On Highway 67 (and Beyond)

In a varied and decades-long career as a photographer and videographer Charlie Steiner has traveled around the world. But he still keeps coming back to the 1960s on Penn's campus, where he got his start.

By John Prendergast

For years the photographer and videographer Charlie Steiner C'68 has been tinkering with a project he calls *Highway 67 Revisited*. Still very much a work-in-progress (though he hopes to pull together a book before too long), it's taken on various forms as he's thought and rethought the concept—sometimes expanding to incorporate seminal texts and era-defining photographs produced by others, and sometimes spilling into subsequent decades to take in later artists and events spiritually, if not chronologically, *of* the '60s—but always having at its heart the photos Steiner took as an enterprising student photographer working for the campus monthly *Penn Comment* and other venues. Those include images of Andy Warhol in his first solo exhibit at Penn's Institute of Contemporary Art, Bob Dylan on stage at the Academy of Music, and Robert F. Kennedy speaking in the Palestra, among others.

The title of the project obviously derives from Dylan's 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, which itself paid homage to an old blues song, "61 Highway Blues," recorded by Mississippi Fred McDowell and others. "That's where Dylan got it. It's interesting because Highway 61 goes from Minnesota, where he grew up, to New Orleans, and it goes through the Mississippi Delta," says Steiner, a longtime New Yorker who relocated to New Orleans a decade or so ago. "And now I live at the end of it. When I first moved here, I lived about six blocks from Highway 61."

The *67* is there "because, to me, looking at the '60s—for the purpose of the book I'm calling "the '60s" 1965 to 72—but '67 was the peak of what most people think of as the '60s," before the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy in 1968 and the killing and other violence at the Altamont Speedway concert in 1969 soured the vision of "peace and love and community," he says. "There's a lot of things you could say is the *end* of the '60s, but '67 was a high point in the cultural and music scene."

Others have different perspectives on that, and about the period in general, he acknowledges. "I've had arguments with people a little younger than me who say, 'Well, it wasn't really a big deal. Things didn't change that much. It was a continuation of the '50s, and it continued into the '80s.'" On the other hand are people like his neighbor—a DJ at the New Orleans radio station where he now works, and formerly at stations in the "hippie central" of Santa Cruz, California. "I asked her when she thought the '60s ended, and she had this real quizzical look on her face. '*It never ended*.'"

Steiner grew up in "the Oranges, in suburban New Jersey—about 40 minutes from Manhattan," he says. His mother was a Penn grad, and he thinks that helped him get in, despite decent but "not at all great" grades in high school. His father was a doctor, and Steiner's first plan was to major in electrical engineering with an eye toward a related career

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES STEINER

Previous page: Contact sheet from Bob Dylan show at the Academy of Music, February 1966. Below: Mick Jagger at Asbury Park Convention Hall, 1966; Janis Joplin on stage in Irvine Auditorium, February 1968; Joan Baez at an event promoting peace in Vietnam, November 1967.

in medical engineering—until he discovered that curriculum would leave him with almost no electives. "I had broader interests," he says, and transferred to the College, majoring in psychology.

His four years at Penn were a time of dramatic change. The big issue his freshman year, as he recalls, involved the extension of the curfew for women students from midnight to 1 a.m. on weekends. That was followed in his sophomore year by protests against campus construction and early environmental activism by the group Save Open Space (SOS). "And then by the third year, the administration building was taken over by protesters about germ warfare research," he says.

The pace of change, reflected as well in the broader culture—"the Beatles, and Dylan going electric, and the Rolling Stones taking over from Frankie Avalon"—was in many ways "really traumatic," he adds. Attitudes toward the war in Vietnam were also more divided than popular memory often paints it. "There were activities about protesting the war, and there were also pro-war people." He recalls the graffiti on a construction fence: "People were spray-painting 'Bomb Hanoi'—people who were more pro-war than Lyndon Johnson," he says. "The first pictures I have of an anti-war demonstration, there are also pro-war people [present], and they were talking to each other. It's almost unimaginable now."

BY the time he got to Penn, Steiner had been taking pictures for years. "I started as a kid," he says. "I used my father's Rolleicord, and I might have had a Brownie or something like that." When he was 11, his grandfather gave him a developing kit as a Christmas present. *LIFE* magazine was a powerful early influence. "I clearly remember coming home from school every Friday and picking it out of the pile of mail and taking it to the living room and going through the whole issue," he says. "I was especially taken with the photos by W. Eugene Smith and still remember his story about Albert Schweitzer," published in the magazine in 1954.

While in high school, Steiner worked for the yearbook and also scored his first professional assignments. "The *Newark Star Ledger* would hire freelancers in football season to cover the high school games, because there were so many," he recalls. "I did that two or three times, got paid $5."

