



**LEONARD COHEN  
ON LEONARD COHEN**

**INTERVIEWS AND ENCOUNTERS**

**EDITED BY JEFF BURGER**

Leonard Cohen, one of the most admired performers of the last half century, has had a strange and eventful life. Now, for the first time, he tells his story in his own words, via more than fifty interviews conducted worldwide between 1966 and 2012.

In *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*—which includes a foreword by singer Suzanne Vega and eight pages of rarely seen photos—the artist talks about “Bird on the Wire,” “Hallelujah,” “Famous Blue Raincoat,” and his other classic songs. He candidly discusses his famous romances, his years in a Zen monastery, his ill-fated collaboration with producer Phil Spector, and his long battle with depression. He also comments on his classic poetry and novels, the financial crisis that nearly wiped out his savings, and his remarkable late-career resurgence.

Here you’ll find interviews that first appeared in the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*, along with conversations that have not previously been printed in English. Some have been broadcast but never published. And some of the material has not been available until now in any format, including the many illuminating reminiscences that contributors supplied specifically for this definitive anthology.

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# FOREWORD

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I've had the chance to talk to Leonard Cohen on a few occasions, some private and some public.

You should know, and you'll see in this book, that he tends to speak in complete sentences, with careful and appropriate vocabulary. Mr. Cohen is a bit formal, in fact.

This is true even after a bottle or two of wine. We did an interview together once. A room was reserved somewhere on the record company lot, where we sat for more than an hour and bantered. He asked me questions about an album of mine that was just being released. The result was funny, dense; he was being provocative and asking (fair) questions about my personal life, and the world of the songs that I wasn't inclined to answer. Especially since we were being recorded for radio.

After the interview was over and we went out to dinner, though, I decided I would probably reveal what he wanted to know. But to my surprise, I found that although he continued to be flirtatious, he no longer pushed to know, and I didn't pull. So all was left unrevealed. Although he had been candid during the interview, it was still definitely a kind of performance as he was more polite, congenial, and friendly in private.

But still somewhat formal.

I asked him once about his preference for wearing suits. "My father was a tailor," he said. "I am not trying to be Paul Bunyan."

One Saturday I ran into him at a hotel in Los Angeles. He invited me to breakfast by the pool at the next morning. I showed up on time. I wondered whether he would wear one of his well-known suits. He showed up wearing jeans, a T-shirt, cowboy boots, possibly a fedora, and a tailored jacket.

"Would you like to hear a song I'm working on?"

"Of course!" I said.

Without looking at any papers, he then proceeded to recite for the next eight minutes a perfectly metered, perfectly rhymed song. (Unfortunately, I can't remember which one.) I sat, mesmerized.

Then, as I watched, first one girl in a bikini came out behind him and then another. They arranged themselves around the pool for a day of sunning.

By the end of the song, there were probably nine girls in bikinis around the pool.

"You'll never guess what happened!" I said to him, and joyfully described the scene right beyond his back.

Without turning around to see, he just shrugged and smiled.

"It works every time," he said.

When I was a teenager, I was the only one of my friends who listened to him, which I did fervently every day after school. I felt that he was my friend, and this feeling was not changed by meeting him. I loved his darkness and complexity, his fearlessness of song choices. It has been strange to witness his rise in the world. Now I must share him with thousands of people at Radio City and Madison Square Garden.

And with you! Enjoy this book and the eloquence of the man.

—SUZANNE VECH  
New York City, 2011

# PREFACE

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How many of the 701 people inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by 2013 hit their peaks in their mid- and late seventies? Maybe just one: Leonard Cohen, who, at age seventy-three, began his first major tour in fifteen years in 2008, the same year he was inducted into the Hall of Fame. Since then, he has performed all over the world to some of his largest audiences ever; released three popular DVDs, *Live in London*, *Songs from the Road*, and *Live at the Isle of Wight 1970*; and issued the most successful album of his nearly half-century recording career, the emotive *Old Ideas*. That 2012 recording—only his twelfth studio collection—climbed higher on the charts than any of its predecessors, reaching number one in nearly a dozen countries and the two or three position in others, including the United States.

