



*Photo: Nora Brown and John Cohen, 2018, photo by*

## REVIEW

**Speed Bumps On A Dirt Road: When Old Time Music Met Bluegrass.** By John Cohen. Powerhouse books, Brooklyn, NY 2019.

*Review by Wayne Shrubsall*

Besides being an ace old time banjoist and guitarist, John Cohen was also a photographer and student of old time banjo playing. When he started working out banjo techniques, Cohen at first employed a familiar process for learning how to play like others did: he learned a lot from recordings. Then he decided to find banjoists in their context—he looked them up while traveling through Kentucky and other areas of Appalachia. Fortunately for all of us “at home”, he photographed, recorded, and befriended many men and women along the way.

Early in the textual parts of basically this book of many photographs, Cohen notes that many country musicians started out life on rural farms were looking for something besides farming, “Music,” he notes, “was their ticket out.” And then, the way

out “began on dirt roads.” With this phrase, Cohen ties his own experience with the music: “I was a photographer and a musician who was involved with old time string band music. It had become important in my life, and I wanted to experience its sources.” Then, Cohen adds a further clue to the book’s title: “To get there I had to get off the highways and onto dirt roads.”

As a result in part of supplying some of his photos for Ken Burns’s “Country Music” series on PBS, Cohen gathered together the many photographs he took from 1958 through 1971. In doing so, he rediscovered many pictures that he then decided to include in “Speed Bumps.” And what a variety he presents in the book: Scenes of home, fiddle conventions at Union Grove and Galax and elsewhere, performances by professional musicians, land auctions, dark taverns, backstage at festivals and fiddle contests and the Opry, people at home singing, playing instruments, enjoying the sounds.

Clearly, the photos are one of the major appeals of the book. As a plus, they are printed and bound in the book on heavy photographic paper. As records of existing and developing old time and bluegrass music, they are most appealing and thoughtfully shot and selected. Who or what is in these black-and-white photos? Known and unknown solo balladeers such as Lloyd and Dillard Chandler, old time instrumentalists such as Wade Ward, Sam McGee

and Dock Walsh, fiddler conventions in places such as Union Grove and Galax, local musicians at a land auction, bluegrass bands famous and not, bluegrass festival performers such as Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Earl Taylor, the Country Gentlemen in 1960, Doc Watson, Tom Ashley, the White Brothers at the Ash Grove, the Lilly Brothers and Don Stover in Massachusetts and elsewhere, Cousin Emmy and Ralph Stanley playing banjo on Pete Seeger’s “Rainbow Quest” program, Maybelle Carter and Sara (Carter) Bayes reunited and playing guitar (Maybelle) and autoharp (Sara) for their last performance together in 1969, Alice Gerard and Hazel Dickens, Eck Robertson—many others. Among these are often found listeners, watchers, fans—general people responding to music as played by a host of different musicians.

Do not think that this is a one-note collection of photos featuring posed and crisp focused shots. Some are actually a little hazy—but that is because they are very candid—quick shots of players, listeners, dancers. Even out-of-focus shots of dancers and bands and individuals make one study the shots just for their being part of the human condition. And of course crisp focuses do that as well. These are people. They are not creatures of an entertainment industry doctored by public relations specialists or magic photo apps that take away one’s age in such a way that the subject becomes something not quite true to life. In addition to his making his photographs into objects of art, Cohen has also such an eye for the humanity of his subjects, and

the photos reveal that and bring it out for this reader (and surely for many others).

I am not alone in this estimation. Mandolinist and guitarist Marty Stuart (in his afterword to the book) notes that “What John Cohen mines from these diverse scenes and levels into common ground is the dignity of all the individuals who stand before his camera. His subjects trust him. They allow him inside their worlds, and ultimately invite him into their lives.”

Of course, the photos may be judged the major appeal of the book. Yet this is not some simple Instagram collection of doctored photos viewable on a screen the size of a three-by-five card, only smaller. Perhaps to remind us that photography printed on paper is an art form, Cohen and the publishers had printed and bound in the book on heavy photographic paper, the kind of paper that will not quickly crumple or yellow. Even the moments that these photos capture are intended to last longer than through the end of next month.

