

BELIEVER



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 by **JOE KLOC**



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CARROLL DUNHAM
(JUNGIAN SYMPATHIZER)
NEIL LABUTE
(MONSTER MAKER)
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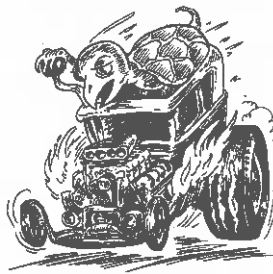
JOE KLOC

THE COLOR AND THE PAGEANTRY OF THOROUGHbred TURTLE RACING

BOHOS, BOBOS, AND THE SLOW DEATH OF NEW YORK'S WEST VILLAGE

DISCUSSED: *Corner-Store Coffee*, *Gravediggers*, *270 Composition Notebooks*,
A Bare Light Bulb, *Ivan the Terrapin*, *Doping*, *The Self-Proclaimed Historian of the Village*,
A "Contemporary Scottish Pub," The Charlie Sheen of Racing Turtles

In the world of competitive turtle racing, Mitch Cohen is known as "the Turtle Man." It is a hard-earned distinction for which he has paid a high price: for decades, Cohen has raised turtles in the lettuce-filled bathtub of his one-room New York City apartment. During fair season, he loads their three hundred pounds of gear into a hard-shell carrier atop his car and totes them to festivals and garden shows as far away as Texas, putting on races for his devoted followers. He has never made much money at this venture. Nor has he ever been married or had children. But the routine has kept him young. He is tall and strong. With sun-worn skin and a full head of white hair, he looks



happy—more so than most, even. In fact it is only his slow, deliberate gait that betrays his eighty years.

Cohen is one of the last of the Village residents from the 1960s who are still around.

Their tribe haunts the neighborhood's few

remaining unpolished spaces: basement apartments, down-and-out bars, and disappearing parks, remembering the Laundromats, cafés, and book emporiums where villagers once whiled away Sunday afternoons, reading, arguing, and enjoying cups of corner-store coffee. I first became aware of their presence a year before I met Cohen. While I was riding the subway in the spring of 2012, an older man noticed I was reading a copy of Joseph Mitchell's *Up in the Old Hotel*.

Mitchell's stories chronicle the lives of New York City bums, flophouse workers, gravediggers, bar owners, bar goers, Calypso singers, fortune-tellers, bohemians, and park preachers who defined street life in Manhattan between the late '30s and the mid-'70s. The man on the subway, whom I'll call Z because he asked me not to use his name, told me that he loved returning to the characters of Mitchell's New York, which, as I would come to discover in the next few months, was also his New York: Z was born in Greenwich Village in the 1940s, back when it was still a working-class Irish and Italian neighborhood. He remembers coming home to find his father mulling over the merits of Marxism in his kitchen with James Yates, the Mississippi-born African American author who had fought in the Spanish Civil War ("The good war," Z said. "Not the bullshit war"). He claimed, too, that he was close with Henry Miller's best friend, and that the two would sit together and read letters Miller sent from Big Sur. ("They thought he was a sexist. He wasn't. He was a romantic.") Back then, Z said, William Gottlieb, the real estate mogul who eventually bought up much of the Village, would drive around in his beat-up car as the locals would joke to one another: "You can sell to Bill, but you can't buy from him."

He first brought up the Turtle Man while we were discussing Joseph Mitchell. One of Z's favorite Mitchell stories was that of Joe Gould, a 1911 Harvard graduate who moved to the West Village and began living on the street, the self-proclaimed "last of the bohemians." For decades, Gould