Besides peaking late, Cohen started late, at least as a recording artist. Born in Montreal on September 21, 1934, he didn't release his first album until he was thirty-three. We won't dwell in these pages on what he did before that age, as his early years are well covered in several biographies, most notably Sylvain Simmons's *I'm Your Man*. Suffice it to say that his youth provided strong hints of the direction his life would take. He was a poetry fan by high school and showed particular interest in the work of Federico García Lorca. He also learned guitar and formed a country-folk group, the Buckskin Boys. Then, in the early 1950s, while an undergraduate at McGill University, he published his first poems and won literary competition.

After graduating from McGill, Cohen flirted with the idea of becoming an attorney (can you imagine?) and attended one term at the university's law school. Then he spent a year at Columbia University in New York. But he became increasingly focused on fiction and poetry. He published his first book of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, in 1956. The following year, he returned from New York to Montreal and began taking odd jobs so he could concentrate on his writing. Four years later, in 1960, he published a second book of poetry, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, which ultimately found its way into many college students' backpacks and did much to enhance his prospects. *The Favorite Game*, his first novel, followed in 1963 and *Beautiful Losers*, another novel, arrived in 1966.

But Cohen didn't release his debut album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, until December 27, 1967. And it took him a long time to develop into the performer he is today. You could certainly hear songwriting brilliance—and the influence of a literary background—in “Suzanne,” “So Long, Marianne,” and many of his other early creations; but Cohen onstage in the early years was by all accounts a tentative and limited performer. Today, critics call his strikingly deep voice “a force of nature” and he appears with a magnificent group of backing musicians and singers who beautifully complement his singing. Watching the video of his performance at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970, though, you'd have to conclude that he was getting by at the time largely on the considerable strength of his lyrics and personality.

In the decades since then, he has sold more than 21 million albums and built a large and devoted fan base. He has been the subject of many documentary films and tribute albums and has seen his songs featured in more than fifty films and covered more than thirteen hundred times by such admirers as Judy Collins, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Joe Cocker, Rufus Wainwright, Nick Cave, Jennifer Warnes, Sting, R.E.M., Concrete Blonde, and Jeff Buckley.

But Cohen's story is far from all happy. Though the cloud appears to have lifted in recent years, he suffered from clinical depression for decades. And while relationships clearly matter a lot to him, he has had a long series of failed ones and has never married. Moreover, he found his retirement savings reduced to about \$150,000 in 2004, after Kelley Lynch—his manager of seventeen years and one-time

lover—misappropriated a reported \$5 million. (In May 2006, Cohen won a \$7.3 million civil suit against Lynch. Sylvie Simmons reported in 2012 that “through the various legal proceedings, Leonard has recovered some of his lost money, though nothing like all of it.” Lynch, meanwhile, was convicted in 2012 of harassing Cohen and sentenced to an eighteen-month jail term.)

There have been musical stumbling blocks as well. In 1977, he collaborated with legendary producer Phil Spector on *Death of a Ladies' Man*, an album that many critics—and the singer himself—considered a serious blunder. And then there was 1984's *Various Positions*, which was anything but a mistake—was, in fact, frequently brilliant—but which Columbia Records deemed not good enough for US release (The label distributed it only in Canada and Europe, though an independent company subsequently issued it in the United States; it finally entered the Columbia catalog in 1990.)

Cohen talks thoughtfully and in detail about all these ups and downs in the interviews that follow, many of which have not previously appeared in print or in English. And the man who emerges from these conversations is as complicated and surprising as his career has been. He once said he “dislikes talking” but at times he is positively loquacious. Indeed, there were years when he seemed to give no time-limit interviews—often in his own home—to almost anyone who asked. Then there were the years when he retreated to a Zen monastery; was ordained as a monk with the Dharma name “Jikar,” meaning “the Silent One”; and for long stretches gave no interviews at all. (During one thirteen-year period, which ended in 2006, he made absolutely no public appearances.) In the many new reminiscences provided for this book, quite a few journalists recall him as the most charming and gentlemanly individual they've ever met; a couple of others remember questionable behavior and ostensibly drunken rants. As for the content of the conversations themselves, who else would discuss the “Talmudic sense of human possibility” in one interview and oral sex with Janis Joplin in another?

Cohen's emotional state varies as much in these conversations as his subject matter, but his mood can be hard to read, particularly in his early and middle years. Half a century ago, he was already developing a reputation for being depressed—and for protesting that he didn't deserve that reputation. “If we assume the role of melancholy too enthusiastically, we lose a great deal of life,” he told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Jed Adams in a brief radio conversation that aired on June 10, 1961. “Yes, there are things to protest against and things to hate but there are a vast range of things to enjoy, beginning with our bodies and ending with ideas.... If we refuse those or if we disdain them, then we are just as guilty as those who live complacently.”

