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'Bird on a Wire' celebrates singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen

By ROBERT W. BUTLER
The Kansas City Star

I've long been aware of singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen — what child of the '60s hasn't tried to woo a member of the opposite sex to the beautiful strains of "Suzanne"?

But only in recent years have I become a genuine fan, thanks largely to "Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man," the 2006 concert film in which world-class artists performed the Canadian bard's songs.

My admiration has been kicked up to full-fledged mania by the release on DVD of "Bird on a Wire," a film about Cohen's 1972 20-city European concert tour that was long thought lost.

"Bird" was shot for British television by Tony Palmer, who for 40 years has specialized in films — both features and documentaries — about musical subjects. He has covered everyone from the great classical composers to such pop icons as Frank Zappa (he helmed the main Mother's 1971 misfire "200 Motels").

Palmer described "Bird" as an "impression" of the Cohen tour, and that's exactly how it plays. There's no narration, no titles telling us what city we're in. The film effortlessly zig-zags between concert footage, backstage gatherings and tour bus segments, with an occasional digression for a poetry reading by Cohen (who was a poet and novelist before he became a neo-folkie sensation in the mid-'60s). One delicious scene finds him trying to pick up a beautiful Swedish girl — but, irony of ironies, there are language problems.

There are moments of crisis — a public address system that conks out, an encounter with an overzealous security staff at a Jerusalem concert. (Cohen invites ticketholders in the balcony to come sit on the stage apron, and the orange-suited goons go ballistic.) But through it all, Cohen maintains a Zen-like equilibrium. In fact, aside from a gentle bemusement, he expresses no strong emotions. (Though by tour's end, he's reduced to tears — maybe it's exhaustion.)

Unlike the classic cinema verite "Don't Look Back" about Bob Dylan (remember when Cohen was described as the Canadian Dylan?), "Bird" has been shot and edited for maximum poetic effect, employing both black-and-white and color footage and different film stocks.

The performances (of now-classics such as "Suzanne," "Sisters of Mercy," "Who By Fire," "Story of Isaac," "Chelsea Hotel," "Famous Blue Raincoat" and the title tune) are superb, with Cohen's deep voice (an acquired taste) perfectly augmented by a small, mostly acoustic band. Just beautiful.

The backstory is pretty great, too. Two years ago, Zappa's former manager sent Palmer several boxes of film found in a Los Angeles warehouse. Among them was most of the "Bird on a Wire" footage, which Palmer painstakingly reassembled over two years, employing the latest digital technology to clean up both the soundtrack (the songs sound great) and the images.

'cash'

Couple (Chris Hemsworth, Victoria Profeta) find suitcase filled with cash. Thug (Sean Bean) shows up to reclaim the money, then puts the pair to work sticking up stores to replace what they've already spent. Uneven, but some nice black humor.

'oss 117 lost in rio'

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Really wanted to like this spoof of old-school James Bond movies. Jean Dujardin is borderline brilliant as French secret agent 117, a sort of brain-damaged Sean Connery clone. He's cocky and sexist and smug despite his astonishing ignorance. (He doesn't know the difference between Jews and Muslims.) And the physical production is a dead ringer for the over-lit, high-living look of 007's world. But the story — our man is teamed with a beautiful Mossad agent to track down Nazis in late-'60s Brazil — and the pacing leave me cold.

'mad ron's previews from hell'

Good for a few yuks. This 1987 compilation of trailers from cheap exploitation horror titles ("3 on a Meathook," "I Dismember Mama," "Texas Chainsaw Massacre") is hosted by a ventriloquist and his "zombie" dummy. Bad humor. Great gore.

"joan mitchell: portrait of an abstract painter"

Before this documentary, I didn't know much about painter Joan Mitchell (1925-1992). Now you can count me as a fan. This 1993 study by the late Marion Cajori contrasts long, lingering shots of Mitchell's work — the woman used color for spectacular dramatic and lyrical effect — with interview footage of the artist. She's a sort of chain-smoking, tough-talking, raspy-voiced wrinkled pixie. The DVD comes with a 40-page booklet with gorgeous color photos of Mitchell's most important paintings.

"the power of myth"

OK, so two guys sitting and talking isn't exactly cinematic.

But when it's the right two guys (Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn in "My Dinner With Andre," for instance), it can be totally absorbing.

That's the case with "The Power of Myth," the classic PBS series in which Bill Moyers discusses the role of mythology in our lives with Sarah Lawrence professor Joseph ("Follow your bliss") Campbell (above).

When first broadcast in 1988, "The Power of Myth" made Campbell an international celebrity and fueled big sales of his books ("The Hero With a Thousand Faces," "The Masks of God").

Ironically, Campbell died at 83, six months before the TV show aired.

But his ideas about how society and our individual lives are informed and molded by mythology are as valid and thought-provoking today as they were back in '88. It was Campbell who noted that "Star Wars" was a classic example of the heroic quest saga so familiar in world mythology. He popularized the idea that truths eluding summation in prose are reflected metaphorically through various universally accepted myths.

This two-disc DVD package cleans up the old videotape images and offers a couple of modest extras, but mostly it's the same terrific show that has been the backbone of PBS fundraisers for more than 20 years.

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