

Venerable Madtown Hall
& *The Making of Venerable Madtown Hall:*
Double CD/DVD Release by Jim Cohn
MusEx Records, 2013

A teaching assistant to Allen Ginsberg at Naropa University in 1980, Jim Cohn was inspired by Ginsberg's belief in spontaneous utterance and his sense that to divorce poetry from music was a big mistake.

An accomplished poet in his own right, as well as curator of the online Museum of American Poetics (poetspath.com), Jim's first official recording was with The Abolitionists, a North Bay Area collective that featured his long-time musical collaborator Mark "Mooka" Rennick. Together, they made *The Road* (Rudy's Steakhouse, 1995) at Rennick's now legendary Prairie Sun Recording studios in Cotati, California.

Jim's solo MusEx Records followed: *Unspoken Words* (1998), *Antenna* (1999), *Emergency Juke Joint* (2002), *Trashtalking Country* (2006), *homage* (2007), and *Impermanence* (2008), a two CD selected compilation set remixed by engineer David Moss.

In early 2013 Cohn returned to the studio to release two new spoken word projects: *Commune*—a collaboration with guitarist Dan Groves, and *Venerable Madtown Hall (VMH)*—a collaboration with keyboardist Bob Schlesinger and Chris Engleman on bass. A film of the *VMH* sessions by Katrina Miller, *The Making of Venerable Madtown Hall*, was released with the *Venerable Madtown Hall* studio recording.

VMH was not Jim's first work with Schlesinger or Engleman. He'd worked with Bob on *Antenna*, and was impressed by the sensitivity and compassion of composition and one-take improvisational execution he saw in Schlesinger's keyboard playing, especially with the work Bob did on the studio version of Cohn's long poem "Treasures For Heaven."

In 2006, Jim recorded with Bob and Chris on *homage*, the recording he made in his mother Lois' memory. For *VMH*, he seemed after a more stripped down sound than *homage* with its drums, electric guitar, horns, and background vocals. The results of this experiment are particularly mindhacking and revealing of the survival of poetry itself.

There's a remarkable spaciousness, a quality of *unuselessness*, permeating both the duets and trios. *VMH* has a complex sense of belonging and not belonging to this or any time. In fact, Jim Cohn seems more unmoored than ever. In the opening track, "Extraterrestrial Girl," he says:

Offhand, I'd say my instruments are defective.
On the other hand, nothing makes sense.

Things that cannot possibly exist are utterly real.

You'll see me again and never know it.

The *VMH* sessions took place at Airshow Mastering, in Boulder, Colorado on January 10 and 11, 2013. The studio was in a mastering suite. They had a portable sound booth. The place had seven or eight cameras Miller set up for her shoot. Tony Crank was the sound engineer. Tony tracked and mixed the record. David Glasser, lead mastering engineer at Airshow, mastered it.

In Jim and Bob's first production meeting to discuss the project, Schlesinger suggested a storyboard approach. Here's Bob's notes from that meeting in late 2012.

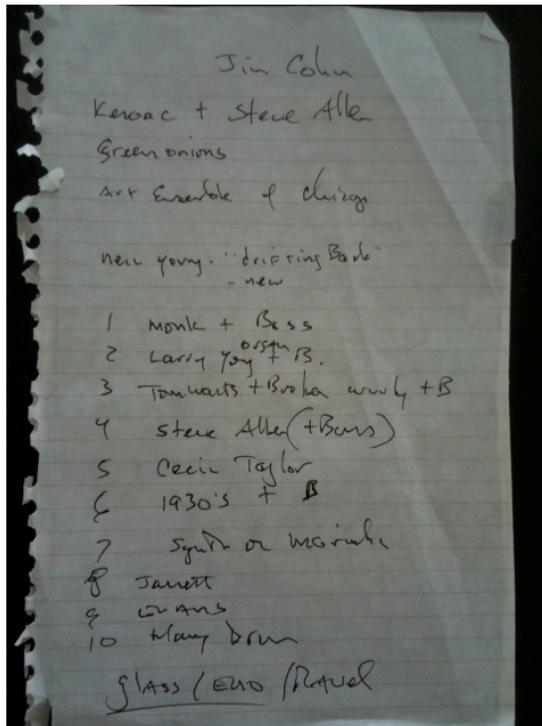


Photo by Bob Schlesinger, 2012.

You can see from Schlesinger's note that Cohn began by suggesting broad categories of spoken word and/or musical styles, including Neil Young and Crazy Horse's long piece "Drifting Back" from *Psychedelic Pill*. That concept never showed up in *VMH*. It did become a kind of backdrop to *Commune*, the recording Jim made a month after tracking *Venerable Madtown Hall*.

This totem of stylists—Kerouac and Steve Allen, "Green Onions" (and by that they mean Booker T and the MG's), and the Art Ensemble of Chicago gave Schlesinger a sense of the musical palette. Cohn always has an idea about where he's going in the studio. In the case of *VMH*, it appears he wanted a jazz record, one in terms of his own history with certain keyboard innovators he listened to—from Monk to Jarrett, Evans to Glass.

Then, there's Cohn's own approach to spoken word. His vocals are rooted in those Kerouac/Allen duets that haunted him not only through *Venerable*, but throughout all his

recordings. “When Hard Times Take Everything” is only the most recent example of their influence on his work.

The musicality or musical elements of Cohn’s spoken word has never been so apparent, even to those who followed him over the decades, as his music lurked in the shadows of his poetry. The film, as a document, uncovers firsthand the art of Jim’s vocals, his uncanny timing, jazz phrasing.

He appears to have gone through a kind of vocal revolution in the making of this record. There’s a sense of time quite in touch with the sophisticated musing of Schlesinger’s piano. When considered against his earlier work, there’s a breakthrough of vocal depth this particular sound lent him. Katrina Miller’s film, *The Making of Venerable Madtown Hall*, is the setting of Cohn melopoeiac liberation.

Cohn brought in about twenty-five recent poems. They recorded fifteen. Ten identically sequenced tracks make up both the audio and video recordings in *Venerable Madtown Hall*. The CD/DVD begin with “Extraterrestrial Girl,” and are followed by “Privacy Bedlam,” “Inscrutable Variation,” “Medicine Verbs,” “Amsterdam and Levette,” “Oriole,” “Celestially Promiscuous,” “Mariners Navigate By The Stars,” “Not Holding On,” and “When Hard Times Take Everything.”

All Jim Cohn’s recordings, with integrated lyrics and audio from his entire catalog, are at www.poetspath.com/jimcohnhomepage.html. Cohn’s recordings and books can be purchased at the MAP store: <https://www.poetspath.com/store/>. Jim Cohn lives in Boulder, CO, with his daughter.

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