Alumni

Outta Here!

How Mets announcer Gary Cohen ’81CC went from the kid in the stands to the man at the mic.

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|
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Gary Cohen (left) with Ron Darling and Keith Hernandez. Photo: Marc Levine / SNY

Gary Cohen ’81CC sits at his laptop in the booth behind home plate at Citi Field. The mezzanine-level view takes in the groomed dirt of the diamond, the crosscut outfield

grass, the empty dark-green stands, the center-field video board, and the cotton-candy-blue sky over Flushing, Queens. Cohen's broadcast partners of twelve seasons, Ron Darling and Keith Hernandez, who both played on the fabled 1986 Mets championship team, have yet to arrive. A cameraman is futzing with a wire. It's three hours before game time, and Cohen is doing his homework.

"On the air, I have to be ready to address whatever comes up, and you never know what that will be," says Cohen, checking the latest stats and storylines for the opposing Miami Marlins. "It could be about a player in today's game or something that happened yesterday or last week or two years ago or fifty years ago." Cohen types some notes. "I spend most waking hours during baseball season just trying to be ready."

Cohen has a clear, strong, middle-lower-register voice that can rise as fast and high as a smacked fly ball. On the air with Darling and Hernandez, it's a voice of unassuming command — deliberate, quick-witted, diagnostic, inflected with the subtle wryness of a consummate straight man. "I'm kind of like the traffic cop" is how Cohen puts it. "So much depends on personality. Ronnie's professorial, Keith's a little more quirky" — any incidental echo of the Rolling Stones is not off-base, given the wattage of the '86 Mets — "so sometimes it's my job to rein in the silly stuff when it's time to focus down there" — Cohen nods to the field — "or to *instigate* the silly stuff when the game stinks."

Cohen, who is widely known as the smartest, best-prepared play-by-play announcer in baseball, does about 150 games a year out of 162 for SportsNet New York (SNY). Each broadcast is its own extended improvisation, its own performance, unfolding with the rhythm of the action.

"Most of what happens up here in the booth," says Cohen, "depends on what happens out there." He gestures again to the field. "Something happens in a game that calls to mind something else, which leads to a conversation on another topic, and that leads to a full-blown discussion of an issue we never had any intention of talking about. Ronnie calls it freeform jazz. I think that's really the best way to describe it."

Like the best jazz trios, Cohen and company work as an intuitive unit. They don't step on each other's lines, and they know when to use the power of silence. "It's a remarkably low-ego environment," Cohen says. "None of us needs to be the guy

who talks the most. None of us needs to be the alpha dog or the guy who makes the point: we're just as happy to be the guy who leads the *other* guy into making the point. In a lot of booths, it doesn't always work that way."

Cohen was born in 1958 and grew up in Kew Gardens, Queens, a few miles down the Grand Central Parkway from Shea Stadium. The Mets were born in 1962, and for their first two years they played — badly — at the Polo Grounds in Upper Manhattan. Even after they moved to Shea they were the sorriest bunch of butterfingers the game had ever seen. Cohen fell in love with them — not for their Keystone Kops blundering but because the kid-oriented, family-picnic feeling of Shea was more appealing than the seriousness and grandiosity of Yankee Stadium.

For his ninth birthday, Cohen received a life-changing gift: a desk-model AM radio, the kind with tubes. Cohen listened to every sports broadcast he could find. Night after night, he drifted through the mists and warbles of the AM dial until he came to a clearing at WJRZ 970, and was carried off by the artful evocations of Bob Murphy, the voice of the Mets.

That was also the year Marv Albert became the voice of the New York Knicks. Cohen was crazy for basketball, and Albert was a revelation. "Marv Albert was the one who inspired all of us New York guys — Michael Kay, Ian Eagle, Howie Rose — to become sports broadcasters," Cohen says. "His cadence, personality, sense of humor, description: Marv was the whole package. When I was a kid, he did the Knicks and Rangers [hockey], and I'd live for those nights just to hear him describe the games."

Then, in 1969, after seven years of futility, a young, hungry Mets team — no one in the starting lineup was older than twenty-six — rolled to the National League title and beat the Baltimore Orioles in the World Series. The Miracle Mets! Cohen was in heaven. He had gone to the pennant clincher against the Atlanta Braves back when fans, in celebration, would climb over the rails and mob the field. "I went onto the field and got my little piece of turf," Cohen says. "Unbelievable that people used to do that. Now you'd get Tasered."

But the real rapture came in 1973. Cohen was fifteen and could go to games on his own. "That year the Mets were in last place in late August and made this incredible run. The division was terrible: they finished 82–79 and still won it. But September was unbelievable. I was there for a lot of those games." The Mets lost the World

Series to the Oakland A’s, but Cohen was aflame with the orange and blue.

