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THE BARD ON THE WIRE

Leonard Cohen

Sep 02, 2010

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The Daily Dose

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Three new DVDs serve up, in equal measures, fresh and vintage glimpses of a musical genius.

BY STEVEN ROSEN



Not only has Leonard Cohen changed a lot in the time between just-released *Bird on the Wire* (a 1972 world tour; released by MVD Visual) and the Sept. 14th-due *Songs From the Road* (the 2008-2009 world tour; Columbia/Legacy), but so too has the purpose and style of concert-tour documentaries.

Bird on the Wire was shot by the British filmmaker Tony Palmer (*All You Need Is Love*, *200 Motels*), and supposedly had some kind of theatrical release in 1974. Not much of one, however, which apparently didn't bother Palmer since it had been edited without his approval. But he recently discovered 294 film cans with bits and pieces of "lost" footage and, given Cohen's resurgence, decided to reassemble it to create a new print closer to his original intentions.

Songs From the Road, on the other hand, is state-of-the-art in its production and marketing. Filmed in such clear high-definition you can see stubble on Cohen's intent face, it features complete, reverential footage of 12 of his performances in 10 cities (there are three from London). It's available as part of a DVD/CD package, or separately as a Blu-Ray. In most of these performances, the audience is an afterthought - exceptions being the vast crowd at Tel Aviv's Ramat Gan Stadium and the youthful crowd that momentarily sings along to "Hallelujah" at Coachella 2009. For those who liked last year's *Live in London*, this is similar.

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Songs From the Road's director/producer, Ed Sanders, knows that the customers for this DVD want the Leonard Cohen concert experience in hi-def and nothing else. They don't want directorial intrusions or commentary. So this DVD is not about the crowd; it's not about the backstage. It's certainly not about the director as a cinema-verite journalist poking around the edges of an icon's world tour looking for a greater truth. (There is a "special feature" of some 20 minutes of interviews with band members conducted by Cohen's daughter.)

Cohen is in his celebrated late-period chanson mode - wearing a hat and well-tailored dark suit, singing in his low voice with great emotion if not range, sometimes falling to his knees for emphasis as the stage-light colors accentuate his songs' moods. The DVD is there for that, and also astutely observes his empathetic backing band under music director/bassist Roscoe Beck. The band's work has the restrained, elegant melancholy of Astor Piazzolla's groups - especially Javier Mas on 12-string guitar and several exotic stringed instruments. And the female back-up singers, Sharon Robinson and sisters Hattie and Charley Webb, cushion and soothe his voice when it threatens to get too raw. The music's quality is indisputable.

Back in 1972, the approach to filming musicians at work was different. After D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*, Murray Lerner's *Festival* and especially the Maysles' *Gimme Shelter*, good documentarians were expected to probe behind the songs. They were after the greater truth, whatever that might be. They weren't just there to record a show.

Palmer, based on this new print of *Bird On a Wire*, wanted to do that. But this kind of fly-on-the-wall approach (Palmer never formally interviews Cohen) has its drawbacks. Watching a few concertgoers bitch about the sound system then isn't very important now; watching the film cut away from Cohen in mid-performance to concentrate on something else feels like too much directorial ego.

But when it works, this is essential Cohen viewing - as important as *I'm Your Man*. Cohen was 38 when this was made - old by singer-songwriter standards of the era but looking awfully young now. On this tour with a small, excellent band (including producer Bob Johnston playing organ and back-up singers Jennifer Warnes and Donna Washburn), he was the still a folk-based troubadour, playing guitar and establishing friendly rapport with his European and Israeli audiences. And many of his now-classic songs were still pretty new - the lyrics and especially the slower, more soulful Van Morrison-

My Web Poll

The 2010 festival season is winding down, with just a handful of high profile events like ATP, ACL and MoogFest left. Which of these were your favorites?

- Ultra Music (March 26)
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- Sasquatch! (May 29)
- Mountain Jam (June 4)
- Bonnaroo (June 10)
- Glastonbury (June 23)
- Electric Daisy Carnival (June 25)
- Pitchfork (July 16)
- Lollapalooza (Aug. 5)
- Wilco Solid Sound (Aug. 13)
- Mile High Festival (Aug. 14)
- Outside Lands (Aug. 14)

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like arrangement of "Chelsea Hotel" here are markedly different from the more familiar version.

Bird On a Wire reaches its apogee in a long sequence at the end where Cohen (raised an Orthodox Jew) starts to cry both onstage and backstage at the tour's final concert in Jerusalem. The sequence is a little hard to follow, either because Palmer had to piece it together from odds and ends, or because of the impressionistic way he wants to present it. The actual performance footage jumps between Jerusalem and another show, and there are mid-song cutaways to old home movies of Cohen as a child in Montreal. (He was a cute kid.)

But the narrative that does emerge is that Cohen is unnerved by performing before such an adoring crowd in a city that has so much symbolism for him. He seems to believe his performance isn't up to it, although we see nothing to indicate that. Before intermission, he quotes from the Kabbalah to explain his misgivings: "Unless Adam and Eve face each other, God does not sit on his throne," he says. "Somehow, the male and female parts of me refuse to encounter one another tonight, and God does not sit on his throne. This is a terrible thing to happen in Jerusalem." (Can you imagine Justin Bieber giving the same excuse for an off-night?)

Backstage during intermission, uptight and smoking, Cohen panics and wants to call off the show. His band members and manager try to convince him otherwise, and he takes refuge in shaving to relax himself. Once again onstage for the final song - a transcendent "So Long, Marianne" - tears start to form. Backstage afterward, openly crying as the crowd stomps and hollers for an encore, he's afraid to go back out. "I can't go out to cry in front of people," he says, clearly in the middle of his own private, wrenching moment. He's as moved as you'll ever see him, and it's impossible not to be equally moved.

A third Leonard Cohen-related DVD, *Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes*, is due on Oct. 19th (via Chrome Dreams). While this does have short, archival excerpts of Cohen performances and interviews, it's primarily a deeply researched, scholarly and thoroughly engrossing look at his influences and origins as first a poet/novelist and then a songwriter. Chapters focus on the Beats, Henry Miller, Jacques Brel, Hank Williams, Federico Garcia Lorca, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan, the folk revival, Judaism and Zen Buddhism. Among those interviewed are Cohen biographers Ira Nadel and Stephen Scobie, Beat Generation expert John Tytell, Garcia Lorca scholar Leslie Stainton, rock critic Anthony DeCurtis and Buddhist monk Kigen.

Perhaps the best of the interviews is with Judy Collins, who recounts how she discovered Cohen as a songwriter when she recorded three of his compositions - "Dress Rehearsal Rag," "Suzanne" and "The Stranger Song" - for her 1966 album *In My Life*. She explains she was most drawn to "Dress Rehearsal Rag," which she presumed was a song about suicide, because she was moving away from pure folk on *In My Life* and planning to record some darker material - a song from the musical *Marat/Sade* and "Pirate Jenny" by Brecht/Weill. Cohen fit in. Among other things, *Leonard Cohen's Lonesome Heroes* establishes what an important album *In My Life* was for its time - it doesn't get the credit it deserves.

Taken altogether (but not quite as a *de facto* trilogy), these DVDs further establish Leonard Cohen as one of the preeminent bards of his generation. Not that anyone needed to be reminded of that fact, of course, but it's reassuring to know that successive generations will also have these aural and visual documents available for consultation, edification and inspiration.



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