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"A sinister cabal of superior writers."

Music DVD Review: Leonard Cohen - Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes



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Leonard Cohen is a musician of rare depth and sentiment. The Canadian singer-songwriter has developed a huge cult following over the course of his career, which now spans five decades. Concurrent with his ever-growing stature as a master of his craft, Cohen has been the recipient of scores of accolades. So it is a little surprising that the new DVD *Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes* is the first to explore the host of influences that have shaped the man's music over the years.

Cohen's early interests were literary, rather than musical. He was 22 when his first published book of poetry appeared in 1956. His poetry collections were joined by two novels in the early 1960s, and his future as a writer seemed assured. Then in 1967, Cohen moved to New York to pursue a career as a folk singer-songwriter. When Judy Collins included Cohen's "Suzanne" on her *In My Life* album, the attention it received launched his career.

As the narrator mentions, getting to the bottom of Leonard Cohen's influences can be a tricky matter. He wears none of them on his sleeve, as others often do. And his style is uniquely his own. You have to go fairly deep into his lyrics, and know a lot about where he has been to locate them. As the DVD's title indicates, a great many of them are the classic outsiders, or lonesome heroes in a polite society.

Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca was probably Cohen's first major inspiration. His dramatic life, lyrical poetry, and tragic end combined to create a compelling story, one that young Cohen found irresistible. While many of his early heroes seem fairly obvious in retrospect, such as the Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg Beat-triumvirate, others are more elusive.

Hank Williams Sr, is one that I never would have guessed. Evidently Leonard Cohen was a big fan of country music as a youth. Even then, he must have recognized something particularly haunting about Hank, because he managed to incorporate aspects of the man into his own songwriter later on. The same holds true for Ray Charles, not so much in the songs themselves, but in the arrangements, and most especially the female back-up vocals he uses so often these days.

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