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Film Features

Bird On A Wire: The Strange Story Of A Leonard Cohen Documentary

Luke Turner , October 8th, 2010 01:43

The Quietus speaks to Stephen Machat about the back story to the recent DVD release of fascinating Leonard Cohen film, *Bird On A Wire*

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One of the highlights of this year's damp and muddy Green Man Festival was the screening, on the Thursday night, of *Bird On A Wire* a long-lost documentary that followed Leonard Cohen's 1972 tour of Europe. This intimate and compelling view of a

man who, despite the recent, rapturously received live tour, remains something of an enigmatic character. His songs, poems and novels might have, for thousands, become little guides into the innermost and darkest workings of their own hearts and souls - but Cohen, rarely interviewed, gives little away.

Which is why *Bird On A Wire* is, for the Cohen aficionado, a vital document and insight into the man. It's a film very much of its time, in the language spoken as much as the trousers and the pipes that Cohen's band like to smoke. It captures, like road films must, the funny, sad, high and low times of being on tour. Standouts are Cohen's humour and humility. On one hand, his dealing with the astonishingly forward and stunningly beautiful female fans who pursue him ("I fear I shall disgrace myself tonight", he tells one) reveals a man with very earthy urges. On the other, his difficulty of accepting his fame and audience frustration with a recalcitrant PA - he wishes to give to the audience 'this broken down nightingale' of his voice, not wanting to cheat them.

Strangely enough, *Bird On A Wire* nearly never saw light of day. Cohen himself re-edited much of the footage before its original release in 1974, following which it was largely unavailable, the singer holding onto the original tape. It was left to Stephen Machat, the son of Cohen's manager Marty, to restore the film with the assistance of original director Tony Palmer. We got in touch with Stephen Machat to uncover what turns out to be a rather curious tale.

**Stephen, can you tell us a little of how you managed to get hold of the footage?

Stephen Machat: In Sept 2007, after not seeing Leonard Cohen in a long while, I met him at his home, as I wanted to discuss Buddhism with him. He thought I was coming to confront him about the Kelly Lynch situation and the property of mine that he had taken. He didn't understand that I really wanted to discuss Buddhism with him. He told me he didn't have time for a philosophical discussion, as he was late to get to temple. I thought he was talking about a Buddhist temple. When I asked him which one, he told me it was a Jewish temple. I asked him why he was going to the temple of the Jewish faith. He said, 'I am 74 years old and I am hedging my bets.' He was not sure what happens when he was to die. He was nervous about my visit, and me for I must have wanted more than to discuss life. At this point in the meeting he volunteered that he had the film and he volunteered that he'd give it back to me. I asked him which film. And he said to me the *Bird On A Wire* film. I said 'Leonard, you told me and others that it was missing.' With a devilish, little boy smile taking over his face, he said, 'I

guess I found it.' It took two more years to actually get the film from Leonard Cohen.

How did you go about restoring it, and preparing it for rerelease?

SM: Cohen gave me back the pieces of the film, not the final cut. Over 3000 pieces were assembled to recreate the film. He didn't want this film to see daylight. There was only one way to fix this film so I could get it released. I had to find the original director, Tony Palmer. In the summer of 2009, an associate of mine was harassing me to tell my Led Zeppelin radio payola story on his documentary of the band, but I kept telling him no. He said it would be good publicity for my book, *Gods, Gangsters and Honour*. Finally he wore me down to such a point that I asked him who else is being interviewed? He told me Tony Palmer. I said if Palmer is really doing it, then I will agree to be interviewed immediately after Tony. I showed up as agreed. He finishes his interview and I reintroduced myself, as I had not seen him in over 25 years. After the hellos, Tony asked if I knew where the film was. I told him 'yes', made Cohen finally give me back the film and Tony got to work assembling the film from over 280 reels. Leonard made sure that he did not give me a final copy. He never believed that I would reproduce the film for release.

What did you change?

SM: Really nothing from Tony's original version as Tony did find the audio track to be his guide as he re-edited and restored the film.

Why the decision to add more modern footage and scenes of war and conflict?

SM: The footage was put in because my generation in 1972 lived and thought every spare moment about the US and the war machine. We even put God into our national pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, as all war nations need God on their side. This phrase was dropped in to the pledge in 1954, when our involvement in Vietnam started. My generation wondered, 'would I, or my brother, cousin, husband or friend be drafted next to fight this war to prevent the alleged Communist take over of Southeast Asia?', under the domino theory of the Pentagon or my generation living in Europe wondering whether or not the communists would attack. Leonard's music at this time spoke to the wrong war killing behaviour of fellow man. Man needs to understand that we the human race are killing machines, that is how we finance our economies. WAR. If that scene works as intended, hopefully people will recognise that whether or not you are at a concert, you as a civilian are a part of this wrong war killing behaviour. We the citizens have the right and the collective power to stop wrongs. What was a visual political statement then is very apropos now.

I especially enjoyed the different aspects of Cohen's character - the flirt, the intelligent man, the wry humorist, the spiritual man, and the artist - that the film brings out. Do you think that was the original intention of the project?