Many of the photos are candid—taken without posed subjects—that help reinforce the humanity in their subjects. They are only sometimes mildly out of focus, and it doesn’t hurt the eye at all. Yet even crisp, clear photos of non-famous folks tell a story if one only looks and listens.

Others are crisp, and many of these have become somewhat famous: a photo of Doc Watson playing a Gibson; a photo of Roscoe Holcomb playing his banjo and looking right at you and into you, the observer; a photo of Dale Poe smoking a cig and playing his guitar, a photo that was on the cover of a 1960s Sing Out! reprints collection; a photo of Bill Monroe backstage at the Opry, wearing his glasses hatless, hair slicked back, playing his mandolin; four photos of Cousin Emmy from Pete Seeger’s “Rainbow Quest” program from 1966, four crisp snaps of Cousin Emmy playing banjo, then fiddle, then a balloon, then playing banjo and singing powerfully with Pete and Ralph Stanley. Powerfully? It sure looks powerful.

But why is this fine masterwork entitled “*Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*”? As noted above, Cohen had to get on the dirt roads to find these scenes and musicians. Why speed bumps? Perhaps because speed bumps make one slow down, maybe even look around, maybe even stop.

Now the big question: when did old time music meet bluegrass? In part, because Ralph Peer was, as Barry Mazor points

out in his biography of Peer, “to nudge the traditional into the realm of pop.” Peer did much of this at the famous Bristol, VA/TN recording sessions in the late 1920s. As Cohen notes, recording these folks moved the “homemade” music from the dwelling into the commercial mainstream. Meanwhile, Cohen notes, a decade later Bill Monroe solidified the parameters of what became bluegrass. Those beginnings do not need further repetition. But Mike Seeger released “*Mountain Music Bluegrass Style*” in 1958, an album that recognized “bluegrass as a distinct sound, shared by different acoustic country bands.” Then in 1959, Cohen released “*Mountain Music of Kentucky*,” drawing attention to the fiddle, banjo, and guitar combination that attracted Cohen’s attention and admiration. Then the recognizable sound of bluegrass many bands were displaying was “confirmed at the first all-bluegrass show—the first bluegrass festival—” in Luray, VA in 1961.”

The preceding paragraph was taken from Cohen’s annotation sections, in this case a print section entitled “When Old Time Met Bluegrass.” However, the longer section is Cohen’s “*Stories Told by John Cohen on a Dirt Road*.” As the photographs are arranged in units ranging from two photos to several more, each unit has a focusing title, and each section has Cohen’s commentary on the various photos. That is as much fun as looking at the pictures. And that is putting it mildly.

I hope you pick up a copy of this hard-bound book of images and words, all solid elements in keeping a sense of the nature and origin of both old time and bluegrass music. The price is forty-five dollars for this book. It is well worth far more than that. It is also the last powerfully-significant contribution to music in American life that Cohen gave us before he passed in September at age 87. According to Jon Pankake in the Times’s obituary, “[Cohen] seemed most aware of the evolving mission of the Ramblers, most aware that the group was about something more than entertaining, was carving out some yet unknown place in history and inspiring many of its audience to become a new kind of musical community.” On a personal note, his and the NLCR work managed to shake awake a provincial, blindered Indiana protestant youth enamored of trite “folk music” as presented in the 1950s commercial world and drop it in preference to becoming a part of that new community. And he was still

influencing newbies like me (but surely not as green), as is shown in the section “In a New Key. The Downhill Strugglers band shows John seated in front of three much younger men on guitar, mandolin, and fiddle, and John, of course, is on banjo. Also, the photo of John and Nora Brown in 2018, playing banjo, seated across from each other, shows Cohen’s continuing interest in teaching and mentoring others in music in the old time style For helping them and me do that—if nothing else, friend John—your work was and is positively valuable to me. Moreover, your place in the greater effort to create a stronger amicability between peoples will be difficult to fill.