

## Leonard Cohen Bird On A Wire DVD: a rediscovered masterpiece

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT 3 JAN 11 @ 04:36PM BY STEVE MOFFATT

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Leonard Cohen's 20-city tour across Europe in 1972 is the subject of Tony Palmer's long-lost documentary *Bird On A Wire*.

*I first wrote when I was nine. My father died and I wrote this little thing and sewed it into his bow tie and buried it in the garden where the pansies grew. He always used to wear a pansy in his lapel. That did something good for my head so I kept on writing*

FOR 40 years it lay forgotten in film-maker Tony Palmer's vaults somewhere, but a chance rediscovery of *Leonard Cohen Bird On A Wire* has brought us a classic rock documentary that ranks alongside D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*.

Like that film, which followed Bob Dylan's 1965 concert tour of Britain (and the infamous "Judas" catcalls he received when he went electric), *Bird On A Wire* tracks Cohen on his 1972 tour of 20 cities in Europe, culminating in a heavy gig in Tel Aviv where the security staff were almost as frightening as the Hells' Angels at Altamont.

Along the way Cohen philosophises, writes and recites poems, deals with unhappy punters when the sound system breaks down (he reimburses a couple of angry Germans out of his own pocket) and negotiates with groupies.

We see him sitting in a bath with his notebook; analysing the previous night's gig on the tour bus; taking a skinny dip in a hotel pool and sharing jokes with the band. And then, of course, there are the performances which, despite the sound system problems, are hypnotic and compelling.

His band is superb with the keyboard of Bob Johnston nicely underpinning the guitars of Ron Cornelius and David O'Connor and stand-up bass of Peter Marshall. Backing vocalists Jennifer Warnes and Donna Washburn, in matching John Lennon glasses, give Cohen his heavenly choir.

Cohen shows he is a master at working an audience, inviting them up on stage, cuddling them and enjoying their idolisation which can turn scary at times.

Most of the songs are the familiar ones from the mid-1960s - *The Sisters Of Mercy*, *So Long Marianne* and, of course, *Suzanne*.

The anecdotes show Cohen's uncompromising attitude to his art and lend an insight into his a commercial naivety (or indifference) which would later force him to tour again to recoup some of his lost money.

The rights of *Suzanne* were stolen from him. "I thought that was perfectly justified because it would be wrong to write this song and get writs from it too. I'm happy for that friend who put this piece of paper in front of me and said 'sign this' and I said 'what is it?' and he said it's just a standard writer's contract and it was gone."

Asked about his success, Cohen says: "Success is survival. When you write a book and it's published and the next year you win the Nobel Prize, you can speak of it as success. But when you write a poem at 15 and it takes 20 years for it to find its way to the people you can't talk of it in the same terms. Success has to mean something different."

Palmer, like all truly great documentary-makers, is nowhere to be seen. He has gained the trust of all those around him and just lets the camera and his "cast" tell the story.

Cohen's songs and singing are often considered depressing. I have never found this to be the case and I think this movie will do a lot to dispel that perception. There is a funny and heartbreaking moment when, after a long interview in which Cohen describes his songs, how he performs them and their content the interviewer goes to play back the tape only to find that it hasn't recorded.

Palmer deftly works in the political reality of the times - the Vietnam war, burning monks, napalm, disturbing images of bodies and killing form a graphic backdrop to *The Story of Isaac*, footage of the Berlin Wall accompanies *The Partisan* and Cohen's rich vein of humour comes to the fore in *There's No Reason Why You Should Remember Me*.

*Bird On A Wire* (TPDVD 166) is a generous 106 minutes and comes complete with a little booklet which reproduces some early interviews. Distributed by Select [www.savd.com.au](http://www.savd.com.au) this is a film which ranks alongside Palmer's other masterpieces - perhaps even outdoing them. It's available at Sanity Music for a bargain \$24.99.

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