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'Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire' Is Presented With a Naked, Visual Immediacy

By **Christel Loar** 29 September 2010

PopMatters Associate Music Editor

"Success is... success is survival."
—Leonard Cohen 1972

Bird on a Wire follows Leonard Cohen on his 1972, 20-city European tour, which began in Dublin and ended in Jerusalem. A version of the film was shown theatrically, in limited release, in 1974, but disappeared shortly thereafter, the original print presumed lost. In 2009, however, pieces of the film, as well as original sound tracks, were discovered in a warehouse and assembled for this DVD which is beautifully presented in a white, gatefold digi-pak featuring a reproduction of Picasso's "Dove of Peace" on its cover.

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



The package also contains a reproduction of the film's original promotional poster and a collectible postcard. The most important part of this release is the film itself, of course. Thankfully, director Tony Palmer (*200 Motels*) has been able to use the found footage to restore *Bird on a Wire* to something that is very close to his initial vision.

It's a breath-taking vision. Gorgeous cinematography, alternating between black-and-white and color footage, rich, resonant audio quality and a sort of loose-but-reverent intimacy combine with stunning live concert performances and candid backstage, interview and travel sequences to show Cohen at the peak of his popularity and the top of his game.

There are 17 classic songs and four poems featured in *Bird on a Wire*, including "Avalanche", "Suzanne", "Passing Through", "Sisters of Mercy", "One Of Us Can't Be Wrong", "Chelsea Hotel", "Famous Blue Raincoat" and, of course, "Bird On A Wire". Cohen sounds magnificent on all of these, naturally, while Palmer's deft use of space imparts a certain feeling of actually being in the audience at one of these shows, or of being the subject of the poems, sitting just off camera as Cohen recites directly to you. The closeness of the camera evokes a deeper sense of shared secrecy, a naked and honest, almost overwhelming, visual immediacy that suits the raw, emotional weight of Cohen's work.

It works well for the banter between songs, too. One close-up concert clip catches Cohen responding to a call from the crowd. He explains, "I love it when you call out like that. I believe that... that I'm going to meet my love. It's going to be some girl who calls out". He implores, "Call out", and you want to, even though it's 38 years later and he will not hear you. This affecting segment goes on with the tale of how it is both fortunate and justified that the next song's rights were stolen, because, "It would be wrong to write this song and get rich from it too". The crowd cheers as Palmer's lens sneaks in ever closer and Cohen slips into the hypnotic and wildly romantic "Suzanne". Quite honestly, the entire effect is rather devastating.

In the non-concert scenes and interview footage, the feeling is more akin to being a fly on the wall. Some of these moments seem surreptitiously captured, such as when Cohen is chatting up a woman backstage until it becomes apparent the camera has intruded. Others seem to be bits of accidental treasure, gathered in passing and only later revealed. Take, for instance, the clip where Cohen, speaking about creativity—or rather not speaking about it—tells an earnest interviewer that he doesn't know anything about that, and that if he does, "It's like speaking about one's own religion... it doesn't serve you to speak about those things". When the journalist presses on, asking, "Well, what do you like to talk about?" Cohen, equally earnest, replies, "I prefer not to speak at all."

This from a man whose words continue to call out across the years.

Rating: 

Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire

Director: [Tony Palmer](#)

Cast: Leonard Cohen, Jennifer Warnes, Donna Washburn

(US DVD: 21 Sep 2010; UK DVD: 6 Sep 2010)

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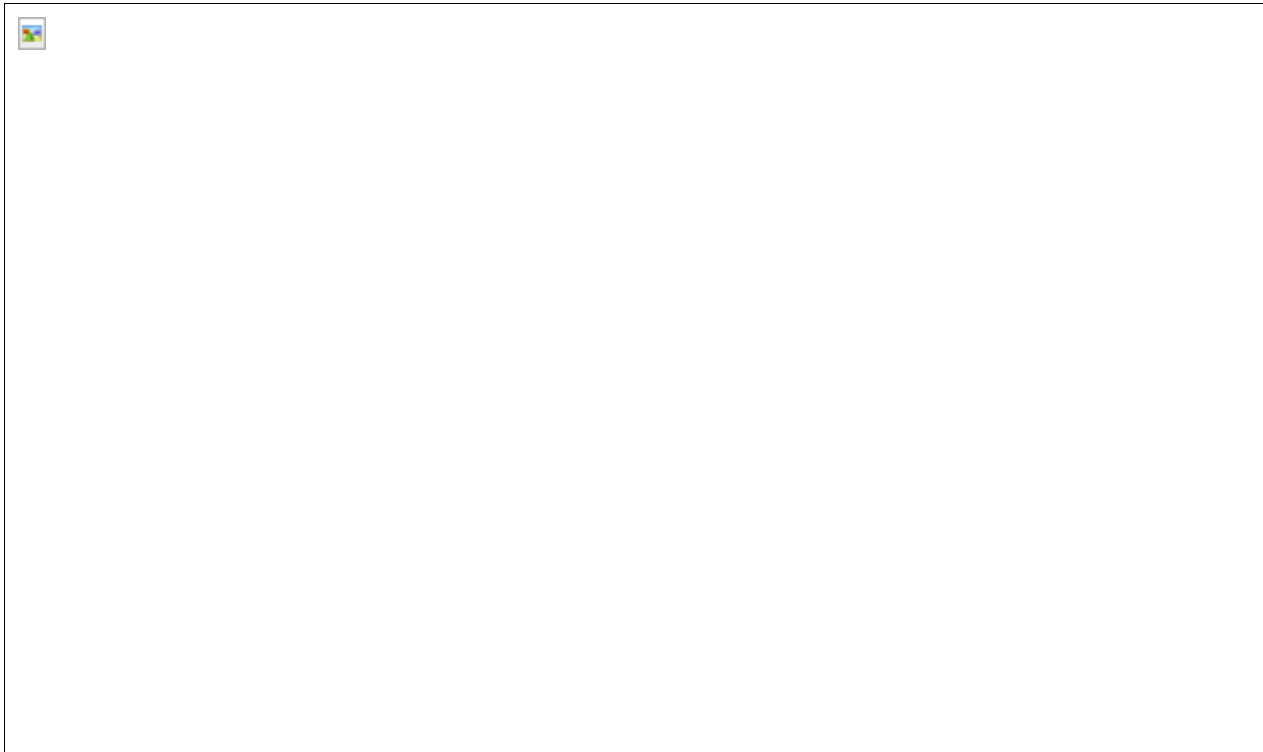
Christel Loar is a freelance writer and editor, a part-time music publicist, and a full-time music fan. She is often an overreactor and sometimes an overachiever. When not dodging raindrops or devising escape plans, Christel is usually found down front and slightly left of center stage reveling in a performance by yet another new favorite band.

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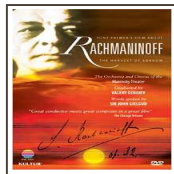


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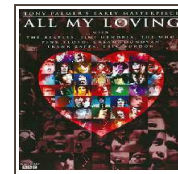
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