

**LEONARD
COHEN:**

He's an unashamed romantic, singer of songs both universal and unique, laced with love and black despair. Leonard Cohen—poet and songwriter—talks to Elizabeth M. Thomson

Leonard Cohen loped across the lobby of a plush, though hip, London hotel. He smiled wryly, greeting me with a firm handshake and profuse apologies for having kept me waiting. He had overslept. I later learned that, in keeping with the image of a romantic poet, he had spent the wee small hours of the morning writing a song.

It was now 10.30 am—by rock stars' and poets' standards virtually the middle of the night. Still, it wasn't too early for Cohen to talk volubly on a number of issues—from writing and performing, to women, Pierre Trudeau and God. And not necessarily in that order.

He was wearing a beaten-up leather jacket and cord jeans and, even in his funky cowboy boots, he's smallish. His face is swarthy, weathered by time and hard living, his green eyes steady. He looks like a mixture of Andalusian flamenco dancer, Indian chief and Dustin Hoffman with a hangover.

His latest book is called *Death of a Lady's Man*, and one of his albums had almost the same title (just that 'lady's' was then, significantly, in the plural). With his unique brand of charm, his soft, unassuming manner and mysterious gaze, it was all too easy to see him as a ladies' man—a far from obsolescent one.

He laughed. 'I don't think any guy is left standing these days! I'm very fond of the company of women, and I think that mating is a good idea...'

Instantly I was struck by the contrast between the warm, humorous gentleman before me and the cold, sombre, even maudlin persona which emanates from my hi-fi system. This was, after all, the man the critics dubbed 'Captain Mandrax' and 'pop's greatest manic-depressive', the man who laces his songs with Second, new razor-blades and even a homicidal Santa Claus.

However dark-seeming his philosophy, his following is vast and enthusiastic. He had just completed three enormously successful concerts here, and capacity audiences had demanded half a dozen encores. People of every age and from every walk of life stood to show their respect and admiration. These were no ageing hippies seeking only to be intoxicated by the memories of a long-lost youth. With his personal magnetism and his songs, Cohen cast a spell that could not easily be broken.

The concerts marked the beginning of a British tour, his first in more than three years. How did it feel to be back in England?

'Well, this has always been a special place for me because it was here that I really began to be accepted, a long time ago. It was a London publishing house that published my first novel. The people here have kept their interest for many years.'

But what about that Famous British Reserve that artists tell us is so inhibiting?

'An audience in Antwerp is more reserved than an audience in London. Everybody knows that the British are really *passionate*—the cover has been blown!' He laughed into his coffee. 'This idea of British reserve and rigidity—I don't know who invented it. Probably the French!'

A Virgoan, Cohen was born in Montreal forty-six years ago of middle-class Jewish parents. He graduated from high school to study English at McGill and Columbia Universities.

His writing career began when he was twenty-two and published *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, a collection of poems written during his teenage years. Of the literary outpourings that followed, it was his second novel, *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966, which won him the greatest acclaim. It was seen by many as Cohen's manifesto, and critic Desmond Pacey described it as 'the most intricate, erudite and fascinating Canadian novel ever written'.

So it was as a firmly established poet and novelist, a *cause célèbre* of the literary establishment, that Cohen entered the world of music a year later. Entered it formally, that is, for: 'I always was a musician. In my late teens I was part of a square-dance group called The Buckskin Boys!'

During the silences in his literary career, it was rumoured that he spent a lot of time writing songs and hanging out around the Nashville studios. In 1966 he met Judy Collins, a great discoverer of dormant talent. (She, after all, did much to promote Joni Mitchell.) She began to record some of his material, and many of her interpretations—among them *Suzanne*, *Dress Rehearsal Rag* and *Bird on a Wire*—have come to be regarded as brilliantly definitive versions.

Cohen talked of her in reverent tones: 'We're speaking of someone at a very high level of

performance, a true professional with loyalty to her craft over the years...'

