



Laramie Movie Scope: Leonard Cohen Under Review 1934-1977

A critical look at Leonard Cohen's early albums

by **Robert Roten**, Film Critic

April 6, 2007 -- Leonard Cohen, one of the most poetic and enigmatic singer-songwriters of the 20th century, gets more scrutiny in this unauthorized documentary film, featuring critical analysis of Cohen's early poetry, fiction and music from music critics, music historians, record producers, audio engineers, musicians and music journalists. There are a few snippets of Cohen's music, photos and film footage of Cohen, but no interviews with Cohen himself. He was also the subject of another recent documentary [Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man](#). That film did have interviews with Cohen and extended concert footage lacking in the newer film. These two documentaries complement each other. They are must-see material for fans of Leonard Cohen.

The film begins with a discussion of Cohen's early life in Montreal, Canada and his career as a poet and novelist, including his six years spent in Greece. His writing career was not producing enough money, so Cohen, at the age of 32, traveled to the United States with the idea of becoming a Country-Western singer-songwriter in Nashville (earlier in life he was a member of a Country-Western group called the Buckskin Boys). That is when he ran head on into the hot folk and rock music scene in New York City, encountering Nico (the subject of Cohen's song "Joan of Arc"), The Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol, along with Judy Collins and Bob Dylan. His songs were an immediate success, with Judy Collins recording "Suzanne" on her "In My Life" album and two more of his songs on her "Wildflowers" album, "Priests" and "Sisters of Mercy." Collins invited Cohen to perform "Suzanne" on stage during an anti-Vietnam War rally, and he was soon thereafter awarded a contract with Columbia records.

The film then goes on to examine Cohen's debut album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*. The producer of that album, John Simon, discusses the process of making the album on the DVD. One of my favorite comments from the DVD about Cohen's first and second albums is by music journalist Robert Christgau: "I loved the first album and I loved what John Simon did to it. People complain about all the girls (a female chorus of background singers) and all that stuff. I always thought this is cool. Cohen is actually far more vulgar than people think he is and that's good. I like that about him. I'm glad he's not Joni Mitchell whose first album is very spare and to me completely unlistenable ... But to me (the first album) magnified him and I thought it made him better. It was actually the second album that I didn't like so much. That's where he spared down and I preferred him a little schlocked up myself."

As Christgau notes, the second album was more spare, stark and sombre. The first album was recorded in New York. The second one, *Songs From a Room* was recorded in Tennessee, where Cohen had isolated himself at a small farm near Franklin, Tennessee. During the first album, he spent months at the famous Chelsea Hotel, where many artists have stayed over the years. Ron Cornelius, a guitarist and band leader for "The Army," a band formed for Cohen's third album, *Songs of Love and Hate*, talks about an extensive concert tour with Cohen prior to recording that album. The tour included the celebrated Isle of Wight festival featuring The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis and the Doors. After the tour, Cohen and the band returned to Nashville to record the new songs for "Songs of Love and Hate." Cornelius describes the contributions of record producer Bob Johnston to that album. Cornelius said Johnston was a great motivator. Cohen and The Army did another tour after the album and later released a live album, "Live Songs."

Cohen returned to New York and chose to work with a relatively unknown producer, John Lissauer, who also appears on the DVD discussing the Cohen album he produced, "New Skin For the Old Ceremony." This album was more like Cohen's first album in that the arrangements were more complex, with more embellishments. Some commentators on the DVD argued that it signals the next stage of evolution for Cohen's musical career. There is a discussion of the song "Chelsea Hotel #2" from that album. The song describes a brief love affair with a woman, who Cohen would later

reveal to be legendary blues singer Janis Joplin. Cohen's revelation is widely regarded to be a mistake, even by Cohen himself. Cohen's songs, like any songwriter's are autobiographical to some degree. They also need to be universal. To the extent they are not universal, they become less relevant.

The last album discussed on the DVD is "Death of a Lady's Man," produced by the iconic Phil Spector (now on trial for murder). David Gold, owner of Gold Star Recording Studios, and his son, Bruce, an engineer, along with engineers Stan Ross and Larry Levine, talk about what was going on during the making of "Death of a Lady's Man." They discuss Cohen and Spector and the tension between the two. Spector was drinking heavily at the time. Cohen later would disown the album, calling it a "disaster." The segment on this album contains another one of my favorite quotes on the DVD, this one by music journalist Andrew Mueller of The Guardian:

"Phil Spector was largely famous for two things: He was famous for being as mad as a frog in a sock. He was just nuts ... He was also famous as a producer for something called 'The Wall of Sound' which was the sound that informed all those great girl groups of the 60's, the Ronettes most obviously, the leader of whom, Ronnie Spector, he was fractiously married to for many years."

The commentaries on the DVD are not just praise for Cohen's genius, there is real criticism, too. There is a range of opinions on numerous famous songs and the albums produced during this early part of Cohen's musical career. There is also an analysis of his guitar playing (classical style) and his voice. At one point, speaking about the toll that the years took on Cohen's increasingly deep and gravelly voice, Andrew Mueller said, "Anything from 'I'm Your Man' onwards, you play it too loud and it kills goldfish." The DVD features Dolby® Digital two-channel sound. In addition to the numerous film and music video clips, numerous still photos are also used in the documentary, spruced up with some digital wispy cloud-like effects to add some motion to the stills.

Extras include an extended version of Ron Cornelius' interview. The segment, called "Army Life," is about the touring and studio band called The Army. There is also a Leonard Cohen trivia quiz which is pretty hard. I was lucky to get 11 out of 25 right. Another extra is a collection of brief biographies of the people appearing on the DVD, including (in addition to those mentioned above) Nigel Williamson, Anthony DeCurtis, Johnny Rogan, Ira Nadel, Ronee Blakley and Jim Devlin. The DVD comes in full screen (4:3) format, region 0 and runs 87 minutes, not including extras. It rates a B.

This documentary will be most appreciated by Leonard Cohen fans. Others, who are not Cohen fans, or who might be unfamiliar with his work, might wonder what all the fuss is about. Those of us who have found ourselves captured by Cohen's haunting melancholic words, find ourselves fascinated by this enigmatic poet. His songs can be heard on movie soundtracks ranging from Robert Altman's "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" to "Shrek" (which features the song "Hallelujah") Even if you haven't heard the songs, just check out Cohen's lyrics on the Internet, you'll see what all the fuss is about. This DVD is being distributed by [MVD Entertainment Group](#) in the US and by [Chrome Dreams Companies](#) in the UK.

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Back to the [Laramie Movie Scope](#) index.



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