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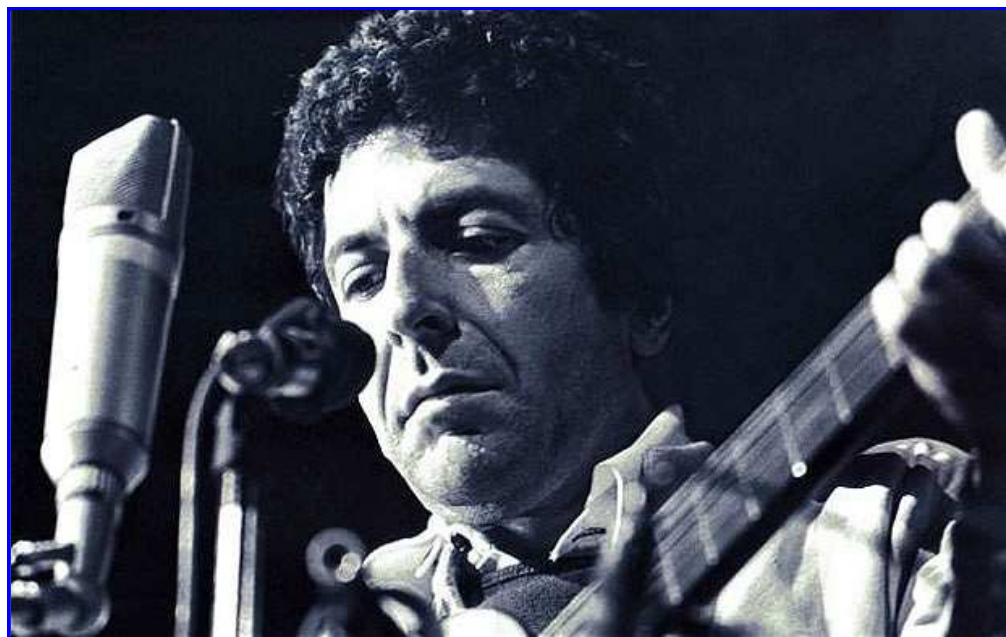
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Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire

November 20, 2010 by [Gerry](#)



In 1972 Tony Palmer made a film about Leonard Cohen's European tour that year, not only filming concert footage, but also intimate sequences of Cohen and his band off stage, on the tour bus, and just relaxing. The film was entitled *Bird on a Wire* and an eviscerated version was screened once at the Rainbow in 1974, before disappearing from view. It was thought lost until more than 290 rolls of film in rusted cans were discovered in late 2009. The cans contained much of the original 'rushes' of the film, and most of the original soundtrack.

Now, with Leonard Cohen experiencing a renaissance in popular and critical esteem with his world tours of the last two years, Tony Palmer has lovingly restored the film and, as well as being released on DVD, it was screened last night on BBC4. Although frustrating in parts, due to the editing which left you wondering what was going on – particularly in the opening sequence where Cohen tries to calm over-zealous, orange-jacketed

security guards at the Jerusalem concert – this was a magical film that seemed to be beamed from somewhere long ago and far away.

Was there really a time when a major singer-songwriter could mix casually with his fans in a concert hall foyer, even handing cash refunds out after an unsatisfactory performance? When the star, apologising for the poor sound quality, would invite those who could not hear properly to join him on stage? Was there really a time when a director could gain such close access with his camera to a public figure? Well, there was once, and the tenor of those times – revolution in the air and the questioning of authority – is the beat that pulses through this film.

Palmer described the film as an ‘impression’ of Cohen’s 20-city tour of Europe in the spring of 1972, when Cohen was just 37 and a successful poet and singer. The strongest impression was of the frustrations and tensions of the touring experience. Cohen and the band were plagued by malfunctioning monitors and a screeching sound system. One extended sequence shows Cohen in the foyer of an Oslo theatre facing up to two aggrieved fans, furious about the poor sound, being given their money back from out of his own pocket.

Cohen at one point on stage describes himself as a ‘broken-down nightingale – sometimes you are living in a song, and sometimes it’s inhospitable and won’t admit you, and you’re left banging at the door and everybody knows it’. Yet his voice sounds great, whether singing or reciting poetry. And there was a fair amount of poetry here, including this arresting verse:

*Any system you contrive without us
will be brought down
We warned you before
and nothing that you built has stood
Hear it as you lean over your blueprint
Hear it as you roll up your sleeve
Hear it once again
Any system you contrive without us
will be brought down*

*You have your drugs
You have your guns
You have your Pyramids your Pentagons
With all your grass and bullets
you cannot hunt us any more
All that we disclose of ourselves forever
is this warning
Nothing that you built has stood
Any system you contrive without us
will be brought down.*

There is more politics: in one sequence, Palmer mixes into the original cut footage of Cohen singing ‘Story of Isaac’ (*‘You who build these altars now/to sacrifice these children’*) with shocking images of war and political violence. And later, Cohen asked about the politics in his lyrics, argues that, in the society we have now, ‘loneliness is a political act’.