claimed to be writing his magnum opus, a compendium of overheard conversations in cafés, bars, restaurants, parks, and subways that he dubbed *An Oral History of Our Time*. He told Mitchell that in some 270 composition notebooks he had compiled the "lengthiest unpublished work in existence": nine million words, all in longhand. His goal was to "put down the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude—what they had to say about their jobs, love affairs, vittles, speers, scrapes, and sorrows" or "perish in the attempt." Z's fascination with Gould was easy to comprehend. Disdaining the Village's upper class ("The bobos are so fucking neurotic"), he, too, had caught himself up in the project of preserving his disappearing city. In speaking to Z, I often wondered whether he knew that Mitchell came to believe that Gould fabricated the entire *Oral History* project. And that since the journalist first published his suspicions, a half century ago this year, no evidence has ever been found to corroborate the existence of Gould's work. I lost track of Z after Superstorm Sandy hit the city, in the fall of 2012, but in the few months I knew him, he would spend each evening sitting on a bench in the Village's Christopher Park. The position's appeal was clear: from the park he could see the Stonewall Inn; a block or so away was Jefferson Diner, where Joe Gould held court during Z's childhood; and the former Lion's Head Tavern, where Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin would come to drink and argue, was directly across from the bench, as was the original office of Norman Mailer's *Village Voice*. "I'm an anachronism," he liked to say.

For Z, Cohen was the only Villager worthy of being called one of Mitchell's Village eccentrics. The turtle racer still lives much the same way as when he first arrived in New York City, fifty years ago, which is to say sparingly, writing poetry and raising turtles in his basement apartment. He is, to Z, the embodiment of the Village that was plowed under by tour buses, boutique bakeries, and stroller-pushing upper-middle-class Americans. "We're dinosaurs," Z said. "Someday they are gonna stick us in a museum with a plaque that says REAL NEW YORKERS."

I visited Cohen at the rent-controlled basement studio in Greenwich Village where he has lived since the 1960s. If you go in for the romance of the long-ago Village artist's life, you have no doubt imagined this very apartment: a twin-sized mattress on the floor, sheets unmade; file cabinets clogged with a lifetime of poetry and turtle racing documents; a bare light bulb on the back wall maintained at low wattage; and in the corner of the room a small desk with a typewriter too new to be insincere. In the bathroom, a handful of turtles with names like Ivan the Terrapin ("the only racing turtle to defect from the Soviet Union") and El Niño ("the Tijuana tornado just after near-fatal rotator cuff surgery") paddled around in the tub. When Cohen brings a date home—as he often does—he always tells her: "The exterminator is coming tomorrow." It did not feel right to ask whether he took the turtles out of the tub when he showered. At one point during my visit, Cohen offered me his easy chair and took a seat at his desk.

Tacked to the wall behind him was a list of words. "It contains all the words I can never remember," he said. "Or at least it will once I remember them." He handed me a glass of water and apologized for not serving anything harder. Cohen told me, offhandedly, that since he was a young man he has viewed his life as that of Edmund in *King Lear*. (Edmund's relevant line: "I pant for life: some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature.") After reciting several minutes of the play, Cohen remembered a tucked-away bottle of whiskey and poured us each a few fingers. He smiled. It was not lost on him that those he meets inevitably want to know why he became the Turtle Man—not in a negative sense, but in the sense that one might naturally wonder why the aurora borealis or the millipede occur.

Cohen was raised and educated in Upstate New York. After college he joined the army and was stationed in Japan as an intelligence agent. He came to the Village in the early 1960s because he had wanted to be a poet but soon discovered he lacked the nerve: once during a public reading of his work, he had meant to say "You are a delicate essence" but mistakenly said "You are a delicatessen," and didn't write poetry again for many years. The "delicatessen" line in this anecdote actually seems the more appropriate poetry back in those Ferlinghetti days, but then perhaps Cohen has always been a man out of time. Cohen would go on to work as a Madison Avenue copywriter and a satirical columnist for *Cosmopolitan* until, in the late '60s, he was introduced to turtle racing by his neighbor. The races were an

easy way to make rent, and when his neighbor left town, Cohen took over. (That neighbor, Cohen claimed, was Ed Spielman, the soon-to-be creator of the hit television series *Kung Fu*.)