When Adams expressed surprise that Cohen didn't seem angry about anything, he replied, “There are lots of things that anger me [but] let us not destroy ourselves with hostility, let us not become a paranoiac. If there are things to fight against, let's do it in health and in sanity. I don't want to become a mad poet, I want to become a healthy man that can face the things that are around me.”

Cohen seemed earnest throughout this interview, but when he talked with the CBC's Bill McNeill for a December 19, 1963, radio broadcast, he sounded somewhat like the early Bob Dylan, who was known for putting on reporters with silly answers to serious if sometimes inane questions. Cohen said he'd been living on the Greek island of Hydra for four or five years “but I keep coming back to Canada to get sick. But it's a very special divine kind of sickness that's absolutely necessary for my life.” Asked whether he was preoccupied with sex, he said, “A man's a fool if he isn't. But I didn't write this thing [ *The Favorite Game*] to titillate, although if it does titillate, it's an extra bonus.”

When journalist Beryl Fox talked with Cohen for CBC-TV on May 8, 1966, you couldn't miss the twinkle in his eye. He told Fox he'd pondered getting a tattoo and when she asked “Where?” he deadpanned, “There's this place on Saint Lawrence Boulevard.” He also mentioned that “sometimes I go down the street and when I'm not in a particularly liturgical mood blessing everything, I divorce

everybody ... in all the houses and I see people bursting out of the front doors and running in different directions and I feel that I've really cleaned up the streets ... just divorcing people. A lot of people want divorce."

As comments like these suggest, Cohen in his early and mid-period interviews could be alternately sarcastic, cynical, or playful. He could also be less than fully candid, perhaps even with himself; he sometimes seems more focused on projecting a persona than on speaking from the heart. But hang in there; he is never less than interesting, even—or sometimes particularly—when he's repeating or contradicting himself. And there comes a time, starting around the late 1990s, when he begins to refer to his longtime public image as a "cover story." At that point, he increasingly discards the cover and talks much more openly about his depressions, his relationships, and his career.

I've never met him, but after reading the interviews and interview-based features collected here, I feel as if I've spent many revealing hours in his company over many years. I suspect you will, too.

I've standardized style in the pages that follow with regard to numbers, punctuation, and the like; I've fixed Americanized British spellings; and fixed some grammatical and factual errors, especially outside quotes. But I've preserved the original magazine and newspaper articles as much as possible and have not done the kind of editing I'd do to a previously unpublished manuscript. I've fiddled just a bit more with the transcripts of audio and video recordings, to remove redundancies and transform the spoken word into something that's workable in print. To the extent possible, interviews appear in the order they occurred; when the interview date is unknown, the publication or airdate dictates placement.

My thanks to everyone at Chicago Review Press, particularly senior editor Yuval Taylor and project editor Amelia Estrich. This is my second book with the folks at CRP, and I still think they're terrific. Thanks, also, to all of those who contributed articles and audio and video recordings and transcripts to this book. Special thanks to the many who provided new reflections and reminiscences and to Alberto Manzano for his help with photography and translations. Thank you to Kathryn Duys for transcribing and translating French passages and to the fans who maintain such helpful websites [leonardcohenfiles.com](http://leonardcohenfiles.com), [leonardcohenforum.com](http://leonardcohenforum.com), and [1heckofaguy.com](http://1heckofaguy.com).

My gratitude goes to my coworkers at AIN Publications, especially colleague extraordinaire Jennifer Leach English. Thanks to my brother and sister, Todd Burger and Amy Downs, and to my lifelong friend Ken Terry. And thanks always to my wife, Madeleine Beresford, and children, Andre and Myriam, all of whom resisted the urge to complain—well, *mostly* resisted the urge—when I disappeared into my home office for hours and days at a time.

Finally, thanks to Leonard Cohen for contributing to the soundtrack of our lives for nearly half a century. I'm glad he's now receiving the degree of praise he has long deserved. As I write this, he's seventy-nine years old, and I know he can't go on forever. But as he sings, "You'll be hearing from me baby, long after I'm gone / I'll be speaking to you sweetly, from a window in the Tower of Song."

