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A cascade of CDs, DVDs about Leonard Cohen

By JONATHAN TAKIFF Philadelphia Daily News staff

We're deep into Leonard Cohen territory this week, and also touching on newsworthy music releases from Heart, Jesse Harris and one of the Radiohead blokes.



Jesse Harris often evokes a mid-career Paul Simon.

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COHEN CALL: A "must-have" for fans is Tony Palmer's long lost "Leonard Cohen - Bird on A Wire" (The Machat Company DVD, A), one of the best music documentaries ever made. It's an eagle-eye view of the quietly intense romantic in his youthful prime, captured on Cohen's 1972 European tour. This was the Cohen still pining for flower child "Suzanne" and those hot times at the "Chelsea Hotel," but also the softly emboldened protest artist reworking biblical imagery to decry war in "Who By Fire?" and "Song of Isaac" (illustrated in the documentary with shocking newsreel images).

Besides great performances, the film is fine-tuned to reveal the tug of celebrity-versus-art that Cohen suffered, trying to stay on point in nutty interview situations, wishing out loud that the audience wouldn't prematurely applaud, tactfully dodging (mostly) the advances of female admirers.

Then Cohen really lets down his guard the last night of the tour when, after licking an odd piece of paper, he mentally melts down on a Jerusalem stage.

What a trip.

Also out today and offering a modicum of understanding of Cohen's literary, philosophical and spiritual roots is the unauthorized documentary "Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes" (Pride DVD, B). Focusing on his influences, including the Spanish poet/playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, are academicians, a former spiritual guide and an early promoter of his songs, Judy Collins, who clearly adores him still.

Coming Sept. 14 is "Songs From the Road" (Columbia Legacy, A) a CD/DVD/Blu-ray disc chronicle of Cohen's 2008-2009 world tour. This one revels in his other golden-years strengths, including that all-knowing vocal grumble and a sublime, world-music-flavored band.

The artist's generation-gapping delivery of "Hallelujah" from Coachella is alone worth the price of admission. And a bonus 20-minute documentary by daughter Lorca Cohen adds icing.

GIRL POWER: After the Wilson sisters' six years in recording retreat, the "2.0" version of Heart beats strongly again with "Red Velvet Car" (Legacy, B+). String player Ben Mink produced with a good balance of electric heaviness (on the bluesy, Led Zeppelin-influenced "WTF" and exotic "Safronia's Mark") and genteel, melodic, acoustic folk balladry (try Nancy Wilson's "Hey You" and "Sunflower").

Don't mean to start a family feud, but I like the well-named, bittersweet romantic pop of the Weepies and their album "Be My Thrill" (Netwerk, B) best when Deb Talan is singing lead, rather than partner-in-musical-harmony Steve Tannen. Try "I Was Made for Sunny Days," enhanced by Colbie Caillat's backing vocals.

GUTS AND GLORY: Did you catch my Richard Thompson interview a couple of weeks back? The amazing, cut-live in-concert (with all new material) band album we schmoozed about, "Dream Attic" (Shout! Factory, A), hits stores today and is most worthy.

Soul crooner Calvin Richardson keeps the old-school mainstream R&B fires burning with "America's Most Wanted" (Shanachie, B-). The title tune addresses a fashion model, not a criminal!

Coatesville's gift to emo rock, Terrible Things, make a strong first impression with their self-titled album (Universal/Motown, B). The prog-rock guitar embellishments (Thinking Yes? Yes!) are an edge up on the competition.

Jesse Harris, best known for writing Norah Jones' melancholy hits, carries on with his own, winsomely voiced reflections on things gone awry "Through the Night" (Mercy Street/Secret Sun, B+). Recorded in Nassau, Bahamas, with horn and organ embellishments and the occasional wafting tropical rhythm, Harris often evokes a mid-career Paul Simon - and that ain't bad.

Even wimpier - and not as good - is the breakout album of wistful refrains from Radiohead drummer Philip Selway, "Familial" (Nonesuch, C+).

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