



## JOHN COHEN, PORTRAIT MAKER

By Todd Harvey

American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

you are right john cohen ... there is no eye — there is only  
a series of mouths — long live the mouths — your rooftop  
— if you don't already know — has been demolished ...

- **Highway 61 Revisited** notes

Photographer, musician, and filmmaker John Cohen is well-known to Dylan enthusiasts. His **Self Portrait** photographs show Dylan in 1970, relaxed and informal. The reissue and expansion of **Self Portrait** provides, in a stroke, redemption for Dylan's music and a celebration of John Cohen's images.

Six of the photos weave throughout the new set's liner notes by Greil Marcus and Michael Simmons. Some of the images may have been used in the original **Self Portrait** LP, but following brother Greil's advice, I don't know because I never bought it.

*Time Passes Slowly: Photographs and More*, a beautiful book included in the deluxe box set opens with a brief essay by Ben Rollins. The first chapter is comprised of thirty-four color photographs of Dylan that John made at his farm near Peekskill, NY, in early spring 1970. Chapter four presents a set of twenty-eight images of Dylan made by John in New York City a few weeks prior. Chapters two and three contain images by Al Clayton and a set of mixed ephemera. As John tells it in *Young Bob: John Cohen's Early Photographs of Bob Dylan* (2003):

Around 1970 [Dylan] asked me to photograph him for an album of songs written by other people. He called the album **Self Portrait**. I had photographed him on my rooftop in 1962. Now we used his rooftop. He had some kind of an idea in mind. I thought it was unusual when he requested that I 'bring one of those lenses like a telescope, so you can take pictures from a couple of blocks away.' He walked through the city streets unrecognized with no nearby camera focused on him.

Later when he came to my house out in the country, to be photographed with my dog, the barn, and the chickens, he put on my hat and stood in the landscape around my place for his self-portrait. The disguise was complete, and very simple.

As he notes, this wasn't their first session. John shot several rolls of black & white still images of Bob and two reels of black & white moving image film, the latter on his new Arriflex camera, in the spring of 1962, at his apartment on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in New York City, as well as a few miscellaneous photographs of Bob with the Greenbriar Boys at the Gaslight.

*Time Passes Slowly: Photographs and More* also presents four images made in Woodstock in summer 1968. John shot them when he interviewed Bob for a *Sing Out!* magazine article that ran in October 1968 (vol. 18, no. 4). That issue featured on its cover—wait for it—a self-portrait by Bob Dylan. The article demonstrated an

easy rapport between old friends and fellow musicians. Clearly, John Cohen was a peer.

Most of Cohen's *Time Passes Slowly: Photographs and More* images have been previously published, though not so extensively aggregated. They appeared in **The Bootleg Series, vols. 1-3**, in *Young Bob*, mentioned earlier, and in John's stunning *There Is No Eye* (2001), among other publications.

More recently, John Cohen has undertaken a multi-year project with the German publisher Steidl to issue a series of books containing his photographs and films, beginning with *Past, Present, Peru* (2010) and continuing with *The High and Lonesome Sound* (2012). Cohen's complete Dylan photographs will be issued by Steidl in 2014, with comment and annotation by the photographer.

For me, the lack of contextualization in *Time Passes Slowly: Photographs and More* creates a nagging uneasiness. We commonly find these images on the Web without attribution or caption information. In my view, a photographic publication can distinguish itself from the Web by providing high-quality printing and information about its content. The current volume tells us the photographer's name, but omits the date, location, and equipment. As well, since both the photographer and subject are still on this side of the ground, why can't we learn their thoughts about the sessions.

John recently told me that he shot both 1970 sessions shot with his Nikon S Rangefinder, wide-angle and 50mm lenses, and a rented telephoto lens. He developed the color slides shortly after the sessions and sent them to Dylan's managers for perusal. The Dylan folks, rightly protective of the images, have held them for the past 40 years. As part of the process for creating his new Steidl book, John asked for and received back the originals. He described to me the wonder of seeing some of these images, really, for the first time. That process of an artist reflecting on his work with new eyes is worthy of documentation. If, like me, you like a little descriptive and technical metadata with your photographs, then save your money for the Steidl book.

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress acquired the *John Cohen Collection* (AFC 2011/059) in 2011. The collection reflects John's work as an important ethnographer



primarily known for his documentation of the Qeros communities of Peru beginning in the 1950s. John's performing career with the New Lost City Ramblers is well represented. His 1950s photography of the Beat scene in New York, as well as photography of other musicians, provides evidence of his incredible breadth.

It is probably too late to see exhibits of John's Dylan photographs at the Morrison Hotel Gallery in Los Angeles and at the New York City gallery of L. Parker Stephenson Photographs, John's exclusive print dealer. But you could catch John with his band, The Down Hill Strugglers, on tour in a town near you. Or watch John cutting an acetate for the 78 Project at the 2013 Brooklyn Folk Festival. John Cohen's Greenwich Village rooftop may be gone, but this man and his creativity remain undiminished.

## Addendum to my Dylan Session in 1971 By Happy Traum

In describing the recording session that I took part in for Bob's **Greatest Hits, Vol.2**, I said that the song **Only A Hobo** didn't work out and was dropped. Happily, it wasn't lost forever! It just showed up on Bob's latest 'Bootleg' release called **Another Self Portrait**, and if I say so myself, it ain't half bad. Actually, I am surprised and delighted at how good it sounds! I played an easy-going clawhammer banjo accompaniment and sang high harmony on the choruses, and the whole thing sounds like it was intended to - like we were sitting around the living room just picking and singing for fun. This was something we did frequently during those years that Bob lived near us in Woodstock, and I relish those easy-going days. There's a really good cover story by Mikal Gilmore in the 12<sup>th</sup> September issue of *Rolling Stone* that beautifully describes those special times that I was lucky enough to be a part of. Check out this terrific and sometimes surprising collection. It's worthy of some deep exploration.



# The Bridge

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**The Bridge** is edited and published by:

**Mike Wyvill and John Wraith: A Two Riders Production**

The views expressed in **The Bridge** are not necessarily those of the editors