

Calendar

Nostalgic Bohemia

Panel Discussion

The [San Francisco] *Oracle* ended as the Haight-Ashbury declined," said Allen Cohen, cofounder of the far-famed, short-lived, psychedelic underground newspaper, which published Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, and William S. Burroughs in its day. Cohen was speaking by phone from Oakland, where he lives in a shared space with a couple of other people. It was shortly before he traveled down to San Diego to participate in a panel discussion at the San Diego Museum of Art, held in conjunction with its exhibition of psychedelic rock posters, "High Societies."

"The decline of the Haight-Ashbury had to do with its immense media appeal," Cohen said. "It was also the result of bad drugs. CIA and FBI provocateurs were part of that decline, too. In league

with the San Francisco police they were trying to break up the scene there. And people started to leave, although it remains a kind of nostalgic bohemia. My guess is that a 16-year-old in Springfield, Kansas, who wants to get away has a choice of going either to New York or to the Haight-Ashbury."

Cohen speaks from personal experience with contemporary 16-year-olds. Although his main occupation remains writing poetry and political prose, he also works as a substitute teacher for the Berkeley school system, most often at Berkeley High.

He sees in his students hope for the political and cultural future. "It's true that over the last 15 years we've seen the

rise of fundamentalism and interest in so-called family values. But remember, sometimes what's said in public bears no relationship to what's really happening in the culture. So you have 50 percent of teenagers who smoke marijuana, on the average, across the country, which is about what it was in the '60s. And they're putting rings in their belly-buttons and tattoos all over their bodies."

He believes the roots of these behaviors are in principles advanced in the '60s — personal liberation and anti-authoritarianism, among others. He also sees piercing and the like, along with trance dancing, as "tribal" activities.

The ultimate '60s tribal behavior was, of course, communal living — i.e., "dropping out of the mainstream, war-torn, weapons-building, military-industrial culture and creating [your] own culture outside of it," said Cohen, who in 1968 left the Haight-Ashbury to live on a commune in Mendocino after the barely two-year-old *Oracle* folded.

The commune lasted in one form or another for 15 years. Of its demise, Cohen said: "Living that intensely with other people, while being totally off the grid — we had no electricity, no phone — puts tremendous pressure on the evolution of consciousness. I mean, American Indian tribes, for instance, which we greatly admired, were adapted to small-group living in the environment holistically and ecologically over a long period of time. But we were carrying a lot of psychological baggage based upon Puritanism, sexual repression, egotism, individualism. And to make breakthroughs in all these areas was going to take tremendous psychological work. We did not have the key. I know few that



Allen Cohen, 1995

really did. Most communes that existed then — and there were thousands — have dissolved."

Still, he sees a glimmer of the former lifestyle in the renewed if modified communal living arrangements prevalent today — "in urban or semi-urban settings."

After Mendocino, Cohen got married and moved to a San Francisco suburb, Walnut Creek. "My wife and I had a preschool for children from zero to five. We learned a lot about childhood and its effect upon adulthood. My wife was a musician and children's song writer and would sing to them. I would help them create stories. I used to tell them, 'See the story in your mind.' A lot of our kids went on to become very creative."

Although he and Annie Cohen are divorced, the school, under Annie's direction, prevails.

Sometimes kids in neo-hippie attire can seem to be masqueraders rather than genuine social activists. Did he agree? "It was difficult, after détente and the breakup of the Soviet Union, to find a focus," he admitted. "It's becoming clearer now. You see the kids fighting the trade agreements, and [their activism] seemed to come out of nowhere, but really it came out of the rave culture, with the help of some '60s people. But mostly it was the kids who were politically hip enough to see the problems with world

corporatism. They understand that we have to fight the takeover of the world by the corporate free-market economy."

Another of the kids' causes is the global-warming situation. "Most everyone except George [W.] Bush accepts that it's really happening. And within the next year or two, I believe we'll see some social and political action against targets who are holding on to the fossil-fuel culture."

Considering that artifacts of the counterculture are currently being displayed in a museum here, did the 61-year-old Cohen feel somewhat fossilized himself?

"Not exactly. I intended — many of us did intend — and thought we were saving the world." He laughed at his use of the antiquated phrase. "And we didn't succeed as directly as we thought we would. But we did plant a lot of seeds."

