

07.05.06

Beautiful Loser

With a new documentary and a book of poems, Leonard Cohen is primed for a comeback. For Suzanne Snider, he never went away.

BY SUZANNE SNIDER

An experiment: Throw some Cohen tunes on a stereo in a crowded room—at a bar, a party—and watch the group split neatly between Cohen-lovers and those drawn toward the closest window with an eye toward jumping. Even the latter group won't cop to hating the music entirely; they'll point instead to its efficacy at bringing on the blues. "Chelsea Hotel #2" and "Hallelujah" are suicidal standards that would fit well on a mix tape (mix CD still doesn't sound right) with Nick Drake and some combination of singers who deliver variations on existentialist romanticism: Jeff Buckley, Mazzy Starr, Gram Parsons, Superwolf, Antony, Gillian Welch. Where you stand on the pain-pleasure continuum of music appreciation will determine which Leonard Cohen songs will be your favorites, or whether you will like LC at all.

But after a certain point, it's hard to avoid the phenomenally prolific Cohen, regardless of your position. The sheer volume of his musical work—17 albums in 40 years (which includes the last 13 years of semi-silence)—astounds. Even if you don't know or love Leonard Cohen's music, you've undoubtedly heard it, perhaps unknowingly. The song "Suzanne"—as reinterpreted by more than a dozen musical greats—is ubiquitous, as are other Cohen standards such as "Bird on a Wire" or "Sisters of Mercy."

Forty years ago, before he'd written his first hit, the National Film Board of Canada released a black-and-white documentary titled *Ladies and Gentleman...Mr. Leonard Cohen*, that celebrated Cohen, then a mod-era Québécois bon vivant in his twenties riding the success of his first book of poetry, in multiple tableaux: delivering deadpan stand-up at a poetry reading, skulking about town in a crisp black trench coat, chucking *I Ching* coins for "guidance," and soaking in a seedy hotel tub while scribbling Latin on the bathroom wall.

Lian Lunson's new documentary, *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, seeks to celebrate Cohen-the-musician but ultimately proves more that Cohen is in fact many men, an ever-emerging hyphenate: a poet-cum-novelist-cum-songwriter-cum-Zen monk, who has in his spare time dabbled in television, a few wars, and a legion of romances. His music alone straddles folk, cabaret, and punk traditions, but you'll find him in the "Rock" section at your local music store. But if the 1965 documentary barely captured Cohen's gestalt, neither does *I'm Your Man* adequately cover the breadth of Cohen's life. Instead the two documentaries together bookend the remarkable and unorthodox trajectory of a man whose path was greatly determined by religion and love, but whose recent comeback—the past few months have seen the release of a new book of poems, a new album and, of course, the Lunson documentary—was fueled by the sudden and more pedestrian fact of financial ruin.

In 1965, the year of *Ladies and Gentleman's* release, Cohen was a snappy young thing charging past his literary elders, Jonathan Safran Foer-style (polite but hardy). His first novel, *The Favourite Game*, sold 120,000 advanced copies and took the \$4,000 dollar Prix Littéraire du Québec. He'd published three acclaimed (and popular) books of poetry, the second of which, *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), became one of the best-selling

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Composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown hasn't always had an easy time fitting in. Neither have his characters.

books of poetry in Canada's history. With the third, *Flowers for Hitler*, his publisher sent him on a high-powered reading tour accompanied by high-priests and priestesses of Canadian literature: Irving Layton, Earle Birney, and Phyllis Gotlieb (names undoubtedly unfamiliar to American readers). Already, on that book tour, the rock star in Cohen was starting to emerge—he attended every reading clad in a black leather blazer—as was his ego. "This book moves me from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung pile of the front-line writer.... All I ask is that you put it in the hands of my generation and it will be recognized," he wrote in *Flowers for Hitler*. If he may say so himself.

Watching *Ladies and Gentlemen* today, it's not entirely clear whether it's the film—which won a Canadian Film Award in 1966—or Cohen's 1964 behavior that's dated: maybe a male poet (or singer) just can't get away with so much blatant swashbuckling and prowling these days. Something about the trench coat, the woman on his lap, and the documentary's worshipful voice-over are just plain embarrassing. The narrative is a desperate hagiography, a masterful work of Canadian propaganda. I might have wanted to drink the Kool-Aid twenty years ago but less so today. Stated less kindly, Cohen comes off as a bit of a pretentious schmuck. And yet there is something admirable about his schmuckiness. Somehow, a scrawny Jewish man with large ears, an underbite, and a deep-sounding drone has become both a revered sage and a sex symbol, ostensibly because he writes (and later because he sings). But we all know it's not just his writing—it's his swagger: the repellent aspects of LC are also his charms. He's perfected nebbish-cool with a puffy bowl cut (later Caesar-style). Somehow, indirectly, I have to believe he's making things better for all of us. Or that he's at least scored one for bookish Jews everywhere.

