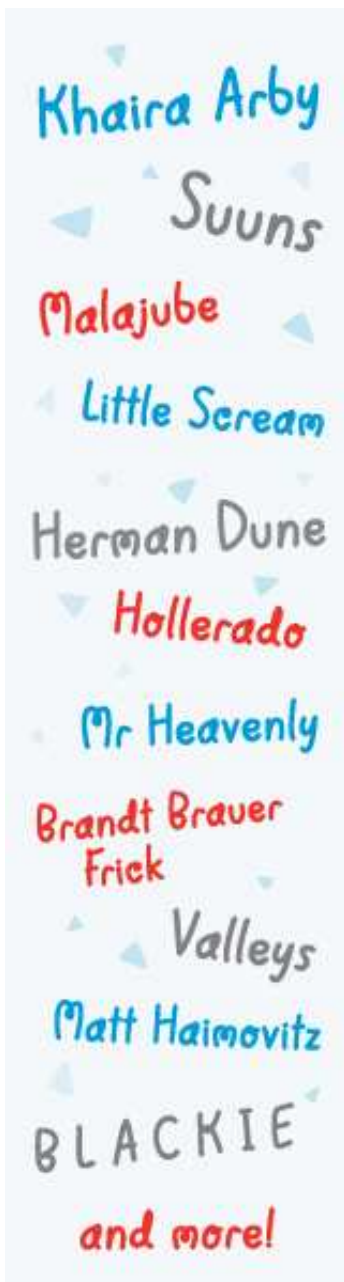


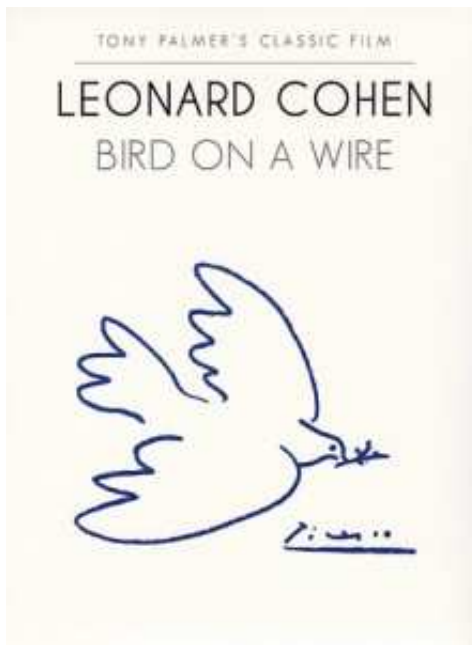


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Dir. Tony Palmer
LEONARD COHEN: BIRD ON A WIRE
The Machat Company / MVD
Format: DVD
Release Date: August 31, 2010
By **Doug Simpson** April 15, 2011



There is a moment during *Bird on a Wire*, director [Tony Palmer](#)'s documentary of Leonard Cohen's 1972 European/Mideast tour that went from Dublin to Jerusalem, when the singer is asked to define success. He tells a journalist that "success is survival."

That's a key component to Cohen's life, work, and the message underlying Palmer's 106-minute film. Songs can come and go; relationships can start and stop; albums can be in and out of print; books can progress from publication to dustbin. But simply surviving through a day, a tour, or more than four decades as a singer/songwriter is an impressive accomplishment in itself. The longevity of creativity is important – not the record sales, tour receipts, or hit singles. Those achievements which transcend the times in which they are written have a lifelong impact, influence, or gravitas.

In 1972, when *Bird on a Wire* was produced, Cohen's musical career was steadily climbing. His acclaimed debut album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia), had come out in 1968; other musicians spread his name and recorded his compositions; and critics and audiences responded to his doom-laden, often dour lyrics. He wasn't as big as Dylan or Paul Simon, but he wasn't far behind. In fact, *Bird on a Wire* resembles Dylan's groundbreaking cinéma vérité movie, [Dont Look Back](#) (dir. D.A. Pennebaker), which memorably observes Dylan's 1965 English tour. As a comparison, in both projects the filmmakers do not deliberately engage the main musicians in front of the camera – they intrude into personal space but do not intentionally become involved in the proceedings. And in both documentaries, the songwriter's life, personality, and character are presented in an relatively objective viewpoint which appears neutral.

Bird on a Wire captures Cohen's tour, from on-stage performances to backstage incidents, from media events to temporary moments of leisure, including candid occasions where Cohen bathes, showers, or swims nude in a pool. There are revealing intervals when Cohen loses his prominent stoicism. This happens when amplifier feedback ruins some concerts – during one scene he ad-libs a tune about the faulty speaker system – and when Cohen, while talking with a beautiful woman, turns to the camera to comment on how difficult it is to have an intimate conversation while a film crew is present.

Cohen's lyrical distinction, which has a confidentiality sometimes bordering on the uncomfortably personal, is strengthened by the film. Palmer's striking concert visuals use many close-ups to enrich Cohen's delivery of his

poetic lines, but Palmer also utilizes other footage – such as then-current and still disturbingly harsh Vietnam War news coverage – to enhance lyrical details. One notable digital improvement absent from the original theatrical film version is French or English subtitles, so viewers can read Cohen’s lyrics as he sings, which helps spotlight the lyrical intricacy. One caveat, though: some pieces which are not copyright controlled by Cohen do not have subtitles, such as “Suzanne,” “Sisters of Mercy” and “Nancy.” There are also several brief hotel interludes where Cohen reads excerpted poems from his 1972 collection, *The Energy of Slaves*, which are a mix of romantic confession (“I perceived the outline of your breasts through your Halloween costume, I knew you were falling in love with me”) and political discourse (“Any system you contrive without us will be brought down. We warned you before and nothing that you built has stood”). Cohen’s blending of body and soul, of a spiritual vigor and his sensuality/sexuality, are also displayed during his renditions of “Sisters of Mercy” and “Avalanche,” but his religious undertones are most clearly heard on “Passing Through,” which includes his conversation with Christ, as well as “Story of Issac,” centering on the Biblical figure.

Another significant Cohen trait highlighted throughout the film is his dry wit, which shines through in a live setting, but is a quality typically downplayed on Cohen’s studio work. Besides the aforementioned episodes about trying to chat to a woman as cameras roll and the hardship of singing over feedback, Cohen humorously discloses what it feels like to sing the same material from one venue to the next, which he describes as being “like a parrot chained to his stand night after night.” The DVD does not have any extras other than the subtitles, but the packaging comes with archival pieces, including a booklet with early 1970s press clippings and photos; a full-color concert poster reproduction; and a full-color promotional postcard reproduction. While those items add to the DVD’s collectability, the film is the real treasure and a must-have for Cohen fans or anyone interested in a closer examination of the artist, his music, and his life.

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