

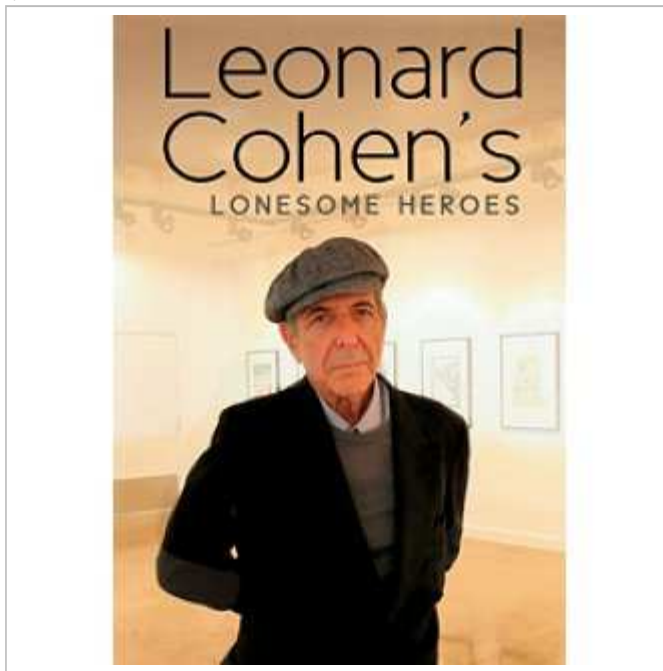
FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2010

DVD Review: "Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes"

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Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes

Pride DVD (UK), 2010

110 minutes, USD \$19.95

MVDvisual.com

Along with the likes of Bob Dylan and Townes Van Zandt, Leonard Cohen is considered one of North America's great singer-songwriters in the poet tradition. The focus of this bio, as with a recent one about Frank Zappa, is to look not just at the man and his work, but what influenced him to be such a *macher* in his field.

While I have seen a few documentaries about Cohen, they rarely go

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About Me

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 88, I used to publish a music
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beyond the singer-songwriter, whereas this one discusses his pre-song work during his time in Montreal at McGill University, and in New York (1956-57) while attending Columbia, and carries through when he had retired to seek solace in Buddhism.

But surpassing even that, there is a secondary level that increases the interest to me. For example, the film describes how a young teen Lenny becomes impressed with Spanish martyr poet Federico Garcia Lorca and decides to write poetry as well. At this point, there is a narrative of Lorca's poetry followed by a Lorca expert describing both his poetry and Leonard's, and compares them. Later, when Cohen lives in New York during the beat era, not only do we hear a recording clip of Allan Ginsburg's *Howl* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," and we also hear some of Cohen's two novels, which has a similarity in style to *Road*," and a Beat Generation expert discusses both. So you get a play-by-play not just by experts on our Canadian subject and how he was influenced, but also analytical details about the heroes.

With the many clips used of the influences, of the experts (including the expected music-related academics, and two critics from *Rolling Stone* magazine), of the original artists, and of course Leonard himself, the pace is actually pretty fluid, and is kept interesting. I found Judy Collins' taking about how she acquired Cohen's songs for an album before anyone else, and how she helped him as a performer, as riveting. It's interesting how she describes how he played her "Suzanne" in a hotel room, and he tells the tale as doing it over the phone. Ah, gotta love oral histories.

Among all these influences are ones the viewer may not have thought of, such as Hank Williams and Ray Charles, but played beside each other, the flux is definitely there. As for the two Hanks mentioned (Williams and Snow), well, Cohen *has* done country songs, such as "The Captain" (*Various Positions*).

An obvious one here is Bob Dylan. Dylan's breaking away from traditional folk and moving into singer-songwriter poetry styles - not to mention that Dylan can hardly be called a classic style singer - surely showed Cohen that his voice could be accepted as-is. Though closer to Dylan in voice, Cohen often wished he could sound as versatile as Ray Charles, who also was influenced - and was influential - by and in country & western ("Unchain My Heart," "You Don't Know Me," etc.). Another is phenomenal French songwriter Jacques Brel, whom Cohen would certainly have heard growing up while living in the French city of Montreal. Brel's complex lyrics and song structure, and even occasional themes (for example, both write about prostitutes, such as Brel's "Amsterdam" and Cohen's "Sisters of Mercy"), can be found in both.

FFanzeen, which dealt with wide-ranging independent r scene. I also photographed bands from the period (and since). And the beat goes o

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As a quick sidebar, I'd like to ask an open question to *all* Leonard Cohen documentarians: why is it no one ever interviews Jennifer Warnes? She is seen in the background of one of the clips doing back-up, but she was as much a muse as she was a support, as she was as well to Mason Williams. She is part of what made albums like *Various Positions* so magical, *especially* the much covered "Hallelujah." But I digress...

To bring this digression into the review conversation, there are a lot of clips of Cohen's songs throughout the DVD, obviously from many periods of his career, which compiled together make an interesting notation of watching him aging, as a performer. As he looks more and more like another Leonard - Nimoy - after all these years he still sings with his eyes closed, and his voice has mellowed and deepened (from cigarettes?).

Those who have followed his career know about his dive into Zen Buddhism, which lead to his retirement for a number of years. For me, this only makes sense as he has been exploring religious themes in his music since the beginning. It is interesting to hear from both his mentor, Kigen, and also from another Zen Buddhist priest (one of those experts I was mentioning earlier). There are clips of Cohen in the Buddhist Mount Baldy Centre, where he has also achieved priesthood, which I have never seen before. This later period was as much a mystery for me about the man as was his pre-"Suzanne" days, when he was a published poet and novelist.

While this DVD was not authorized by Cohen, it is respectful without being genuflecting, which is a nice break from the norm. Perhaps because it is more "experts in the field" rather than other musicians, there is less "we're-not-worthy" moments, and more introspection to output, which is a nice touch for a tributary discussion. Even Judy Collins, who is just a bit gushy, pre-dated Cohen's music, so she comes off as much as mentor as fan. It's also a risk as Collins is probably the only recognizable name to most people, but that is also part of what makes this so compelling.

As these kind of DVDs go, this is one I can happily recommend, including to people not very familiar with his music. By the end, the viewer will have more of an idea of L. Cohen's work.

The bonus side is kind of slim, though I'm not complaining. Along with the bios of the "panel" (as the talking heads who discuss Cohen are called), there is a further clip of Judy Collins discussing Cohen and his music. There is one thing she says that bothered me a bit, is when she states that perhaps it was for the better that all of Cohen's

retirement money was ripped off so that he had to go back to touring and working (two albums have come out since), thereby giving the world more of Cohen's words and music. That comes off as highly presumptuous to me. But as she did some of her best work in the later stages of her career (e.g., "The Blizzard"), and she is perhaps viewing the situation though that filer, I'll give her that much.

Bonus Video:



Posted by Robert Barry Francos at [11:02 AM](#)

Labels: [Bob Dylan](#), [Buddhism](#), [Canada](#), [DVD review](#), [FFanzeen](#), [Hank Williams](#), [Jacques Brel](#), [Judy Collins](#), [Leonard Cohen](#), [Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes](#), [Robert Barry Francos](#), [singer-songwriter](#)

Reactions: interesting (0) cool (0) informative (0)

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