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Home now playing (film) Leonard Cohen | Under Review

1934-1977 (Sexy Intellectual)
Leonard Cohen | Under Review 1934-1977 (Sexy Intellectual)

Written by Byron Kerman

Tuesday, 29 May 2007



Cohen's supposed appreciation for the mysteries of women comes off time and again more like that of a callous braggart with a Sharpie in a men's room stall. If he wasn't one of the most gifted lyricists rock has ever known, he would be left to write with his dick. "Sexy Intellectual," indeed.

In an episode of British cult-favorite sitcom *The Young Ones*, Neil the hippie is scared that he's going to be bitten by a vampire. He says he's afraid of becoming dead, yet still alive, "like Leonard Cohen."

Cohen carved out a curious niche for himself with the release of his first albums in the '60s. His funeral songs offered cryptic poetry, rapid fingerpicking on his acoustic guitar, morose moods, and a sort of "bittersweet playboy" pose that probably rubbed off on the somewhat younger Donald Fagen.

Those first three albums, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, *Songs from a Room*, and *Songs of Love and Hate*, established Cohen as a sort of Canadian, poor-man's Dylan. He was a folkie, sure, but more quiet and intense than most of the pack. His songs sounded as plain and intimate as a post-coital confession, but those lyrics—so different and so dense. And that voice -- as impossible as the notion might seem, in a world where no one can actually sound like Lou Reed, he sounded like Lou Reed.

Almost 40 years later, he's considered nobody's imitator, though still an acquired taste. He's an icon whose songs have literally been covered and recorded more than a thousand times. You may not even realize that's Cohen's "Hallelujah" that Jeff Buckley made his own, and "Everybody Knows" was his song before it was Concrete Blonde's. His best known song, "Suzanne," was written for and performed by friend Judy Collins before she persuaded him to get onstage and try it out for himself.

This DVD, from Sexy Intellectual's "Under Review" series, features no new interviews with Cohen but offers appraisals from musical collaborators, Cohen's producers, biographers, and critics. It's a product for the serious fan, really, but it does penetrate a unique musical mind for the dilettantes who happen to watch it, too.

I was one of those dilettantes. Before I watched it, I knew precious little about Cohen. Now, fresh from viewing it, I have some questions.

1. How can a man with such a wonderful knack for poetic language seem like such a heel at the same time? Cohen will whip out a line like "Like a bird on the wire/ like a drunk in a midnight choir/ I have tried in my way to be free" from "Bird on the Wire." It's gorgeous. Then, in his famous postmortem dismissal of onetime fling Janis Joplin, he offers, "I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel/ you were talking so brave and so sweet /giving me head on the unmade bed/ while the limousines wait in the street" (from "Chelsea Hotel #2"). Cohen's supposed appreciation for the mysteries of women comes off time and again more like that of a callous braggart with a Sharpie in a men's room stall. If he wasn't one of the most gifted lyricists rock has ever known, he would be left to write with his dick. "Sexy Intellectual," indeed.

2. As noted, the DVD has no new interviews with Cohen, and very little of him in conversation at all. Is this a weakness? Or is it actually a strength? A critical take need not interview the subject himself, but when it doesn't, we're left to wonder if "unauthorized" should be read "miscellaneous schmucks have their say." Then again, maybe a candid Cohen doesn't really belong on his own DVD. A (partial) retrospective is best curated by the curators, not the artist. In theory.

3. Why do nearly all his album covers feature a photo of Cohen himself, á la Phil Collins? One would like to believe that Cohen's sensitive lyrics guard an ego smaller than that of self-aggrandizing, synthpop-imp Phil Collins. But like those of Collins, virtually every single Cohen album cover is an image of the singer himself. Get over your almost-handsome Semitic-beaked visage, Leonard. You could have put anything on your album covers, but anything settled on your face, seven times out of ten. *The Death of a Ladies Man* album, a Phil Spector-produced train wreck, has a cover with you sandwiched between two '70s chicks, one of them (your girlfriend at the time, apparently) pouting and icy. I'd no idea you'd joined Roxy Music.

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Review in a Hurry: Better than the original? Could it possibly be? Maybe 13 is a lucky number, after all. Danny Ocean & Co. strike it...

Surf's Up!

Review in a Hurry: The suddenly ubiquitous Shia LaBeouf voices Cody, a teenage penguin (yes, more penguins!) who enters his first pro surfing contest. This...

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Review in a Hurry: Like that wildly entertaining friend who takes forever to get to the end of a story, Pirates is a rollicking good...

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Shrek the Third

Review in a Hurry: This latest installment in the ogre-hyped franchise (Shrek toothpaste, anyone?) makes for serviceable summer entertainment, even as it shows signs of...

Mr. Brooks

Review in a Hurry: Suspend your disbelief and tag along with Kevin Costner on fly-by-night murder missions. Do it because you wish your alter ego/imaginary...

Georgia Rule

Review in a Hurry: It's being sold as a lighthearted, tear-jerking chick flick. In actuality, Georgia Rule has a serious dark side—and that's not a...

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Movie Review: You're Gonna Miss Me

Book Review: North River

Book Review: The Diana Chronicles

4. What the hell happened to the man's voice? This isn't on the DVD, which ends with 1977, but Cohen eventually went from high baritone to Barry White-tone. His singing voice was relatively normal, but at some point he became a Tom Waits-style freak singing in a bass that rivals former Seattle Supersonic Shawn Kemp's speaking voice—an almost unintelligible, three-testicled subsonic rumble. Were the early days a put-on, or did Cohen start inhaling cigars and eating tin cans?

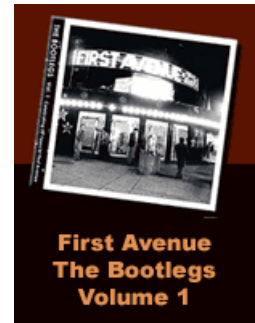
The documentary interviews a variety of critics and associates, some quick to genuflect, others happy to share their hang-ups about some perceived dip in quality during Cohen's first five albums. In particular, the animated, articulate Robert Christgau and the slightly less animated Anthony DeCurtis have some pointed comments worth sharing. The insight into Cohen's character as a successful poet and novelist, an uncommonly gifted lyricist, and a cult singer-songwriter is good stuff. The lingering question of how a writer who can at times sound as trenchant as the poet Robert Lowell can then turn around and describe himself, pityingly, as a depressed playboy rolling off yet another nubile woman with a weary sigh, remains unanswered. | **Byron Kerman**

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