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Bird on a Wire (BBC4)



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No, not that lame movie with Goldie Hawn and Mel Gibson, but Tony Palmer's documentary about Leonard Cohen's tour of Europe in 1972. The film, originally disliked by Cohen and abandoned, was thought to be lost. But it turned up again, in some old film cans, and Palmer has painstakingly restored it. Which is a good thing, because it's wonderful.

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, I'm crying. I don't know why, but I am. You know what? It's OK to cry.

It would be interesting to know what any young people watching and listening made of it. Did it hit any kind of spot or was it just a bunch of miserable old hippies? Get the

DVD for your dad at Christmas, and then watch him laugh and cry.

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