



[Login](#)
[Register](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Contests & Promotions](#)
[Careers](#)

SCREEN FEATURE

[Email this](#)
[Comments \(0\)](#)
[Post a Comment](#)

News & Views

[Life](#)
[Music](#)
[Screen](#)
[Arts](#)
[Sex](#)
[Blogs](#)
[Best of Edmonton 2010](#)


Volume 1 No. 877
September 16, 2010

[Slideshows & Videos](#)
[Movie Guide](#)
[Listings](#)
[Bars & Restaurants](#)
[Destination Guide](#)
[Archives](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Contests & Promotions](#)

Rediscovering Leonard

Tony Palmer's classic Cohen documentary concert film rediscovered after nearly 40 years.
Published September 9, 2010 by Alistair Henning in Screen Feature

Bird On A Wire is veteran documentarian Tony Palmer's film about Leonard Cohen's 1972 European Tour. Having gone missing soon after completion, the film which is only now receiving its first official release almost 40 years later.

Palmer was asked to make the film by Marty Machat, Cohen's long-time manager right up until his death in 1988. Recently, Palmer shared how the film came to be.

"Machat, who's since died of cancer, had two problems. The first problem was that Leonard didn't enjoy touring and wasn't going to do it any more. The second problem, which he didn't tell me until some while later, was that his record company was threatening to dump him because the first three LPs had sold pretty badly. They'd sold reasonably well in Europe, but in the States had sold very badly.

"So Machat was faced with the problem that if he didn't get something filmed, it was possible there would be no visual document on record of this extraordinary man. So that's why the film got made.

"I always wondered why, during the film making, I never ever saw a record executive. In retrospect, I can see why: it's because they weren't interested in him!"

A difficult artist, Cohen was initially wary of filming. Palmer explains, "When I first met Leonard in October 1971, he laid down various conditions. Firstly, that I included him reading his poems. Another was that I not convey the impression he was simply a whimsical poet of love songs. And thirdly, that I never lost sight of the fact that the songs had a very hard political edge. Some of the songs more than others, but they certainly were intended as political statements about the human condition.

"It's to Leonard's credit that he never prevented us from doing anything. There's a scene at the end, in the dressing room in Jerusalem, when he's completely collapsed and he's in tears. We were two feet away from him, and none of what you see in the film, especially not that sequence, was done for our benefit. He wasn't playing up to the camera, that was really what he felt, and he just ignored us.

"Once, I made a film about Maria Callas. In a way it's an interesting parallel, because my film about Callas is about a woman who's in a hell of a mess, who also happened to be a great opera singer. Rather than film about a great opera singer, who's also a woman in a hell of a mess. There's a very important balance there.

"The version on the DVD is about 95 per cent of what it was originally. But even before Leonard saw it, it was shown to the BBC because the film I'd made of the farewell concert of Cream was made for them. The BBC immediately bought it, and offered money for it. If that had been accepted, Machat would have gotten back three quarters of what he'd invested, immediately. Alas, Cohen told me he thought the film was 'too confrontational,' and worried that he often appeared 'exhausted, even wasted'."

Nine months and hundreds of thousands of dollars later, a second version of the film was ready. Parker "was told it was shown to the BBC, who turned it down flat saying 'it was a mess.'"

Parker now has a copy of their letter. Apparently, Machat also had refused to pay for the re-editing, thinking that this was now Cohen's responsibility.

Version 2 had a brief theatrical outing and was shown for one night only at the Rainbow Theatre in north London, July 5, 1974, almost two years after Parker delivered the original version.

Parker says he not invited to see the revised version: "I was not at the Rainbow, and only saw it for the first time six months ago. Had I seen it then, I would have insisted my name be removed, because although it contains about 50 per cent of my original film, the structure has been destroyed, the musical editing is crass beyond belief, and the whole purpose of the film had been lost. When I read that Cohen would only promote the film "through gritted teeth," I think I can understand why."

After that, film disappeared. Palmer had never kept a copy of the original version. And, in every biography of Cohen that appeared conflicting and misleading information appeared about the film.