SM: My father when he made the movie was so desirous of sharing with the US market the Leonard Cohen he knew because his sales there did not exist. Dad believed that if my generation knew Leonard Cohen like he did, Cohen would gain the recognition that Dad so felt he deserved. In fact, his US record label did not believe in Cohen. He was dropped by the US owned CBS in the US, now the Japanese owned Sony. This is how we put *Death of a Ladies Man* out on Warner Brothers in the US. The intention of the movie was to show Cohen and the 360 degrees of life with his rock n roll road show to make people aware of the artist.

Do you feel Bird On A Wire is an accurate glimpse of Leonard Cohen at the time?

SM: Yes. The movie depicts LC as he was at that time. Tony Palmer did a fantastic job of sharing the Cohen that he captured on film. A very intimate portrait that Tony, to this day, still cannot believe LC let him in that close. It is the most intimate rock documentary I have seen.

There's also a very strong political element to the film that perhaps you wouldn't see in a tour film about contemporary artist. Do you feel it is a snapshot of a more politically engaged time in culture?

SM: Yes, my generation was politically engaged then. Today, no way. We are numbed. Why? I believe that the banks and big corporations have taken over the heart and soul of our living and breathing world. The multinational theft and perpetuation of war that the citizens of Western nations allow their governments elected officials to perpetuate for their puppet masters, the banks and corporations, is disgusting and must be brought to the end.

Music was once upon a time the message that could invigorate, incite and excite a docile youth to become aware of their parents and their grandparents misdeeds. In the 80s Ms Thatcher and Ronald Reagan began the process of the numbing and dumbing of their populations by allowing the corporations with their bankers and with puppet legislators legislating to take over control of the communication in media, news as well as entertainment financing corporations, for these corporations do not create thought they sell what already exist to perpetuate their ruling order. There is no longer independent thought that banks will finance. It is totally controlled to perpetuate the new Sadducee merchant lifestyle. There is absolutely no politics of human essence. It is all about how much we get and why you need to keep doing this. Heaven awaits those who follow our God-blessed governments, owned and controlled by the masters of the universe, your bankers. My generation is the worst of the bunch. We could have made a difference. Instead we sold out to American Express, Visa and MasterCard.

How was it for you on a personal level revisiting a film that your father was so closely involved with?

SM: When I first saw Dad on the tapes, after 22 years of his earth nap, my eyes teared up. It was strange watching your father on film try to manipulate and do what he did so well at a younger age than I am now. I was very happy to feel my father again. I am very happy that my children can see and feel their Grandfather. I loved my father and am so happy this film came out because my Dad was right. Leonard survived the passage of time and is recognized as a man with songs and poems that others should get to hear and feel.

Was Leonard Cohen pleased to see the film reissued? Have you had any feedback from him?

SM: Interesting question. Cohen is a Virgo but he acted like a Gemini. His manager was given the film by Tony Palmer. We were seeking the approval of Leonard Cohen to show the film as a world premiere and to sell special commemorative DVD's of this film at his authorised fan club gathering in Krakow, Poland in early August 2010. The fan club was given the authority from Cohen to show the film. Then at the end of August I received an email from Sony's business and legal affairs telling me that LC and management do not want the film to be seen. Conflicting? Yes. I find it all so amusing. The film is out and, family opinion aside; it is the best movie out there

showing an artist living as a human being. I don't know what the real Cohen thinks or feels about this film, but at the end of the screening in Krakow, his fans gave it a ten-minute standing ovation.

Can you tell us a little of your subsequent work with Cohen?

SM: My job with my father regarding Cohen was to make sure that the materials he created were marketed and promoted. Dad held his conflicted hands of indecision and confusion. Leonard was dad's account at our firm Machat and Machat. However, I loved the promoting and marketing games so I did what I could when I could to keep Cohen's career moving forward when the product was decided on and was schedule to be released. I am a force that pushes and gets others to pay attention to what I feel needs to be heard or seen. The story is fully explained in my book as well as orally spoken and available via iTunes and other digital domains.

What is the most important thing you have you taken from knowing Leonard Cohen, and knowing his music?

SM: The only thing any of us can ever learn from another human consciousness is this - fear destroys love and the truth of man's experience here on earth. To learn to share. I really am happy and proud that I know Leonard and that Leonard was able to teach me so much as I pushed him to share with me who he really is and what he is all about, with or without song.

Bird On a Wire _ is available to buy now [via Amazon](#). Stephen Machat is also the author of _ Gods, Gangsters and Amazon _ which is available to buy as an audiobook on [iTunes](#).

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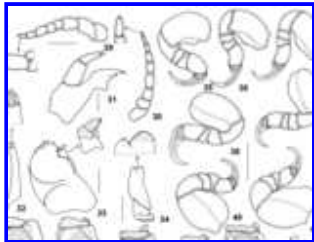
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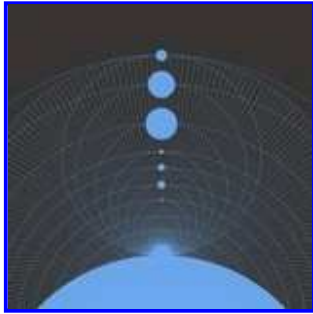
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