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### Leonard Cohen: under review

Submitted by [Chris Estey](#) on May 12, 2008.

The other night I decided to get out some of my favorite records, one of them being American Music Club's *Mercury* -- which is probably my favorite album of the 90s -- to refresh the palette for all the new music I'm listening to. As I listened to the 1993 black-heart gem of Mark Eitzel's relational entropy, wondering if any single record ever had that many great lyrics, I suddenly started hearing the melody to Leonard Cohen's "In My Secret Life" massaging my disintegrating memory.

So I got out the album that opens with that track, *Ten New Songs*, which I would never have thought to call my favorite album of THIS decade. When it came out a few years ago, I thought the lyric sheet was excellent, but had pretty much given up on the light Casio-driven folk-funk Our Moody Doomed Father of Love Song persisted in recording. But listening to *Ten New Songs* immediately against Eitzel's genius song cycle, a record that had gotten me through at least one blue-black year, and I realized I am now old enough, have matured enough to accept where Cohen has been going (musically). *Ten New Songs* has thus been played the rest of the week, and though only half of it makes me behave like my father with a bourbon and a Sinatra LP circa 1972, I am willing to concede the Canadian singer-songwriter-poet-ladies' man-Buddhist monk-etc. is as well as has been always ahead of the game.

That becomes very obvious on viewing "Leonard Cohen: Under Review 1978-2006," which (I kid you not) came in the mail the next day. A follow up to MVD's study of Cohen's more hipster-beloved earlier records (want to really piss me off? Repeat the fool's "conventional wisdom" that early Waits and latter Cohen are mutually deficient due to the bleatings of your non-critical thinking peers), I have to say this is one of the very best of the documentaries the specialty DVD/audio company has released -- many of the usual suspects from the series are here, including Robert Christgau and some Uncut editor/writers, biographers and bewitched collaborators of Cohen's -- and brings up in detail all those deliciously mordant and boom-pah-pah music movies L. has been putting out since the fascinating monstrosity of his team-up with Phil Spector at the end of the 70s.

A good deal of its charm for me personally are the confused responses to what I would consider the Secret History of Cohen, the album where his past and future vortexed; a record called *Various Positions* that wasn't even released in the States. When it came out in 1984 my girlfriend and I absorbed every day through our relationship together and apart. (Yes, the girlfriend responsible for my missing front tooth.) I was living in a punk group house at the time, and at first my housemates wanted to kill me for playing the rickety-keyboard driven, very religious sounding LP on the communal stereo system. I mean, to go from Pere Ubu's *Dub Housing* to the Only Ones' *Another View* to Bryan Ferry's solo albums -- hey, wait, to our fellow for example Nick Cave fans\* it started to make sense. It definitely got played even when I wasn't there.

But it was a weird record -- and on the MVD doc the critics chat about why: It might be the first lo-fi keyboard masterpiece. Cohen was bored plunking badly on an acoustic guitar and insisted on plunking out automatic rhythms on a handheld pre-set keyboard anyone could buy instead.

OK, but why is this the record I would most write a 33 1/3 book about -- it can't just be Cohen's great lyrics with junk-culture one-man jams, could it?

No, it is also the tracklisting, still unknown by many Cohen fans who are told this is a transitional record, a flawed groping between the expansive *Recent Songs* (1979) and the title-track and "Waiting For The Miracle"-blessed *The Future* (1992)\*\*: "Hallelujah" (and this is still my favorite version, sorry Buckley and Cale and et al fans) with his darkest song about authority "The Captain" and his darkest song about God "The Law" and his most beautiful gospel number "If It Be Your Will."

Yes, this would be the album I would want to interview everyone involved about, and plink-plonks aside, the songs hold up as Cohen's best. I have a theory it has a little to do with what the "Under Review" DVD brings up about Cohen's collaboration with Canadian pervert-cabaret arranger Lewis Furey for the musical "Night Music," and Cohen's own self-made feature film "I Am A Hotel," but I might as well thank MVD and these writers and save that for my OWN book.

\*-Are you a fan of "Boatman's Call"? You might want to pay attention.

\*\* - Yes, I skipped "I'm Your Man," which really isn't an album, more like the Mount Rushmore of music (just ask Frank Black, among many other fans). That story is the regular Cohen enthusiast's reason for picking up "Leonard Cohen: Under Review 1978-2006," which is totally worth it just for THAT story.

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[Reviews](#) [TIG blog](#)**1 Joseph Riippi said on May 13, 2008:**

Oh Estey...bless you for bringing up Cohen. I've gotten no end to the grief for my including among my top ten of 2007 the collaboration between Cohen and Philip Glass on "Book of Longing." Do you have the book of poems and sketches? It's beautiful, and the record is gorgeous of gorgeous.

I love \_Ten New Songs\_, but I got to say that \_New Skin for the Old Ceremony\_ still just does something for me...I guess because it was the one that turned me on to him, and who doesn't want to be Marlon Brando to his Steve McQueen? Or KY Jelly to his Vaseline?

What a lyricist...

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**2 Facts About Rob said on May 13, 2008:**

Estey--  
 props for pushing AMC's "mercury"... A BRILLIANT record... "gratitude walks" is one of the most beautiful songs of melancholy ever written.... "what godzilla said to god when his name wasn't found in the book of life" is right up there...

Eitzel is always teetering on the brink of writing one of the greatest records of all times... and "mercury" came so frickin' close i'll always listen to whatever he writes next... waiting, hoping!!! (his solo album "candy ass" comes nearly as close too... it's that sort of yearning that reflects right back at you in his music... he's trying to write his best song ever each time out, and i listen to each offering cheering him on in the quest... the fraility is breathtaking...)

i agree with almost every word about cohen, as well, but it was the first lines about AMC that really got my goosebumps going... (original AMC drummer Tim Mooney mixed our record coming out in july, by the way)

[» reply](#)

**3 Chris Estey said on May 13, 2008:**

That Glass-Cohen book sounds wonderful ... I need to track one down and check it out, Joe. Thanks for the tip!

"New Skin" is a really special record to me too -- very few songwriters express that level of observational honesty with such strikingly personal imagery. It's "poetic" enough to get him by without lawsuits, but there is a whole lot of life wrapped up in that record.

Speaking of which, thanks FAB, about recommending Eitzel's upcoming solo records. I have a couple of his previous ones and was disappointed by much of them. Yeah, "Mercury" set a standard that has been impossible for he or AMC to love up to, solo or band-wise. Breathtaking indeed. (Hey, when your record is done, please let me know more about it, via christestey@threeimaginarygirls.com ...)

[» reply](#)

**4 Andrew Boe said on May 13, 2008:**

This is an interesting post, Chris.

I have heard mixed things about the 'under review' DVDs, but now I have to admit that I am intrigued at least by the one on Leonard Cohen. He is one of my all-time favorite artists.

His first four albums, the folk ones, are all just about flawless.

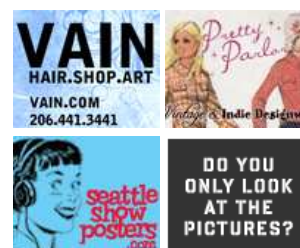
I never quite understood the change in direction from morose folk music to corny casio songs with awful backing singers, but all of those keyboard based records have some excellent songs and the lyrics are always untouchable.

[» reply](#)

**5 Andrew Boe said on May 13, 2008:**

Oh, and I love The Boatman's Call. It is one of Nick Cave's best albums.

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