

## COUNTER RHYTHMS

PAUL F. COHEN HEARS THEM IN JAZZ AND THE LAW BY JIM WALSH

Albert Einstein once said, “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

Thankfully, some hardy souls—jazz drummer/vocalist and attorney Paul F. Cohen, for one—have managed to meld the servant with the gift.

“It’s all music to me. Music is life,” says Cohen, taking a break from rehearsing for his CD-release party at the Hollywood Studio Bar & Grill for his first vocal recording, *Paul Cohen & Friends: I Want You Back*.

“You listen to a jazz tune and you can hear the melody,” explains Cohen, as he then sings a few lines of “Back Home Again in Indiana.” “But there are chords, counter rhythms, counter melodies, and alternative chords, and I hear all of that as I do a case. When I do a case, I hear somebody talking, and I hear the inverse of it and the counterpoint and the personal.

“It’s like hearing Jimmy Scott sing ‘When You Wish Upon a Star.’ You can hear the pain, a life, and all the stuff he’s gone through and how the world has treated him. I can hear that whenever anyone talks to me.”

Even over the phone and thousands of miles away, it’s easy to hear that Cohen is an especially acute listener and player, and easier still to imagine how he brings his well-honed improvisational powers to the courtroom.

“I will ask questions of a client like, ‘What kind of shoe do you wear?’” he says. “I have friends who are very linear lawyers who ask, ‘Why are you asking those kinds of questions?’ It’s because I’m getting the shade of something. It tells me that he wears these shoes maybe because he’s short, maybe because his feet hurt, or he’s arrogant. There’s something there. It really helps me in resolving cases. A lot of my stuff doesn’t go to trial, not because people can’t afford to, but because there’s a better way to do it that can make everybody happy. Most of my referrals come from my opponents, and it’s because, y’know, how do you play with five guys in a band and not step on the trumpet player’s toes? [Practicing law] is the same thing.”



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Cohen started playing drums when he was 12 years old. The rest of his music résumé reads like liner notes from an all-star compilation box set: Born in Pittsburgh, he spent much of his high school years playing in Harrisburg, and taking the train to New York City to study with drumming great Henry Adler and play with some of the best bebop players in New York.

While attending the University of Pennsylvania, he played in a Dixieland band that toured Europe and spent five weeks in Paris. He attended NYU law school and played music in the coffee shops of Greenwich Village in the storied jazz scene of the early ‘60s. Throughout it all, he found himself playing with such mentors as Tony Scott, Bill Evans, Dick Garcia, Charles Mingus (“I only lasted one day because he scared me so badly”), Ornette Coleman, Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon and Paul Blay.

After law school, Cohen and his wife moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked for two years in the U.S. Department of the Interior, two years with Neighborhood Legal Services, was executive director of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and drummed with various local and touring acts. After landing at the Western Center on Law and Poverty in Los Angeles, he went into private practice in

1972, and has handled litigation matters related to probate, conservatorships, trust and estate administration, and business disputes ever since.

For his next act, Cohen, 73, is climbing out from behind his drum kit and taking a turn on lead vocals.

“I’ve been singing out behind the drums for over 20 years,” he says. “And recently my producer Jane Getz suggested I try *singing* from behind the drums. I was curious if I could do it. With drumming, it’s physically difficult to throw your body in one direction and sing. Singing and drumming is not a natural act. When you’re playing the guitar or piano, your arms are close to your body and you’re not throwing yourself. So it’s a gyroscopic kind of thing to do; if you’re front singing and back singing, your body is playing in one place and you’re singing in another.”

Ever curious, Cohen took tap dance lessons in 2001. One afternoon while arguing for his probate fee, a judge who had caught wind of the counselor’s latest foray into performance art suggested he augment his argument with a display.

“So I did,” says Cohen. “I tap-danced for two minutes right there, and I got my fee. The whole court just cracked up.” 