

Why I love Leonard Cohen.

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At Cambridge University in the 1960s, we marched against the Vietnam War to the songs of Bob Dylan, but romanced young ladies to the poetry and songs of Leonard Cohen. Together, the poetry of Dylan and Cohen was the epitome of good taste—demanding political commitment, spiritual yearning, romantic obsession, and a great deal of intense discussion.

I was introduced to Leonard Cohen's music by a friend the day I arrived at Cambridge in September 1968. I immediately went out and bought his first long-playing record, *The Songs of Leonard Cohen*. Then I listened to him obsessively, every night for three years—always waiting for the next album like a child. Yet I never saw him perform live until this fall, forty-four years later.

Cohen, now seventy-eight, has just finished a European tour and begun a thirty-five city American tour—a coup considering that American audiences have been on the whole less appreciative of his work than their European counterparts. The performance I saw in Madrid was heart-rending, pure euphoria and exultation. He played for four hours and the Spanish audience would not let him go. At the end he skipped off the stage like a young man. His latest album, *Old Ideas*, reached number one on the charts in seventeen countries, from Belgium to Poland to Canada. Many of his most ardent fans do not speak English but learn the words of his songs nevertheless.

Cohen has a special affinity for Spain. Last year, he was awarded the Prince of Asturias Award for the Arts, Spain's top intellectual prize, and at the ceremony he explained how a Spanish flamenco guitarist in Montreal gave him his first guitar at age fifteen and taught him how to play. His first book of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, was published in 1954, when he was just twenty years old, and was inspired by Federico Garcia Lorca, who was killed in the Spanish civil war. The book was republished on its fiftieth anniversary and is a continuing point of reference for Cohen fans:

Then let us compare mythologies

I have learned my elaborate lie

Of soaring crosses and poisoned thorns

And how my fathers nailed him

Like a bat against a barn

To greet the autumn and the late hungry ravens

At a hollow yellow sign.

The opportunity finally to meet Cohen and indulge in a long conversation with him before the show revealed a man who is humble and deeply in touch with the world. We talked about not only his music and his band but the wars in Afghanistan and Syria, growing old, why he has deliberately avoided becoming a rock celebrity, and the variety of religions and spiritual paths he has embraced over the course of his life.

Cohen did not become a singer until he was thirty, although he was a poet by the time he was twenty. In

recent years, Cohen has applied his mournful, rasping voice, his tearful endings and dramatic pauses, to more complex musical compositions with female voices and multiple instruments, especially strings—songs that the early Cohen troubadour with his single guitar might not have even recognized as his own.

A Canadian Jew descended from rabbis, Cohen infuses his music with his enduring interest in religion. He reads Jewish scriptures but is also a master of Zen Buddhism of the Rinzai school; his closest friend and mentor is the 105-year-old California-based Japanese Zen master Joshu Sasaki Roshi. Going through a bad spell in the 1990s, Cohen spent five years in a Zen monastery outside Los Angeles. For a time he gave up music; he returned to it partly out of necessity, after discovering that his manager had run off with all his money. He later spent several years studying with a Hindu mystic, Ramesh Balsekar, in Mumbai. He is also extremely knowledgeable about Islam and, in particular, Sufism, the most spiritual branch of Islam. Some of the Sufi whirling dervishes in Turkey have even danced to his songs.

But Cohen is best known for his sad, evocative love poems, which, turned into songs, have immortalized beautiful, sexy, intelligent, neurotic women, as did with Suzanne on his first album:

Now Suzanne takes your hand

And she leads you to the river

She is wearing rags and feathers

From Salvation Army counters

And the sun pours down like honey

On our lady of the harbour

And she shows you where to look

Among the garbage and the flowers

There are heroes in the seaweed

There are children in the morning

They are leaning out for love

And they will lean that way forever

He has had an extraordinary and complicated love life but has always seemed to treat his lovers, his musical collaborators, and everyone else around him with grace, warmth, manners, and respect. Sylvie Simmons has just published a biography, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, which unearths much detail about his life and beliefs. About the flamenco teacher in Montreal who, after meeting Cohen in a park, gave him his first guitar lessons, and later committed suicide, Simmons quotes Cohen as saying, "I knew nothing about the man, why he came to Montreal, why he appeared in that tennis court, why he took his life.... But it was those six chords, it was that guitar pattern that has been the basis of all my songs, and all of my music."

One of his most celebrated girlfriends was the mysterious Marianne of the song "So Long, Marianne." Simmons tells us more about her. She was Marianne Ihlen, a former Norwegian model who ran away to the Greek island of Hydra with a Norwegian writer who soon after left her and their son. She became Leonard's muse for many years, appearing in the background of a haunting photo on the back cover of *Songs from a Room*, his second album.

Cohen's songs have probably been covered by more artists than the works of any other pop singer—there are literally hundreds of versions of his songs. And he has encouraged many of his own collaborators to do independent work. His early back-up singer Jennifer Warnes brought out a wonderful album of Cohen songs

called Famous Blue Raincoat. It has just been reissued on its twentieth anniversary; the musical arrangements by Roscoe Becks (who is still Cohen's musical director) for Warnes's stunning voice remain as fresh as they were two decades ago. Sharon Robinson has been a vocalist and a joint songwriter with Cohen since 1979. Her 2008 album Everybody Knows is a haunting, melancholic compilation of her own and Cohen's songs. And Anjani Thomas, another collaborator and vocalist, issued her Blue Alert album in 1992, which Cohen produced himself.

Today, as Cohen's voice becomes still deeper and more gravelly, he uses female singers more prominently; his recent work is characterized by extensive harmonizing with two young British sisters, Hattie and Charley Webb. They, too, have their own album, Savages, and a separate musical career. No other song artist to my knowledge has promoted so many people around him to become singers and stars in their own right. It is part of Cohen's enduring humility and eagerness to share his own success.

Working as a journalist, I have taken Cohen everywhere, through long bouts covering the wars in Afghanistan and Central Asia, including during a stint with the Taliban in the 1990s. Wherever I travel, I still pack him like a sleeping pill, a beautiful ghost you can surrender to, a spiritual man for these unspiritual times, someone with whom you can shed the weight of reality, your fears and concerns.

Above all, Cohen's music is about love, tolerance, and beauty. These days he is preoccupied with death and his own passing, ruminations that have resulted in him often singing one of his earlier great songs, "If It Be Your Will":

If it be your will that I speak no more

And my voice is still as it was before,

I will speak no more.

I shall abide until

I am spoken for,

If it be your will.

If it be your will that a voice be true,

From this broken hill I will sing to you.

From this broken hill all your praises they shall ring.

If it be your will to let me sing