

Mp3 Stephen Cohen - Real Life And Fiction



stephen cohen | real life and fiction

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creative acoustic adventures by Kerrville New Folk Award Winner using guitar, voice and original sculptural percussion instruments 12 MP3 Songs FOLK: Modern Folk, ROCK: Acoustic Details: "Stephen Cohen mixes acoustic guitar with his own handmade smorgasbord of Eastern percussion instruments welded together like some sort of Dr. Suess contraption (a "fo-fo-famfoogler" perhaps). It's an act all the Whos down in Whoville would dig- ambient, worldly, quirky folk. "Cohen's musician-inventor tag was recognized with an award at this year's Kerrville New Folk Concert. His new disc, real life and fiction, offers a good helping of his eerie take on folk Americana. His voice, a mix of Bill Morrissey's ragged growl and Rickie Lee Jones, scat stuttering, spars with his guitar playing, which dodges fast fretwork for the different shade of inventiveness and edge of John Fahey's quiet, quirky ramblings. Live, his handmade "sculptural percussion" instruments have got to be seen to be believed. "-Bill Smith, Willamette Week, Portland, Or. 2000 Art in all its parts Stephen Cohen's music sounds simple, but to play "Rain, Rain, Rain" at a recent concert required the help of no fewer than five standing audience members, plus another two or three in the front row playing accompaniment on sets of tiny chimes. "Now I need those back at the end of the song," Cohen reminded the crowd at Performance Works NorthWest, an innovative community rehearsal and performance space in Southeast Portland. The folks standing held either rain machines -- nail-studded wood blocks that tinkled quietly when played with a stick -- or big sheets of copper and brass, and a smaller sheet of silver. Big Rain, Big Wind and Little Wind. "OK, go ahead and practice," he told the sheet metallistes, who already had begun to rumble and whang their instruments with unsettling alacrity. "Now, the guitars will start out and you guys keep still. Then the little chimes and the rain blocks come in, then the wind, but not too loud, otherwise you'll drown out everything." Somehow, it all worked -- the song progressed from the fingerpicked guitar melody and Cohen's vocal (little more than "I've been

out in the rain" repeated) and weathered some exuberant rumbles from the wind department, only to subside gently, not with a bang but a tinkle. "Just toss 'em anywhere," he says, dismissing his impromptu accompanists after the song. "They're all metal and you can't break 'em -- I used to have some glass chimes, until they went the way of all glass." Cohen is a great one for all manner of musical impedimenta, which he hauls around in a big duffel custom-built by a guy who makes hot rod upholstery and body bags. Cohen calls himself a "sculptural percussionist," which explains the profusion of stuff around his folding chair. The items range from the fireplace screen-sized "sculptural percussion instrument" slung with chimes, bells and gongs to those tiny chimes he passed out to the audience. Cohen made those brass chimes and just about everything else, save for the panpipes, the longer 16-barreled Hmong pipes and his guitar. A table next to him holds shakers, capos, tuners, the brass slide and the chunk of glass bottle neck that he uses on his guitar -- though the edge of a panpipe also has been known to serve in the heat of a song. "This is a Test" starts out as just a pulse of open-tuned guitar with different notes of the chord sounded as Cohen intones, "One-two, one-two. This is just a test." He uses his left hand to flail a quick flurry of melody from the silver chimes at his knee, then uses the brass slide to coax a swoopy glissando out of his guitar, which pulses on unabated except for a spray of harmonics. It's quirky and experimental, recalling at times an all-acoustic Laurie Anderson, with a bit of her love of loops and repetition but none of the high-tech gloss. By the time he sings a charming little ditty called "Baseball," he's won over the crowd for the night. "OK, in the chorus of this song, I'm gonna need you guys to make noise like you would at a baseball game -- just yell and shout." He moves a green canvas nearer his chair. It's a painting of "the Green Monster," the imposing wall at Boston's Fenway Park -- and a percussion instrument in this setting. "You've got a glove, you wear a hat," Cohen sings, "you hit the ball with the . . ." Whack! He smacks the painting's frame with a drumstick as he moves into the singsong chorus, "Baseball, baseball, we like baseball. . . ." The crowd enters into its yelling assignment with a fine ferocity, and once again the song becomes more than the sum of its shouts. "I've been doing a lot of kids' concerts through the Arts Council," Cohen said after the show, "and they're very interactive shows. I'm incorporating that in my regular performances." Which would explain the seated guy who kept time by dribbling a basketball during the last of "Let's All Root for the Home Team," and Linda Austin's dance to an instrumental during which she used two bicycle kickstands as maracas. Or young Adam Frazell's imitation of a train whistle on the Hmong pipes during "The Dusty Old Freight Train," and Christopher Shotola-Hardt's bouzouki

parts on several songs, including one sung in Hebrew and English. By the time he got to "The Closing List," Cohen's music was making complete sense. That dark little tune was minimalism at its best: The images of shutting down after that last night were sung in a world-weary drone that would've done Tom Waits proud. The sparse, compelling accompaniment was what the song needed to make it a jewel-like still life, as if Van Eyck had painted the death of a dream. And perhaps what I was feeling that night was gratitude for the human scale of Cohen's music and the sense of community engendered in the audience. In a culture that spawned Britney in all her marketing-driven, intra-modally synergistic glory, it's nice to know that guys still sit down with guitars and get people to sing along, and that there are still small, quirky spaces such as Performance Works NorthWest where art can happen unexpectedly. -John Foyston, The Oregonian, January 18, 2002. Congratulations on a super fine recording (real life and fiction) and uniquely interesting CD package. In addition to this is a test and thomas, which have already gone out on the WNTI airwaves (and more will follow), I am fond of Track 5, grandfather. Eleanor Chapman, WNTI, New Jersey, March, 2004

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