

People worked together because they wanted to create something beautiful.

Journalism through rose-colored glasses

By David Armstrong
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

ALLEN COHEN was dreaming. It was a beautiful dream. The Arc de Triomphe was in it, and all around the famous landmark, people strolled and talked and turned the pages of a newspaper each was carrying. The newspaper was covered with bright splashes of color — with rainbows. The paper didn't have a name yet, even in Cohen's unconscious mind. No matter, Cohen and his friends, in an act of wakeful dreaming, would create it.

In the summer of 1966, the newspaper that Cohen, a young poet, envisioned was born in a small office in the Haight-Ashbury and christened the San Francisco Oracle.

The Oracle published only 12 issues, folding in the chilly spring of 1968, just months after the Summer of Love that the paper helped bring into being.

But in its brief existence, the Oracle attracted the highest circulation of any of the 400 underground papers in the United States. It published

free-form poetry, striking collage art, swirling, determinedly non-linear layouts and cryptomystical essays that seemed more Tibetan than American. Its sun-splashed issues became collectors' items virtually as soon as they hit the street.

"The Oracle wasn't done for a materialistic purpose," remembers Cohen. "People worked together because they wanted to create something beautiful that could stimulate human evolution and consciousness."

Cohen, who is now 47, had never published a newspaper before co-founding and editing the Oracle, and he hasn't published one since. Much of his energy goes into the nuclear disarmament movement these days, and the poetry that he's been writing since he moved to San Francisco from his native New York in 1963, smitten with The City and drunk on the language of the Beat poets.

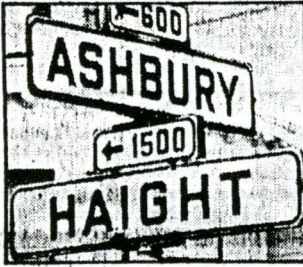
But after a few minutes of conversation in his small, lived-in Sunset District home, it's evident that Cohen is still proud of his dreamchild. He lugs a leather satchel into the kitchen, takes out a package wrapped in tie-dyed fabric and spreads his collection of Oracles on the table.

The papers smell musty, the way old newsprint does, and the colors are a bit faded, but you get the idea: The Oracle was, quite simply, Psychedelic Central, and leafing through the vintage issues practically induces a contact high.

"The paper was made, and read, by people who were in an expanded state of consciousness," Cohen says matter-of-factly.

Every issue on the table is filled with did-I-really-see-that graphics. One issue includes a jump page where continuing articles were typeset in circles

The Summer of Love



20 Years After



Examiner/Craig Lee

Allen Cohen has given up newspapering, but he still writes poetry to keep his hand in

instead of the straight, up-and-down columns of conventional newspapers. Another has a cover festooned with the photograph of a seer — the third eye in his forehead open to the cosmos — in place of the squinty-eyed politicians that adorned the covers of mainstream publications.

"Today, you see some of the design elements in magazines like Omni and Playboy," Cohen says, "though it took 15 years, until USA Today, for a newspaper to use effective color reproduction on a daily basis."

The Oracle's imaginative use of color — along with its singular layout and the unabashed religiosity of its writing — helped make the paper unique, even in the anything-goes underground press.

The paper was awash in color, especially after Cohen and his cohorts discovered that inserting small plates in the inkwells of the big web presses at Howard Quinn (their San Francisco printer) enabled them to run three colors at a time and create additional colors by blending ink — a technique called split-fountain printing.

"We were trying to explode the newspaper form," Cohen explains. "Standard newspapers were giving us linear, black-and-white rigidity, a mass-production, military model. We were saying, 'Here's what the rest of humanity is doing, and wants to do.'"

"Marshall McLuhan was a big influence," Cohen continues. "He understood that the medium was the message, and that we were entering the age of

— See SUMMER, E-4

SUMMER OF LOVE

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— From E-1

the global village.

"Every move that we made was intended to be made on the world stage," says Cohen of the media-trippers at the Oracle. "We sent the paper to Russia and eastern Europe in the bottom of boxes of old clothes. We had subscriptions in Vietnam. U.S. soldiers there read it. The response was extraordinary."

Not only did the Oracle have a distinctive look, it had a one-of-a-kind editorial policy. Indeed, its news judgment was more cosmological than political, more timeless than timely.

The Oracle's most memorable piece may have been its 23,000-word record of a wide-ranging rap session with psychedelic proselytizer Timothy Leary, poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, and the late Zen philosopher Alan Watts — all carefully transcribed and solemnly presented, the way the New York Times would have handled a meeting of heads of state.

Of course, Leary, et al. were heads of state — at least for the longhaired dropouts and wannabe's of the hip counterculture — in a way that Lyndon Johnson and Leonid Brezhnev were not. The Oracle understood that and heralded the summit meeting of the gurus accordingly.