Cohen races his turtles inside a circular ring, roughly eight feet in diameter, that he can easily roll up to pack atop his car and transport around the country. He performs his act in a blue cape, an Icarus-winged hard hat, and an American flag-print bandit mask, traipsing around the ring announcing, "I am Turtle Man, defender of the innocent." This pre-race pageantry can take upward of twenty minutes. "I realize some of you may not understand that you've been entertained by me until you get home," he told an audience in New York. But "I want to see a lot of money on the track after the show, because I need cab fare home. And I live in Venezuela." To a crowd at the Pittsburgh Home and Garden Show he opened up a question-and-answer session: "We're gonna go to the field for the track introductions momentarily. But before we start, does anyone have any questions at all? About turtles, about turtle racing, about why



I am doing this to the world?" (When a girl in the audience asked what kind of turtles they are, Cohen replied, "They are Episcopalian.") Some in the crowd inevitably grow impatient with Cohen's comedy routine. "Don't be in such a hurry," he told one woman. "They're turtles." Strutting across his Astro turf-bottomed race arena, the Turtle Man eventually gets to his point: "I know this is stupid. But you'll watch it. Remember that." The business of actually racing the turtles takes only a moment: he places the four creatures in the center of the ring, and, within a minute, one usually scuttles to the edge to claim victory. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is turtle racing at its most exciting," Cohen said to the Pittsburgh audience. He picks up the victorious turtle (in Pittsburgh it was El Niño) and shouts, "We have a winner! Honor him!" as he steps out into the audience to sell T-shirts.

Cohen wasn't always racing at garden shows. But the last quarter of the twentieth century was a historically difficult time to be a turtle racer. The public's interest in the sport waned in the 1970s, when the New World International Turtle Track Commission—whose races were drawing more than two hundred entries from nine countries—was rocked by scandal when it was discovered that the 1974 championship turtle had the chassis of a toy electric car taped to its underside. "I am past words," the chairman of the NWITTC commented at the time to *New Scientist* writer Patrick Ryan. "Turtle racing stood on the verge of being a mass sport. Now attendances are bound to fall off." And so they did. The sport was lousy with cheaters.

Electroshock, hot-air jets, and doping were all tried. According to Ryan, however, doping "met with little success because tortoises have very strong heads. Retsina they lapped like water, cognac they downed by the saucer." A decade later, the sport took another hit when undercover police officers stung a fair in southern Ontario, arresting turtle race organizers for keeping an illegal gaming house, a crime worth up to two years in prison. The case was later dismissed when it was determined that turtle racing was a game of skill and not chance: "You can reduce the odds consistently by betting on an active, pregnant female," one expert told a local newspaper.

At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult to perform on the street in New York. The fairs have all "gone corporate," Cohen said. These days, if an artist wants to perform at a Village fair, he has to pay festival sponsors for a booth. This fee often exceeds what Cohen will earn from his tips. As a result, he must travel farther and farther from the Village, from New York City, and even from the East Coast to make a living at his turtle act, placing him in what some might consider the unfortunate position of struggling to scrape by at a profession he once got into because it took so little effort in order to live rather comfortably.

The Turtle Man is not bitter. His profession has given him the time to travel around the world. He has, by his own account, been a stowaway on a Soviet ship and stood down sword-wielding captors in Afghanistan. For decades, the only city in Europe he didn't visit was Paris, because, as a young man, he promised himself he

would visit only if a woman he loved invited him. "When I was sixty," he said, "one finally did." But the lifestyle has taken its toll. At times, he regrets never having married or had children. And he finds old age frustrating, particularly how taboo it is for older men to be interested in younger women. "I don't feel old," he once complained to me after a forty-minute conversation with two young women led nowhere. "I was hoping they would invite us to Paris."

There are a few places left in Greenwich Village from the time when Cohen arrived. The oldest bar in his neighborhood is a narrow, wood-paneled saloon called Julius'. Most nights, you can still find a man named Tom Bernardin posted up at the bar, where he has held court for almost four decades and is today the self-proclaimed historian of the Village. Bernardin moved to the neighborhood in the 1970s after graduating from college in Massachusetts. "I was gay," he said. "I knew I wanted to get out." When he arrived, he gravitated to



Julius', which since the late 1950s had been serving gay clientele and is the oldest gay bar in New York City. "This is like my living room," he told me.

When I first met Bernardin, in October of 2013, he wore a fedora and a sweatshirt and, as he spoke, was organizing a package of leaflets detailing the history of the bar. I had come to buy a reprint of a 1961 map of the Village in hopes of discovering what the neighborhood looked like when Cohen moved in. This, Bernardin pointed out, would be quite a difficult task. On the map, Julius' is one of the few remaining accuracies.

