

TONY PALMER'S CLASSIC FILM
LEONARD COHEN
BIRD ON A WIRE



As Columbia release *Songs From The Road*, a CD collection of recordings from Cohen's recent tour, so comes a DVD of Tony Palmer's long lost documentary of the 1972 European tour with a band that included Bob Johnston on organ, Ron Cornelius on guitar and Jennifer Warnes on backups.

Having been re-edited without Palmer's involvement and turned down by the BBC, it was released on a very limited run on July 5, 1974; a one night only screening at the Rainbow. Palmer says that version contained 50% of his original material, that the structure had been totally destroyed and the musical editing was "crass beyond belief." He recalls reading that Cohen would only promote the film "through gritted teeth".

Other than poor bootleg videos, the film subsequently disappeared, presumed lost. Then, in 2009, Steve Machat, son of the film's original producer, unearthed rusty cans containing 294 rolls of film in a Hollywood warehouse. The negative wasn't among them, some prints were in black and white and some were badly scratched. However, with much of the original rushes and most of the sound dubbing tracks, Palmer was able to painstakingly restore much of the footage to a close resemblance of his original film.

It opens at the Tel Aviv concert, a show that almost turned into a riot as Cohen invited the audience to move closer and the orange suited security guards forcefully went about their business of ensuring they didn't. The plug is eventually pulled, with Cohen saying they'll play again somewhere where it's their scene.

What follows is a not necessarily chronologically assembled diary, Palmer and his cameraman having incredible fly on the wall access to life backstage as well as the performances.

Permeated throughout by his charismatic presence, there are some wonderful insouciant moments, among them the strikingly good looking and self-deprecating 38 year old Cohen unsuccessfully trying to pick up a girl backstage, conscious of the camera recording his chat ups.

Throughout Cohen displays a sense of humour that belies his then reputation as a troubadour of gloom, a tag he mockingly sends up during one performance (in another he laughs when audiences applaud a song's introduction, saying it's impossible to guess what he's going to play since they all sound the same), while, posing for photographs and blowing smoke, also playing up to his image.

Apparently plagued by a dodgy sound system on earlier shows, things come to a head in Germany where the speakers squall with feedback (apparently a crew member plugged his headphones into the wrong socket on the second night and blew the PA amps) and Cohen improvises his frustration by singing at them. Afterwards, two disgruntled fans demand their money back and accuse everyone of cheating the crowd. Bemused by the whole confusion, Cohen hands over his own money.

Aside from its rough and ready portrait of life on the road, the film contains 17 of Cohen's finest songs (many in full) often in the sepia or black and white tones of the early album covers.

Soundtracking footage of the Berlin wall, *The Partisan* is especially potent while other stand-outs include *Sisters Of Mercy*, *Suzanne* (which he introduces by describing how he lost the royalties with a rip off contract), *Story Of Isaac* and *Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye*. In addition to the songs, the DVD also restores Cohen reciting four poems from *The Energy Of Slaves* that were excised from the edited 1974 version.

Like the tour, the film builds to a moving climax when, fatigued, tetchy and so nervous about playing Jerusalem and failing, Cohen wonders about cancelling the show. He then receives such a rapturous response that, moved to tears, he has to be coaxed back out to say thank you and bid goodnight before the film's title track plays over a closing montage of archive childhood footage. It's rare for a music documentary to have soul; this one glows.

With the cover featuring Picasso's *Dove Of Peace* (permission unprecedently granted by the Picasso Foundation), the DVD contains replica promo poster and card and a booklet of photos and cuttings.

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