—JEFF BURGER  
Ridgewood, New Jersey, 2011

# PART I

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## THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

*Cohen draws attention with his poetry and fiction, then picks up a guitar and delivers classics like “Suzanne,” “Sisters of Mercy,” “Bird on the Wire,” and “Famous Blue Raincoat.”*

# TV INTERVIEW

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ADRIENNE CLARKSON | May 23, 1966, *Take 30*, CBC (Canada)

Though Leonard Cohen gave a few brief interviews in the early sixties (several of which are quoted in this book's preface), he spent most of the period living in semi-seclusion on the Greek island of Hydra. He was nearly as reclusive in the late sixties and early seventies, when he was granted only the occasional interview.

One such interview was with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Adrienne Clarkson, who decades later would describe herself as a Leonard Cohen groupie who has been to dozens of his concerts all over the world. Clarkson talked with Cohen shortly after the publication of his second novel, *Beautiful Losers*. At the time, Cohen's debut album release was still a year and a half away, but the thirty-one-year-old artist was already receiving lots of attention for his novels and poetry, particularly in his native Canada. As the introduction to Clarkson's interview makes clear, however, that attention wasn't exactly all favorable. —Ed.

**Adrienne Clarkson:** Listen to what some of the critics said about his latest book.

**Announcer:** [*reads from reviews.*] “This is, among other things, the most revolting book ever written in Canada.” [Robert Fulford, *Toronto Daily Star.*] “I have just read Leonard Cohen's new novel, *Beautiful Losers*, and have had to wash my mind.” [Gladys Taylor, *Toronto Telegram.*] “Verbal masturbation.” [The *Globe and Mail.*] “We've had overdrill and overkill and now we have oversex.” [The *Globe and Mail.*] “At its best *Losers* is a sluggish stream of concupiscence exposition of ... nausea.” [*Time.*]

[*Cohen reads a poem.*]

**AC:** How does it affect you when you read a poem that you've forgotten? Is it like reading a poem by someone else?

**Leonard Cohen:** Well, this time I was just faking it because for the purposes of continuity I had to read this poem but I hadn't read it for some time, and I left out a verse and I'd forgotten the meaning of the whole poem.

**AC:** Does it in any way disturb you? Isn't every poem a part of you as a poet?

**LC:** It doesn't disturb me 'cause I don't think anything was at stake. But I think that the message comes through with the body, with the eyes, and the voice. You could really be reading the instructions from a shoe-polish can.

**AC:** What's the point of writing poetry if you could just as well read instructions on how to polish your shoes?

**LC:** It depends. If you want people to have shiny shoes, you want to write those kinds of very good instructions. And if you want to polish other parts of yourself, you do it with poetry.

**AC:** How can you relate the creating of a work of art with an act of polishing shoes?

**LC:** It depends on where you're looking. It depends exactly where you've got your binoculars trained. If you stand far enough away, it's probably the same thing. You know the story of that juggler who performed his acrobatics and plate balancing in front of a statue of the virgin? Well, I think it really comes down to that. You really do what sings.

**AC:** Is that the key to your diversity?



LC: I'm all in one place.

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AC: You may seem so to yourself. But you must admit that for other people looking at you, the poet, the novelist, the man who lives in a white house on the [Greek] island of Hydra, scion of a Jewish family from Montreal, pop singer, and writer of pop songs ... all these things may add up to Leonard Cohen but they do look rather complex at first.

LC: Well, I think the borders have faded between a lot of endeavors and people are no longer capable of those kinds of poses, like the poet on the mountain with the cape or the singer catering to the masses. All those kinds of expression are completely meaningless. It's just a matter of what your hand falls on and you can make what your hand falls on sing then you can just do it. If someone offered me a building design now, I'd take it up. If someone offered me a small country to govern, I'd take it. Anything going, I'd like to try.

AC: Would you feel bad that maybe the building you designed would fall down or the country that you were trying to govern would turn into chaos?

LC: I don't think the building would fall down and I have perhaps an arrogant dream that the country would [endure] ... I knew a fellow [*Michael X. —Ed.*] who was trying to take over a country. He's a friend of mine in England. He's the head of a large Negro movement there and he will probably take over a country soon. I asked him what the purpose of his government will be and he said, "It will be to protect the people from government because they're fine as they are. Just let 'em alone and no government will just keep everything away."

Things are really a lot more substantial than we think. And I think that my building would probably last. It would either last or fall down depending on the needs of the people inside it. Some people may want a building to collapse over them at a specific time. A friend of mine designed a mural for a coffee shop in Montreal with a special glue on it. This glue dried every winter and the mural fell to pieces and he would have to be engaged to repair the mural. He said, "Cars are designed with built-in obsolescence—why not murals?"