During his first year at Penn, he doesn't think he took any pictures. "I don't have anything" from that period, he says. But in the fall of 1965, his sophomore year, he met someone who was a photographer for the yearbook, which led to his doing work there as well, and then to taking pictures for a monthly student magazine called *Penn Comment*. Ultimately he became photo editor for both publications.

One day between classes he happened to meet his photographer friend, who mentioned that there was something happening in the Furness building (now Fisher Fine Arts Library), which was the first home of the Institute of Contemporary Art. "He said, 'You should get a camera and go,' and he might have mentioned Andy Warhol, I forget, but that's how I got to that."

Steiner thinks this was probably a day or two *after* the show's famous opening night, when Warhol and his entourage escaped through the roof because of the crush of the crowd. But it was still a lively scene. "It was a party. And they had loud music playing, and people were dancing,

Pro-war graffiti on a construction fence calls for bombing then-North Vietnam's capital Hanoi and the Student Peace Union (SPU); Muhammad Ali on campus in March 1968 before a speech in Irvine Auditorium; Robert F. Kennedy speaking in the Palestra in April, two months before his assassination.

and he came through the crowd and that's when I got the picture of him from very close autographing a Campbell's soup can."

The photo was published in *Penn Comment*—"It might have been the cover," he says—and later was used, without attribution, in the first book about Warhol. "They just copied it out of *Penn Comment* and took off the graphic." Steiner saw the photo again after Warhol's death in 1987. "I was living in New York, and I went to my local newsstand. I looked down and there was my picture on the cover of *Artforum* magazine—the preeminent high-end art magazine," he says. "They had copied it out of the book, which I found out later. So I contacted them, and the editor was very apologetic." And *Artforum* "did pay me something and they put a credit in a future issue," he adds.

During the winter break in 1965–66, Steiner also participated in "Project Mississippi," organized by the campus chapter of the NAACP, in which Penn volunteers helped build a community center in Strike City, an encampment set up by a group of tenant farmers who had formed a union and gone on strike for better wages and working conditions. "My parents reluctantly gave the necessary written permission—Mississippi was a scary place then," he says. "One of the reasons I may have been accepted was my offer to photograph the project," and it likely also helped that he was able to take along his father's circular saw, he says. "I brought my camera and shot what I thought was interesting."

On February 28, 1966, Steiner was in the audience at the Academy of Music when he got a shot of Bob Dylan playing

Andy Warhol autographs a Campbell's Soup can at his ICA show. After appearing in *Penn Comment*, this photo was appropriated by *Artforum* magazine after Warhol's death.

guitar that would later be used in the artwork for Dylan's 1966 double album *Blonde on Blonde*. That came about, believe it or not, after one of his fraternity brothers saw the photos and encouraged him to show them to Dylan.

"I went to Columbia Records," Steiner recalls, a little incredulously. "I forget how, but I got to someone named Virginia Smith in the art department during winter break." He left the photos with her and heard back in a few days: they liked them but weren't really looking for performance photos. "So I went to pick them up, and while I was in her office just getting my stuff to go, Dylan walked by. I went out into some hallway and got my nerve up and went back and found him, and I said, 'I have some pictures.' And he looked at them. The picture that he used, he was attracted to it particularly because it showed him playing guitar." Coincidentally, Dylan had been going over the artwork for the album and realized there were no pictures showing him with the instrument, "and he thought he wanted to have that."

Steiner didn't get a photo credit or any payment for that one, either, though the shot appeared in multiple releases of the album, even as others originally included fell by the wayside. Three decades later, he managed to get back the copyright. "Because when something's published without a copyright notice, it's in the public domain," he says. "I could prove that it was mine."

In the summer of 1967, between Steiner's junior and senior years, he made another significant music connection, with Frank Zappa's band the Mothers of Invention. Though based in Los Angeles, "they had played in New York a year earlier, and I read about them, probably in the *Village Voice*, which I got in Philadelphia because my mother's friend gave it to me as a high school graduation present," Steiner says. "And so I was very in touch with what was happening in New York."

He took some photos of the band's first show from his seat and returned with the prints the following weekend. After Zappa looked at the photos "he invited me to come anytime I wanted, and I could roam around on the stage, go anywhere I wanted. So I did that several times because they played in the same theater from the spring into the fall."

One day backstage, he noticed "this cute girl," he says. "In all my years as a photographer, I do not go up to cute girls and take their pictures. It's not my thing. But this one, I just spontaneously said, 'Hey, can I take your picture?' And she gave a big smile and was happy that I asked and looked up, because she was short. I'm only five six. She was much shorter.

"And that was that. Anyway, I showed that picture to the Mothers the following week and asked, 'You know who that was?' 'Oh, that's the chick that sings with the Stone Poneys.' So that was Linda Ronstadt. Real star power."

