



LEONARD COHEN A Biography by Larry Sloman

"What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think that it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is the caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shape of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love."

-- Leonard Cohen, Beautiful Losers (1966)

From a mountain in Montreal to an island off the coast of Greece, through an endless succession of sterile hotel rooms, by way of a small cabin in a monastery high above a mountain southeast of the city of angels, and then back to a modest house in a decidedly unfashionable section of Los Angeles, Leonard Cohen has explored that "remote human possibility," with an appetite that is sometimes swollen and sometimes spartan. For the last forty-odd years, over the course of nine volumes of poetry, two novels, and now fourteen record albums, Cohen has shared his vision with those among us who realize that the mysteries of the interior life is a project never fathomed by the latest round of contestants on "Survivor."

Leonard Norman Cohen was born in Montreal in 1934. His father, an engineer who owned a clothing concern, died when Leonard was nine. He went on to attend McGill University, where at 17 he formed a country-western trio called the Buckskin Boys. He also began writing poetry and became part of the local boho-literary scene, a scene so "underground" that it was bereft of 'subversive intentions because even that would be beneath it." His first collection of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies, was published in 1956, while he was still an undergraduate. The Spice Box Of Earth (1961), his second collection, catapulted Leonard Cohen to international recognition.

After a brief stint at Columbia University in New York, Leonard Cohen obtained a grant and was able to escape the confines of North America. He traveled throughout Europe and eventually settled on the Greek island of Hydra, where he shared his life with Marianne Jenson, and her son Axel. Cohen stayed in Greece on and off for seven years. He wrote two more collections of poetry, the controversial Flowers For Hitler (1964) and Parasites of Heaven (1966); and two highly acclaimed novels, The Favorite Game (1963), his portrait of the artist as a young Jew in Montreal, and Beautiful Losers (1966), described on its dust jacket as "a disagreeable religious epic of incomparable beauty." Upon its publication, the Boston Globe declared, "James Joyce is not dead. He is living in Montreal under the name of Cohen." To date, each book has sold more than a million copies worldwide.

But even the warmth of Hydra couldn't contain Cohen's restless spirit. "For the writing of books, you have to be in one place," he told Musician magazine in 1988. "You tend to gather things around you when you write a novel. You need a woman in your life. It's nice to have some kids around, 'cause there's always food. It's nice to have a place that's clean and orderly. I had those things and then I decided to be a songwriter." Leaving behind his domestic scene, Cohen returned to America, intent on settling near Nashville and pursuing a musical career. He was championed by Judy Collins, who recorded both "Suzanne" and "Dress Rehearsal Rag" on her 1966 album, In My Life. In 1967, Cohen appeared at the Newport Folk Festival where he came to the attention of legendary Columbia A&R man John Hammond (who also recruited Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen to the label). By Christmas, Columbia had released his first album, The Songs of Leonard Cohen.

It was a remarkable debut, as songs like "Suzanne," "Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye," "So Long, Marianne," and "Sisters of Mercy" propelled Cohen to the top of the pop-confessional pantheon. The songs had such power that Robert Altman's 1971 film *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* became, in effect, the first long-form video for Cohen's soundtrack.

In 1968, Cohen published Selected Poems: 1956-1968, an anthology of poems from the earlier books along with a section of new, previously unpublished poems. For this volume, Cohen was awarded the Governor-General's Award, Canada's highest literary distinction. He promptly declined the honor.

Songs From a Room (1969), his second album, and Songs of Love and Hate (1971) further reinforced Cohen's standing as the master of mortification and the sentry of solitude. With "Bird On a Wire," "The Song of Isaac," "Joan of Arc," and "Famous Blue Raincoat," he continued to stretch the borders of the pop song landscape.

1972 marked the release of a new book of poems, The Energy of Slaves and Cohen's first live album, Live Songs, which featured an amazing 14-minute improvisation, "Please Don't Pass Me By," along with live versions of songs from his first three albums.

New Skin For the Old Ceremony (1973) was a bit of a stylistic departure. Featuring a more orchestrated sound (thanks to producer John Lissauer), Cohen continued his investigations into the hottest crucible of the human spirit -- the muffled battles in the boudoirs.

Cohen took a sabbatical from the musical wars for the next few years, releasing only a greatest hits album, Best of Leonard Cohen (1975).

In 1977, he was back with what was certainly his most curious album, Death of a Ladies' Man. It started as collaboration with famed producer Phil Spector, but ended with Cohen being excluded from the final stages of recording. "It was a catastrophe," he remembers. "Those are all scratch vocals, and Phil mixed it in secret under armed guard. I had to decide whether I was going to hire my own private army and fight it out on Sunset Boulevard, or let it go. I let it go." The following year Cohen published a collection of poems and prose-poems titled Death of a Lady's Man.

Recent Songs (1979), the next album, was another stylistic departure from its predecessor. Gone was the Spectorian wall-of-sound, replaced with a more delicate musical patina partly due to the influence of co-producer Henry Lewy (who had previously worked with Joni Mitchell). The songs continued Cohen's dissections of the vicissitudes of the male-female union, but also began to reflect his long-standing explorations into the religious arena.

