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Leonard Cohen - Bird On A Wire

By Todd Totale
September 8, 2010

LEONARD COHEN
BIRD ON A WIRE



Leonard Cohen - *Bird On A Wire* (TMC)

The story goes that Leonard Cohen's manager, Marty Machat, commissioned director [Tony Palmer](#) to follow Leonard around on a 20-date European tour with the intention of capturing a bit of the creative muse on celluloid.

The film *Bird On A Wire* sat in Machat's storage until he passed away, at which time Cohen took over possession and kept the film in hiding. Recently, Cohen returned the footage to the son of his former manager, who immediately set about tracking down Tony Palmer to complete the project that had started four decades earlier.

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Using the footage they obtained and combining it with stock footage and other archival material, Palmer presents a documentary that unknowingly captures Cohen making one of his most enduring characteristics: reclusiveness.

It's a fascinating film, narrated by Cohen, his band members, and through the other players that crossed paths with the tour, a tour that seems to have the full intention of making Leonard's star shine a bit brighter.

Spoiler alert: He fails miserably.

Leonard Cohen doesn't seem to want to embrace the fame that's being offered to him, and on occasion, seems resentful of the adulation that he receives.

He bites back whenever the audience begins applauding when they recognize the first few bars of his songs. By the third time this happens, Cohen seems ready to battle the offender, playing the same chords over and over until he gets the silence he craves.

"I can stand here for a long time..." he warns, waiting for the crowd to quiet. "I'm tough, you know. I can take this."

At other moments, Cohen is incredibly sensitive, encouraging the cheap seats to move closer to the stage and then chastising the security personnel for addressing the invited with just a bit too much muscle.

"I know you're just doing your job ... but you don't have to use your fists," he lectures, before he gets pushed off the stage by the same hired headknockers.

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The intimacy runs deeper as we see Cohen showering nude after a gig with longtime Columbia Records' producer and musician Bob Johnson bathing in the stall right next to him.

The camera keeps rolling while Cohen ingests some acid before a show, tolerates interviewers who pose silly questions or who forget to hit the record button on their tape recorders, and it captures him looking increasingly troubled as he realizes that the everyday drama of playing music on the road may not be the greatest environment for someone blessed with more writing skills than social ones.

He loses it in the middle of one performance when the stage monitors begin to feedback. At first, he sings a spontaneous song ("Come on speaker! Won't you speak to me?") but as his patience expires, he smacks the microphone away and ends the performance.

Afterward, a pair of disgruntled fans corner guitarist Ron Cornelius to chew him out for "cheating" the crowd with the show's early ending, suggesting to the infuriated guitar player that the next time they rehearse and check the equipment before opening the doors for the audience.

Cohen immediately intervenes and personally refunds the pair's money.

But it's the final show - Jerusalem of all places - where Cohen begins to completely unravel in mid-performance, and this time the crowd is much more tolerant of his neurotic breakdown.

He offers that the band will try to regroup backstage, but once he's outside of the gaze of the adoring public, he curtly declares that he is not capable of returning to the stage. It seems that everyone has a say in this, from the intolerant to the enablers - they all state their opinion to Cohen, who ignores them in return.

Then he goes over to the sink and begins to shave.

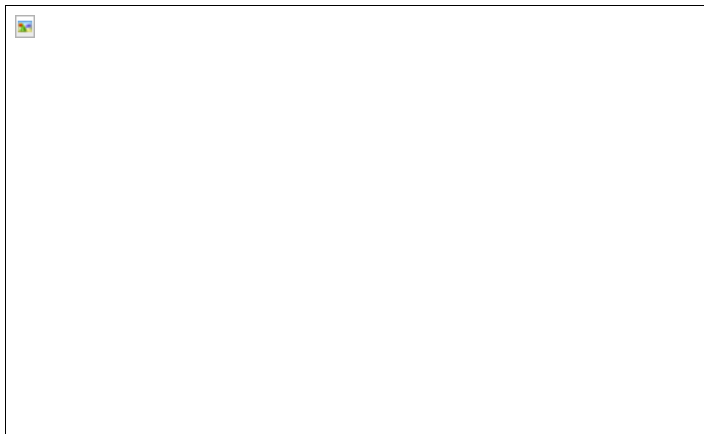
Even with offers to refund the crowd their money, they stay. And after a few minutes of guilt trips and tactical comments from others, he reluctantly returns to the stage with a stunning rendition of "So Long, Marianne."

Cohen finishes the song then immediately retreats backstage, an emotional wreck. But even while weeping, they pester him to go back on stage one more time.

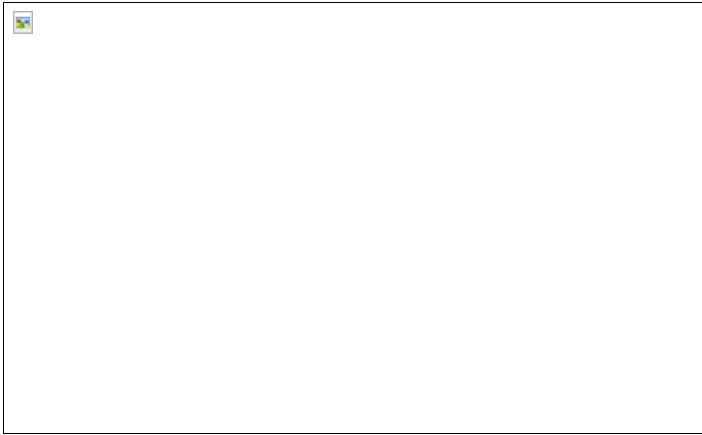
You wouldn't be far off in calling *Bird On A Wire* Cohen's version of *Don't Look Back*. Palmer's vision is a bit hodgepodge at times, thanks to some pointless footage of Vietnam war atrocities during the song "Story of Isaac." It completely contradicts Cohen's own underhanded political stance, and it stops the film just short of becoming required viewing.

But what *Bird On A Wire* lacks in directorial craft, it makes up for in unmatched footage. This film becomes required viewing for any Leonard Cohen fan not for its song selection or for the performances themselves; it deserves a special place because it documents his reaction at being presented with an opportunity to become a bigger star than his sanity was prepared to allow.

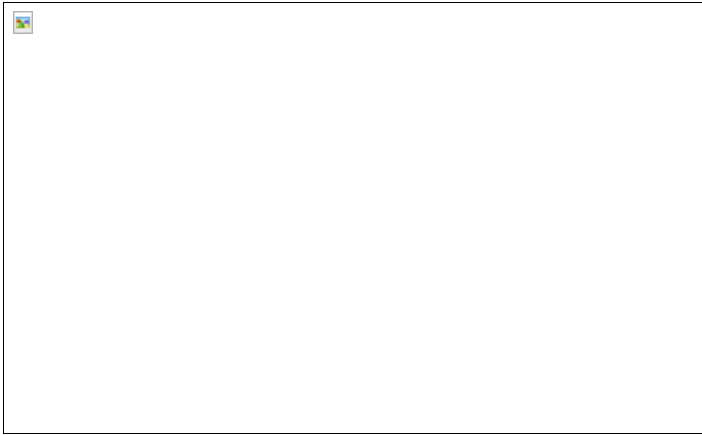
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