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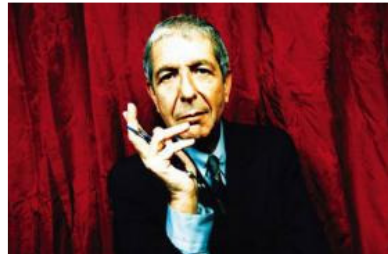
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Steven Machat Interview

Behind the scenes of 'Bird On A Wire'

General Posted by Robin Murray Mon, 16/08/2010



Despite his immense fame and influence, Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen remains an enigma.

Connecting the Canadian literary renaissance to the Beat era, post war poetry to the hippy era Leonard Cohen's work is hugely important. Yet still the singer

resides in the shadows, rarely granting interviews.

However a new film could blow apart that image. 'Bird On A Wire' was shot on a European tour in 1972, and features Leonard Cohen struggling with his rise to fame and the ideas being fostered upon him.

A stunningly evocative film, 'Bird On A Wire' was presumed lost, being resurrected by director Tony Palmer from the original prints. Music industry mogul Steven Machat lies behind the project, fulfilling a promise to his father - Leonard Cohen's long term manager - by allowing fans to see the film.

A fascinating document, the film is set to be shown in an exclusive screening at The Green Man in Wales. Ahead of the screening ClashMusic tracked down Steven Machat to find out more about the film and his revealing autobiography.

Where did the urge to re-visit the film come from?

What happened was – it's written well in my book –my father used to manage Leonard Cohen. My father believed that he was a prophet, a man who could see and speak of the times he was living in. My father wanted to record Leonard while he was giving these messages about society, because he believed at the time that it would be important at a later date. So the tour was organised in 1972. Here's something which I've only understood in time: a rocker is someone who will rock the establishment. A roller is someone that can roll with what they rock. Very few rockers are also rollers, because it's hard to stand in the earthquake you create. This film shows Leonard rocking, but it also shows him just being human, being unable to withstand the pressure of being the anointed one. The one who would help everyone get through it. I find it one of the most interesting pieces of film that I've seen, you can see the actual affects on a man as he has to look through the rocking that he created.

So what happened is that Leonard and I have a past, and when my dad died Leonard ran away with our secretary. Took all his books and records back and disappeared. I didn't give a shit as I wanted to live my own life, which I did. It's all written in the book, I've done albums over the world. I've had more hits than any and more riches than ever. I've been involved in over 900 albums, in some capacity. I went to see Leonard one day, he really didn't want to talk to me but he had to see me, and he volunteered he had this film. I was like "what do you mean you have the film?" He told me



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he had it, when I thought it was lost. So he gave it back to us. Soon as I got the film back I sought out Tony Palmer, the man who directed the film in the first place, and when I realised that the film was in pieces I needed Tony in order to give my father back what he really wanted everyone to see. For everyone to see Leonard. I got Tony to re-edit the film. He did that and in essence got a second opportunity for everyone to see his creation. It's basically the original film as created in 1972 as best Tony could remember it. It's gorgeous. It shows Leonard in that era when he was testing himself. It's beautiful and I think it's a testament to Leonard, a testament to my father's memory and I'm so honoured and proud to be able to do this.

It's a fantastic time piece, for people my age who wanted to change the world. But all my generation did is become the ruling order which they got so sick off. My generation may be the worst of them all, because they became the bankers and the monsters of the universe. What we've done is create terrorism through banks and through bomb dealers. So it's really, really interesting and hopefully it will enlighten the youth.

Are there a lot of counter culture ideas in the film?

It doesn't state it like I just did, but it's there. It's the entire feel, the entire emotion. Because I grew up in that era I can feel it. What happened to my country, the United States, is that when we lost Vietnam we realised "hey wait a minute – we were taught that we were God's representatives and this was God's way so what are we going to do?" We became the bankers and the disciples, who say that if you don't agree with us then we'll come and take you over.

How exactly does Leonard Cohen struggle with his role?

All of the above. Fans, critics, Leonard himself. His crew, his musicians and those on tour with him. It's absolutely fantastic. I'm showing this as life is about sharing and not dictating and I'm just so happy that I can allow folks to share this. Here's a spokesperson who struggles with what he's saying. The other thing you get is that when you study history all these spokespersons who have come down to us they've not had the opportunity to speak to people like we do today. Their voice was never put on record, and until 100 years ago your voice couldn't have been recorded. So we need to document this. It's really cool and I'm really happy this is coming out.

Bird On A Wire - Trailer



Did the crew gain full access to the tour?

It's unbelievable. Leonard gave full access to Tony, Tony being the director of the movie. He felt very comfortable with Tony. I'll tell you something really strange – seeing my father in the film, a younger man than I am now. After not seeing him for 22 years, it's weird the first time you do that. My

son was able to see him. You know, my son came over and he left nine weeks later with a record label. He's fantastic.

What material does he focus on?

It's the music up until that point in time, that he has. It's a full band. It's really cool. I ended up becoming friends with Bob Johnson who is the musical director, and Bob Johnson became very instrumental in my life as he took me to Nashville. I ended up at law school with Al Gore and other politicians of the world. It's just fantastic. Putting all the pieces together of my highway, into who and what I am now.

Will the film gain a general release?

We're trying to put together a limited release and a DVD. Fans who show up at The Green Man can get an initial copy of the DVD signed by Tony Palmer the director. Myself and Tony will be there answering questions – Tony can answer questions about the movie and how it was done then, and I can talk about the connection between Leonard, my father and me. I ended up working with Leonard – through my father – for ten, eleven years.

Has Leonard Cohen seen the new version of the film?

My instinct says yes but I don't know the answer to that. Leonard's on tour now. By the way we're premiering it actually with the Leonard Cohen fan club in Krakow on August 6th. Tony and I are going to go there.

What led to you writing a book?

Well what happened is that I just got sick of constantly working for the banks, working to pay people who don't even have the money they loaned me. I figured there was a reason that my entire journey in life took me, in essence, over 90 nations. I represented all these African artists. I represented all these black artists, who by the way are not African-American. Not matter what people tell you they are Americans, they were sold by their African families to America and the truth is they're probably more American than any white, they've been here since the 1500s. I was the black manager of the year and I've learned so much that I just want to share before my tenure on Earth is done. I've worked in Mexico, with musicians from Japan. Huge artists. It's a very rich story and it just tells about wanting and needing, avarice and love.

The industry you portray is deeply corrupt, do you still believe this?

Oh yes. There's nothing more corrupt than our government who propped up the banks, to pay bankers who never had the money is the first place. In the music industry were are owned and controlled by bankers and it is the most corrupt form of business known to man. I believe it should be nationalised immediately.

Bird On A Wire will be premiered at Green Man Festival on Thursday 19 August and it is released on DVD by The Machat Company in September. Steven's insider's guide to the music industry 'Gods, Gangsters and Honour' is available to buy on Amazon and selected chapters are available as audio books on iTunes

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