1984 saw the publication of The Book of Mercy, an amazingly beautiful and profound collection of poetic meditations. Various Positions, a 1985 album, presented the full flowering of these religious concerns. Songs like "Hallelujah," "The Law," "Heart With No Companion," and "If It Be Your Will" are contemporary psalms, born of an undoubtedly long and difficult spiritual odyssey, so difficult that its conclusion left Cohen literally "wiped out." "I had a lot of versions of myself that I had used religion to support," Cohen told L.A. Style in 1988. "If you deal with this material you can't put God on. I thought I could spread light and I could enlighten my world and those around me and I could take the Bodhisattva path, which is the path of service, of help to others. I thought I could, but I was unable to. This is a landscape in which men far stronger than you, far braver, nobler, kinder, more generous, men of extremely high achievements have burnt to a crisp on this road. Once you start dealing with sacred material you're gonna get creamed."

I'm Your Man (1988) was the culmination of Cohen's professional and personal reintegration, an amazingly crafted work that speaks eloquently to the experience of one of our most respected wordsmiths. Buoyed by now-classic songs like "First We Take Manhattan," "Tower of Song," and "Ain't No Cure For Love," it was no surprise that the album went to #1 in several European countries.

Four years later, Cohen released The Future, an amazing aural documentation of our cultural malaise. Scrutinizing both our boardrooms and our bedrooms, declaiming like an old testament prophet ("The Future") or begging like a penitent ("Be For Real") the bard always had his eyes on the prize: the healing power of love. The Future featured "Democracy", one of Cohen's most ambitious songs ever, nothing less than an attempt at a new national anthem, the CNN of the soul, propelled by a memorable Whitmanesque chorus: "Sail on, sail on O mighty Ship of State! / To the Shores of Need/ Past the Reefs of Greed/ Through the Squalls of Hate/ Sail on, sail on, sail on..."

In 1993, Cohen edited a new collection of his writings, published as "Stranger Music". It contained song lyrics, poems and fragments from his journals.

Shortly after touring in support of The Future, Cohen began spending more and more time at a Zen retreat high atop Mt. Baldy in Southern California. He spent most of his time meditating, working on koans and cooking for his teacher, Sasaki Roshi. While Cohen was residing at Mt. Baldy, Leanne Ungar and Bob Metzger produced a live album, Cohen Live (1994), a collection culled from Cohen's 1988 and 1993 tours.

In 1999, after nearly five years at Mt. Baldy, during which time Cohen was ordained as a Zen monk and given the Dharma name of Jikan (Silent One), he came down from the mountain armed with hundreds of new poems and song lyrics. He immediately began working on the songs with Sharon Robinson, a former back-up singer who had also previously co-written two songs ("Everybody Knows" and "Waiting for the Miracle") with Cohen.

While anxiously anticipating a new studio release, Cohen fans were mollified when producer Leanne Ungar rescued some amazing tapes of Cohen's 1979 concert dates in England, released as Field Commander Cohen – Tour of 1979 (2001).

And now they have Ten New Songs, an entrancing collection of (what else?) Ten New Songs born out of the collaboration with Robinson, the multi-talented songwriter, vocalist and instrumentalist; midwifed by producer Ungar.

While Cohen's painstaking meticulousness has led to many long passages of time between albums, artists as diverse as Neil Diamond, Nick Cave, Diana Ross, Joan Baez, Rita Coolidge, and Joe Cocker have kept Cohen's music on the airwaves with their own interpretations of his songs. Long-time musical colleague Jennifer Warnes released the critically acclaimed Famous Blue Raincoat in 1986, an entire album of Cohen's work.

In 1991, a number of contemporary recording artists collaborated on an evocative tribute to Cohen. I'm Your Fan was the brainchild of Christian Feuret, the editor of Les Inrockuptibles, the most popular rock magazine in France. Originally intended for release on the magazine's small offshoot label Oscar, the project mushroomed into an 18-song cover collection released by Atlantic, featuring such prominent alternative musicians as REM, John Cale, Nick Cave, Ian McCulloch, Pixies, the House of Love, and Lloyd Cole.

Another tribute album, Tower of Song (1995), featured interpretations of Cohen songs by more mainstream artists such as Billy Joel, Sting, Elton John, Willie Nelson and Bono.

Cohen's output does not exist solely on paper or on disc. He conceptualizes his own videos and, in 1984, scripted, directed and scored I Am A Hotel, a half-hour short feature that won first prize at the Festival International de Television de Montreux (Switzerland) and was submitted for Academy Award consideration. He collaborated with singer/songwriter Lewis Furey on Night Magic, a rock opera movie for which he won the Canadian Juno award for "Best Movie Score" of 1985. His work in front of the camera even included a memorable cameo as the head of Interpol on NBC's "Miami Vice."

For a man who only "aspired to be a minor poet" early in his career, Leonard Cohen has produced a body of work that has withstood the passage of time. With the release of *Ten New Songs*, his fourteenth album, he continues to bring to us, through the musical idiom, a documentation of maturity and survival. He has become an elder.

"If there is anything in my own work it's because how I cop to my own experience," Cohen told L.A. Style. "That's what I became. I became a writer and as my friend (Irving) Layton always said, a poet is deeply conflicted and it's in his work that he reconciles those deep conflicts. That place is the harbor. It doesn't set the world in order, you know, it doesn't really change anything. It just is a kind of harbor, it's the place of reconciliation, it's the *consolumentum*, the kiss of peace." Jikan Leonard Cohen has taken us down to that place by the harbor and our world has become that much richer for the journey.

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