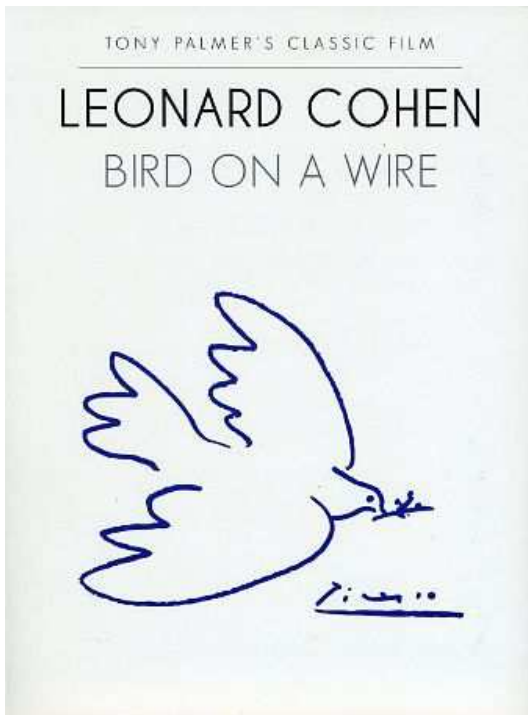


## FAME Review: Leonard Cohen - Bird on a Wire (DVD)



## Bird on a Wire

[Leonard Cohen](#)

The Marchat Co. TDVD166

Available soon from [Voice Print Records](#).

A review written for the Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange  
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Business versus music, it's the old game, and the conflict makes an appearance right away in this rescued 1972 concert tour documentation that turns into a psycho-sociological study. Everything begins with a small riot following on Leonard Cohen's invitation for the folks in the cheap seats to come on down and enjoy the gig more fully in one of his appearances. The security force responds to the press of people with fists and, within minutes, some fat belligerent business fuck is in the middle of things with puckered hateful lips and dollar signs glaring angrily from blazing eyes. Commerce versus art, it's the old story, and this gem of a film takes us back to an era when overthrow seemed possible. How foolish we were...thank God. Even Leonard saw it and says so directly right in the camera: "I'm no longer free, I'm an exploited man."

The trifold packaging of this beguiling release speaks of elegance. Joining the 10-page booklet is a folded reproduction of the poster that heralded the flick lo those many years ago, and there's also a period post-card. The whole arrangement echoes a try at the old **All Things Must Pass** (George Harrison) and **Fillmore: The Closing Days** LP box sets of the time. In a modern age when the move is to present art in reductio ad absurdum, **Bird on a Wire** is extremely refreshing. The film itself saw a spottily brief screening schedule in a few theaters and then mysteriously disappeared. Only bootleg copies were available under the covers, and all seemed hopeless until, two years ago, 2008, the original rushes were found, restored, and reassembled by director Tony Palmer.

Business and art. Early on, Cohen tells his audience, just before launching the song, that the rights to *Suzanne*, his most famous tune, were stolen from him by some standard business shark, but Leonard's calm take on the philosophical upside of that is arresting, spun out with the gent's dour placidness and reconciliatory acceptance. He even wishes the thief well. In **Bird**, if you ever had a doubt as to the man's imperturbable genuineness, that will be dispelled forever. For such a quiet guy, there's an omnipresent searing intensity, and, watching the saga unfold, one no longer wonders that he would much later enter a zen monastery to escape the madness of the world. Everywhere in even that day's incipiently corporatocratic realm dwelt suits, security, and business pricks, all of them Cohen's bane, a theme repeatedly constantly through the flick. Jesus had the moneychangers, so did Leonard.

**Bird on a Wire** is presented simultaneously as a melange and phantasmagoria, constantly switching shots, giving a bird's eye view of how life was conducted in the 60s and 70s. It seems, though, as if the globe itself swirls around Cohen, overpowers him in the fight for justification of existence. Not long before the end of the many-city circuit, Lenny laments that only one concert out of 20 worked out well. At a certain point, he's cornered by two indignant, blowhard, chivying, self-righteous, a-hole fans in Germany, following upon a misfortunate incident wherein the stage amps blew out. These obnoxious glib bastards badger him for a refund...which he promptly pays out of his own pocket. Unfortunately, the run-in allows us to understand that the leprosy of consumptive chivying is not only a businessman's wont but too often everyone's. The tour, not surprisingly, spirals into one disaster after another, and, while doing his level best to rescue matters personally, the toll increases on Cohen. By the time the Jerusalem end-station arrives, he's straying into a nervous breakdown.

Like the performer's music and poetry, though, **Bird on a Wire** is a revelatory work, one very much deserving re-examination on many levels. Palmer, as much journalist as auteur, did a job that matches or exceeds D.A. Pennebaker and his celebrated oeuvre. A lot of naked honesty arises and creates an impasse between being operant and achieving transcendence. I doubt Leonard ever resolved that. I'm not sure any of us do.

### Track List:

- Avalanche
- Suzanne
- Tonight will be Fine
- Passing Through
- Who by Fire?
- Story of Isaac
- One of Us can't be Wrong
- The Partisan

- Sisters of Mercy
- Chelsea

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