It was Judy Collins who first brought him on stage—at a New York concert in 1967. He was almost too frightened to sing. Deciding, though, that cowardice was a bad way out, that summer he made a *début* in his own right at the Newport Folk Festival, the showcase that had helped the young Joan Baez emerge as a major talent, and then brought Bob Dylan to the heart of the folk generation's consciousness. Four years later, it did the same for Leonard Cohen.

His first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, hit the turntables in 1968, and within a very short time a strong Cohen cult had mushroomed.

Despite his love of music, becoming a singer-songwriter was an act of survival. 'I couldn't pay the grocery bills, although I had written maybe five books by that time. The humour and irony of that observation is that, knowing what one knows now of the music business, anybody who leaves writing to try to make it as a singer would have to be a fool—because if there's anything chancier than writing, it's probably singing!'

Aside from having butter on his bread, Cohen has realised other ambitions. He has often said that he wanted to make it as a pop singer in the market-place, as it were, and have other people sing his material. He also believes that poetry should be for the masses, not just a rarefied few. He has done much to popularise poetry as a medium.

Leonard Cohen has now recorded seven albums, and each has moved countless millions of listeners, although the controversial *Death of a Ladies' Man*, on which he collaborated with super-producer Phil Spector, bewildered many of his fans. Cohen commented that he hasn't 'disavowed' the album: 'I think it has a kind of Wagnerian excellence. The songs are good—actually there are some of my best lyrics there. But somehow the voice was lost in the mix, from which I was excluded by both secrecy and armed bodyguards. I was never permitted to go back into the studio, and I lost control of the record.'

Happily, his latest album, *Recent Songs*, finds him in a more sympathetic setting, combining the atmosphere of the earlier records with

THOUGHTS OF A LADIES' MAN

an unexpected musical sophistication. To many, Leonard Cohen's phenomenal success is a source of surprise. Cynics and detractors would say that his audience is composed entirely of the depressed, dejected and rejected who find a bottle of wine and a Cohen record the only things to help them make it through the night.

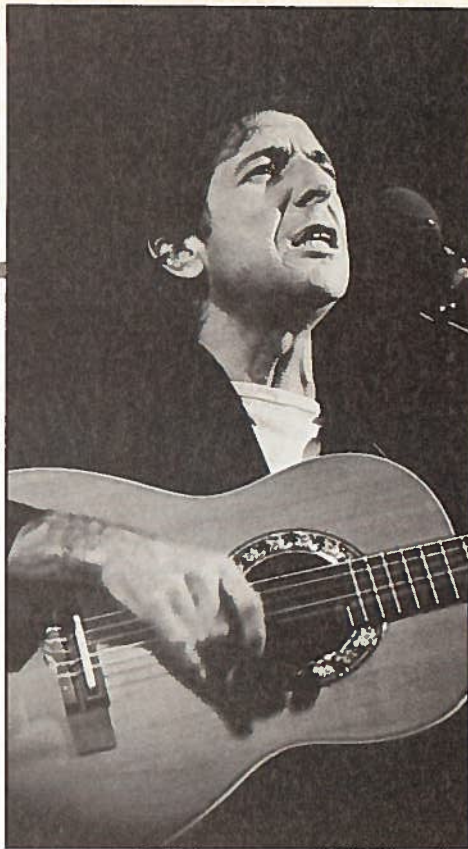
'The confusion of seriousness with gloominess is an inaccurate understanding,' he remarked. 'We have an appetite for seriousness and we can be destroyed as easily by mindless frivolity as we can by obsessive depression . . . Somewhere in between, there's a condition that is quite peaceful. It's called "seriousness" and it's an appropriate response to a number of things that happen to be going on on the crust of this star . . .'

Even to the unbeliever, Cohen's sense of humour comes through. It's there in his songs, when he's on stage and when he talks. For him, it is inherent in human behaviour. He loves wit and laughs 'at all the right and wrong places in all the movies'.

