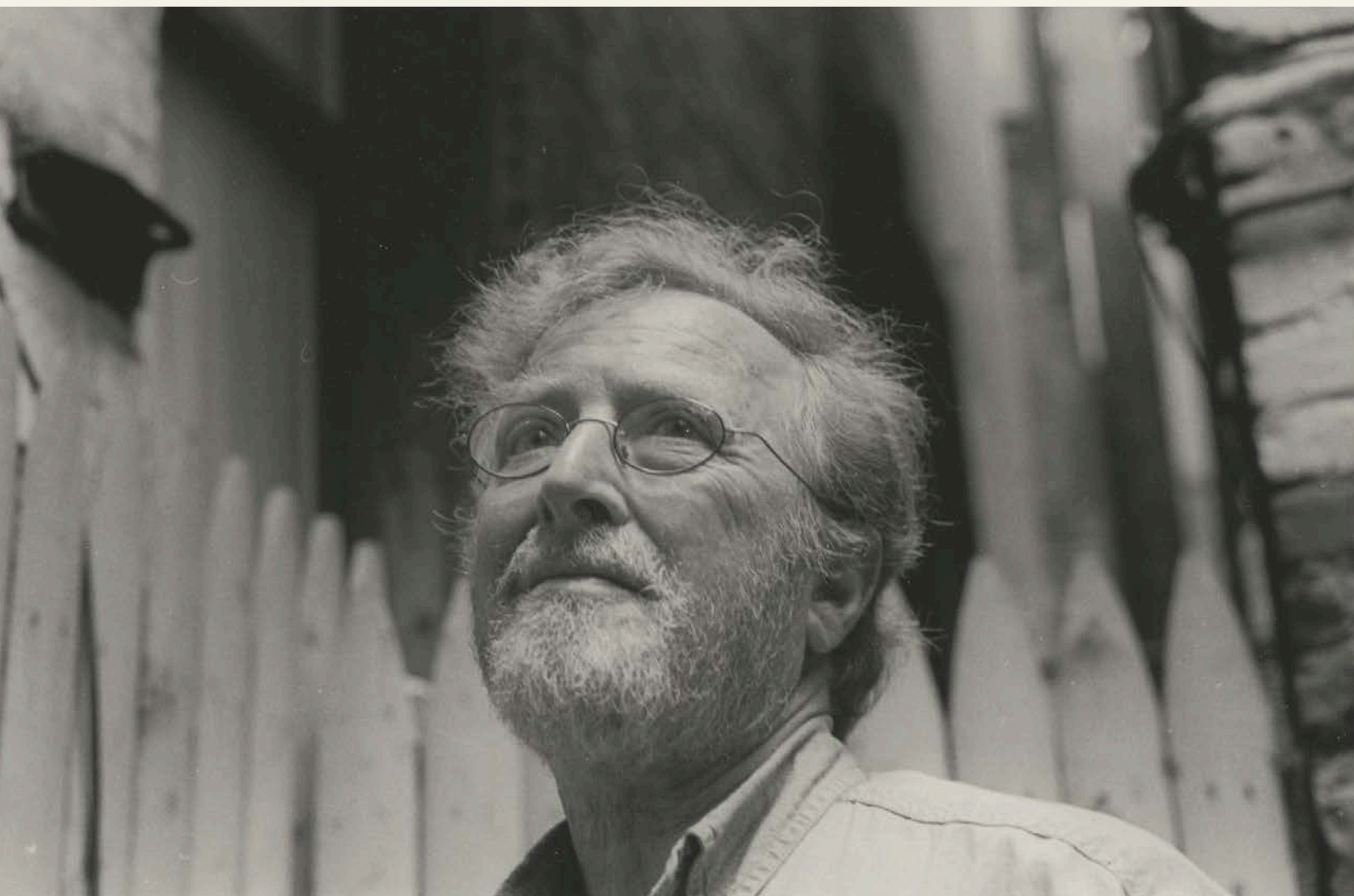


TURCHIN CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

IMAGE AND MUSIC: JOHN COHEN

JUN 6 - DEC 13, 2025

BICKERS GALLERY



John Cohen
Doc Watson & Gaither Carlton
New York City, NY, 1961



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John Cohen
Elizabeth Cotten & Son
Washington, DC, 1960

Front:
Ed Grazda
Portrait of John Cohen

For years, I've made photographs of people playing music that brings a community together, calls up old spirits, and evokes family memories. Music making transcends everyday life.