AC: What about poetry?

LC: I think that history and time pretty much build obsolescence into poetry unless it's really the great stuff and you never know whether you're hitting that.

AC: Don't you ever?

LC: Sometimes you know about it. But I'm not interested in posterity, which somebody said is a kind of paltry form of eternity. I'd like to see headlines ... instead of the Spencer case [*An apparent reference to Vancouver mail clerk George Victor Spencer, who was caught collecting information for the Soviet Union —Ed.*], something like "[Canadian painter Harold] Town Finishes Painting Today." I'd like the stuff I do to have that kind of horizontal immediacy rather than something that is going to be around for a long time. I'm not interested in an insurance plan for my work.

AC: What about the kind of diversity that you want to do? Do you want to write musical comedies like Town wants to do?

LC: Oh, yes, sure. I'd like to write a musical comedy.

AC: What would it be about?

LC: I'd really have to fall on an idea. But I'd like to do that. Maybe Town would sing the lead.

AC: Does he sing?

LC: All the time. He's a very good singer.

AC: Do you mean with notes and everything?

LC: He's not tied down to anything.

AC: Does that help—to sing?

LC: I think it helps everything.

AC: Does that mean you have to opt out of society? It's a terrible phrase but it's the only way I know how to put it to you.

LC: Well, it's a good trick if you can manage it, but I don't know anybody who's managed to do that. Everybody's on the crust of this star. I don't know anybody who's opting out, except a couple of astronauts and they always come back. And they bring their own smoked-meat sandwiches with them. Nobody really wants to leave.

AC: When you go off to your house in Hydra, do you want to leave? Do you leave things behind?

LC: Well, I have no plans to go back there. I've been in Greece off and on for six years now. I've just been discovering Toronto for the past couple of days. It's really nice.

AC: Is it exciting?

LC: I think it's a happy revolution.

AC: A revolution?

LC: Well, that's how we describe all phenomena today. But there's a quiet one in Quebec and I think there's a happy one here. I was walking on Yorkville Street and it was jammed with beautiful, beautiful people last night. I thought maybe it could spread to the [other] streets and maybe even ... where's the money district? Bay Street?

AC: King and Bay.

LC: King and Bay. I thought maybe they could take that over soon, too.

AC: Do people need the kind of happiness that you can sing about?

LC: I don't establish any of those criteria for happiness. I just like to sing. I don't have a program to establish with my singing. I just like to get up and sing my piece and sit down, listen to other people.

AC: Do you actually not make value judgments about what you like to do better or less? Right now you're writing songs. You're not writing poetry, you're not writing a novel, so you're liking [songs] better.

LC: I've got a new book of poems ready to go out ... but I don't want to be glutting the market with new work so I'm holding that back a while. No, everything keeps on going or it stops. You know when you're

happy. There's been so much talk about the mechanics of happiness—psychiatry and pills and positive thinking and ideology—but I really think that the mechanism is there. All you have to do is get quiet for a moment or two and you know where you are.

**AC:** And so this knowing where you are ... you don't need the help of anything like drugs or liquor?

**LC:** It's not a matter of the help. You can cooperate with the vision that alcohol gives you. You can cooperate with the vision that LSD gives you. All those things are just made out of plants and they're there for us and I think we ought to use them. But also there's another kind of high to get from refusing to use them. There are all kinds of possibilities. Asceticism is a nice high, too. Voluptuousness is a high. Alcohol is a high. [Harold] Town gets beautiful under alcohol. I just get kind of stupid and general and throw up. But some people get beautiful with alcohol.

**AC:** Do you see things in terms of highs and lows or is this just an appeal to sensation?

**LC:** It's not just a matter of sensation. What I mean by high is not a manic phase of swinging, knocking down buildings, and laughing hysterically. I mean that you're situated somehow. There's a nice balance. You're in the center of your own orbit or as Dylan said, you fade into your own parade.

**AC:** In one of your poems ["Why I Happen to Be Free," in *Flowers for Hitler*], you say, "Now more than ever I want enemies." This is in your poem about how people conspire to make you free. Do you feel that way about the criticisms of your book?

**LC:** Oh yes. I'd feel pretty lousy if I were praised by a lot of the people that have come down pretty heavy on me. I think, first of all, in a way there's a war on.

