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A singer must cry: Bird on a Wire on DVD



Leonard Cohen's recent return to the world's stages after a decade and a half of relative reclusion has, among other things, served to

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remind us just how magnetic a presence the soon-to-be 76 year old troubadour can be. Few performers combine Cohen's particular blend of humility and authority, gravity and humour—he's a consummate showman who seems metabolically incapable of taking his audience's adoration for granted. Yet Cohen, who only began his career as a recording artist in his mid-30s, who insisted on singing his own material despite the limitations of his voice, whose musical styles have only intermittently dovetailed in any way with the transitory fashions of that have marked his 40+ years in music, has also at times revealed a deep personal ambivalence to touring—which might help explain the hiatus. The tension between Cohen the showman and Cohen the tender, at times mercurial poet obsessed with communion and not "cheating" his audience, his band, or himself with anything less than emotional honesty is very much a part of what makes his concerts as riveting and even transcendental. This tension is eloquently captured in Tony Palmer's documentary *Bird on a Wire*.



The 1972 European tour, which ended in Israel and was plagued by technical problems, which featured Cohen's famed producer Bob Johnston on organ and the angelic Jennifer Warnes sharing back-up vocals with Donna Washburn, possesses a certain mythical status in Cohen's biography. I'd read many years ago about the final concert in Jerusalem where Cohen dropped acid and wept on stage during a performance of 'So Long, Marianne.' The story always had this apocryphal tinge to it. I never believed I'd actually see the event on film, but here it is. It almost wasn't. After getting a limited release in a reportedly messily assembled version unauthorized by Palmer in 1974, *Bird on a Wire* vanished. It was only in 2009 that 294 rolls of original film were discovered, re-assembled and restored by Palmer for its new, first-ever DVD

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release from Conveyer.



Cohen was 37 then, at one of many career peaks, and clearly magnetic on a number of levels—we actually see him decline invitations from not one but two different Euro-babes who approach him after a performance. He initially seems rather serious but soon enough regains his trademark deadpan humour and sense of mischief and camaraderie. He improvises an ode to a speaker that refuses to stop emitting some galactic-sounding feedback. He invites audience members to come up on stage to hear the music better when the PA shuts down completely. He improvises a self-satirizing introduction for himself: “Leonard Cohen is going to sing songs of anguish and despair... The skulls appear... They’re lowered by wires by a man above the stage...”

Once the songs are properly begun they’re all of them magic. A rendition of ‘Suzanne’ with spectral organ and bubbling bass is especially buoyant. He and the band imbue ‘Story of Isaac’ with an extra layer of portent. ‘Please Don’t Pass Me By’ is used as a sort of call to arms. And of course there’s ‘Marianne.’ Cohen had already left the stage once that night, apologizing profusely but insisting that things just weren’t working. Yet the audience, many of them teenagers, won’t have it. At one point they offer to sing to *him* if he’d just come back out. There’s a hilarious bit where, while backstage and still uncertain he can continue, Cohen convinces himself that what he really needs is to shave, and shave he does—if he can only stop laughing. Most impressively, he doesn’t cut himself. It’s unclear whether or not he ever actually confessed to the audience that he was already deep in the throes of his LSD trip.

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Palmer's career as a filmmaker—he's also worked in theatre and opera and as a critic—has been grounded in an interest not only in music but also portraiture. His eclectic range of subjects have included Cream, Maria Callas, the Beatles, Ginger Baker, and Benjamin Britten. His most famous film is probably the 1971 batty satirical rock flick *200 Motels*, co-written and co-directed by its featured performer, Frank Zappa. *Bird on a Wire* benefits as much from Palmer's obvious facility with gaining superb coverage of musical performances with apparently skeletal resources as it does from its wide-ranging access to off-stage business and Cohen's personal transparency. All of the original coverage, photographed by Les Young, looks terrific, particularly for its distinctive framing of strikingly lit faces during the performances. All of what appears to be new post-production work however—the titles, the cutaways to home movies, the recycling of scenes from Don Owen's 1965 film *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, or most especially the images of violence in Vietnam—look comparatively hokey, at times in poor taste, and, above all, unnecessary. The image and sound captured during the actual tour easily stand on their own without this additional contextualizing. Thankfully, the original material is about 95% of what we get here, which makes *Bird on a Wire* essential viewing for fans of Cohen and of tour documentaries in general.