After graduation, Steiner moved to Boston for graduate school at Boston University's School of Graduate Medicine, partly out of "fear of the draft" as well as a lingering desire to do something related to his major in psychology. It was a rigorous program designed for people interested in going into medical

Top: The Steiner photo from Dylan's Academy of Music performance that appeared (uncredited) in the inside jacket artwork for *Blonde on Blonde*. "He was attracted to it particularly because it showed him playing guitar." Below: Linda Ronstadt. "Real star power."

research, with a curriculum similar to the first year of medical school, he says. "I dropped out after a year and just started doing photography, which is what I wanted to do anyway."

He found work with a local magazine called *Fusion* that "was like a Boston version of *Rolling Stone*," he says. "I could call them up and say, 'Hey, I want to go see Van Morrison,' and they put me on the list. So I have a lot of pictures from the green room at the Boston Tea Party," a concert venue that operated from 1967 to 1970.

To supplement his income, for a while Steiner drove a cab, which was "a great thing for a freelancer," he says. "If you showed up at eight in the morning, they gave you a cab—nothing decided ahead of time, no schedule. If you showed up, you worked. So I did that and tried to make a career in photography."

He also found a job teaching photography in a summer camp. The person who hired him also worked for a community college in New York and helped Steiner get a job teaching there. At first he was commuting weekly, but eventually moved to New York to start a new life. "I was a freelance photographer from 1969 or '70, until in the '80s I got into photojournalism. I was doing all kinds of different photography: architectural, corporate annual reports, a little advertising," he says. "By a 'simple twist of fate,' I became a photojournalist in '79 and did that exclusively for at least a decade into the '90s."

Among his subjects were Lech Walesa in Poland, Norman Mailer, and Corazon Aquino when she was running for president of the Philippines. He made multiple trips to the Philippines in that period, he says, "working mostly for *Newsweek*, sometimes on assignment, sometimes just on spec, as they call it. You just go and do something and see if you can sell it." His work also appeared in *LIFE,* the *New York Times Magazine, TIME,* and the European publications *Paris Match* and *Stern*.

After visiting Europe for the first time on his own in the mid-1970s, he went to Paris and began a documentary fine art project. That also sparked a lasting interest in the connections between painting and photography. "I tried to learn about color and composition from the Impressionists and post-Impressionists, especially Van Gogh and Manet," he says, "as well as from Japanese Ukiyo-E artists," of whom Katsushika Hokusai—whose *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* has graced generations of dorm room walls—is probably most familiar.

Steiner expanded his photojournalism to video starting in 1985. "I started literally carrying the photo bag on my left side and the video bag on the right side," he recalls, and footage he shot appeared on all the major US network newscasts, as well as stations in Canada and Japan.

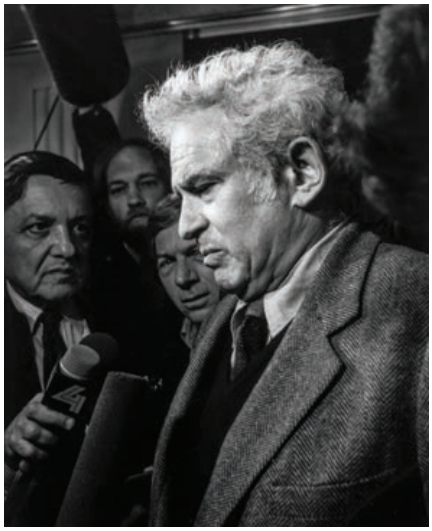
In the Philippines, he was able to sell some video he shot to the networks "because I got exclusives. I was with Communist rebels in the mountains," he says. "It took months to arrange, and to get there and get back. The networks weren't going to send somebody there for three months." Interest in the country's politics picked up in America especially with the 1986 election campaign between Ferdinand Marcos and Aquino, "and so I was able to sell footage of that stuff. And so I was moving into video documentary."

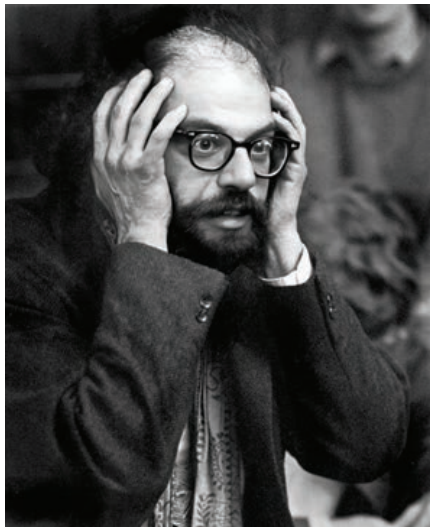
He first became interested in Filipino politics "because I was getting regular work from the Japanese edition of *Playboy*." Along with the "girlie pictures" that mimicked the US edition, in every issue "they had a kind of *LIFE* magazine-type photojournalistic story, and I got to do some of that. They sent me to Jamaica to cover Reggae Sunsplash 79 [a music festival in Montego Bay, Jamaica] and I met Bob Marley," photographing him at his house.