Despite a curvy and improvisatory path through life, Cohen always remained loyal to his roots: religion and clothing. Born in Montreal, Québec, on September 21, 1934, into a family of wealthy garmentos, Cohen was fed a steady diet of liturgy—"It sent shivers down my spine"—and Marvel comics, before writing his own verse. At age nine, Cohen responded to his father's death by splitting open one of the man's bowties, inserting a poem, and burying the bricolage in the ground behind his house.

Both of Cohen's grandfathers were heavily involved in the Jewish community, a tightly-knit group within a Catholic city (familiar to fans of Mordechai Richler). His mother's father was a rabbi and wrote the popular *Lexicon of Hebrew Homonyms* as well as *The Treasury of Rabbinic Interpretations*. His father's father was vice president of the first Zionist organization in Canada and founded an Anglo-Jewish journal called *The Jewish Times* (a precursor to the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*). Cohen matriculated to McGill University for college, where he presided over both the debate team and Zeta Beta Tau, formed a country music trio called the Buckskin Boys, and spent Friday nights with the campus Hillel chapter. He circumnavigated the campus and city in his trademark tie, slacks or even a suit. Two false starts followed Cohen's graduation: one term in law school and a stint (1956-57) at Columbia University. When Cohen dropped out of Columbia, he checked out the New York scene, which was at that time largely Beat, only to find that bohemia didn't serve him any better than academia. Still, Cohen would return to this very scene less than a decade later to begin his musical career.

If the young Cohen was a man without a plan, he wasn't a man without a country. By the late fifties, Cohen had secured his status as a national quasi-treasure in Canada. In 1959, he received a Canadian Council grant to work on his first novel, *The Favourite Game*. He took the prize-money and headed to Greece, inspired by a teller at the Bank of Greece wearing sunglasses on a particularly gloomy Montreal day. For the next five years, Cohen traveled between Montreal and the Greek island of Hydra, writing and living on next to nothing, while romancing several women, including model Marianne Ihlen ("So long Marianne").

Meanwhile, *The Favourite Game* hit bookstores and Cohen's celebrity reached epic proportions. A coming-of-age story set in Montreal, the novel follows an LC-like young poet named Lawrence Breavman as he struggles with (among other things) love, and rallies against what he sees as superficial forms of religious observance.

Cohen's second novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966), was also written on Hydra, in a haze of

fasting and amphetamines, work conditions that may or may not explain why Cohen followed up a Canadian *Catcher in the Rye* with something nonlinear, fragmented, Joycean, and (obviously) far less accessible. The critics went at *Beautiful Losers* with a sledgehammer, fueled by indignation and a sense of betrayal.

In both novels he'd wrestled with sex and religion, with equal measures of reverence and irreverence. In *Beautiful Losers*, he went too far for many readers. Michael Ondaatje would eventually dub this book "Canada's dirtiest novel," but his once-devoted Jewish audience was less worried about the naughty bits and more concerned with his baffling new literary direction and his seemingly off-the-wall theorizing about Jewish identity, history, and religion. "The New Jew loses his mind gracefully," Cohen argued adding:

He applies finance to abstraction resulting in successful messianic politics, colorful showers of meteorites and other symbolic weather. He has induced amnesia by a repetitious study of history, his very forgetfulness caressed by facts which he accepts with visible enthusiasm. He changes for a thousand years the value of stigma, causing men of all nations to pursue it as superior sexual talisman. The New Jew is the founder of Magic Canada, Magic French Québec, and Magic America. He demonstrates that yearning brings surprises. He uses regret as a bulwark of originality. He confuses nostalgic theories of Negro supremacy, which were tending to the monolithic.

More recently, *Beautiful Losers* has been championed as one of the greatest novels of the century. In 2005 the novel was chosen for the country's **Canada Reads** program, a turnaround which may speak to Cohen's prophetic voice more than anything else. No one contests that Cohen belongs to a pantheon, but to which pantheon? Arguably the one filled with Jewish-and-Sex-identified, Workaholic Auteurs: Woody Allen and Philip Roth. Norman Mailer. The difference between Cohen and the others is that just when Cohen becomes intolerably arrogant, he morphs into a loveable sissy, a crybaby. Missing from both *Ladies and Gentlemen* and *I'm Your Man* is the kind of scene that appears in the superior but lesser-known Cohen documentary, *Bird on a Wire* (1972), in which Cohen breaks down and sobs during a performance in Israel. And though Cohen didn't cry publicly when *Beautiful Losers* was rejected by his once-adoring public, he still went looking for a new path. And one can imagine that he shed a few tears behind closed doors, or perhaps, made someone else sad enough to do it for him.

