

A PATRIARCH OF THE SAN FRANCISCO SCENE

BOB COHEN IS NOT A HOUSEHOLD NAME in the world of psychedelic concert-poster collecting, like his partner Chet Helms is. But oh, was he there, and oh, was he important. Mr. Cohen was simply the co-owner, co-manager and sound engineer for the Family Dog, the San Francisco concert promoter that ran neck-and-neck with Bill Graham from the outset - early 1966 - until the company's demise in late 1968. In other words, when the scene was all fresh, new and exciting.

"I was the sound man and the stage manager," Cohen tells Heritage. "I mixed the sound, the monitors and the PA, and recorded the show. All at the same time." Cohen's tapes have been used for official live releases by the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, the Oxford Circle and Commander Cody.

But that was on the weekends. During the week, Cohen had another duty. The Family Dog was, after all, quite a small company. "I was very instrumental in the posters," he says. "My job was to get the original artwork from the artist and get it over to the printer in time so the poster would be ready at least four or five days before the show. I would also determine how many we should print."

Cohen even lent a hand to finishing off some of the Dog's beloved posters. "Sometimes I'd go to the artist to pick it up and they weren't even finished yet," he says, laughing. "I'd have to sit there and help them." In what way? "Opaquing different color layers. They'd tell me, 'Take this area over here and opaque it in.' This was the end of the job, and they were making the color separations. I'd just do what they told me to do."

But Mr. Cohen had never fully broken out his paper archives and art portfolios full of posters, paperwork and ephemera until Heritage first visited his Bay-Area house late last year. And what a fun and impressive trip down memory lane those portfolios contained. You see the best of it in these pages, and in Sunday's internet-only auctions. The super-rare FD-1 and FD-2 pre-concert first printings, the former having been used as note pads on the verso once the concert had passed. Several other first printings of the earliest dance-concert posters are here, including the famed FD-26 Grateful Dead "Skeleton & Roses" poster. And even a second printing of that poster with only the blue color. Amazing!

Cohen recalls that all the earlier titles were initially printed just as advertising pieces. Then the light bulb went off, a new collecting hobby was born and the company found itself in lockstep with Bill Graham's firm over at the Fillmore.

"We were doing two things at the same time," is the way Cohen puts it. "I was reordering the early ones, which we only made 200-500 copies of so they ran out almost immediately, and then I was also upping the first-printing quantities as the shows went on. At one point in 1968, we were ordering 5,000 posters on the first run.

"But in the earliest days, we just didn't know. Who knew? I only needed enough posters to post around in stores and on telephone poles to advertise the show; it was the only advertising we did. There wasn't any business of selling posters yet. I'd say by July or August of '66 we'd started ordering larger amounts, because we were starting to sell posters to poster stores. We were getting calls and letters from head shops all over the United States wanting to know if they could get some more posters. There wasn't any real science to it; whatever we were short on, we re-ordered."

Chet Helms initially enlisted Cohen mostly for his sonic capabilities and experience with hi-fi equipment. In early 1966, just before things got rolling, Cohen actually worked for promoter Graham first. "Chet

introduced me to Bill Graham," he recalls. "So then I became the sound man for the Fillmore Auditorium. So one week at the Fillmore it was a Bill Graham show, the next week a Family Dog show. I did about three or four of those, until Chet decided he wanted his own place. He found the Avalon Ballroom and asked me to go with him exclusively. I think I had been at the Fillmore for two months."

Cohen recalls his weekend experiences doing the Family Dog dance-concerts for over 2 ½ years. "There were three bands doing two sets each, between 8 and 2 in the morning," he tells Heritage. "That's six sets. My job was to get them on & off so that we could get everybody in. If it was someone like the Grateful Dead playing, they would never stop! They'd be in a groove, playing along, and I'd be like, 'Um guys, you gotta get off, the next band's gotta get on.'" How did you stop them? "Hand signals, and then threatening to cut the sound off," he says with a laugh.

