

## The DVD-Laser Disc Newsletter

### Songs of love and hate

Tony Palmer's work has ranged from terrible dramas to rewarding classical music documentaries, but his most compelling films have been his pop music profiles, primarily because he manages as a documentary filmmaker to persuade the artists he is covering to let him record the warts as well as the bouquets. The films are consistently intelligent, sensitive, defiant of the specific clichés associated with the respective artists, and deliver a compelling narrative line as well as a refreshing perspective on the music and the personalities. Palmer's 1974 documentary, **Leonard Cohen Bird on a Wire**, released by The Mackett Company (UPC#6504388737000, \$20), is one of his very best. It depicts Cohen's 1972 European tour and includes a couple of complete numbers with many more that are reasonably complete, but periodically interrupted by cutaways. Because of the quality of the material, you don't mind. Early in the tour the sound system shorted out and, one infers, due to incompetent management on the part of the tour's promoters, it was never satisfactorily fixed, so that every time Cohen stepped onto the stage and up to the microphone, it was an adventure. At the beginnings of songs, in the middles of songs and at the ends of songs, his amplifiers would wig out on him, not only spoiling his presentation, but messing big time with his concentration. By the end of the tour, he is a basket case. We once reviewed a Neil Diamond concert film in which Diamond was whiny and petulant over the stresses of touring and the responsibilities associated with making money by performing in concerts. He sounded like a spoiled child. What Palmer captures of Cohen, however is completely different. He, too, is stressed out over the demands of performing live, and often unsure of how to proceed, but Palmer manages to sustain sympathy for his travails. You understand why Cohen would appear so emotionally vulnerable even when things are going well for him, and charge it to artistic sensitivity rather than insulated indulgence. When interwoven with Cohen's sublimely poetic songs and the readily apparent desire of every woman who comes up to him to consummate the meeting, set to Palmer's resplendent editing in tight perfection to Cohen's rhythms, the 106-minute program is completely absorbing from start to finish and belongs in the company of the best pop music documentaries ever compiled.

The DVD's packaging is simple but lovely, featuring a white jacket illustrated with one of Pablo Picasso's best known graphics, and accompanied by several nice jacket inserts. The image is in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image has the natural wear one associates with documentary filmmaking, but is otherwise in excellent condition, and the stereo surround sound is rich and smooth. There are optional English and French subtitles ("Et que à travers le feu? Et qui à travers l'eau? Qui au soleil? Qui dans la nuit? Qui après une rude épreuve? Qui malgré un process public? Qui au joyeux mois de mai? Qui malgré une decomposition tres lente? Qui aimerait lui parler?").