



Movie Review: *Leonard Cohen Under Review 1934-1977*

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In the world of popular music there are few figures as enigmatic as Leonard Cohen. The Canadian singer/songwriter/poet/novelist/ has been a figure of both controversy and mystery in the musical and literary circles he moves in. His mystique is such that even his backup singer of recent years has been able to release a disc, seemingly based on nothing more than her association with him.

While his music has always been very well received in Europe, he has never quite had the same popular success in North America that other folk singer-troubadours have managed. Perhaps it is because he was a poet first and a musician second, or maybe because his subject matter was difficult and uncomfortable to listen to and think about, North Americans, even his fellow Canadians, have never wholeheartedly embraced him.

The forthcoming DVD, *Leonard Cohen Under Review 1934–1977*, is an examination of the man and his work through his early years as a poet, and the first ten years of his music career. Interviews with music critics, musicians who have played with him, and the producers of his first four albums (Phil Spector, who produced *Death Of A Ladies Man*, Cohen's fifth album, was unavailable for interviews due to being brought up on murder charges) talk about each of the first five releases in depth, analysing what they did and didn't like about each one.

First a brief history is told by his official biographer Ira Nadel and archival film clips are used to illustrate some of the highlights of his early days as a poet and novelist. How little Cohen knew about music and the music business is revealed succinctly by his reason for going into it: to make extra money because he wasn't getting enough money to live on as a poet and novelist (long before the days of the million dollar advances).

The albums *The Songs Of Leonard Cohen*, *Songs From A Room*, *Songs Of Love And Hate*, *New Skin For An Old Ceremony*, and *Death Of A Ladies Man* are all put under a

magnifying glass. The dissections follow identical patterns in that each starts with an overview of where Cohen was in his career and his life at that time, followed by the circumstances of the recording (*Songs From A Room* was written at an isolated farmhouse near Nashville for instance), and then a look at the songs from each album that are distinguishing marks in his career — songs like "Susanne", "Bird On A Wire", "Who Will Light The Fire", "Chelsea Hotel 2", plus others that anybody familiar with Cohen will recognise immediately. Each person has a go at what they think of the song, and whether or not it was significant in Cohen's career.

What is especially good about this movie is the fact that it's not just a collection of people fawning indiscriminately over his work. While some of the people - the musicians who worked on various projects for instance - are openly fans of his material, others have differing opinions. Each person called upon for an opinion gives reasons why they dislike a piece, or think it is a weaker attempt on his part ("Chelsea Hotel 2" is almost universally disliked by these critics because Cohen later revealed it was about Janis Joplin and in doing so he ruined the song's redeeming feature of mystery and turned it into a puerile piece of gossip).

Two of the more fascinating discussions centred around *Songs Of Love And Hate* and the Phil Spector-produced *Death Of A Ladies Man*. In the case of the former the discussion focuses on the fact that for the first time Cohen used a full band both in the studio and on the road. Ron Cornelius was band leader and lead guitar player for that album and he provides a fascinating look at what it was like to put the album together, and how the band and Leonard coalesced into a family.

At the complete opposite end of the scale, as far as comfort level goes, was his experience working with Phil Spector. After hearing about things like Spector stealing the master tape and mixing it down by himself, it comes as no surprise that Cohen almost immediately disassociated himself from the project. As the recording engineer for the album said, "Leonard deserved better than that."

Just as a personal aside, I've never really seen the appeal of Spector's work, and when I heard in this movie that Leonard Cohen had recorded with him, I was quite surprised. From what the critics had to say about the final result and Cohen's own eventual reaction, I bet there was probably a fair bit of second-guessing about that decision by a lot of people.

But to me it shows that Cohen was interested in experimenting. I may not like Spector's work, but that doesn't mean other people don't hold him in esteem. If you're going to do popular music, why not take some chances? At least that way you're never going to be bored. *Death Of A Ladies Man* may have been a failure as an album but it showed that Cohen wasn't content to be just another folkie.

Leonard Cohen Under Review 1934–1977 is a fascinating view of the first five studio albums Leonard Cohen recorded. What makes this superior in a lot of ways to so many different rock or pop documentaries is the fact that the people involved are not afraid to

offer a negative opinion about a disc or a song.

For individuals interested in an up-close view and in-depth analysis of the early years of Leonard Cohen's music, I would highly recommend this documentary. Not just to fans either, but for those looking to learn about his music for the first time as this is as close to an unbiased opinion on his work as you're probably ever going to get .

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