Cohen's favorite part was recording the shows, but not every one. "I only recorded the shows I thought were going to be good," he says. "Tape was expensive. Sometimes the ones I didn't record were really amazing, and I was really upset that I didn't record it. In retrospect, I should have recorded everything."

One of Cohen's favorite stories involved seeing the Doors for the first time at the Avalon, in March of 1967. Elektra Records had released the group's first single, "Break on Through," and their self-titled first album, but neither were on Billboard's charts yet, and they were third-billed. He didn't bother rolling tape, and the



The Family Dog Staff. Bob Cohen Far Right, Chet Helms Second from Left (photo by Herb Greene)



Bob Cohen Today, with One of His Prizes

Hippies Get Charged Up On 'Electric' Rock Music

This is the last of a series on the weird world of the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, the heart of hippieland.

By DAVE FELTON

SPECIAL TO THE PRESS
FROM LOS ANGELES TIMES

SAN FRANCISCO—San Francisco electric rock is not much soul music as it is stomach.

There's something about 300 watts of amplified guitars, drums, harmonicas and organ that grabs your lower intestinal region and turns it into a private, pulsating battle.

How much you enjoy the concert may depend on how much you enjoyed your last meal.

Actually, it doesn't really matter whether you enjoy the music or not, it will have accomplished its purpose—in suck you in, to totally involve you with what's happening.

This basically is what the hippie creative renaissance is all about, a sort of sensual extremism that runs through their music, their light shows, their costumes and psychedelic posters.

Renaissance headquarters is San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, the West Coast's music center for the bombarding arts. But the Haight-Ashbury influence can be observed at every teenage gathering and on every teenage radio station around the country.

"What we're trying to create is a total environment kind of thing. We're getting the kids aged 16 to 25," explained Bob Cohen, 29-year-old co-manager of the Family Dog, a hippie production agency at 639 Gough St.

"What we do is we put together packages, usually three rock groups, a light show and sound system. We've even put a show on in Orange County—in the gym at the University of California's Irvine Campus.

HOWEVER, he said, the Family Dog's main job is sponsoring the wild, weekly weekend teenage dances in San Francisco's Avalon ballroom, fluorescent balls that regularly draw thousands of costumed youngsters from the bay area per night. A similar show runs simultaneously in nearby Fillmore auditorium.

With his long, receding hair, Cohen is one of the few hippies in Ben Franklin glasses, who actually looks something like Ben Franklin. He quit his electronic engineering job and joined show biz after discovering the electricity of rock and roll.

"The groups we book all



This is Bob Cohen, co-partner in charge of the Family Dog, a hippie theatrical promotion agency

that sponsors the electric rock light show and psychedelic dances at the Avalon ballroom in San Francisco.

have the 'San Francisco sound,'" he said. "It has to be experienced in person. I've taped every single group that has appeared at the Avalon; they're strange tapes, they can only be played at full volume..."

"We match the groups by energy levels," said Cohen. "We try to book two high-energy groups and one low-energy per show. Certain blues groups, say, are low energy groups. Then you get groups like the Grateful Dead or the Quicksilver Messenger Service—they're high-energy. When they're on, you can't talk anywhere in the building."

NOT THAT the kids do much talking anyway at the Avalon. Mostly it's a lot of dancing, a lot of staring, some rolling on the floor, some flaking out and occasionally a freak-out or two.

"We only have a few rules. You can't wander in and out of the building. You can't take your clothes off—it would be nice if you could, but the police are against it. No physical violence and no narcotics," Cohen said.

"It doesn't matter. Every-

body's high when they come

in, some have trouble getting up the stairs. "We've had a few acid freak-outs. See, there's these pillows and rugs in front of the bandstand where the kids can lie down if they don't want to dance. Well, when the dance is over at 2 a.m., some of the kids won't leave. We have to go around and wake 'em up."

"A few are so turned on we have to bring them down with tranquilizers. We have a doctor on hand at all times, and we always see that the kids get home or to a hospital."