His decision to take up another career in response to literary failure was reasonable, but less logical was his decision to choose music as that more reliable career. In 1966, he moved to New York City, set up residence at the Chelsea Hotel, and signed with manager Marty Martin, who introduced him to Judy Collins. Collins snapped up "Suzanne"—Cohen sang it to her over the phone—and before the year was out, she'd made it a hit. Her second album, released in 1967, featured three more of his songs.

Soon, with Collins' encouragement, he decided to try his hand at singing. Cohen's voice was never virtuosic. Some icons start with the voice and others begin with the words. Cohen fit squarely into the latter camp, though he invented his own sort of vocal beauty, or perhaps reset the standards. He was better at seducing than singing, and he applied that paradigm to his delivery. He maintained the cool (and sometimes the stoicism) of Roy Orbison, with the same steady gaze (*sans* sunglasses). But then he punctured his own cool with grand and melodramatic displays of feeling, ruptures of emotion that each audience and each audience member experienced as profoundly personal. In other words, he did—and still does—what every manipulative lover learns to do quite early: withholds and then gives. And somehow, the feeling that follows the withholding appears to be an elaborate gesture of generosity.

My own love affair with Leonard Cohen was aptly born of ego: With his song "Suzanne," he made the serenade possible (and even likely) for me. People sang "Suzanne" involuntarily, as if life was finally a musical and people were now moving between speech and song without cause. But my vanity hardly explains the overabundance of "Suzanne" covers: Neil Diamond, Peter Gabriel, Nina Simone, Joan Baez, Fairport Convention among

others. What is it about that song that inspired so many (often lesser) imitations? In college, I leafed through my *Norton Anthology of Poetry* and discovered that Leonard Cohen was a poet and "Suzanne" was a poem. By the time the anthology's fourth edition emerged, however, Cohen had been excised without explanation. Did this mean that Cohen was no longer a poet? Or that he had never been one at all, on second thought? Cohen's voice can't be extracted or evaluated apart from his lyrics or arrangements. His voice is purely the sound of his songs. Just as he is many men in one, a prismatic shape-shifter, he has many audiences. He's the musician cool enough for teenage kids, tame enough for grandparents. For several years, I bartended and Cohen was on my shortlist of musicians that could straddle several discerning audiences: the Polish carpenters, the geriatric Bingo crowd, young punks, and suits.

From 1967 through 1980, Cohen produced at least one album every two years and his musical career quickly eclipsed his literary reputation, particularly in the United States, where his books hadn't quite made the same splash they had at home. Somehow, during that same period, he found the time to bed Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell, Rebecca De Mornay, and countless other women. He traveled to Cuba a few weeks before the Bay of Pigs skirmish ("I wanted to kill or be killed,") entertained the Israeli Army during the Yom Kippur War (imagine a dressed-down USO operation), he dabbled with Scientology (the line "Did you ever go clear?" in the song "Famous Blue Raincoat" is a reference to the religion), began studying Zen Buddhism, and finally reapplied himself to the study of Judaism. Somewhere in between he had two children with Suzanne Elrod (who is not the Suzanne of song).

In the 1980s, he moved to Los Angeles—partly to live closer to his guru, Roshi—and made a cameo appearance on *Miami Vice* (a show that could really get down with Cohen's predilection for suits). Eventually, he joined Roshi at the Mt. Baldy Zen Center near Los Angeles, leaving behind his high-profile romance with De Mornay, and, more importantly, both his musical and literary careers (he'd continued to publish poetry over the years). In 1996, Cohen was ordained as a Rinzaï Zen monk and named Jikan, or "Silent One" (a koan-like choice for a man "born with the gift of a golden voice"). Ironically—or not—Zen brought Cohen back to Judaism. "When I broke my knees and I couldn't practice in the meditational hall," he told Arthur Kurzweil in the *Jewish Book News*. "I began laying *tefillin* every morning and going through the Shemoneh Esrai and really understanding that there were these eighteen steps and that they were a ladder...." In 1999, Cohen came down from the mountain, leaving Mt. Baldy and returning to his home in Los Angeles.

