



LEONARD COHEN

Leonard Cohen embodies poetry. The genuine, pure kind. In his albums, in his songs, in his poems, novels and films, he confronts the world, life, love and politics. The latter having always dictated his attitude has often led him to adopt a low profile.

On the Greek island of Hydra, in the environs of Nashville, in New York or in his native Montreal, you will not find him at cocktail evenings or discotheques, chic parties, or premieres, previews, openings or other social gatherings. The man is discrete, almost secretive.

Having graduated from McGill University in 1955, Leonard Cohen turned quickly to writing, and just barely out of his teens published his first collections, "Let Us Compare Mythologies" and "The Spice-Box Of Earth", which heralded him as the most brilliant hope for Canadian literature. Hope was transformed into reality in the early sixties with the release of two novels, "The Favorite Game" (1963) and "Beautiful Losers" (1966), remarkable chronicles of Jewish ghetto life in Montreal. Each sold more than 300,000 copies worldwide, and each is today considered a classic. Two other poetical works, "Flowers For Hitler" and "Parasites Of Heaven" were soon added to his catalogue of masterpieces. But it was his songs that made Leonard Norman Cohen more than a star. A lover of music from a very early age ("It has always been present behind my words," he says), he was a member of a country group in the mid fifties, The Buckskin Boys, before studying folk and popular song. 1967 saw the release of The Songs Of Leonard Cohen, an album which introduced classical poetry into a rock world fired by Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, race riots, students revolts and the Viet-Nam war. Leonard Cohen's success was immediate, in Europe as well as in North America. Critics and intellectuals alike were in ecstasy over his masterful control of language and expression, and the acuteness of his perception.

The public quickly learned by heart the words of "Suzanne", (later interpreted by Judy Collins and Joan Baez) as well as those to "The Stranger Song", "So Long Marianne", "Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye". In 1969, Songs From A Room was released, and included "Bird On A Wire" (of which Joe Cocker recorded a sublime version) and "The Partisan", which Cohen cannot be considered to be, even if he has always condemned war and oppression, and continues to do to this day.

On tour, triumph was awaiting him, the summits of which were attained in 1970 at the Olympia in Paris where he unleashed one of the most outstanding ovations of all time, and during the Isle of Wight Festival where he shared the hill with The Doors and The Who. It was at this time that Songs Of Love And Hate appeared, completing a trilogy, and establishing the international reputation of its author. "Joan Of Arc", "Famous Blue Raincoat", "Last Year's Man", enlarged his collection of masterpieces, while "Diamonds In The Mine" demonstrated, as did "Tonight Will Be Fine" that Cohen can boogie when he feels like it. Moreover, it is one of his principal claims: "People say that I'm a mediocre musician because I only use three chords. They think that I don't know any others. It's not true. I know how to play fifths and sevenths. I have merely decided to opt for the greatest simplicity".

Live Songs, recorded in concert as its title implies, reinforces this assertion, and was coupled with a new volume of writings "The Energy Of Slaves" (1972). The delivery of New Skin For The Old Ceremony at the end of 1974 marked a musical development, with a more detailed approach to the arrangements, and a touch of jazz was seen to appear. The following tour continued this evolution and aroused passions in France, where Leonard decided both to perform at the Fete de l'Humanite (the annual Communist festival) and to accept an invitation to dine at the Elysee with President Valery Giscard d'Estaing.

Then followed a hiatus, broken in 1977 by the successive names: Death Of A Ladies' Man and Death Of A Lady's Man. The record, produced by Phil Spector, was to become one of the greatest enigmas in the history of popular music. However, the final product was not entirely up to expectations,

which is regrettable since its author had never shown such corrosive verve, nor such exuberance, particularly in the very daring "Don't Go Home With Your Hard On", sung alongside Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg.

When he resurfaced in ^{1979/}~~1980~~, the punk movement had exploded and "new wave" was in full momentum. In Recent Songs there reemerged a certain amount of academicism, calling upon the use of the violin and oud to produce a Jewish-Slavic melancholic appeal. And although it seemed unlikely, younger musicians, far from rejecting him, related well to Cohen, admiring his uprightness and integrity. The group "Sisters of Mercy" even went as far as to borrow their name from one of his old compositions.

In the meantime Leonard Cohen has produced a half-hour video entitled "I Am A Hotel", which was awarded first prize at the Festival International de Television de Montreux in Switzerland. He has just published what he himself calls "a book of prayers" (entitled "Book Of Mercy") and is working on a pop-opera film for which he has written the lyrics to the music of Lewis Furey (entitled "The Merry-go-Man"). Carol Laure and Nick Mancus will be the stars. As for his new album, Various Positions, recorded with old companions Jennifer Warnes and John Lissaner, he is proving more than ever with new marvels such as "Hallelujah", "If It Be Your Will" and "Dance Me To The End Of Love", that at fifty years of age, the poet is still standing!