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Leonard Cohen: Under Review 1934 – 1977 (DVD Music Documentary)

Picture: B- Sound: B- Extras: C
Film: B

Few singer-songwriters have been as influential as Leonard Cohen yet managed to stay in relative obscurity. Artists of many genres refer to Cohen as an inspiration, and several tribute albums featuring high-profile acts have appeared. Yet his name is still mostly unknown, even to people who listen to a lot of music. It's odd for a musician whose body of work spans over forty years.

Leonard Cohen: Under Review covers roughly the first half of his career. Born in Canada in 1934, Cohen had a decent degree of success as a writer long before he even considered music as a vocation. He was a regular at poetry readings throughout Canada in the heyday of the Beat movement. Evincing a strong work ethic that continues to this day, Cohen was never content to simply write whatever came to mind. He would spend months finding the right word, often discarding hundreds of lines of poetry that he considered failures. He published a collection of poetry, **Flowers For Hitler**, and two novels, **The Favorite Game** and **Beautiful Losers** to mixed reviews.

Having learned to play guitar early, he decided to try his hand at songwriting. On his way to Nashville to break into country music he was waylaid in New York City by Andy Warhol's Factory, and more importantly, the Greenwich Village Folk music scene. Dylan was just beginning to explode, and the market was ripe for intelligent, quirky poetry set to music. Cohen was a natural match.

His voice is low and resonant, his lyrics thoughtful, deep, and emotionally personal. Neither proved to be very radio friendly. Still, sales and force of personality allowed Cohen's career to, if not flourish then at least continue.

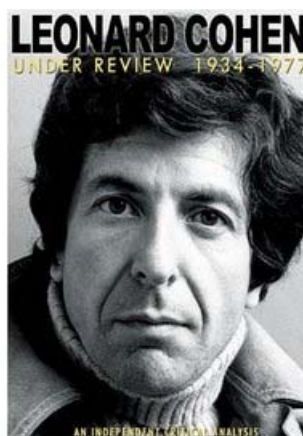
The DVD covers the recording of each of Cohen's first six albums in some detail. Interviews with many of the musicians and producers bring the time period and the process to life. Archival footage interviews with and performances by Cohen round out the documentary feel here. Time is spent tracing the development of Cohen's sound, from the sparse folk music feel of his brilliant debut album **Songs of Leonard Cohen** through the richer orchestration of **New Skin For the Old Ceremony**.

Unfortunately, the film ends with a discussion of **Death of a Ladies' Man**. Over-produced by Phil Spector, this remains one of Cohen's most unlistenable albums. Cohen himself hated the final album, calling the production (in an interview included on the DVD), "grotesque."

Cohen's career continued well beyond 1977. His signature album, **I'm Your Man** didn't appear until a decade later, and Cohen continues to be a vital artist today. As a fan, I can only hope there is a second volume of the **Under Review** series.

- Wayne Wise

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