John Cohen

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

The musician, folklorist, photographer, painter, documentary filmmaker, writer, collector, and educator John Cohen (1932 – 2019) visited Appalachian State University on several occasions to participate in musical gatherings over the years. This exhibition features some of the music he played for campus audiences. He knew Doc Watson, of course, and Roscoe Holcomb, and a host of other famous people; hell, he was married to Pete Seeger's half-sister, Penny (Penlope) Seeger, also an accomplished folk singer.

I knew John's photographs before I had the pleasure of meeting him. One day while visiting my friends Rufus Cohen and Suzanne Sbarge in Albuquerque, Rufus said, "My father is visiting in a few weeks; we'd like you to meet him when he comes." A few weeks later my husband and I had the pleasure of meeting John Cohen. Suddenly, I put the obvious together. Rufus was John Cohen's son – that John Cohen – the photographer. Sometimes life wakes you up that way. Cohen's photographs do that, wake you up to show you things you thought you knew in a beautiful new way. The vintage photographs gathered here are only a small selection from Cohen's enormous archive. Curious? Poke around on the internet and you'll find a lot about this talented man. Prefer books to pixels? John Cohen published many books during his lifetime including *There Is No Eye* (2001), *Young Bob: John Cohen's Early Photographs of Bob Dylan* (2003), *Do Not Disturb My Waking Dreams* (2019) and *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road: When Old Time Music Met Bluegrass* (2019). Additionally, he made 15 films including *The High Lonesome Sound* (1963), *Sara and Maybelle: The Carter Family* (1981), and *Mountain Music of Peru* (1984).



John Cohen seemingly knew everyone in the literary and musical circles of the Beat Generation. His camera quietly documented many artists over a long and storied career. The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage made a short film about Cohen's life in 2009. *Play on, John, A Life in Music* claims that he was the inspiration for the Grateful Dead's song, *Uncle John's Band*; Cohen is better known, however, for the traditional music he played with his band, the New Lost City Ramblers. They recorded 15 albums on the Folkways label.

In the late 1950s, Cohen began his pilgrimages to the South. In 1961, he co-founded the Friends of Old Time Music, a volunteer organization that brought Southern musicians to wider audiences, often funding the concerts themselves. Many of the photographs in this exhibition are of the musicians Cohen knew, played with, and promoted for their "High Lonesome Sound." Roscoe Holcomb, Lloyd and Dillard Chandler, Orna and EC Rugby, Mr. & Mrs. Sams, Elizabeth Cotten, Wade Ward, Charlie Higgins, Doc Watson, Arnold Watson, the Stanley Brothers, the Stoney Mountain Boys, Lester Flat and Earl Scruggs, Bill Monroe; the list of musicians goes on and on. Look with your eyes and listen with your heart.

John Cohen left an incredible legacy through his images, his films, and the musicians and photographers he mentored over the years. I was lucky enough to meet him, maybe 10 years before he died. He was always full of life, sharing incredible stories with humility and kindness, never losing his playfulness. We invite you to enjoy this glimpse into one of John Cohen's worlds through the images on view, some made right here in these Appalachian Mountains, some just right down the way from the Turchin Center.

Many thanks to the extended Cohen family, L. Parker Stepheson, and our colleagues across campus – Tom Hansell, Trevor McKenzie, and Darci Gardner – who contributed their time, expertise, and music to this exhibition.