Julius' is on the southwest corner of a triangle-shaped block defined by Tenth Street and Waverly Place. When the structure was built, in 1826, however, those streets were named Amos and Factory, relics of the Village's working-class community roots. Amos Street was named for Richard Amos, a landowner who in 1796 bought the parcel that now contains Julius' from England's Earl of Abingdon. Back then, the Village consisted of tracts of farmland and tanneries, nestled north of the settlement of Manhattan, which was itself only two decades earlier cut free from England's rule. Julius' was opened a year before the Civil War ended, where it began to serve the neighborhood's growing population of Irish, Italian, and French immigrants who worked at the factories and docks along the waterfront. "There was a very big Irish, working-class mafia," Bernardin said.

In the early twentieth century, the Village was still a blue-collar

neighborhood, where larger residences were being subdivided to accommodate a booming immigrant population. Outbreaks of cholera and yellow fever decades before had necessitated that the neighborhood be kept separate from Manhattan when the city adopted a strict grid plan. Because of this, the area maintained its peculiar side streets, which, in addition to cheap rents, began attracting a burgeoning American bohemian class in the early 1900s. When Prohibition was enacted, in 1920, the Village became infamous for its speakeasies, including one opened by the young writer Henry Miller. As the Jazz Age passed through the Village, it transformed the neighborhood establishments, attracting an upper-class crowd. If not for the stock market crash of 1929, kids like Cohen and Bernardin might have been priced out by the '60s and '70s as their ideological descendants would be years later. Bernardin recalled a time when he used to chat in the elevator with an old Jewish woman living in his building who was enrolled in a college Shakespeare course. "Now it's the same everywhere. I can't get a fucking hello."

But for Bernardin, the eventual demise of bohemian Village life wasn't simply a result of the slow, gentrifying forces of the late twentieth century (the "fucking bobos," as Z puts it). There were two factors that conspired to bring about the contemporary character of the neighborhood: first, "The reason New York is New York is that it is one of the world's most perfect harbors," Bernardin said. But, according to him, the Village squandered its fortunate position in the last century.

"We threw it away, good working-class jobs." Then, in the early 1980s, the AIDS epidemic hit the city and particularly Greenwich Village, killing thousands of people, among them artists, poets, playwrights, and performers. Remembering Julius' at the time, Bernardin said, "You would think they just opened up a concentration camp." Many of his friends died. And those who survived moved away. "It's tough to rebuild on a graveyard. All those apartments became available."

Outside of Julius', Bernardin told me that if he were still young, he wouldn't move to the Village. He pointed across the street to an upscale, brunch-peddling "contemporary Scottish pub," remembering how he used to visit the tailor shop and travel agency that once occupied the space. "Where's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? Where's the revolution?"

"Every generation says it's over," Bernardin conceded as we stood outside a line of high-heeled tourists waiting to purchase a pastry from Magnolia Bakery, made famous (or infamous, depending on whom you ask) by the characters of *Sex and the City*. After all, before the Village was a bohemian destination it was a working-class dockworkers' neighborhood; before Julius' was a gay bar it was a writers' bar, a jazz bar, a speakeasy, and a blue-collar watering hole; and before Z's Christopher Park was urban green space it was a tobacco farm. But according to Bernardin, the neighborhood had, in recent years, lost what had been its defining characteristic throughout the twentieth century. "What happened here spread out. The literary movement, the

artistic movement, they spread out, gradually made their way to Omaha. It's not gonna happen anymore." The Village worlds of the Turtle Man, of Z and Bernardin, of Dave Van Ronk and Allen Ginsberg, of Jane Jacobs and Joseph Mitchell, of Joe Gould and Henry Miller, of Dylan Thomas and James Baldwin and the whole lot of twentieth-century bohemians, street performers, painters, novelists, journalists, and poets now exist only in their artwork's reverberations elsewhere—like still-traveling light whose stars have long flickered out. It may in fact be the case that Cohen is the last bohemian artist in Greenwich Village whose work is still "spreading out," riding on the stubborn and unsustainable energy of an eighty-year-old man, in a plastic carrier atop his car as he drives around the country in search of anyone who might still enjoy a turtle race.

Today, Cohen has again taken up spoken-word poetry, performing occasionally in cafés around the city or at the festivals where he races his turtles. One of his poems (around five minutes long) is about a man who has visions of a human-wrought apocalypse:

And I told them all that had happened to me,

And they said things like "easy,"
"we'll see," "we'll see."

