

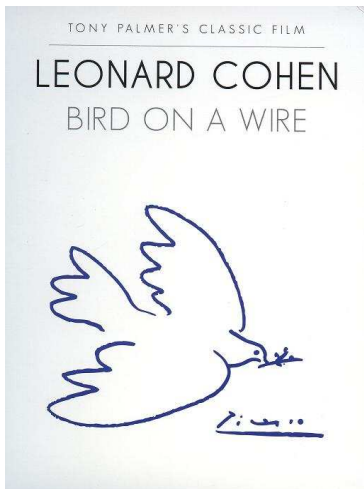
LEONARD COHEN BIRD ON A WIRE

Directed by Tony Palmer

The Machat Company, issued by Conveyor Canada

DVD: Colour & B/W

106 minutes



For Leonard Cohen “success is survival.” And how well he has survived, our Canadian troubadour, a hit as poet and novelist in his early youth, a romantic by temperament, an international celebrity as balladeer whose “broken-down nightingale” voice has never deterred the lustful advances of female groupies. “You can’t hurt us anymore,” he intones at the opening of Tony Palmer’s restored 1972 documentary. “Nothing that you’ve built has stood...every system you have contrived without us will be brought down.” The tone is firm, solemn, yet gentle, suggesting how a militant anti-Establishment figure can sound like a contemplative pacifist without becoming a laughing stock. *Bird On A Wire* suggests repeatedly that no matter how dangerous his ballads may sound, the singer is a gentle, self-deprecating artist who has always striven to be free of the usual entanglements that often bedevil us.

Issued just in time to celebrate Cohen’s 76th birthday, this documentary follows Cohen’s 20-city tour in 1972, beginning in Dublin and ending a month later in Jerusalem, with stops in Paris, London, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, etc along the way. Originally released as a film in 1974, it had a very limited run and then “disappeared.” However, in 2009, 294 rolls of film containing many of the original rushes and much of the 1972 soundtrack were discovered, and Palmer (one of the leading directors of music documentaries and historical films in the world) was able to restore much of this footage on DVD. The visual quality is, of course, variable, going from grainy to over-exposed, from alluring sepia to warm colour, and there is no spoken narrative through-line. But the latter point is not necessarily a drawback, for the whole point of the documentary is intimacy. So, there is footage of Cohen swimming nude in an indoor pool, Cohen skipping stones on the surface of water, Cohen urging those who cannot hear him on a faulty sound system to move closer to the stage, Cohen in actual performance, Cohen patiently giving offstage interviews, Cohen politely turning down prospective groupies, Cohen paying off some disgruntled Berlin fans, and Cohen reflecting on his career.

Fans will relish excerpts from four poems from *The Energy of Slaves* and seventeen music tracks, including “Suzanne” (an indisputable classic by any measure, but whose rights were stolen from him by a long-ago friend), “Passing Through,” “Sisters of Mercy,” “Chelsea Hotel,” “So Long, Marianne,” and “Bird on a Wire.” Sceptics, of course, will probably remain sceptics, but only if they lack a taste for lyrical writing. The singing is another matter. Cohen is always adenoidal rather than mellifluous, but he often achieves *duende*, and he has enviable modesty and

humility about his voice and performance. As he reveals on film, he rarely listens to his own records and can't stand his own voice for more than thirty minutes. So what is his allure? Can't be sexual any more. Must be his sheer poetry and inner vulnerability. "I only do the music that I like to do," he maintains. He fits into a type of singing that is common in Montreal (where he was born and educated)—that of the *chansonnier*, the street and café singer. But to this is allied the style of the Jewish cantor, for though he is not a practising Jew, Cohen had an orthodox father and was well versed in the cantor tradition. So, his music combines various genres: light rock, romantic ballad, folk song, spirituals, and blues. His texts (by his own admission) are sometimes difficult, but they have a seductive quality. And he is a wonderful medium for them because he doesn't treat them as museum pieces or sacred pieces.

Palmer's film is not hagiography. There is the usual expected documentary footage of Cohen's childhood, but the film shows us a Cohen who questions his own popularity and success. It shows us how vulnerable he can be even in live performance when spontaneous applause at the outset of a song unsettles him. It shows him in various moods: gentle impatience over a chronically malfunctioning sound system, mediation between a restless audience and rough security guards, shock over insulting Berliners accusing him of deliberate fraud because of a delinquent sound system, honest thoughtfulness about the factors that affect how a song will live, and, most sentimental of all, overwhelming tearfulness at the significance of the tour's ending in Jerusalem (city of peace).

This, then, is a documentary by a famous artist of an even more famous artist. And fans of each will most assuredly approve *Bird On A Wire*. The package includes a booklet of press clippings, original poster for the film, and a lobby card celebrating the Poet of Rock Music.

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