**AC:** What kind of war?

**LC:** Well, it's an old, old war and I think that I'd join the other side if I tried to describe it too articulately, but I think you know what I mean—that there's a war on, and if I have to choose sides, which I don't generally like to do, I'd just as well be defined as I have been by the establishment press.

**AC:** Thank you, Leonard Cohen.

## COHEN CLIP

### On Self-Discipline

"It takes a fantastic inner compulsion [to write]. Nobody writes who doesn't really drive himself. I feel secretly that I am much more highly disciplined than anybody I meet. I know what it is to sit down at a desk for long periods of time and lay it on. *Beautiful Losers* was written every day until it was finished. I wrote a minimum of four hours a day and a maximum of twenty. The last two weeks I worked twenty hours a day. That was when I flipped out."

—from "Is the World (or Anybody) Ready for Leonard Cohen?"  
by Jon Ruddy, *Maclean's* (Canada), October 1966

# AFTER THE WIPEOUT, A RENEWAL

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SANDRA DJWA | February 3, 1967, the *Ubyyssey* (Vancouver, Canada)

By the time Sandra Djwa interviewed the then thirty-two-year-old Cohen, he was on the verge of receiving serious acclaim for his music. The release of his first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* remained more than ten months away, but Judy Collins's recordings of his "Dress Rehearsal Rag" and "Suzanne" appeared shortly before this conversation. (Both were on her November 1966 sixth album, *In My Life*, which spent thirty-four weeks on the US pop charts.)

The interview, which Djwa conducted while earning her PhD at the University of British Columbia, ran on page eight of the school student newspaper and was not touted on the front page. When I emailed current editor Jonny Wakefield to ask about including the piece here, he replied, "Wow, we had an interview with Leonard Cohen?"

Djwa remembers the conversation well, however. "I had written an essay called 'Leonard Cohen: Black Romantic,'" she told me, "and had sent it to the journal *Canadian Literature*. In it, I had argued that Cohen was a 'black' romantic, and writing the essay had given me some sense of the questions to ask in the interview." Djwa added that during her conversation with the singer, "I sensed that he was a little spaced out but he was very helpful and spoke of his sense of 'wipe-out' while in Greece."

The interview was not Djwa's last encounter with Cohen. "He phoned me in the mideighties from California, regarding his friendship with Canadian poet, lawyer, and political activist F. R. Scott, whose biography, *The Politics of Imagination*, I was then writing," Djwa recalled. "He said he had attended law school at McGill for a time because it had been a good place for Scott, who was then McGill's dean of law. Scott gave Cohen permission to stay for a time at his summer cabin at North Hatley [a village in Quebec, Canada—Ed.], where he wrote much of [his first novel] *The Favorite Game*. Cohen was doubtful about leaving the family clothing business to become a writer, but he recalled that Scott 'gave me the courage to fail.'" —Ed.

**Sandra Djwa:** At one point, when reading *Spice-Box*, seeing all the poems that you simply call "songs" and later, when you started singing on the TV show *Sunday*, I thought of you in connection with the Yiddish word "ngin." I think it means "singer of the people."

**Leonard Cohen:** Ngin, yes. That's close to the tradition. We have all somehow lost our minds in the last ten or fifteen years. Whatever we have been told about anything, although we remember it, and sometimes operate in those patterns, we have no deep abiding faith in anything we have been told, even in the hippest things, the newest things. Everybody has a sense that they are in their own capsule and that the one that I have always been in, for want of a better word, is that of cantor—a priest of a catacomb religion that is underground, just beginning, and I am one of the many singers, one of the many, many priests, not by any means a high priest, but one of the creators of the liturgy that will create the church.

**SD:** Is that one of the reasons why the dominant personalities in most of your books are poet-priests? Even in *Beautiful Losers* the narrator-historian is a priest by election.

**LC:** Yes, and since this is the vocabulary we are using for this discussion, I would say that *Beautiful Losers* is a redemptive novel, an exercise to redeem the soul.

**SD:** I also thought it was a pop-apocalypse. **LC:** Yeah, sure, that's good.

**SD:** But how do the two go together? That's what I don't understand.

**LC:** When there's a complete wipeout, there's a renewal. In that book I tried to wrestle with all the deities that are extant now—the idea of saintliness, purity, pop, McLuhanism, evil, the irrational—all the gods we set up for ourselves.