"Just wait for the doctor, he'll make you well,"

"You poor baby you look like you've just seen Hell."

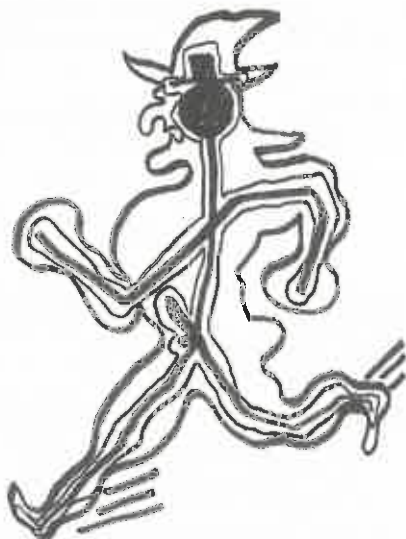
"Just wait for the doctor and you'll be okay,"

And no one was hearing what I had to say.

And I felt the tears rolling down my face,

'Cause I knew that I'd lost, that I'd lost that race.

Cohen may write in the Cold War parlance of his generation, but this poem was composed more than a decade after the Reykjavik summit. Living for fifty years inside his rent-controlled bunker beneath Greenwich Village, Cohen, like Z and Bernardin, has watched his neighborhood change. ("This is only cleaning up a long-dead place," the poem's narrator declares.) Standing outside one of these boutique fashion shops, looking through the window at a display of nearly identical high-end purses,



Bernardin sighed. "Now they all want to look alike. That's what really kills me. This is never again going to be a place for struggling people."

Cohen's favorite turtle is the smallest in his bathtub. Named Englebert Hawmp, number zero has yet to win a race. Cohen described him to the Pittsburgh crowd as "a turtle with no chance to win, a turtle with a dream. He's got no chance; he's up against green machines.... And yet Englebert is here to run. He's a little turtle with big stars in his eyes and no chance at all. Isn't that just the kind of stark personal drama that makes modern turtle racing what it is?" Englebert's nemesis is his larger, faster brother, Dump, "a turtle for whom I have no respect," Cohen told the audience. "A turtle who has no sense of morality. No sense of professionalism. A turtle who is just in it for the groupies. He is the Charlie Sheen of racing turtles. You can boo him if you want." When the crowd complied, Cohen responded: "You people just booed a turtle because some nitwit told you to. That is so bizarre."

For Cohen, the turtle act has come to parody a society so given to inventing competitions that it has become invested in the outcome of a turtle race. (Gambling remains a problem at Cohen's races.) "People sometimes ask themselves, Why am I watching this dumb show? If you think this isn't a worthwhile experience, consider this: you have been watching a show meant for four-year-old children. Most of you think you're here for the children's sake. I happen to know you're not. You're here to watch this dopey show for

twenty minutes, to watch four turtles do absolutely nothing. Next time you take yourselves too seriously, I want you to remember that. Because that is very interesting."

Before Cohen and I parted ways, I asked if he had any races planned in the city. He didn't. There was a chance that, on a whim, he might put on a show some summer day in Central Park, but only if he thought he could make back the fifty-block cab fare it would cost to haul the turtles up there from the Village. This was unlikely, given that he wouldn't take bets. The city had priced him out. But he persists nonetheless, showing his act across the country. That had been the whole point, hadn't it? This season, his nearest race would likely be another in Pittsburgh. After that it is on to a renaissance fair in Texas, where he will bill his act as "The Color and Pageantry of Thoroughbred Turtle Racing," this time calling himself Englebert Hawmp. Texas was the big one, Cohen said. The fair had become a haven for the old guard of fire jugglers, storytellers, knife throwers, acrobats, folk singers, and other street artists who were once so emblematic of mid-twentieth-century bohemian life. He will have a chance to recite his poetry for them onstage after the turtle races. He hopes the other artists won't laugh. ("Always listen for the crickets," he advised me.) But no matter if they do. Afterward, they'll all drink, joke, and piss each other off anyway, like an encampment of outnumbered soldiers on the eve of battle. ★

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