





# Bruce, Moose, music and wine

It's a dog's life at  
B.R. Cohn where  
cabernet and olive oil  
mix with rock 'n' roll

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**b**ruce and Moose.

It would not be fair to either to say that they look exactly alike.

But there is between them the familial similarity that often occurs between dogs and their owners. They go together, they are, in some transcendent sense, a package.

Moose is the easy part of the equation, a 10-year-old, 100-pound hound, a laid-back, imperturbably mellow alter ego who follows Bruce around with a slow and deliberate bowlegged shuffle and keeps a bed in the tasting room the better to receive the affectionate attention of his adoring fans. Moose is what Bruce likes to call a "blabrador," a Labrador-bulldog mix, the product of an unsanctioned union between a yellow Lab and one of Bruce's English bulldogs. He is the front man, the front door fixture, the presence everyone wants to pet.

But getting to know Moose doesn't necessarily mean you'll get to know Bruce. It's much more complicated than that.

For one thing, where do you start? There's only one Moose. But which Bruce do you talk about?

The winemaker? The rock band manager? The olive oil entrepreneur? The

*Bruce, Moose  
and the beloved  
'46 Ford Woody.*



philanthropist who parlayed an inside seat at the rock 'n' roll banquet table into nearly \$2 million worth of charitable donations?

The book on Bruce is big. Information is everywhere. Accolades envelop him. Gold records hang on his walls. Vintage cars fill his garage. Famous people are speed-dialed into his cell phone. Not to mention, the guy owns his own winery.

But, really, who is he? A kid who got lucky? A managerial ingenue?

When he was 23, Bruce happened into a San Mateo recording studio where his brother worked and met guitarist Tom Johnston and drummer John Hartman, two Doobie Brothers-to-be. That was the beginning of everything.

"We cut a demo tape and we sent it to Warner Bros. We got a record. It took a year to get the deal," Cohn says.

But the self-titled debut album flopped, or as Cohn likes to say, "It stiffed"—selling somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000



copies. After tweaking their lineup and polishing their sound, the Doobies recorded a second album, *Toulouse Street*. The very first track, an infectious little ditty called "Listen to the Music," took the airwaves by storm. What followed is part of rock 'n' roll history—a history Cohn managed, first as one of the youngest and now as one of the longest-lasting managers in the music business.

It gets better. Michael McDonald, a brilliant singer and songwriter, joined the band. In 1979 the group's "Minute by Minute" nabbed a Grammy Award for Best Album, while "What a Fool Believes" won Song of the Year. More Grammys followed. For a band that once gigged regularly in pizza parlors and biker bars, this kind of success wasn't just surprising, it was overwhelming.

Especially when you realize that Bruce was still a kid, a pup, a 20-something. Growing up, he split his time between San Francisco and more rural environs in

Sonoma County where his family raised goats. In the city, the Cohns lived on Seal Rock Drive in the Outer Richmond district overlooking Ocean Beach. Bruce attended Lincoln High, the public school a few blocks away, and he burned off all that teenaged testosterone in fast cars instead of hanging out on the street.

"It was real drag racing," he says. "It kept me out of an element I could've really fallen into."

What he's talking about is being a teenager in dangerous proximity to the Haight-Ashbury, where drugs were as common as tie-dye.

Racing kept him employed—he had to keep a job to pay for it.

He went to college, got a degree in radio and television from the University of Colorado, and soon found work as a nighttime television engineer at TV-20, while he ran a music rehearsal studio during the day. In 1969 he began managing the Doobies.

Fresh-faced as he was, Cohn had the foresight to set up a profit-sharing pension plan in 1972 and then spent half his time investing the band's hard-earned dollars into more surefire revenue builders, like real estate.

"I thought the band would be over in five years, so I started planning—that's why I bought all the commercial real estate for them."

For all the obvious success, Cohn's life is a little elusive, difficult to reel in. Maybe that's because sometimes, when he's midway through an interesting story, you realize he's told it so often he doesn't have to be fully present and the story becomes a mask, something you can't see behind. Still, you listen, because he's Bruce, because he tells good stories, and because you hope bits and pieces of who he is will leak out.

## Wheels of Fortune

Listening to Cohn spell out the details of his star-studded life, you can't help



B.R. Cohn concert scenes, clockwise from above: Doobies Patrick Simmons and John McPhee, Tower of Power, Bruce donating \$300,000 check, concert crowd, Huey Lewis, Tower of Power lead singer Barry Briggs.





wondering if part of his success is just pure, dumb luck. Is that the secret? Is he just lucky?

"Not at all. It's been a long, hard road," he says, sitting on a patio just outside his winery's tasting room. "It's been financially stressful for 20 years. It's been a major hard road. The music business is no cakewalk, and neither is the wine business."

Moose begs to differ. Basking beside his master, his relaxed repose is contradicting every word. For Moose it's been a cakewalk, a dog's day, a canine nirvana. He has his own wine label and a best-selling blend called Moose's Red, along with a line of dog biscuits, T-shirts and an exorbitant amount of public attention from winery visitors who lavish him with more affection and belly rubs than any dog could beg for. A major hard road? Moose doesn't think so.

Bruce admits, however, that things are looking up. "I'm finally coming into a place I've been looking for for 30 years," he says.

The winery is paying its bills, and the

## His phone goes off ... it's a Doobie, calling about the new album

band is booking 80 shows a year. Now if only the planning department would get off his back. He has ambitious plans for his event calendar, which means there are bureaucratic hurdles in his path.