ONE'S FIRST visit to the Avalon ballroom can be an exhilarating or shattering experience, depending on how long one stays and his threshold of pain. The following description of what happened there on a recent Saturday may or may not be fully accurate; it was written without the benefit of drugs.

They start lining up an hour before the doors open. They are two kinds: The hippies, the freaks and flower children of the entire bay area, dressed in every fabric of their expanded imagination and decorated by all the beaded symbols of the world; and the frat boys, the conservatively

cost-and-tied, and clean-faced youngsters who have come mainly to dance and see what's happening.

Since the Fire Department only allows 1,000 inside, an equal number must wait in the cold, in lines around the block, for several hours and some will never get in.

THE DANCE floor is bathed in ultraviolet light, which makes even the frat boys, in their bright shirts and teeth, glow like zombie visions.

A giant projection screen hides three of the four walls. It is covered with blood, or honey, or oil and ink and alcohol—all the vibrating ingredients of a liquid light show, operated from an upstairs booth by six men with rotating glass dishes.

Everything keeps time to the music, the lights, the slides, the abstract films, the dancers, even a mad black-light puppet show near the snack bar upstairs.

In one corner of the dance floor a stroboscopic flood light turns giggling hippies into spastic silent actors. They toss a balloon into the air and watch it jerk and act funny.

The strobe attacks their peripheral vision, and soon the whole room darts from

left to right to left. Nothing is fastened any more.

IN ANOTHER area, kids play with fluorescent toys, a fluorescent ball and boat and rubber elephant. An electric orange go-cart whizzes by. Surrounded by dancers playing ring-around-a-rosy, someone in a sailor suit is drawing with fluorescent chalk.

He applies chalk to the floor, then his hands, then his face and hair and finally over all his clothes and shoes.

This is not the Avalon; it is a fantastic, turned-on nursery of super children. In its own small way it is the Haight-Ashbury and the entire hippie world.

Which raises two questions: When is the dance going to end? And if it ends, who is going to wake up the kids and send them to their homes and to their hospitals?

Perhaps that is the wrong attitude. At the Avalon a dancer is dancing by himself. He is jumping and laughing and waving a fluorescent tambourine. When asked why he is dancing alone, the tambourine man shouts:

"I'm not. I'm dancing with everybody. I'm dancing with everybody. Think positive, man!"

band was spectacular, just blew him away. So he rolled tapes the second night, and the Doors were awful, with Jim Morrison all but incoherent. "Only a couple of songs were useable," Cohen laments. "I sure wish I had taped the first night."

After the Family Dog closed in late 1968, Cohen got rehired by the firm's new Great Highway enterprise, which ultimately fizzled. "That lasted for less than a year," he says. "Then I started Bob Cohen Sound and I contacted the bands and said, 'I'm available and I can do the sound for you.' And they all knew me from the Avalon, so they wrote me into their contracts. I was then doing the sound for about 15 bands."

And then... Altamont. That's right, Cohen was enlisted by the organizers of this disastrous show in December 1969 to set up sound, but he didn't have enough equipment. Turns out, nobody did. "No sound company singularly had enough equipment to do the show," he recalls. "I did the whole left side... all of stage left. The whole stack of speakers." Somebody else did the right side, but at the end of the day, the concert's sound was the last thing on anybody's mind.

So Mr. Cohen's life and career is full of experiences and memories that most of us can only wistfully dream of. He was at the right place at the right time, and did a great job. And rubbed elbows with all of our musical heroes. So... why is he parting now with all of his prized paper mementos?

"You spend your whole life collecting this stuff, and then you eventually realize you have to get rid of it all," he muses. "I'm just [planning ahead] about what happens at the end of my life. My kids don't want it, or maybe just one poster, so I gave them a second printing. Otherwise, time for somebody else to enjoy all these."

Thank you, Bob; enjoy them, we certainly will.

Pete Howard, Consignment Director
Heritage Auctions, Entertainment & Music



Cohen on Left, Chet Helms Seated

Cohen On Stage at Altamont, Dec. 1969