The affair continued through college. It was the late 1970s: Yankees time. The high-paid, high-powered, world-beating Bronx Bombers. But Cohen lived in an alternate baseball universe. From Morningside Heights he would take the subway out to Big Shea. Big, empty Shea. “The Mets were terrible. Four thousand people in the ballpark” — Shea held fifty-seven thousand — “but it was great,” Cohen says. “Give the usher two bucks and sit in the best seat in the house. I felt like I had the team to myself: Bruce Boisclair, Joel Youngblood . . .” Cohen would stretch out in the desolate stands, the swampy Flushing air trembling with flight-path thunder from LaGuardia, while above him, in the mezzanine, Bob Murphy sat in his booth, at the microphone, creating word pictures on the air.

At Columbia, Cohen majored in political science, but the center of his college world was WKCR. There, he landed a gig in the sports department doing radio play-by-play, not just for baseball but also for football, basketball, and soccer. “I got to broadcast many, many Columbia losses,” Cohen says. “But I also got to call some great basketball — the team of ’78–’79 was fabulous. Alton Byrd ’79CC and Ricky Free ’79CC and Shane Cotner ’79CC and Juan Mitchell ’79CC. They won seventeen games that year. They were tremendous. And Columbia had terrific soccer teams — John Rennie was the coach, and you had a great player, Shahin Shayan ’80CC, ’84BUS, ’85SEAS. And baseball: Mike Wilhite ’78CC, ’07GSAPP, Rolando Acosta ’79CC, ’82LAW.” Cohen can go on.

It was in Columbia’s booths that Cohen worked on his vocal technique, learning how to use his diaphragm like a singer. In fact, he looked more like a rock singer than a sportscaster. (A 1980 college photo of Cohen with Woodstock-caliber tresses became an object of lengthy scrutiny on a recent telecast.) Whether at Baker Field or courtside in Dodge gym, Cohen logged hours at the microphone, building the muscles to think and talk at breakneck speeds, to enunciate, to get the names and numbers right while describing rat-a-tat bang-bang action.

Then he graduated, got a haircut, and went out to find a job.

You send out tapes and hope somebody likes you. Cohen got some bites. He spent his first few years in professional radio covering local sports in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Then he went to Norfolk, Virginia, where he did the news, a tax show, and fishing and boating reports; he even went up, with unhappy digestive results, in the traffic copter. He also got to do NCAA Division I basketball for the first time, at Old Dominion.

In 1986, while the rowdy, Dionysian Mets lit up New York on and off the field, Cohen was quietly sojourning in Durham, North Carolina, calling games for the Durham Bulls: his first minor-league job. The next year he moved up to the Triple-A Red Sox in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. And then, in the summer of 1988, he got a call: the Mets — his Mets — needed someone to fill in for a game, alongside Bob Murphy.

Cohen jumped at the chance. He went to Shea Stadium, and waiting there in the booth was Murphy. Cohen had to pull himself together. “It was incredibly nerve-racking. Murph did a great job of calming me down.” Cohen was told it wasn’t an audition, but shortly afterward, a job opened up. That fall, Cohen interviewed for three big-league radio jobs: the Montreal Expos, the San Diego Padres, and the New York Mets.

The Padres called and needed an answer immediately. Cohen was torn. He did love hot weather. Certainly there would be nothing wrong with living in San Diego.

But he wanted the Mets job. He wanted it more than anything.

So he kept the Padres on hold and waited desperately to hear from the Mets. Finally he could wait no longer. On the Friday before Christmas, Cohen went to Worcester, Massachusetts, to announce a Providence College–Holy Cross basketball game. The moment he got to the arena he went to a pay phone in the lobby and called his Mets contact. “He gave me the answer,” Cohen says. “And that was —” Cohen shakes his head. No words for it.

He had gotten his dream job.

Cohen started in 1989, teaming with Murphy, the voice of his childhood. They were on-air partners for fifteen years.

“I had to pinch myself every day,” Cohen says.

Murphy retired in 2003, and in 2006 Cohen joined SNY. After seventeen years on the radio for the Mets, Cohen was moving to television.

“When Keith and Ronnie and I started on SNY, none of us really had any idea what we were doing,” Cohen says. “For me, I was a radio guy. In radio you’re working with one other person and the engineer, and you’re really your own show. You create your own reality, and you can go in any direction you want. In television, you’re trying to marry words to pictures, and you’re getting ideas from producers, and your partners are experts. It’s completely different.”

As Cohen sees it, the shared lack of TV experience was a blessing. “We all knew we were dependent on each other,” he says, “and that helped make it a real collaborative enterprise.”

The trio became known for its droll banter, discursive digressions, bracing candor, superior preparation, and intricate wisdom of the game; and above it all, atop the tower, blinking in the night, was the beacon of Cohen’s voice, rising, as Cohen might say, *to the apex of its range* . . .