On stage in Manchester Cohen imagined young people 40 years in the future, equipped with some unimagined technology, viewing the film, by which time the town would be a ruin: ‘It’s well on its way,’ he observed laconically. ‘And I hope the banks follow...’

The opening scenes of *Bird on a Wire* were shot, I’ve learned subsequently, in Tel Aviv. They show hired

security men in orange overalls beating up fans who wanted to move to the front of the hall. The film also ends in Israel, in Jerusalem, where a scrappy, apologetic performance is abruptly terminated during a performance of 'So Long Marianne'. He walks off stage, but is eventually compelled by the devotion of the crowd, to come back out. We see him backstage, worn out and sobbing, along with Jennifer Warnes and other members of the band.

Simon Wollaston in [The Guardian](#) commented:

It looks like it would have been fun to have been on the road with Cohen and his band in the early 70s. It's not the usual kind of band-on-tour high jinks and bad behaviour. There's a lot of sitting around, naked swimming, smoking, introspective thought, writing poetry in the bath, picnicking by the side of the road, throwing pebbles into the sea – that kind of thing. While terrible things were going on in the world. But there was wine and there were women, too. Lots of women for Leonard – beautiful, big-eyed 1970s women, leaning in their darkened doors.

And jokes. Some of this film is very funny. Like the ridiculous journalists asking their ridiculous questions (though I did feel for the poor guy whose tape recorder didn't work – I've been there). And arguments with promoters over speakers that keep blowing up. And one of the band admitting that he nodded off on stage during Suzanne. And Cohen's repartee with his audiences. "Sometimes you can live in the song, but sometimes it is inhospitable and won't admit you, and you're left banging on the door and everyone knows it," he tells them. This would be baffling from most people, but because it's coming from Cohen, it makes perfect sense.

Most of all, though, it's about the music, of Cohen at the peak of his power, mesmerising audiences with beautiful, sad songs. And then, on the final night of the tour in Jerusalem, it all gets too much. Cohen breaks down on stage; he's crying, the band's crying, the audience is crying...

Director Tony Palmer has said of his film:

Maybe what is valuable about the film today is not only that it contains 17 of Cohen's greatest songs performed by him in his prime, it has a real feel for the rough and tumble and difficulties of life on the road. I know of few other films where the backstage confusion comes so vividly to life, with Cohen apparently taking no notice whatsoever of the camera. I doubt if today we would be allowed such access. The songs are haunting, unforgettably so. The poetry is extraordinary. But so is the man. Looking back after 38 years, my admiration for Cohen remains undiminished. The original film was made with love – I hope that quality once again shines through the restored film.

The band

Ron Cornelius – electric and acoustic guitar

Bob Johnston – piano and organ

Peter Marshal – electric and acoustic bass

David O'Connor – acoustic guitar

Jennifer Warnes – vocals

Donna Washburn – vocals

Songs featured

If you wanted just one reason for watching this film, it would be that it contains possibly the only recorded

performance of Chelsea Hotel #1 - a significantly different precursor to the album version, known as Chelsea Hotel #2. This YouTube clip has the audio from the 1972 concert in Tel Aviv, though not the video:

- Avalanche
- Suzanne
- Tonight Will Be Fine
- Passing Through
- Sisters of Mercy
- Who By Fire?
- Story of Isaac
- One Of Us Can't Be Wrong
- The Partisan
- Sisters of Mercy
- Chelsea Hotel #1
- Nancy
- One Of Us Can't Be Wrong
- Famous Blue Raincoat
- Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye
- So Long, Marianne
- Bird On A Wire

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1. on [November 21, 2010 at 14:22](#) | [Reply](#)  [Elizabeth](#)

Now this I must catch up with...thank you, Gerry.

2. on [November 21, 2010 at 23:57](#) | [Reply](#)  [Tessa Coker](#)

For once USA has it! Was able to pre-order rental on Netflix – thanks for the head's up, Gerry.

3. on [November 23, 2010 at 10:40](#) | [Reply](#)  [Gerry](#)

BBC4 are screening it again on Wed/Thurs night this week at 1.00 am Thurs morning.

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