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Leonard Cohen

Under Review 1934-1977 [DVD]

(Chrome Dreams/Sexy Intellectual) Rated: N/A
 US release date: 24 April 2007 (MVD)
 UK release date: 19 March 2007

by Tom Useted

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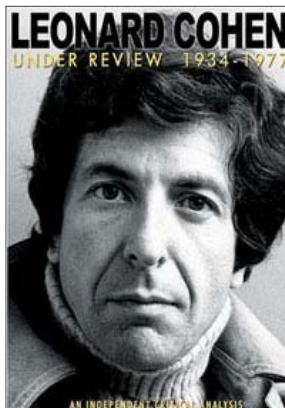
I've come across several of these critical review DVDs that haven't been astonishingly bad. A lot of people don't like them, but I enjoy catching glimpses of relatively rare video clips, and occasionally the talking heads will provide a flash of insight. It was with perhaps misguidedly high hopes that I popped Leonard Cohen's *Under Review* into the player, and boy, was I ever disappointed.

When a DVD is almost entirely worthless from a visual standpoint, um, that's poison. And that's just what's wrong with this one. There are some early clips of Cohen reading his poetry, and much-too-brief bits taken from television appearances, including chronologically inappropriate but fairly arresting 1980 and 1988 performances of songs like "Bird on the Wire", but nothing else. Even during the relatively long discussion of Cohen as a live performer, all we get is 20 seconds of "Suzanne" from the Isle of Wight film, and most of that is crowd footage. The rest of the video is made up mostly of onscreen commentary from an unusually impressive group of prominent rock writers (Robert Christgau, Anthony DeCurtis, Johnny Rogan), along with several Cohen scholars (for lack of a better term) and collaborators (guitarist Ron Cornelius chief among them). What else? Scenic shots of birds and oceans, clips of Judy Collins and Bob Dylan to provide "context", and lots of still photos.

The opening chapter may be the most interesting for Cohen fans unfamiliar with the songwriter's background, as it briefly covers his literary career and attempts to fit his work into the context of Canadian lit. It might even be enough to encourage admirers of Cohen's music to check out his poetry and the controversial novel *Beautiful Losers*.

After the discussion of Cohen's career prior to music, this disc takes the predictable chronological tour through his albums. *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, *Songs from a Room*, *Songs of Love and Hate*, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* and *Death of a Ladies' Man* all fall under the dull assault of the critics, who gush over Cohen's debut for what seems like forever, universally agree that its follow-up was "sparse", and praise *Love and Hate* for its bleakness. *New Skin* finds them somewhat divided: there's disagreement over whether the more pop-oriented production helps or hurts the songs, and "Chelsea Hotel #2" comes in for some criticism, mostly due to Cohen's revelation that the song was about Janis Joplin. This response is rather hypocritical considering Rogan's willingness to go on and on about "Joan of Arc's" Nico connection. Additionally, the commentators point out the "reality" behind some of Cohen's other famous songs. Like, "Suzanne" was about a real woman who really made tea with orange peels! "Bird on the Wire" was about birds on a telegraph wire! Good lord! So much for keeping things mysterious.

The only time anyone tries to "interpret" a lyric is when Rogan and Christgau both tackle "Did you ever go clear?" from "Famous Blue



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Raincoat”, and while both critics reveal the line’s roots in Scientology, Christgau rightly points out that the listener doesn’t need to know what Cohen “means” to recognize the brilliance of the lyric. This seems reasonable, if rather obvious.

The segment on *Death of a Ladies’ Man* is disappointing, considering it’s the most uncharacteristic album in Cohen’s catalogue. Too much time is wasted on peripheral subject matter like an elementary discussion of Phil Spector’s “Wall of Sound”, which anyone bored enough to pick up this DVD in the first place will probably already be familiar with. The result is that the actual music on *Death of a Ladies’ Man* is barely heard, outside of a tiny bit of “True Love Leaves No Traces” and a later (hilarious) performance of “Memories”. Not that the Wall of Sound, which the commentators spent oh so much time dissecting, is on especially strong display on either of those performances (especially since “Memories” hails from a live performance). Why not give us a snatch of “Don’t Go Home With Your Hard-On”, Wall-of-Sound disco poetry at its finest?

It’s not like *Death of a Ladies’ Man* is ignored more than the other albums, though. Only “Bird on the Wire” is heard from *Songs from a Room*, and at odd intervals the producers actually don’t even use Leonard Cohen’s music at all, opting instead for generic acoustic guitar fingerpicking. I didn’t count, but I’d be surprised if more than ten studio recordings from these five albums are heard during the course of the eighty-minutes-plus program. And *Live Songs*, the widely ignored collection of concert recordings, is briefly mentioned but not discussed whatsoever.

What’s especially frustrating about this DVD, and what may very well turn me forever off these critical review discs, is that it so sickeningly sets out not to engage viewers, but to indoctrinate them. The Cohen disc does this more so than any other documentary of this type that I’ve seen. That the commentators are mostly humorless is especially frustrating when you consider the humor in much of Cohen’s work. The only genuinely funny moment in the whole program is when Ronée Blakley (the only female commentator, whose name is misspelled in the credits) refers to “the rabbinical quality of his Jewishness, if I may say so” while describing Cohen’s voice. The rest of it is as predictable as an empty wall, and just about as entertaining. The attitude of the film, combined with the inexcusable dearth of music, vintage film clips, and specific opinions, is enough to send it straight to the garbage.

(Extras are a brief, pointless interview with guitarist Ron Cornelius, a quiz - I scored a “passable” 16 out of 25 - and contributor bios.)

RATING: **2** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 EXTRAS: **2** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

— 17 May 2007

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