Then, in 2009, 294 rolls of film were discovered in a warehouse in Hollywood. Palmer tells the story: "There were various ups and downs over the past year. An 'up' was when we thought we'd found the material, and it was shipped by London by of all people Frank Zappa's manager (who's sadly since died). A 'down' was when I got the stuff and I realized it was all the original rushes, the dailies. Many were in rusted up cans that sometimes had to be hammered open. There was no way I was going to reconstruct the film from that. I believed that nothing could be salvaged. The cans did not contain the negative (which is still lost);



Recent Blog Posts

[Interview with Jazz Vocalist John Boutte](#)

[Cedar Tavern Singers at the AGA](#)

[Celtic Fiddler Lizzy Hoyt Concert Review](#)

[Lady Gaga Live Reviewed](#)

[FRINGE REVIEW: The End Of Civilization](#)

Recently Commented

Jays on [Best of Edmonton 2010 Readers' Picks](#) 4

thededmontonian on [Lights, Camera ... Inaction!](#) 6

lululucy on [Lights, Camera ... Inaction!](#) 6

hughdancer on [Lights, Camera ... Inaction!](#) 6

Hot Discussions

[FRINGE REVIEW: Dying City](#) 8

[Lights, Camera ... Inaction!](#) 6

[Best of Edmonton 2010 Readers' Picks](#) 4

[Alejandro Escovedo](#) 2



some of the prints were in black and white; and much of it had been cut to pieces and/or scratched beyond use.

“The next ‘up’ was a rainy day in London; I thought I’d organize the boxes, and quite by chance I knocked the lid off one of the boxes and inside were the original dubbing tracks [soundtracks, for the mixing of the sound]. I knew they were original because they were accompanied by the dubbing charts, which were in my handwriting. So all of a sudden we had a soundtrack, but absolutely no pictures. I then began to systematically go through about 294 cans of rushes. It was like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. We’d find one bit of picture and I’d remember it, think ‘that goes there’ and I’d cut it out from the rushes. We’d send it off to the laboratory to be cleaned and restored, and stored digitally. The film you just saw is made up of around 3,000 little bits of film that were put together in that way. Part of me feels ‘my God, we actually did it!’”

According to Palmer, “Leonard has communicated that he was very relieved that the film has finally appeared. Machat’s son, who helped us, told me, that Leonard felt in a strange kind of way he’d let me down, that the film that I’d made had somehow gone and been replaced with a film which he hated.”

Palmer recalls, “About six months after the premiere of the second version, Machat called me up and quietly asked me how difficult it would be to reconstruct the original version. So I remember saying, this was shot on celluloid. The moment you cut the negative, there’s not much you can do. And even now, when we reconstructed the film you’ve seen, we never had found the negative. What you see on the DVD is all positive film, polished, cleaned as best we can.”

For Parker, working on this documentary “has been very special. Because this was a film that was effectively lost, and now we’ve found it.

But it was worth it, says Palmer, to recall and restore his original purposes in making the film: “Yes, the songs are haunting, unforgettably so. The poetry, now restored having been deleted in Version 2 by persons unknown, is extraordinary. But so is the man. Cohen objected in the original film to scenes of a riot in Tel Aviv. I wanted the scenes because they showed Cohen’s power over an audience, not by him shouting, but simply by his presence. Authority doesn’t really describe it; transparent goodness is probably closer. And a profound belief that it is the poet’s responsibility to address the problems of the world, the political problems. “That belief, tough and uncompromising though it is, is the centre of my film.”

Post the first comment: (
Login or Register)

[More Screen Feature...](#)

ALISTAIR HENNING IN SEPTEMBER 9, 2010 ISSUE

Theatre Season Preview

SEE previews the upcoming seasons in Edmonton theatre.

in Theatre Feature

[More by Alistair Henning...](#)

All Content Copyright © SEE Magazine 2008 [About Us](#) [Contact Us](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Contest Disclaimer](#)