

FORT COLLINS WEEKLY

Music DVD Reviews

By Kurt Brighton

Leonard Cohen —Under Review 1934-1977 MVD Visual



There is a magnificent Portuguese word that doesn't translate very well to English—*saudade*—which means roughly “an inexplicable longing of the soul.” Few artists' entire body of work have so consistently exemplified this concept of human loneliness, this never-ending search for something to fill a spiritual hole that cannot be identified, much less explained, as that of Leonard Cohen.

Leonard Cohen – Under Review 1934-1977 paints the backstory and early career of an artist who never fit any mainstream category. Though he played in a couple of casual bands in college, it wasn't music, but rather poetry where Cohen initially found success. First published in 1956, he enjoyed a degree of early fame as a writer, moving to Greece for six years after publishing two critically acclaimed novels and several collections of poetry. That's when he decided to try playing music professionally as a way out of the dire financial straits to which most poets are doomed.

Right. Musicians do much better, Mr. Cohen.

But it worked for him. Despite this early decision that he described in a later interview as “mad,” Cohen found himself in the right place at the right time—New York in the late sixties—and he met the right people. An early fan was Judy Collins, who covered “Suzanne” and several other Cohen songs, and also introduced him to John Hammond, the producer who broke Bob Dylan. But it was Cohen's background as a successful poet that made his name. His songwriting is intensely literate and personal, more poetry set to music, than music onto which words have been grafted.

The film relies heavily on music writers as well as producers and musicians who have worked with Cohen to examine his first five records, enigmatic exercises in melancholia mixed with wry gallows humor that cemented his place as a rare voice. Although the performance and archival interview footage is limited—

the film is unauthorized by Cohen—the insight into the man’s history and work is invaluable.

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