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Bird On a Wire: Leonard Cohen's 1972 European Tour



MOVIES 03 September 2010 (Movie Review)

Words: *Julian Douglas*

Bird on a Wire is **Tony Palmer's** long forgotten and long lost 'fly on the wall' documentary of **Leonard Cohen's** 1972 European Tour. Starting in the salubrious surroundings of Dublin's *National Stadium* and ending in Jerusalem, the film interweaves live concert footage with backstage encounters. It follows a mostly bewildered band and management as they deal with exploding speakers, backstage groupies and the vagaries of an artist with an extremely delicate temperament. The performances are where this film really wins out. We are treated to beautiful versions of all the old favourites including *Suzanne*, *Sisters of Mercy*, *Chelsea Hotel*, *So Long*, *Marianne*

and, of course, *Bird on a Wire*. Cohen comes across as an enigma but is this contrived or a very genuine artist finding extreme difficulty with success and stardom?



The name **Kelley Lynch** may not mean much to some Cohen fans. As his manager it was she who, in 2004, was caught with her fingers firmly in his pension fund cookie jar. She evidently did this to the tune of \$5m which left Cohen virtually broke, bus pass in hand heading into his own personal 70s. She may well have done us all a favour. As he propelled himself back to work the world started to realise that this valuable artist was buried barely beneath the dust. In 2010 he is more popular than he ever was and at 75 years old, despite some questionable output over the years, still gives performances of such craft and artistry that his loyal following are simply left to drool. In his own prophetic words in 1972, "Success is survival".

Bird on a Wire gets in very close, sometimes uncomfortably close. Palmer got great access to Cohen both backstage and front of house, travelling and even into his shower. Throughout, Cohen is seen as a deep thinking artist and poet seemingly fighting several emotions - he doesn't want to be there - yet he seems to really enjoy the attention he receives. He talks of finding it hard to come to terms with writing an intimate song for one person and now being made to 'parrot' it out, night after night. "What would you like to talk about?", an eager journalist asks. "I'd like not to talk at all", he answers. It is important to remember that he is no 'spring chicken' at this stage - he is 37 years old.

LEONARD COHEN BIRD ON A WIRE



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Elegantly wasted would be the nicest way to describe him. His band constantly massaging his ego to encourage him to perform and his management trying to deal with the realities of touring in the 1970s as best they can. There are wonderful moments such as the band's crew loading suitcases into the holds of commercial jets, Cohen giving his own money to disgruntled Germanic types backstage after a particularly fraught performance and his ad libs and rambling during shows. Many genuinely hilarious moments are sprinkled through the nearly two hour film such as a sultry groupie coming on to Cohen backstage and him enjoying every moment of it. "Do you have a place?", he enquires. "I have many places", she responds. The final performance in Jerusalem descends into hilarious farce after what seems to be a questionable plan of taking mind-altering drugs before the performance begins.

The camerawork during the performances is understated, simple and beautiful and Palmer has the confidence in Cohen to leave the camera lingering for a long, long time.

If I have a quibble with this documentary it is that there is simply no structure. For a lukewarm fan this could get tedious. Given he focuses in on his Jewishness there could have been some kind of dynamic around the journey of the tour and the fact that it ends in Jerusalem. Seldom are we told where the filming is taking place and some songs are obviously made from several performances.

Ultimately though this film stands as a fascinating document of an important artist who over his exceedingly long career has written many beautiful and loved songs. He continues to delight audiences around the world and let's hope he has the power left to keep it up for a little while longer.

Bird On A Wire is available from Tower Recirds, Golden Discs, Laser, Celtic Note, IFI and online at classical.ie. RRP €19.99.

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