Posted by JB at 8:35 AM 

Labels: Bird on a Wire, Bob Johnston, concert, Don Owen, drugs, home movies, Israel, Jennifer Warnes, Leonard Cohen, Les Young, LSD, music, public weeping, shaving, skulls, Suzanne, Tony Palmer, Vietnam

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- Stagger Lee (1)
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- Stanley Tucci (1)
- Stay Hungry (1)
- Stephen Frears (1)
- Stephen King (1)
- Stephen McHattie (1)
- Steve Coogan (3)
- Steve Martin (2)
- Steven Soderbergh (5)
- sticky nowhereiness (1)
- Still Life (2)
- Stranger Than Paradise (3)
- Straw Dogs (2)
- Styx (1)
- submarine (1)
- suburbs (5)
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- Sugar (2)
- suicidal penguin (1)
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- Summer Hours (4)
- Sunset Blvd (2)
- surrealism (1)
- Susan Sarandon (2)
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- Sven Nykvist (2)
- sweaty man love (2)
- Synecdoche NY (3)
- Takashi Shimura (3)
- Take Aim at the Police Van (1)
- Talking Heads (4)
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- taxi cabs (3)
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- telenovela (2)
- television (3)
- Terrence Malick (5)
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- Terry O'Quinn (1)
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- Texas (9)
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- The Atrocity Exhibition (1)
- The Ballad of Narayama (1)
- The Band's Visit (1)
- The Big Lebowski (3)
- The Birds (1)
- The Clash (1)
- The Class (3)
- The Color of Money (1)

- The Dark Glow of the Mountains (1)
- The Day the Earth Stood Still (2)
- The Dead Zone (3)
- The Deer Hunter (2)
- The Doors of Perception (1)
- The Exiles (2)
- The Exorcism of Emily Rose (1)
- The Fountain (2)
- The French (19)
- The Furies (2)
- The Godfather (1)
- The Headless Woman (2)
- The Hunter (1)
- the illusion of choice (2)
- The Innocents (1)
- The Invention of Morel (2)
- The Jugger (2)
- The Killers (1)
- The Last Mistress (1)
- The Long Goodbye (1)
- The Man Who Wasn't There (1)
- The Mother and the Whore (1)
- The Moviegoer (1)
- The Ongoing Moment (1)
- The Others (1)
- The Passenger (1)
- The Passion of Joan of Arc (2)
- The Postman Always Rings Twice (1)
- The Proposition (1)
- The Reckless Moment (3)
- The Road (3)
- The Rolling Stones (1)
- The Seventh Continent (1)
- The Seventh Seal (1)
- The Shining (2)
- The Small Back Room (1)
- The Sound of Insects (1)
- The Strangers (2)
- The Tenant (3)
- The Terminators (2)
- The Thin Red Line (1)
- The Turn of the Screw (3)
- The Twilight Zone (1)
- The Unconsoled (1)
- The Verificationist (1)
- The Virgin Spring (1)

- The Whole Shootin' Match (2)
- The Young One (1)
- theatre (9)
- Theo Angelopoulos (1)
- There Will Be Blood (4)
- Thomas Pynchon (1)
- Thoreau (1)
- Tilda Swinton (2)
- Tim Orr (2)
- Tim Robbins (1)
- Tim Roth (2)
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- Tobey Maguire (2)
- Todd Haynes (2)
- Tolstoy (5)
- Tom Cruise (1)
- Tom Hanks (1)
- Tom McGuane (2)
- Tom Skerritt (1)
- Tom Waits (3)
- Tommy Lee Jones (2)
- Tony Danza (1)
- Tony Leung (2)
- Tony Manero (2)
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- transfiguration (7)
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- Tyson (3)
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- Ugetsu (1)
- Uncle Rick (2)
- underloved books of 1978 (3)
- Underworld (1)
- unknowability (14)
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- untrustworthy leprechauns (4)
- unwitting cannibalism (2)
- Ursula Zürrn (1)
- vagabondism (3)

- vaginal (14)
- Val Lewton (5)
- vampire (2)
- Van Gogh (2)
- Van Heflin (1)
- Van Morrison (2)
- Vangelis (1)
- vegetables (1)
- Velvet Underground (1)
- Vertigo (1)
- Victor Erice (1)
- Videodrome (2)
- videotape (5)
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- Viggo Mortensen (3)
- vigilantism (5)
- Vincent Price (1)
- vinyl (2)
- Viridiana (2)
- Vivre sa vie (1)
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- voyeurism (4)
- W.G. Sebald (2)
- Waking Life (1)
- walking (6)
- Walter Huston (1)
- Walter Matthau (2)
- War and Peace (1)
- Warren Ellis (2)
- Warren Oates (3)
- waste disposal (2)
- water (6)
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- weird sex (11)
- Wendy and Lucy (4)
- Werner Herzog (17)
- Wes Anderson (1)
- westerns (14)
- What the Crow Said (1)
- White Noise (2)
- wigger (1)
- wigs (3)
- Wild Kingdom (1)
- Will Oldham (3)
- Willem Dafoe (1)
- William Blake (1)
- William Eggleston (1)
- William H. Macy (1)
- William Holden (1)
- William S. Burroughs (7)

- William T. Vollmann (1)
- Wim Wenders (2)
- Winter Light (1)
- Wong Kar-Wai (3)
- Woody Allen (6)
- work (20)
- World War II (5)
- wrestling (7)
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- Yo La Tengo (1)
- yogurt (2)
- Yukio Mishima (1)
- yurt cinema (1)
- Zachary Lazar (1)
- Zerkalo (1)
- Zodiac (2)
- Zola (3)
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