The home-run call never used to have a name. It was just how an announcer expressed the climax of the ascending drama of a swatted ball arcing over the field and clearing the fences. “*Going, going, gone!*” (Mel Allen.) “*Kiss it goodbye!*” (Bob Prince.) Today, homerun calls can feel contrived, test-marketed. Not Cohen’s. And while he would “rather be judged by the totality of what I do for five hundred hours a season” than by a catch phrase, he’s happy to have delivered a hit.

“In the minors I tried every manner of hokey, ridiculous home-run call, and when I got to the majors I realized how hokey and ridiculous they were,” Cohen says. “So I started just describing what was happening, and by luck or happenstance, I started calling home runs in a particular way that people seem to enjoy.”

Cohen’s call typically begins something like, “A drive in the air, deep left field” — his voice climbs with the trajectory of the ball — “that ball is headed toward the wall — that ball is” — and now the ripping, primal yell — “*outta here!*”

And time stops. For fans, this cry, so phonetically and rhythmically natural, so genuine (in moments of extreme transport he’ll repeat it: *outta here! outta here!*),

has a physical power, like a Stratocaster power chord, electric, hair-raising, complete.

Seth Wenig / AP Photo

Gary Cohen is not sentimental about baseball. He does not see baseball as a grand metaphor. Baseball is baseball. It’s part of life, not a reflection of it. Life is much more. Life is his wife, Lynn, and their five children. Life is books, movies, music. Life is what happens between games, between seasons.

Life is the road. After twenty-nine years of traveling with the Mets, Cohen spends most of his downtime in his hotel room, or in the gym, or at the ballpark. And when the season ends in October, he will switch gears and return to another passion: basketball. The Mets TV talker also does radio for the NCAA Division I Seton Hall Pirates of South Orange, New Jersey. Basketball is instinctual for Cohen, a first language, and a way to maintain his chops: the free-jazz guy going back to his bebop, to the joyous precision of rapid-fire play-by-play.

“The games last two hours, the action carries the entire broadcast, and it’s just describe, describe, describe, whereas baseball is the complete opposite,” Cohen says. “I find basketball to be tremendous fun.”

Cohen walks through the wide, curving corridors of Citi Field (the ballpark opened in 2009 right next to Shea, which was demolished) to Mets manager Terry Collins's pregame press conference. On the way, he sees someone: a Met, in uniform, with reporters around him. Cohen goes over. It's a rookie pitcher who's just been called up to the big leagues. He's in the classic mold: tall and rawboned and fresh-faced and polite. Cohen introduces himself. The pitcher appears excited to meet Cohen, who's been calling Mets games since before the kid was born. Cohen wishes him well and continues on his way. "That's the best," Cohen says, his voice warmed by the glow of every rookie who's made it to the majors. "Once they get here you never know what's going to happen. Just being able to get here is incredibly special."

In the pressroom, Cohen sits in a folding chair in the back row. Terry Collins steps to the lectern, Mets cap pulled over bristly white hair, so that a grim shadow falls over his brow. Cohen listens and takes notes as Collins talks about the bullpen.

Afterward, Cohen says, "I have less contact now with players than I did thirty years ago. The nature of the player-media relationship has changed drastically. There's a much greater wall now. If you visit the clubhouse when the media's allowed in, you might find five players. It didn't used to be like that. It's no one's fault; it's just the way things have evolved. I spend less time in clubhouses now, but I make sure I'm there every day, because if I say something that offends somebody I want to be there, to be accountable."

But, he adds, "I've been through nine managers since I've been here, and Terry Collins is by far, *by far*, the best to deal with."

Other things have changed. Over the past twenty years, the use of sophisticated (and, for some fans, incomprehensible) statistical analysis to evaluate players has become de rigueur. "It's foolish to ignore it," says Cohen, "because ball clubs are using advanced statistics to determine who to sign, who to trade for, and who to play, so you have to pay it some mind.

"But I don't think the fans care so much about numbers on a spreadsheet. In all the years I've been doing this, no one's ever come up to me and said, 'X player has higher WAR [wins above replacement] than Y player.' No. It's always, 'What's David Wright really like?'

“That’s what people want to know about: the human beings behind the game. They want to feel a connection. They want to feel in touch with the humanity.”

Cohen heads back around the corridors and refreshment zones of Citi Field to the SNY booth. The booth is crowded with producers, directors, camera people. Hernandez and Darling are in there too. Hernandez, ever the life of the party, is cracking jokes. Everyone’s laughing. No pregame jitters up here.

So the evening begins. In a moment, Cohen and his partners will take up their microphones, look into the camera, and leap into another night of baseball.

“The season is a marathon,” Cohen says. “You dive into the deep end of the pool in April, and you come up for air in October. That’s it. You just try to stay healthy and make it through the six months. By the end, everyone’s tired.

“But once the first pitch is thrown, the adrenaline kicks in. You find your way through it for the three hours, then you crash.”

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