Lech Walesa in Gdansk, Poland, 1987; Norman Mailer outside a New York courtroom, 1982; Allen Ginsberg during a visit to Penn, 1968.

The *Playboy* assignment was for an interview with Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, the husband of Corazon Aquino and "the principal opposition to the dictator Marcos" until his assassination, Steiner says. "I got very interested in his stories." Using some contacts from Aquino, he returned to the Philippines and "kept going back. And so I covered that for a long time."

He also traveled to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union "during the Gorbachev years, when it was still Communist." Though he was "mostly interested in cultural things," politics intruded—and paid the bills. "When Gorbachev was kidnapped by the military, and Yeltsin took over and declared the end of the Communist Party, there was, like, no government—so journalists couldn't get a visa because there was no one to talk to," he recalls. "I already had a visa because I wanted to do a cultural story about this state of Georgia, that was now a country. So I was able to go right away. And I got there, like a day after the end of Communism. And I covered that for two months, and then I finally went to Georgia."





Earlier, in 1980, he had embarked on what turned out to be a long-term project following a sect of Bengali mystic musicians in India that he first encountered at a reading by the poet Allen Ginsberg. "I first read *Howl* when I discovered it hidden—my father had it hidden in his bedroom. I don't know why it was there, but I found it, and I read some of that stuff." That "mind expanding" poem became a big part of his entry to the 1960s,

Steiner has amassed 300 hours of video of the Japanese *avant garde* dancer Min Tanaka for a planned feature-length documentary.

Steiner says. The mystics he met at a Ginsberg reading in New York became a fascination that lasted several decades more. He followed up with them a few months later—and then kept reconnecting. "I just went back [most recently] in December 2023. So that's 43 years, over 43, and I'm starting to work on finishing that project now." Titled *Ami Pagol (I Am Crazy)* it will encompass music as well as "culture, spirituality, and religion, and life in rural India," he says.

"I was also going to Asia a lot. Besides India, I was going to Japan. I have a major project about a Japanese *avant garde* dancer who moved to the countryside to do farming as body work, Min Tanaka. And I have 300 hours of video of him," he says, with plans for a feature-length documentary to be titled *Moving Man*.

Since 2014, he's been the video director at New Orleans radio station WWOZ 90.7 FM. "There's a big music festival in the spring that I was going to for years and years," Steiner says, "and anyway, long story short, I had met the general manager and become friends, and he just called me up and said, 'We're starting a video department, and I want you to do it.' So my wife and I were looking for a warmer place to live, and our parents were all dead, so we were free to go anywhere. And we moved, so I've been here since then."

Looking back at the early days of his career in the 1970s, "photography was really big, and it was a good time to be a photographer, because there were a lot of events for photographers and where people got together and showed each other's work and discussed it," Steiner says. "And when I got into photojournalism, it was kind of the end of the golden era of the photojournalist—because the money disappeared after that."

Besides *LIFE* magazine as an inspiration, Steiner points to such exemplars of "street photography" as Henri Cartier-Bresson, of "the Decisive Moment"; the documentarian of Paris Eugene Atget; and later practitioners of the 1960s and 1970s like Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. But he also admires Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and the West Coast-based f.64 school, known for their exquisitely composed black and white prints of natural settings, one of whose members, Minor White, was teaching at MIT when he lived in Boston.

As he wrestles with how to tell his story of the 1960s, Steiner seems poised between the street photographer's aim of capturing an essence and the instinct of an encyclopedist to get it all in. He has his beginning—"I start with the Penn project to go to Mississippi—because in terms of political movements, everything came from the Civil Rights movement," he says—but after that he's been weighing a variety of lengths and approaches.

"In movies, there's an expression: a stringout. A stringout is when you're editing a movie and you just put everything down that you shot kind of in the basic order. And it might be three or four hours, and you need to cut it down to 90 minutes. So the book is like a stringout."

Steiner's description also brings to mind the experience of watching a passing landscape from a car window. Dylan references aside, "I like the word *highway*," he says. "That's the American thing, you know, driving down the highway. That going forward is kind of the American mythology. And I don't want to ever sound nostalgic—I'm anti-nostalgia, but *revisiting* sounds like, 'Okay, we're just visiting. We're not like, dreaming about how wonderful it was or something.'"

This Alumni Weekend, Charlie Steiner C'68 (www.charliesteiner.com) will be featured in conversation with Gazette *editor John Prendergast C'80 about his career and his ongoing project* Highway 67 Revisited *at "Remembering and Celebrating the 1960s at Penn" at 3:15 pm on Friday, May 16, in Cohen (formerly Logan) Hall auditorium. To register for this and other Alumni Weekend events visit www.alumni.upenn.edu/alumniweekend.*