– Mary Anne Redding, Senior Curator

Ed Grazda
Portrait of John Cohen

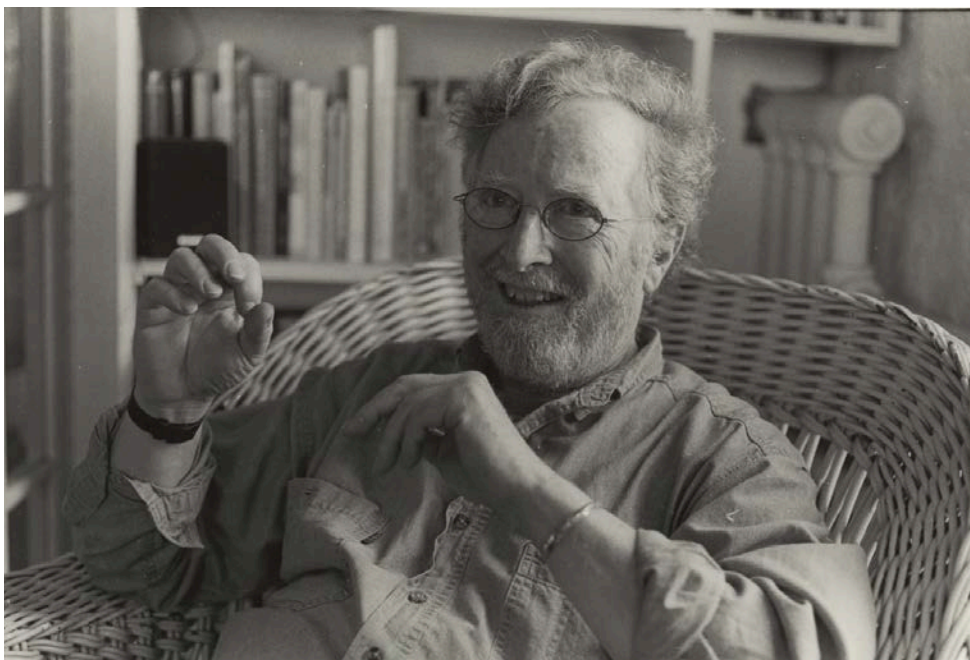


ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Born in Queens, New York, John Cohen (1932-2019) was a true polymath. Among his many talents were photography, filmmaking, writing, music, folklore, and ethnomusicology.

Cohen studied painting at Yale University under Josef Albers and photography with Herbert Matter; receiving an MFA in the 1950s. Cohen also researched indigenous Andean weaving in Peru. His photographs of Peru would be the first photographic exhibition held at the Yale University Art Gallery, shown alongside textiles by Anni Albers. Parallel with his research in Peru, Cohen's interests in old-time music led him to make numerous field recordings in Appalachia. These recordings are an important document of rural culture, contemporaneous with those collected by Alan Lomax and Harry Smith, now held by the Library of Congress.

Cohen was a founding member of the famed New Lost City Ramblers in 1958, which began a long career as a performer. His photographs of Roscoe Holcomb, Woody Guthrie, Muddy Waters, Elizabeth Cotten, a young Bob Dylan, and many other notable musicians, provide a visual window into this rich aural world. His 1962 film, *High Lonesome Sound*, became synonymous with that music. Cohen performed regularly with the Downhill Strugglers and was often called upon as a resource for ethnomusicologist scholars and researchers alike.



Ed Grazda
Portrait of John Cohen

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY (CONT.)

Herbert and Mercedes Matter would provide introductions for Cohen to the nascent artistic communities in downtown Manhattan when he moved to East Ninth Street and Third Avenue in 1957. The location would be fortuitous: dirt-cheap rents adjacent to the bars and artists' clubs in Greenwich Village, and the scene of numerous artist-run galleries and performance spaces. Cohen lived next door to Mary and Robert Frank, who would ask Cohen to photograph Frank's first film, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), co-directed with painter Alfred Leslie and narrated by Jack Kerouac. Cohen emphasized the ambience and mood among the cast and crew, which included Larry Rivers, Delphine Seyrig, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, David Amran, Richard Bellamy, and Alice Neel.

John Cohen began making photographs in 1954 when the only work for a photographer was in photojournalism or advertising, neither of which he wanted to do. Rather, he made personal photographs, documenting things which were important to him: mostly artists and musicians. His photographic inquiries lead him to the Andes and to Appalachia, where he photographed traditional musicians in their homes. In addition to gaining fine art notoriety, his images were used on record covers, in television and movie productions, and later informed his film projects. With his long-time publisher, Steidl, Cohen published several photography books.

Cohen was featured in over forty solo exhibitions across the US; his work was central to group exhibitions presented at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, the Museum of the City of New York, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, among others. His photographs are in the permanent collections of twenty institutions and his ninth monograph, *Speed Bumps on a Dirt Road*, was released in September 2019. Invested in the future of the field, Cohen started the photography program at SUNY Purchase in 1972 where he taught for 25 years. His photographic estate is represented by L. Parker Stephenson in New York.

Artist Biography courtesy of L. Parker Stephenson Photographs, New York and the John Cohen family.



INVITATION TO REFLECT

John Cohen was a photographer, filmmaker, musician, folklorist, and song collector. The exhibition *Image and Music* shows us the environment surrounding the songs John Cohen recorded and explores why these songs are important. Cohen had many connections with great musicians, writers, scholars, and activists; he was part of a larger community of artists making a difference through their work.

Choose a song from the track list of this collection of music *The Social Power of Music* produced by Smithsonian Folkways, the institution that houses many of John Cohen's old-time music recordings:

<https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40231.pdf>

Consider the history of the song you chose...

How do events in the time surrounding the recording contribute to what we think and know about the song?