— Jeanne Schinto

"The '60s: The Whole World Was Watching"
Panel discussion: Allen Cohen; Stewart Alpert; Paul Krassner, cofounder of the Yippies; and Joel Selvin, author/pop-music critic
Thursday, June 21, 6:00 p.m.
San Diego Museum of Art's Copley Auditorium, Balboa Park
Free
Info: 619-232-7931

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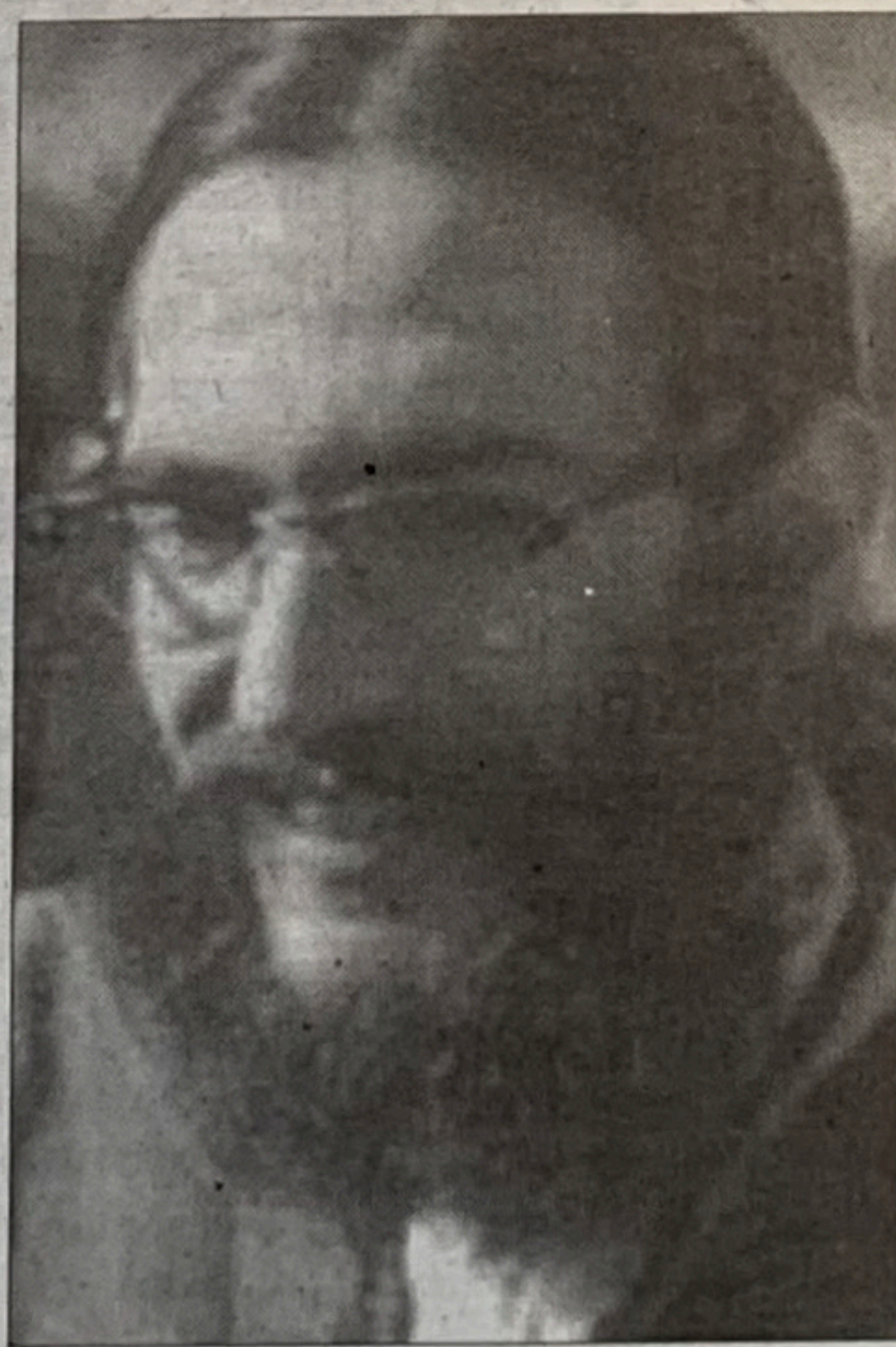
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San Francisco Oracle



Allen Cohen, late '60s