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Home

News

Commentary

Business

Investing

Sports

Life

Arts

Technology

Drive

Site map

Movies

Television

Theatre

Music

TIFF

Home

» [News](#)

» [Arts](#)

» [BOOKS](#)

» [Warren Clements](#)

- [TV LISTINGS](#)
- [PUZZLES](#)
- [HOROSCOPES](#)
- [VIDEO](#)
- [COLUMNISTS](#)

- [BACK TO SCHOOL](#)

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**ARTS**

Warren Clements: DVDs

## An intimate look at Leonard Cohen in his prime

Reconstructed documentary on 1970s tour shows an artist who's humble, vulnerable and wholly committed to his craft



[Warren Clements](#)

From Friday's Globe and Mail Published on Thursday, Sep. 09, 2010 5:04PM EDT Last updated on Thursday, Sep. 16, 2010 11:42AM EDT

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In an interview replayed this week on CBC-Radio's *Q*, singer Kris Kristofferson recalled his 1970 appearance at the Isle of Wight music festival. The unruly crowd hated him, he said. They hated Jimi Hendrix. The only artist who managed to charm them was Leonard Cohen – in the wee hours of the morning, wearing a raincoat over his pyjamas.

Two years later, Cohen had to exercise those calming powers once again. He embarked on a 20-city tour of Europe and Israel, and, as Tony Palmer's documentary **Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire** makes clear, much went wrong. The sound system blew up after the first couple of dates. Some Scandinavian ticket-holders were so disagreeable that Cohen reached into his pocket to refund their money. His invitation to audience members to sit closer to the stage in Tel Aviv was thwarted by security guards so "unnecessarily nasty" (in Cohen's words) that the show was called off. "Disperse quietly and let's take off," he told the crowd. "Be together somewhere else, because this scene isn't working."

What comes across in the 106-minute film, out on DVD next Tuesday, is how seriously Cohen, 37 at the time, takes his craft and how lightly he wears his mantle. Amused by what's written about him, he improvises a song at one show: "Career. Career. Leonard Cohen is going to sing his songs of anguish and despair." When someone shouts out, he replies, "I love it when you call out like that. I believe that I'm going to meet my love, it's going to be some girl who calls out."

He speaks of the difficulty of singing the same songs night after night. In Jerusalem, he leaves the stage because he feels he's just going through the motions – "There's no reason we should mutilate a song just to save face" – and has to be cajoled into returning to face a cheering crowd. He and the band then deliver committed versions of *Hey*, *That's No Way to Say Goodbye* and *So Long, Marianne*.

There was additional drama after the film was shot. Cohen had given director-editor Palmer total access. The camera followed the singer into the shower, captured him weeping when he couldn't bring himself to return to the stage, and looked on as Cohen interacted with a flirtatious visitor. "It's hard to come on to a girl in front of the camera," Cohen said to the lens. The BBC liked Palmer's cut and agreed to buy it.

But Cohen thought the result was "too confrontational" and made him look "exhausted, even wasted," Palmer said in a recent statement about the film. Manager-producer Marty Machat asked for the raw material, and Palmer's assistant editor put together a version that the BBC rejected. The film died. Then, last year, 294 cans of film turned up in a Hollywood warehouse. Much of the footage was unusable, but the sound dubbing tracks were in good shape, and Palmer used them to reconstruct his movie.

It looks good and sounds terrific. There's a particularly beautiful rendition of *Who by Fire* (the backing singers are Jennifer Warnes and Donna Washburn), although, regrettably, the accompanying visuals are not

of the concert but of the band getting off the bus. Other songs, such as *Chelsea Hotel*, *Sisters of Mercy* and *Suzanne*, do show Cohen singing them.

In a wry introduction to *Suzanne*, he says he unknowingly signed away the rights to the song at the behest of a "friend." "So I thought that was perfectly justified, because it would be wrong to write this song and get rich from it, too." The audience applauds.

### BLU-RAY RELEASES THIS WEEK

#### **Delicatessen** (1991)

No sooner has Jean-Pierre Jeunet's latest French-language confection (*Micmacs*) arrived on DVD than his brilliant first feature comes to Blu-ray. The faint of heart may shrink from a bare outline of the plot – tenants of an isolated building risk winding up on a rack in the butcher's shop – but there's little gore and much that is funny, ribald, romantic, influenced by Buster Keaton and designed like a Gothic fantasy. In an excellent new hour-long retrospective, Jeunet doubts that a film such as this could find funding today, more's the pity.

#### **Breathless** (1961)

Jean-Luc Godard's most entertaining movie retains its freshness half a century after it helped inaugurate the New Wave in French filmmaking. It's about a petty criminal (Jean-Paul Belmondo) who hooks up with a carefree American (Jean Seberg, with an influential pixie haircut), but the joy is in the telling rather than the tale. The Criterion set's bonuses are identical to those on the 2007 DVD, including Belmondo's recollection that Godard wrote the dialogue each day before filming. Blu-ray adds a touch of sharpness to a transfer that was already fine.

### MOVIES ON DVD

#### **Dean Spanley** (2008)

This one bypassed theatres, which is a shame. It's good to see actors of the calibre of Peter O'Toole (as the grumpy father), Jeremy Northam (as the barely tolerated son), Sam Neill (as the eponymous dean) and Bryan Brown (as the purveyor of a rare Hungarian wine) enjoying themselves in a whimsical story mined from a late novella by fantasy-writer Lord Dunsany. The tale involves reincarnation, dogs and father-son relations, but much of it is built on charm. Bonus features include O'Toole and Neill telling brief anecdotes about, yes, dogs.

#### **Letters to Juliet** (2010)

Whatever your view of romantic tales of long-lost love, it's a cinch you won't get out of this one without planning a holiday to Verona (the home of Romeo's Juliet) or Tuscany, gorgeous Italian destinations that figure hugely in the plot. Oh, the plot? A visitor to Verona (Amanda Seyfried) finds a letter written by Vanessa Redgrave's character and lost for 50 years in Juliet's wall. All together now: Road trip! In the extras, director Gary Winick says he learned how to shoot a scene of two people meeting one person by watching *Law & Order*.

### TV ON DVD

#### **Glee: The Complete First Season** (2009-10)

Welcome to the hour-long show that blends high-school power struggles and inventively choreographed Technicolor karaoke, while ensuring that Jane Lynch's mean, acerbic cheerleading coach is around to offset the show's occasional forays into sentimentality. Bonus features include a tribute to Madonna, a fashion review (Rachel "has about four hangers full of socks") and, on the Blu-ray edition, an amusing video

commentary in which the actors and co-creator Ryan Murphy, who does most of the talking, make wisecracks about the pilot episode.

**The Good Wife: The First Season (2009-10)**

In this one, Mr. Big is Mr. Big House. State attorney Peter Florrick (Chris Noth) has been sent to the slammer for corruption, and wife Alicia (Julianna Margulies, late of *ER*) has to return to her job as a (junior) defence lawyer while looking after her children, negotiating office politics, solving a case a week and dealing with her complex feelings about her husband's betrayal. So, complications all round, and that's good. Bonus features include commentaries and a nod to real political scandals that fed the fiction.

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