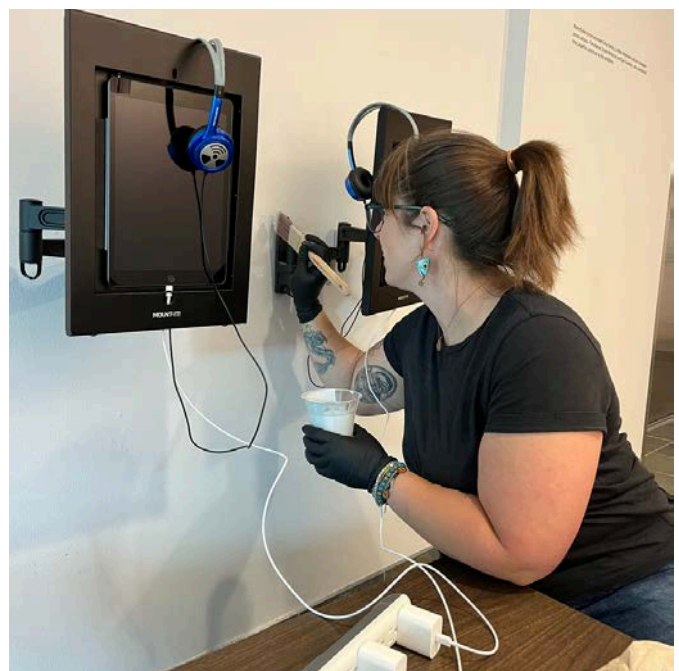
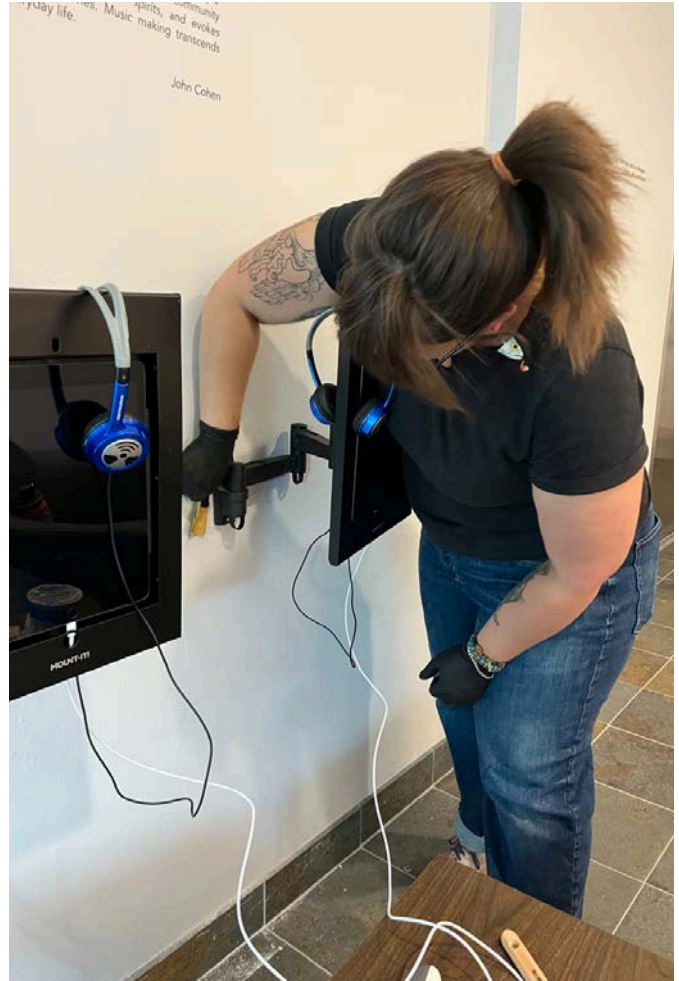
How might the meaning change if someone else were to sing it at a different moment in history?