He ponders his future behind a pair of sunglasses, but they're not some affectation of distant coolness. We're sitting outside on patio furniture in the late morning sun, and Bruce has chosen to face the glare so I don't have to.

His phone goes off a few times.

First it's "a Doobie," calling to talk about the new album the band will soon



*Moose markets a variety of tasty products while fiercely protecting the driveway of Bruce's winery.*

record. That's big news, but Bruce drops it casually into the conversation like he's talking about the weather. He's even brought in Ted Templeman, who produced 12 of the band's biggest-selling records, and plans to self-produce the new work and take it straight to Starbucks. They don't have a label, which isn't slowing down either the recording schedule or Cohn. A similar maneuver paid off for Joni

In 1984 he reached the conclusion that if you could grow grapes, you could crush grapes. So he did.



Mitchell, and Cohn is confident it'll work for the Doobies too.

The band may have fallen off the radar when it comes to record sales, but Cohn's commitment has never wavered. Not only has he managed the Doobies for 37 years, he's had them headline his annual Charity Music Festival since 1989.

"When I commit to do something, I do it," he says with quiet emphasis. "I spent half my life with them, well over half my life."

The Doobie Brothers aren't just a loaf of bread in the B.R. Cohn financial pantry. They are his family and his friends, and it's a very selective inner circle because when you know as many people as Bruce does, you have to be a little cautious. Too many people want too much.

"I only have a few really good friends," he says thoughtfully. "I have a lot of acquaintances."

### Long Train Runnin'

Though Cohn is no longer tied to the touring schedule that took him through 150 cities a year, he still spends at least two weeks a month traveling, and works seven days a week.

"It's easier now. My kids are all grown and don't need me to drive them to school or get them to soccer practice."

He bought the Sonoma property in

1974 as a retreat from the grueling touring schedule.

"It was meant to be a place to raise my family," he says.

And it was. Cohn brought up his four children there, two boys and two girls. The transition to viticulture was purely an accident. He spent the first few years of vineyard life simply selling grapes to other wineries. But in 1984 he reached the inevitable (and common) conclusion that if he could grow them he could crush them. And so he did. His first winemaker, Helen Turley, helped him put his Olive Hill cabernets on the map, and cabernet sauvignons are still what Cohn is known for, although he's quick to point out that he dabbles in pinot noir as well.

The winery makes it possible, or at least easier, for Cohn to exercise his philanthropic side. For his annual fall concert, in addition to the Doobie Brothers, he routinely books names like Taj Mahal, Little Feat, Willie Nelson, Jackson Brown, Bonnie Rait, Tower of Power and Joe Satriani. The charity events usually sell out, and the concerts alone have raised \$2 million over the last 21 years, every cent going to local causes like the Sonoma Valley Mentoring Alliance, the Hospital Foundation, Valley of the Moon Children's Home and Boys and Girls Club Valley of the Moon.

"Makes me feel good," he says coolly, when asked why he does it. "It has an impact. We can give them a really good amount of money." At this point, the philanthropy is as much a part of his legacy as the Doobie Brothers. "I'd like to be known for doing a good job, making good products, and helping out in charities where I could."

For all the good works, there are those who say Bruce Cohn can be a difficult person to work with. It isn't criticism he seems to care about. "I can be (tough to work for) because I like things right, so in that way, I guess I am." And anyone who gives away as much money as Bruce will sooner or later end up making someone unhappy. "There's a line of people and I don't have enough money to go around," he says. "It's disheartening when you can't do them all."

What you get when you interview Bruce is not the open book. It's the CliffsNotes: a carefully chosen selection, with enough depth to keep you captivated but still wishing you could read the unabridged version.

Even when he tells the story of how his son almost died after contracting malaria

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*The Cohn estate: a retreat from the grueling schedule and a place to raise the kids.*

during a Peace Corps stint in Zambia, there's not much evidence of emotion. Bruce is a guy who keeps it together at all times.

Unless, of course, you get him around Moose, his trusty sidekick and the best available evidence that when Cohn calls it a day, there's another side he has no intention of showing just anyone, and certainly not a reporter. When conversation turns to soulful-eyed Moose, a boundless warmth spreads over Cohn that wasn't there before. He's breeding the dog this year with another "blab" named, what else, Moosetta.

### **Rockin' Down the Highway**

Get him talking about his collection of vintage cars and you'll also draw out some tempered excitement. Cohn's been collecting cars for the last 20 years, and one of his most prized possessions is a fully restored 1946 Ford Woody wagon that once served as a U.S. Embassy staff car in the Philippines. Both General Eisenhower and General MacArthur sat behind its steering wheel.

His other baby is a gorgeous rarity from Australia—a 1933 Willys roadster Cohn spent 18 years rebuilding into a street rod. He still drives the vehicles regularly, and he has a special affection for both the cars and the people who fix and restore them. He even confesses that if there is one thing he wishes he could do, it would be to get under the hood of these automotive gems and do some of the work himself.

"I wish I could've gotten into that... (but) you can do just so much and do it well," he says.

Though he's approaching the age when some men retire, Bruce Cohn still keeps a relentless schedule and he isn't about to spend his days roaming the golf course or lounging on a lawn chair. Right now he's focused on expanding the winery's olive oil and food program, tying more food and wine events together and plans for a guest chef dinner in the works.

"I don't think I could do well if I retired," he says. "I need to keep busy, (that's) my personality. I like projects."

And maybe that's one reason the Bruce Cohn story feels unfinished—he hasn't finished living it. **S**