

Folk music

## John Cohen obituary

Film-maker, photographer, folk music revivalist and founder member of the New Lost City Ramblers



John Cohen, right, Mike Seeger, centre, and Tracy Schwarz, the New Lost City Ramblers, playing at the Newport Folk festival, Rhode Island, in 1966. Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

### Tony Russell

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John Cohen, who has died aged 87, was distinguished in at least three fields. As a photographer in the 1950s and 60s he made memorable images of contemporary American writers and painters, and of the young Bob Dylan soon after the singer's arrival in New York. As a film-making musicologist he documented traditional arts in the American South and in Peru. And as a musician, particularly as a founder member

of the New Lost City Ramblers, he had an incalculable influence on the American folk revival and all that followed.

The original Ramblers – Cohen, [Mike Seeger](#) and [Tom Paley](#) – inspired a generation to investigate the world of old-time music recorded in the 20s and 30s. As well as tracking down some of the original players, John (and Seeger) recorded in the field many hitherto unacknowledged musicians, such as the remarkable group of Appalachian banjo players gathered on John's anthology *High Atmosphere* (1975), or the traditional singer Dillard Chandler, whom John documented in the 1973 album and film [The End of an Old Song](#).

For lovers of old-time Appalachian music, however, John's most enduring gift may prove to be his work with the Kentucky singer, banjoist and guitarist [Roscoe Holcomb](#), who sang and played for him several albums of riveting music, and who was the central figure in his film [The High Lonesome Sound](#) (1963).

John was born in Queens, New York, to Israel, who owned a shoe store, and his wife, Sonia (nee Shack). He grew up on Long Island, absorbing [Woody Guthrie](#) records while learning to play the guitar and, later, the banjo. At Yale University, where he organised folk music events on campus and began photographing folk musicians, he secured a master's degree in fine arts in 1957. A year later he became a New Lost City Rambler.

The Ramblers' live performances and 20 or so albums would take up much of John's energy for about a decade, but in 1961 he also found time to create, with Ralph Rinzler and Israel Young, the Friends of Old Time Music, a group of enthusiasts who promoted and staged the first New York concerts by Holcomb, Dock Boggs, [the Stanley Brothers](#), [Doc Watson](#), Mississippi John Hurt and many other traditional performers. He edited, with Seeger, *The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book* (1964), which became the bible of the American folk revival, and also wrote articles for the folk magazine [Sing Out!](#)

He was busy, too, with his camera on the New York cultural scene, and worked as production photographer on [Robert Frank](#) and Alfred Leslie's film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), which featured beat generation writers such as Jack Kerouac, [Allen Ginsberg](#) and [Gregory Corso](#), with music by [David Amram](#). Sixty years later Amram would be John's last visitor, dropping in to play the song Georgia for him on his piano minutes before he died.

John was fascinated by Peru, and visited it often to document, in sound and photographs and on film, the lives, work and culture of the Andean people. A wedding song performed by a young woman, taped by John and his wife, Penny (nee Seeger, Mike's youngest sister), in Huancavelica in 1964, was selected for inclusion on the golden record attached in 1977 to the Voyager 1 and 2 space probes.

In 1972, as the Ramblers began to work together less frequently, John became professor of visual arts at Purchase College, part of the State University of New York, a position he held for 25 years. His love of what he called marginal music – idioms outside the

mainstream, such as Native American song, bluegrass and cowboy music – led him to make the film *Musical Holdouts* (1976), which he followed with short films in 1981 about [Sara and Maybelle Carter](#) (of the original Carter Family) and in 1983 about the English traditional singer [Walter Pardon](#) (*The Ballad and the Source*).



John Cohen on banjo at a celebration of old-time music in New York, 2006. Photograph: Jack Vartoogian/Getty Images

He formed his own group, the Putnam String County Band (he was then living in Putnam County, New York), and there were regular regatherings of the Ramblers (featuring Tracy Schwarz, who had replaced Paley back in 1964) for concerts and folk festivals. In London in 2002, first the original trio and then the newer one took the stage at a concert celebrating the 75th anniversary of the first recordings of the Carters and [Jimmie Rodgers](#).

Over the past decade John was allied with musicians two generations younger than himself, in a New York-based string band initially called the Dust Busters, subsequently [the Down Hill Strugglers](#). According to one band member, Eli Smith: “John’s work and ideas operated at a deep level and were revelatory for a great number

of people. He had a feeling and an idea about music, visual art and culture that he followed for his entire life.”

A selection of his photographs, *There Is No Eye*, was published in 2001, and *Young Bob*, his images of Dylan, two years later. Examples of his work are held in many American museums and galleries. A 2009 Smithsonian documentary, *Play on, John: A Life in Music*, celebrated his achievements in all his chosen media.

Penny died in 1993 and their daughter, Sonya, died in 2015. John is survived by a son, Rufus, and two grandchildren, Dio and Gabel.