John Cohen
Dale Poe
Galax, VA, 2010

BEHIND THE SCENES





SELECTED WORKS

John Cohen
Mrs. Sams
Combs, Kentucky, 1959



IN THE EXHIBIT



John Cohen
Doc Watson
Deep Gap, NC, 1962

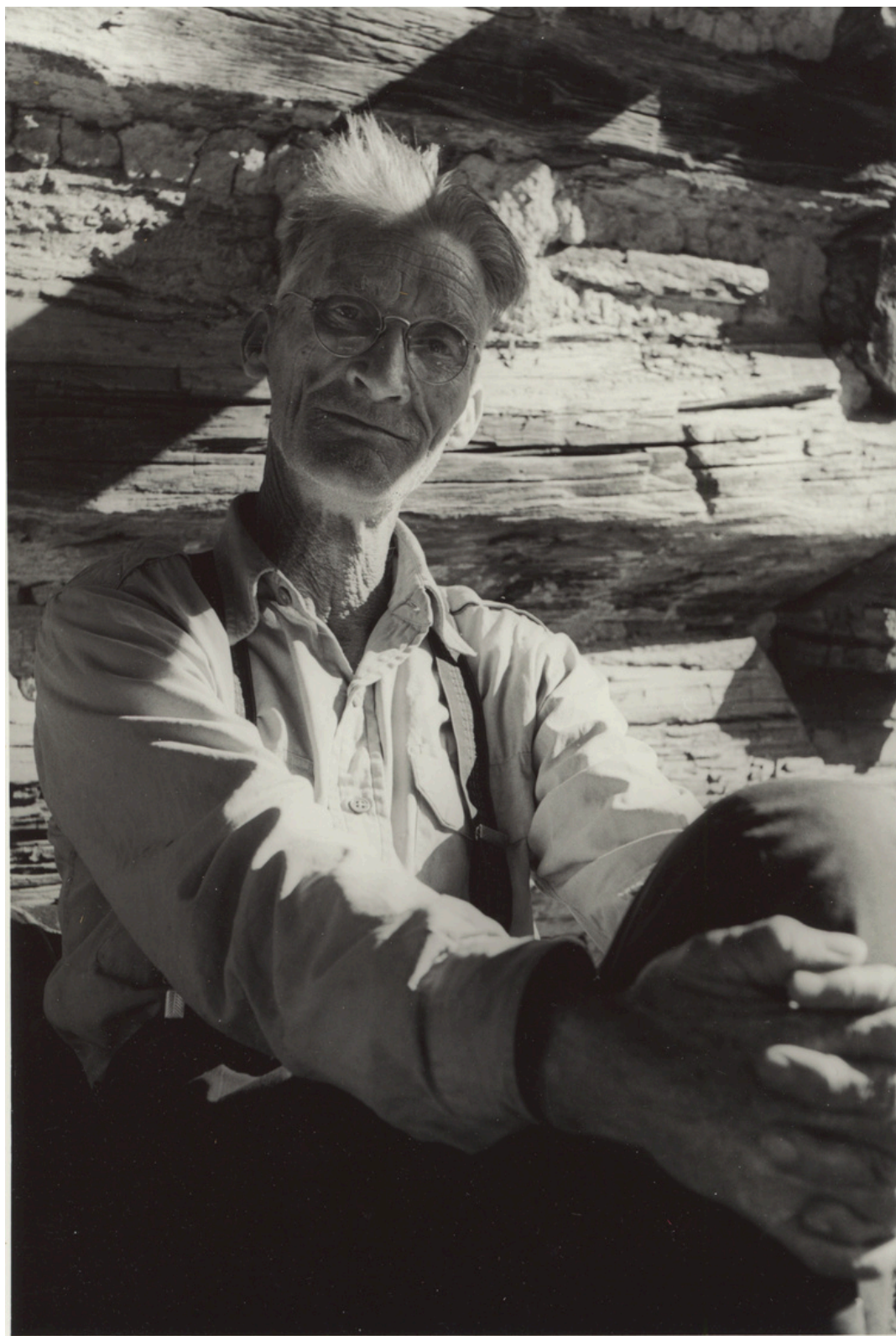


John Cohen,
Odabe & Mary Jane Halcomb
Date unknown



John Cohen
Roscoe Halcomb
Daisy, Kentucky, 1959

John Cohen
Lloyd Chandler
Sodom, NC, 1965





John Cohen
Wade Ward & Charlie Higgins
Galax, VA, 1961

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

John Cohen Trust	<u>Website</u>
L. Parker Stephenson	<u>John Cohen Gallery</u>
Eli Smith	<u>Photos of John Cohen and Friends 2010</u>
Library of Congress	<u>John Cohen Collection</u>
Smithsonian Folkways	<u>The New Lost City Ramblers</u>
University Illinois Press	<u>Gone to the Country</u>
Southern Spaces	<u>The High Lonesome Sound</u>
Drew Christy	<u>Some Crazy Magic: Meeting Harry Smith</u>
Southern Cultures	<u>John Cohen and Roscoe Halcomb</u>
PBS	<u>John Cohen</u>
Flashbak	<u>John Cohen's Portraits</u>
New York Times	<u>John Cohen Death</u>
NPR	<u>John Cohen Death</u>
Smithsonian Folkways	<u>John Cohen Obituary</u>
Smithsonian Folkways	<u>John Cohen Tribute</u>



THANK
YOU

FROM THE TURCHIN CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts at Appalachian State University engages visitors from the university, community, nation and beyond in creating unique experiences through dynamic and accessible exhibition, education, outreach and collection programs. These programs inspire and support a lifelong engagement with the visual arts and create opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

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STATE UNIVERSITY