

The Telegraph

Bird on a Wire, preview

This 'lost' 1972 Leonard Cohen documentary is as moving as the man's music.



Portrait of an artist: Leonard Cohen

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You can't move these days for behind-the-scenes music documentaries. From Take That's *Look Back, Don't Stare*, shown on ITV at the weekend, to Bruce Springsteen's film about the making of his *Darkness on the Edge of Town* album, on sale this week, it seems no album release is complete without a fly-on-

the-wall documentary to accompany it. Some of these – the Springsteen documentary and the Rolling Stones film *Stones in Exile* released with their reissued *Exile on Main Street* album earlier this year – have provided rare footage and some interesting insights into the making of their respective albums. But most of these films are bells and whistles, fancy extras to entice fans to part with more cash for albums they may already own.

An honourable exception to this though is the long lost Leonard Cohen documentary, *Bird on a Wire*, to be shown on BBC 4 this Friday. While five million viewers were tuning in to the reconciliation of Take That, I was lucky enough to be invited to a small preview screening introduced by the film's director Tony Palmer. Palmer has already staked his place in history as one of the great music documentarists of the 20th century, from his landmark Seventies music series *All You Need is Love* to the surreal Frank Zappa film *200 Motels*.

Palmer recounted the unbelievable tale of how the film was 'lost' for 38 years. After being invited to follow Cohen in 1972 on what was then billed as one of his last ever tours, Palmer filmed the Canadian singer songwriter – or poet as he preferred to be called – on the road across Europe, ending up at a final gig in Jerusalem. However, Cohen objected to the documentary's final cut and after re-editing it himself, it received one showing before disappearing without trace.

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That was until a couple of years ago, when Palmer took a call from a friend who had discovered some rusting tins in a film vault, labelled *Bird on a Wire*, and was sure "it wasn't the film with Goldie Hawn in it."

From these hundreds of decaying film reels and offcuts, Palmer recreated the original 1974 film and I have to be grateful that he bothered because *Bird on a Wire* is simply one of the most beautiful and moving music documentaries I have ever seen.

The behind-the-scenes Leonard snooping is both fascinating and hilarious- whether it's Cohen swimming naked in a hotel pool, patiently answering the mindless questions of journalists, being propositioned by saucer-eyed groupies, arguing with promoters over rubbish speakers, or imploding with anxiety and fleeing the stage on the final night of his tour.

It is also a compelling document of Europe in the early Seventies, of life on the road for ordinary musicians, passing through grey airports and stopping at the side of the road for sandwiches while an atmosphere of war and hostility played out in the news pages.

But more than that the film is a visual match for Cohen's music itself. There is achingly beautiful footage of Cohen singing at the peak of his powers, lit and framed so as to look like a renaissance painting. Palmer is unafraid to linger on the performances as much as the backstage shenanigans because as Cohen himself says, the songs for him are like meditations – he has to really inhabit them in order to be able to sing them. The camera freezes on Cohen's tear-stained eyes as he breaks down in front of the Jerusalem audience and it feels almost painfully intimate.

Yet in watching him sing, you see more of the soul of this unique, enigmatic artist than any fly-on-the-wall footage could reveal. I came out of the screening with tears in my own eyes to find a queue of people waiting to buy a signed copy of the film from Tony Palmer himself.

Bird on the Wire is up against *Children in Need* this Friday but even if you don't think you are a big Leonard Cohen fan, take a break from the charity marathon and watch this wonderful film

Bird on a Wire, BBC4, Friday 9.00PM

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