And how was this combination of art and esoterica received on the increasingly mean streets of the Haight and places like it around the world? Ecstatically.

The paper's circulation peaked at what Cohen says was "somewhere between 100,000 and 125,000."

In the underground, only the Los Angeles Free Press, with a top circulation of 100,000, rivaled those numbers — although the Free Press published every week. The Oracle aimed for monthly publication, but appeared less often, whenever scant financing and its anarchistic volunteer staffing permitted.

Despite its otherworldly air, the Oracle was, in its way, an activist publication.

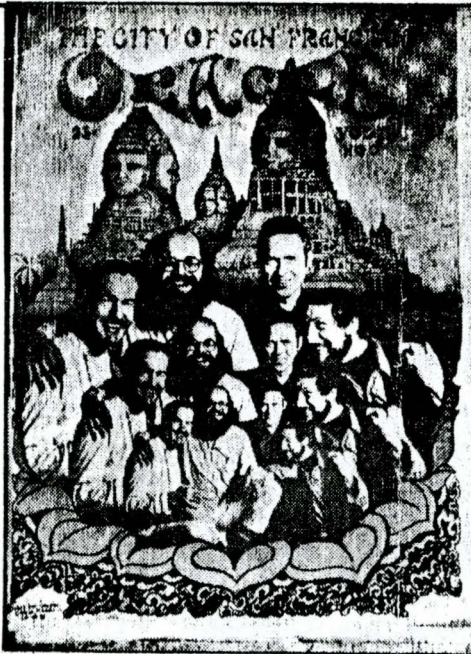
The paper organized and publicized the first big Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park, an event designed to unite Berkeley political radicals with the cultural radicals of San Francisco — and Cohen later came up with the idea publicly to exorcise the Pentagon. This evolved into the massive antiwar rally that Norman Mailer immortalized in his book "The Armies of the Night."

In addition to feeding the heads of its readers, the Oracle fed the bodies of at least a few. Kids peddled the paper on the street for a quarter — "one of the few ways that people had to make a living," according to Cohen.

"We fed people in the kitchen at our office," Cohen remembers. "We always had a big pot of rice and vegetables going. We also told people where to get a guide, to come down (from bad drug trips). We had a place in Big Sur to send people to clean up from drugs. We were both a hospice and a newspaper."

"We were pleading with city government to help us out," says Cohen of Haight habitues of 20 years ago.

"We wanted them to make the park available, to make food available. They complained that people were staying in crash pads. Of course they were; The City wouldn't make the park available for camping. They wouldn't capitulate to our needs in any way."



The Oracle's seventh edition, left, featured a dialogue between counterculture gurus Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary

When the Haight imploded from the pressure of young newcomers and its own overheated expectations, Cohen, like many catalysts of the neighborhood's great social experiment, headed upcountry. He lived in a commune in Mendocino from 1968 to 1975, when he moved back to The City, convinced that "I had written enough poems about redwood trees and mushrooms."

Despite his evident appreciation for the difficulties of living up to the ideals of the '60s, Cohen is not a member of today's trendy life-is-hard-and-then-you-die crowd. He is casual and articulate in conversation, and seems comfortable espousing what others might call naive or nostalgic — the values of "peace love and community" that animated the Oracle.

"Now, I would make it a mixture of art and political, cultural and social concerns," Cohen says of the newspaper. "I guess I've changed a little bit and society has changed a little bit. Society has accepted the idea that human beings have a spiritual dimension, although some of that is fundamentalism."

"There's also much more sympathy between people in the mainstream and outside the mainstream," Cohen goes on, "because the people from the '60s are intertwined with the mainstream."

About the counterculture's most ambiguous legacy, Cohen observes:

"Drugs — and I include as drugs, cigarettes and alcohol — are used as a measure of pain in society. We have a lot of pain. Drug use is a therapeutic problem, not a criminal problem. We don't jail people for smoking cigarettes, even though it's deadly. I believe in the legalization of all drugs, along with places where people can get help if they abuse them."

Cohen presented a slide show about the Summer of Love that drew 2,000 patrons recently to the Roxie Theatre. He is looking for a publisher to issue a hardcover anthology of the Oracle. Meanwhile, he supports himself selling men's hats at a store in North Beach. His next collection of poems is appropriately titled "The Hat Poems."

Other Oracle veterans are keeping on, often in ways that seem stunningly right. Former co-editor Steve Levine is nationally known for his books on death and dying. Several ex-staffers are working artists in San Francisco. Another is living in Nepal, where her young

son is venerated by local monks as an enlightened Buddha.

"The Oracle," Cohen concludes, "was the third most beautiful thing ever published in Western culture. The most beautiful were the illuminated manuscripts. The second were William Blake's books. And the third was the Oracle."

Allen Cohen and Summer of Love Productions, the sponsor of this year's 20th anniversary events, can be contacted at 753-3015.