by some as a visionary after devoting most of his life to performing, championing and preserving the lost music of the American south.

As a founder-member of the influential, old-timey string band, the New Lost City Ramblers, he helped shine a light on the rural country music of the 1920s and 1930s Depression era, revitalising it with an energy and verve that brought it into the heart of the 1960s American folk revival and gave identity to its unsung original performers.



The New Lost City Ramblers at the Newport Folk Festival in 1966, l-r, Tracy Schwarz, Mike Seeger and Cohen CREDIT: Michael Ochs Archive/Getty Images

As such he helped inspire a new, young generation of folk musicians, including a young Bob Dylan, while the *High Lonesome Sound* title of his 1963 documentary film fell into common usage as a description of Appalachian music. One of the Grateful Dead's most popular songs, *Uncle John's Band*, is said to have been inspired by Cohen, who was known as Uncle John to younger musicians.

Yet Cohen was a New Yorker, born in Queens on August 2 1932, growing up in Long Island with his parents, Sonya and Israel, who owned a shoe shop. His elder brother Mike – who had a group called the Shantyboys – first got him interested in folk music and, mostly listening to Woody Guthrie records, he learned to play a variety of stringed instruments.

At Yale University, where he went on to achieve a bachelor of fine arts degree, he met a similarly minded enthusiast, Tom Paley, and they started playing hillbilly songs together and promoting informal music sessions on campus, which were then known as “hootenannies”.

Meeting another kindred spirit, Mike Seeger, they formed the New Lost City Ramblers and swiftly gained a keen following on the college campus circuit with their energetic string band arrangements of old songs reflecting the harshness of daily lives, such as *How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live*, *Taxes On The Farmer Feeds Us All* and *Breadline Blues*. Where other groups of the era sought commercial success through polished updates, Cohen determined to stay true to the music's roots, going on numerous research field trips to the south.

The Ramblers appeared at the first Newport Folk Festival in 1959 and went on to release their first LP, on the Folkways label. In the next four years – until Tom Paley left to be replaced by Tracy Schwarz – they released eight albums, including *Songs From The Depression* and *Moonshine & Prohibition*, and toured regularly, becoming the catalyst of a musical counterculture, notably influencing Ry Cooder and the Byrds.



The New Lost City Ramblers' 1963 album

“We made it possible for urban-based musicians to step out of the demands of the music business and look out into America to get in touch with the genuine energy, drive and craziness out there,” said Cohen.

Along the way he became an important archivist and documentary maker, directly responsible for discovering important traditional artists such as the Appalachian singers Dillard Chandler and Roscoe Holcomb (the primary subject of his *High Lonesome Sound* film).

He also documented the times with his photographs, which appeared in various magazines, gallery collections and books, such as *There Is No Eye* (2001) and *Young Bob* (2003), a photographic record of Bob Dylan’s early days in Greenwich Village. A new collection, *Speed Bumps On A Dirt Road: When Old Time Music Met Bluegrass*, was recently published by Powerhouse Books.

Cohen left the New Lost City Ramblers in the early 1970s when he began teaching visual art and photography at Purchase College, New York, but reunited with them for a 20th anniversary concert at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1978 and for a 35th anniversary tour in 1993.

In 1999 he released a solo album, *Stories The Crow Told Me*, and also played occasionally with another old-time string band, the Down Hill Strugglers, and remained



a passionate advocate of the music. He was associate music producer with T Bone Burnett on the 2003 US Civil War film *Cold Mountain*, appeared in the *No Direction Home* Martin Scorsese documentary on Bob Dylan and was himself the subject of a 2009 Smithsonian Network documentary, *Play On John: A Life In Music*. His extensive archive is now housed at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

Cohen in New York in 1962 CREDIT: David Gahr/Getty Images

In 1965 John Cohen married the musician Penny Seeger, half-sister of Pete; she died in 1993, while their daughter Sonya Cohen Cramer, also a singer, died in 2015. He is survived by Rufus, his son with Penny.

John Cohen, born August 2 1932, died September 16 2019