



REVIEW OF *AMERICAN CULTURAL REBELS*

Reviewed by Brian Murphy

Roy Kotynek and John Cohassey, *American Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers, and Musicians from the 1850s through the 1960s* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Co., 2008).

Put two serious historians together in one 254-page book, and you are unlikely to find a literary soufflé. Here is a book with much matter.

Koytenek and Cohassey have collaborated on an immensely useful—and concise!—volume that fulfills the promise of its title . . . and then some. The story actually begins in post-Revolution France, when “isms’ swept Europe.”

Although Emerson claimed that “history is biography” (and there are *plenty* of juicy biographies to be found here), Koytenek and Cohassey give us a thrilling intellectual ride (as we hear about Byron, Poe, and Whitman) from Romanticism, through Aestheticism, and on to Decadence at the end of the 19th Century, and then the development of anarchism and modernism as well as the brief pre-World War I affair between Socialism and Bohemian hedonism.

Drugs (we’ve been waiting for this) first pop up in 1912, the very first being peyote. Although Diego Rivera, in his autobiography, called Picasso “the master of masters,” Koytenek and Cohassey opt for Marcel Duchamp (who found and founded Found Art) as the seminal visual artist of the century: indeed, he stays in this story right through the Sixties. Dada is

seen as a short-lived movement that had profound and long-lasting effects: it was an unusually wild movement dedicated to the proposition that the highest human activity is play. When we meet pugilist-poet Arthur Cravan and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and learn about “living Dada” experiments and exhibitions, and when we hear that the Baroness was called a “sexual terrorist” and a gender-bender, and that “she once attached a tail light to her posterior,” then we regret this book has no pictures!

The story has been largely devoted to the visual arts up to now, but music enters the scene with Edgard Varese, who will have even more influence on the cultural rebels than Schoenberg and Stravinsky. However, we quickly turn back to the word—the story of Eugene O’Neill and the Provincetown Players, the Greenwich Village “idea,” and the artists’ colony in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

The next major historical development takes us to that fabled site of Paris in the Twenties, and it remains an ever-fresh tale: Sylvia Beach’s famous book store, Shakespeare & Company, which saw so many literary gatherings was one of the centers. Sylvia Beach also became the first publisher of the modernist masterpiece, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The names alone call up the era: Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound (who knew he was famous as a *dancer*?) Cole Porter, Gershwin, Scott & Zelda, the Murphys—Gerald and Sara, who found living well to be the best revenge—the scene is positively clotted with fascinating personalities and still-standing artistic accomplishments. We read about the immensely influential little magazines (such as *the transatlantic review*), about how the endlessly fascinating Man Ray carried on the Dada spirit, how the post-*Rite of Spring* composers took music in such new and strange directions—Virgil Thomson’s collaboration with Gertrude Stein that resulted in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which is a pretty strong contrast to George Antheil’s fantastically noisy *Ballet mecanique* (originally meant to accompany Fernand Leger’s classic avant-garde film of the same title).

It is a nearly giddy experience, merely reading Koytenek and Cohassey's tales, so it something of a relief to return to the relatively staid USA. We learn about Hollywood decadence but also discover the interesting fact that Los Angeles never really produced its own "Bohemia."

We travel down to New Orleans to see the young Faulkner—as did Hemingway before him—savagely break with poor Sherwood Anderson, who seems to exist in literary history as a father-figure to be trampled. While down there, we also learn about the beginnings of "jazz" and how it traveled up to Chicago. Great stories are found up there. Particularly noteworthy is the tale of drummer Dave Tough—as earlier Koytenek and Cohassey had treated us to a fascinating scholarly account of the real life-drummer who inspired a memorable scene in *The Sun Also Rises*.

In New York, the most interesting rebels are found in Harlem: the Harlem Renaissance is, in the Twenties, in full and controversial flower (alarming proper people like WEB Dubois), in the music, in the sexual variants, in the first stirrings of what will become Black Pride in the Sixties. We hear of the journal *Fire!!* and of its one extremely influential issue. And of course there is the ubiquitous Carl Van Vechten, his discovery of and practical help for such writers as Langston Hughes, his photos of nearly everybody, and his own still-controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. (A modern edition of this novel has been produced by OU English Professor Kathy Pfeiffer.)