Whatever Leonard Cohen writes is an extension of experience, although 'sometimes I'm more the reporter than the confessor'. The book *Death of a Lady's Man* he described as 'one long poem concentrated on as accurate an expression as I could get of the inner predicament of my marriage, and many other marriages'. The women in his songs 'all have a basis in actual personalities, though some of them are composites'.

He denies that his seeming difficulty with relationships has any Freudian connection with childhood. Cohen is no D. H. Lawrence searching for a mother-lover figure. 'It's a mistake to blame things on other people, especially your parents. Everybody suffers, but growing up involves forgiving—not using relationships as an alibi . . .'

On page and on turntable, Leonard Cohen's word-weaving and the boldness of his imagery can hypnotise. He may lack Bob Dylan's breadth of vocal expression—yet, like Dylan, he made a whole generation of listeners search for some *real* meaning in songs. While Dylan shows the influence of the beat generation of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, Leonard Cohen remains the unashamed romantic.



Although Cohen's writing is rarely as elusive or surreal as much of Dylan's, it is significant that he came to prominence during the period of silence that followed Dylan's motorcycle accident in 1966. That is not to belittle Cohen's talent—just that he emerged at the right time and also, like Dylan, bridges the troubled waters of words and music.

'I always had the feeling of the closeness between the written lyric and the lyric that is sung, that at one point they were one and the same thing . . .'

Surprisingly, he does not create a song by setting a poem to music. 'There is a form of expression which I call verse, which I do on the page, and it bears no relationship to my guitar. There's another form, that I call song, that I write on the guitar because the words are usually suggested by a modulation of chords.'

As major influences, he cites 'the Bible, liturgical music, and poets like Garcia Lorca . . . I think I've inherited and happily understand what montheism is: an understanding that there is only one reality, only one thing happening. You may choose to call it God, Christ, Grace, Creation . . .'

Many writers of mass influence have been Jewish—a disparate bunch spring immediately to mind: Marx, Freud, the Gershwins, Dylan,

Janis Ian, Cohen himself . . . Is there a common link beyond that of birthright?

'They—the Jews—have a certain commitment to language. All these people used the written word as a vehicle for the clarion calls that have terrorised humanity ever since.'

He sees art in all its forms as 'the only kind of expression that can heal: the real and authentic expression of a man's loyalty to *his* experience, however he sees it.' The protest movements of the 'sixties' shook everybody up—I was touched by everything that happened, by singers like Dylan, Judy Collins . . . Joan Baez and her beautiful voice—she's another individual who has put her whole *life* on the line for her convictions.'

Cohen also lays his beliefs on the line. To him, Trudeau is 'probably one of the greatest figures we've ever produced. He dignifies the country with his presence.' When he was briefly out of office, rejected on grounds that amounted to marital scandal, Cohen was outraged. 'Such vilification of a former hero—it says a good deal about the fickleness of the voting population. The viciousness with which he has been treated does us no credit.'

Cohen remains 'very much a Montrealer. But I like to feel like an Indian—they don't have to respect that border. I like to be on the move. America is a great, vast, bewildering, indescribable human experiment, and I don't want to lose touch with what's going on there . . .'

Leonard Cohen is one of Canada's three most significant contributions to the contemporary musico-literary scene. With the other two—Joni Mitchell and The Band—he shares a common bond, but he has given the world a greater legacy. For here is a professional thinker who, by baring his soul to the public, can help us to recognise and come to terms with some of the problems we encounter on our one-way ticket through life.

Throughout our conversation, Cohen spoke with a candour and modesty that is rare these days. He is completely lacking in the glibness and hype that surround 'stars' of an infinitely smaller orbit.

He is a complex man, not easily summed up. Though he himself did a pretty good job in the closing line of his song *Famous Blue Raincoat*: ' . . . sincerely, L. Cohen'. □

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