PRESS RELEASE

There is No Eye: Photographs by John Cohen
January 18-March 1, 2002

The Photographic Resource Center at Boston University (PRC) is pleased to announce the first major retrospective exhibition of photographs by John Cohen — the musician who provided inspiration for the Grateful Dead song “Uncle John’s Band.” The exhibition of over 130 stunning black and white images, “There is No Eye: Photographs by John Cohen,” will make its debut at the PRC January 18-March 1, 2002 and then travel nationally. As co-founder of the band the New Lost City Ramblers in 1958 and a regular writer for Sing Out Magazine, Cohen was central to the emergence of the urban folk revival of the 1960s. The title of the exhibition was drawn from the liner notes for Bob Dylan’s seminal album, Highway 61 Revisited (1965). The show is accompanied by a powerHouse Books monograph with an introduction by arts writer Greil Marcus as well as a Smithsonian Folkways CD, featuring music of those pictured, both of which will be available for purchase. Cohen’s photographs are now housed in such major collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. John P. Jacob, former PRC Executive Director and Senior Curator, curated the exhibition.

Cohen came to photography after studying at Yale University with painters Josef Albers and Herbert Matter. He then moved to New York where he mixed with a burgeoning art world, including many of the Abstract Expressionists artists and Beatnik poets. Cohen was able to photograph stills for photographer Robert Frank’s films Pull my Daisy and Sin of Jesus, as well as several “happenings.” He was moved to make his first photographic series while assisting Matter with a film on the roots of jazz in Black gospel. Cohen explains his love of photography: “Photographs were like poetry to me, triggering ideas, stimulating images in the mind. Images that were too active to sit on a wall.”

With the New Lost City Ramblers, Cohen attempted to recapture the authentic string band sound of the 1920s and 1930s, which so influenced Dylan and others. Cohen’s band appeared several times at the legendary Newport Folk Festival and was instrumental in documenting and reviving traditional music. It was he who coined the phrase “high lonesome sound” in reference to this genre; his film of the same name is legendary. This exhibition is particularly timely as we again rediscover roots music through the successful film O Brother Where Art Thou and soundtrack. Cohen’s exhibition is the perfect accompaniment.

The exhibition and book cover all areas of Cohen’s work: New York City of the 1950s, the Beats, American traditional music as well as his travels in Peru and the American South. The sensitive and moving portraits provide a virtual lesson in 1960s cultural history: Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Franz Kline, Red Grooms, Philip Guston, Alan Kaprow, Woodie Guthrie, Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, Doc Watson, Roscoe Holcomb as well as an extremely young Bob Dylan. The opening reception for “There is No Eye” is Thursday, January 17th, 5:30 pm-7:30 pm. Cohen will present a lecture and a booksigning on Friday, January 18th at 6 pm ($5 for members/ $10 for non-members). Call 617-353-0700 to reserve a space and for more information about other exciting public programs.

“With the publication next month of his first monograph, ‘There Is No Eye’ (powerHouse), and a touring retrospective by the same name opening on Jan. 18 at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, Mr. Cohen makes a strong case that his pictures should be remembered not only for the subjects they document but for their formal qualities.”

-- Blake Eskin, New York Times, November 18, 2001

“You can look at John Cohen’s ‘There Is No Eye’ and see through very familiar eyes: the New York City eyes of Helen Levitt and Walker Evans, Evans’s country eyes, the highway eyes of Robert Frank, even Margaret Bourke-White’s doubting eyes in Holiness churches…”

-- Greil Marcus, Introduction to “There is No Eye”

PUBLICATION AND CD:

monograph by powerHouse Books (200 pages, 127 duotone and 39 four color photographs) and Smithsonian Folkways CD with extensive liner note booklet (23 songs, 1/3 of which are previously unreleased, including Bob Dylan’s “Roll on John” from a 1961 radio program) over 130 gelatin silver prints courtesy the artist and Deborah Bell Photographs, New York.

See also www.johncohenworks.com

NUMBER OF WORKS:

Extensive press: two New York Times articles, two NPR stories, as well as local Circulated by the PRC, the exhibition currently will travel to several venues after Boston’s presentation (January 18-March 1, 2002), including the Georgia Museum of Art, the Chicago Cultural Center, and the University of North Carolina’s Weatherspoon Art Gallery, with more to be added.

For more information contact:

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