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Bird on a Wire: beautiful film of Leonard Cohen and his times

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by Siân Ruddick

This stunning documentary follows Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen on tour in 1973—the one he claimed would be his last.

As Cohen travels through Europe, the mood of the times—one of upheaval and questioning of authority—seep through.

At one gig he tells audience members sitting in a balcony, "You seem awfully far away, why don't you come closer?"

Fans and Cohen defy security and begin to play a set with people sitting all over the stage and on the floor.

Cohen talks about his sense of loneliness and alienation, and his hatred of the soulless reproduction of music.

His work is very cooperative and he views the process of performing and writing music as a collective act.

When one interviewer refers to "your band", Cohen corrects them, referring instead to "the women and men I play with."

The original documentary was rejected by Cohen.

Another producer took on the project and made a new film—but the BBC wouldn't show it, and it had one screening before disappearing.

This version is based on the original soundtrack and the cut-offs—both recently rediscovered.

It is beautifully shot.

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This film is a delight for any Leonard Cohen fan—but the photography and the atmosphere of the piece make it stunning viewing for anyone.

The only reservation I have is over one of Cohen's gigs in Israel.

Backstage he tells his fellow musicians that "Jerusalem means city of peace".

Whether he was trying to articulate hope, aspiration or reality was hard to tell.

Bird on a Wire, directed by Tony Palmer, will be shown on BBC4 on 19 November at 9pm and is be available at www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer for seven days afterwards

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