In general, the 1930s saw the mainstreaming of modernism. The celebrity of Salvador Dali, for example, epitomized the triumph of modern art—particularly surrealism.

The Depression and the repeal of Prohibition had some unintended consequences. The latter produced a new gay-straight segregation when saloons became legal. The former produced the politicization of Bohemia. Koytenek and Cohassey are very helpful and interesting on the appeal of Marxism and Socialism and help us to understand how, in a word, Greenwich Village went Red. Moreover, we come to under-

stand how the theatre was the most politically committed of the arts. Virgil Thomson reappears in the story, and the importance of *Four Saints in Three Acts* is both emphasized and clarified.

World War II and the late 1940s produced, if anything, even more decisive changes in the arts than the First War had. Modern Dance was genuinely new—as was the revolution in painting called Abstract Expressionism. Jazz took on a new importance, as Bebop became music to be listened to, not merely danced to. Bird (Charlie Parker) merits extended treatment—his revolutionary music, his tragic life.

Then came the Beat Generation of the 1950s. Jack Kerouac coined the term “beat,” and the tale of the first reading of Ginsberg’s *Howl* in San Francisco is carefully told. Across the country, jazz-cum-poetry readings enjoyed a memorable, though quite brief, vogue.

It comes as something of a shock to read of *opposition* to all this by such as Lionel Trilling and similarly high-minded New Critics. We might be forgiven to think we have been reading not about rebels but simply about the history of 20th Century art. But the mandarin worries of the New Critics were pretty much swept away by that most rebellious of decades, The Sixties.

As Koytenek and Cohassey note, “for the first time, music, not literature or painting, became the counter-culture’s leading vanguard.” Even a Lionel Trilling couldn’t argue against music.

Classical rebels like John Cage and jazz artists like John Coltrane (especially noted is his important 1964 album *A Love Supreme*) profoundly affected the Sixties’ rockers such as Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers, Carlos Santana, Patti Smith, John Sinclair, and Bob Dylan. Dylan, of course, is not a “rocker,” but Koytenek and Cohassey make clear the fascinating trips folk and jazz made into rock from opposite directions. Miles Davis (the later Miles, much influenced by Jimi Henrix) gets considerable attention.

Music may have been the most important art form, but

Pop Art certainly rocked. Andy Warhol and the other pop artists revived Duchamp's experiments as well as his basic idea: it's not the work of art but *the idea behind the work* that is important. Duchamp was especially enamored of Sixties "Happenings." He loved them: to bore people! He'd never thought of that! They were like John Cage's use of silence in music.

The East Village scene is examined with some care, and, of course, we hear about that emblem of the time—*Fuck You!*—*A Magazine of the Arts*. We are reminded of the Fugs, a band with no musical training, and the famous Velvet Underground, a band with some.

They were doing things somewhat differently out on the West Coast. Ken Kesey (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is one of the seminal novels of the period) met the near-legendary Neal Cassady (who had figured in Kerouac's *On the Road*) and got excellent hallucinogens from the VA hospital where he worked. In 1964, Kesey and his Merry Pranksters took a colorful bus to the New York World's Fair, stopped to see the experiments going on with Timothy Leary, and returned to the West Coast, where the term "hippie" was coined in 1965, and the San Francisco scene became a model for youth across the country. In music, the Grateful Dead showed the new fusion of folk, blues, and free-form jazz. San Francisco's KMPX became the country's first underground radio station, and The Diggers announced that all is free.

The Los Angeles scene was somewhat different: but the Beats still exerted their influence—together with such disparate people as Rimbaud and Aldous Huxley—on Jim Morrison and The Doors. In the "freak scene" that developed, Frank Zappa stubbornly refused to fit in anywhere.

Koytenek and Cohassey make no grand generalizations to be derived from their study. They say only that they intended to show "how artistic avant-gardists and their supporters formed or influenced countercultures and ultimately mainstream culture, which copies its values, as well as its aesthetic surroundings, symbols, and even myths."

That is precisely what *American Cultural Rebels* has achieved. If any should object that we have seen many trees but not the forest, one can reply that we have seen truly fascinating trees . . . and it's been one hell of a ride.