You'll see both something and nothing of Leonard Cohen the man in Lunson's documentary, a somewhat standard concert-doc with a bevy of music luminaries—Nick Cave, Antony, Jarvis Cocker, Beth Orton and much of the Wainwright gang (Rufus, Martha, Kate & Anna McGarrigle) among others—performing Cohen covers at the Sydney Opera House in January 2005. Antony brings down the house—*Lock those windows!*—with "If It Be Your Will," a rendition worth the price of admission alone. And Antony may be the only singer capable of channeling the strange brand of torture and amphibiousness that propelled Cohen through his unorthodox career. Less justified are randomly placed interviews with Bono and Edge, who appear to be caught in transit by Lunson; they fail to do more than kiss Cohen's ass with a litany of vague statements while standing in an unidentified hall. In a disconnected but glorious finale, Cohen sings "Tower of Song" with U2 on a small stage at New York City's Cutting Room.

Cohen fans know that he experienced a most inconvenient misfortune after he returned to public life. In 2005, the Canadian press revealed a major misappropriation of Cohen's funds by his business manager (and, yes, former girlfriend) Kelly Lynch. By the time he caught wind of the drain all that was left of Cohen's millions was \$150,000. Now, Cohen, at age 71, has resigned himself to making a buck, hence the new collection of poems and drawings, *Book of Longing*, out earlier this month and the release of *I'm Your Man*. Cohen has hinted that he may be interested in getting back on the road. But at a moment when Cohen loyalists fear he may destroy his art by singing for his supper, Lunson wisely gives Cohen the last word—or, song—and Cohen's voice sounds richer, deeper, more seductive than ever, and, also, patently proud: *I was born like this. I have no choice. I was born with the gift of a golden voice.*

It would be a mistake to paint Cohen as a victim, even with his recent financial woes. This is a man who has always masterminded his own narrative: He's so deftly engineered his life that documentarians inevitably fail to successfully grab hold of their slippery subject. At this point, his fans consider him something of a wise elder, though to some of his devotees (like me, for example), he's occasionally more like a perverted grandfather, his appetite for women and sex clearly unabated by age.

But even hungry hearts experience ennui, a (leave it to Cohen) more European brand of boredom. In the new collection, *The Book of Longing*, Cohen appears to want everything and nothing, a state of mind that may not behoove a Zen monk on Mt. Baldy, or even a Zen monk in Los Angeles. "After a while," he says in "My Life in Robes,"

You can't tell
If it's missing
A woman
Or needing
A Cigarette

Obviously, for Cohen, eros is essential. He can't put his finger on the missing, only the missing-ness, and so Cohen—the man and the music—continue to float through the darkness (if you weren't in darkness when you first turn his music on, you will be after). It's the kind of music to which you can sleep or love, as background or foreground, as partner or soundtrack. And like every great paramour, Cohen is once again putting out. 🍷

Suzanne Snider is a Brooklyn-based writer, currently at work on a book about a millennialist communal society in southwestern Michigan.

Illustration  Elfo.

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COMMENTS

great synopsis of a wonderful career...i still have my copy of his Selected Poems from 1968 but have misplaced Beautiful Losers...a great addition to jewish traditions for NEXT. Thank you Suzanne.

Posted by bert hirsch on 07.05.06

This is so absorbing...I especially love the distinction between then and now...how a male poet-singer cant get away with "prowling" or "swashbuckling"...or maybe the modern version is the much more drippy, weepy, spineless Emo Band phenomenon...Coldplay and their clones...interesting to note the difference...

Posted by Mike Albo on 07.06.06

Thank you Suzanne (great name) for loving Leonard Cohen as much as I do. He will always be The Man. Beautifully written.

Posted by Marcie on 07.07.06

I remember so many, many Cohen moments. From dorm room to rec room, from college lounge to roadtrip music, from down in the dumps to up on the heights. FRom Canada to Australia. Thank you for capturing a scent, a trace, of The Man.

Posted by Charlene Fairchild on 07.14.06

I am in the class of never having consciously heard of Leonard Cohen, even if I have heard his music. My compliments to Suzanne Snider for an engrossing intro to the man's life. Great writing.

Posted by john on 08.03.06

Great commentary on Leonard, Suzanne. I studied with Sasaki Roshi, the same Zen Master that Leonard did in roughly the same years. Leonard, although he has had his difficulties with ladies, should have been made Roshi's successor. The fact that Roshi was too blind to see that is one of the great untold tragic stories of Buddhism in the West.

Posted by Greg on 03.02.07

I play his music daily as I drive to wherever!..Early tapes...later tapes...CD's for home.. he is 'My Man'..and I appreciate the excellent commentary of Suzanne Snider. Another true believer....

Posted by Joie on 11.01.07

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