**SD:** But isn't there a kind of artistic dishonesty in setting up ideas to wrestle with and then trying to put the structure of a book on it? It doesn't always work.

**LC:** If you could see the man who wrote that book. I have always said that my strength is that I have no ideas. I feel empty. I have never dazzled myself with thought, particularly my own thought—it is one of the processes that my heart doesn't leap out to.

When you said “a singer,” that's it. A singer is one who embodies in his person the idea. I have never felt myself to be a man of letters. I've always felt that whatever there was, was me, and there was never any distance between myself and the reader. I've never had the feeling of writing a book but of going up and seizing somebody's lapel or hem.

I've always wanted to be created just like the priest creates the prayer for the mass for the congregation. It's not the idea of imposing a prayer but that he creates the finest part of themselves. It's that job more than anything else that I'm interested in.

**SD:** There seems to be a certain pattern in your work, that of creation, moving between aspiration and disintegration. It seems to me that your myth of art has two women figures, that of the beloved, the aspiring figure, and that of the mad-woman, the destructive. The whole structure seems to be that of the Orpheus myth.

**LC:** Absolutely. I've always honored both the wrathful deities and the blessed deities and I'm in the middle completely. There are no functions that I have in my daily life that give me any distance from what I do and I systematically cut all the things that might. I've burnt all my bridges. What you say is true and I acknowledge it as we sit here. As it comes out I just feel that I'm a child. There's a poem about this. I just wrote it yesterday and can't quote it exactly: “I have come to this green mountain / I am thirty-three / I am a child of the double trinity.” One is dark and one light and the third that comes from it like a braid that takes its color from both, like a salamander. That seems to represent me to myself. That's the way it's always been and I don't think I have control over it myself. I can tell you honestly, I've tried a lot of disciplines—yoga, Hebraic discipline—in an effort to control my mind but I find that I have no control. It's not that a man chooses the gods that he worships—it's the gods who choose him. And it's only when we come closest to the gods that we engage in creation. But I feel that these parts are unreachable parts of myself. There are times when I feel that I'll never do another thing. Creating a work is a lot of pain and that's all I'm trying to get across. And because of the pain you haven't got the opportunity to see the whole arena.

I'm not trying to dramatize or anything, but I vomit a lot at ideas. It's not that I put things in. It's just that certain things obsess me and I get nauseous. There are things I have to do. Of course you've got to watch yourself to see that you don't get addicted to pain and remember that there is another deity and that ecstasy is the other side. The one is the way to the other.

**SD:** Let's talk about Leonard Cohen, the folksinging personality.

**LC:** I wouldn't call myself a folksinging personality. I think this nation has a great case of schizophrenia. There's no contact, in a sense, between the people who watch me on TV and the other half. I really don't care what they call me. I'm not a particularly good painter but I'm doing a little painting now, putting together a collection. I have this feeling that if you liberate yourself, anything you lay your hand on can sparkle. Professionalism is the enemy of creativity and invention. There's a possibility for men to live in a way of continually changing their environment. It's a matter of whether or not you believe a man can change his environment. I believe he can. My painting and my singing are the same thing.

I don't care what people call me, whether you call it folksinging or some people call it a priestly function or some people see it as a revolutionary activity or acidheads see it as psychedelic revolution or poets see it as the popularization of poetry. I stand in with all these people. These are all the people who

say we can change, get out of pain. That's why I'm interested in pop. In a way this is the first time that people have ever said, "This is our age and we exalt in it and we delight in it, it is ours." It's an assault on history and it's an assault on all these authoritarian voices who have always told us what was beautiful. I like to be created by pop because it's an ally in my own time. My time says it's beautiful and it's part of me and I want to be created by it.

**SD:** Is that why you choose an excerpt from a Ray Charles record— "Somebody said, lift that bale" [from "Ol' Man River"]—as an epigraph for *Beautiful Losers*?

**LC:** Yes, I think that's the real news on the streets today. Somebody saying it can be better ... maybe we can't but somehow we can get closer to our center. Somebody saying whatever there is around that we don't like can be changed—the monolith has begun to dissolve.

**SD:** Are you suggesting the disintegration of personality when you quote from [Italian Jewish writer] Primo Levi at the beginning of *Flowers for Hitler*?

**LC:** That quotation is, "Take care not to let it happen in your own homes." He's saying, "What point is there to a political solution if in the homes these tortures and mutilations continue?" That's what *Flowers for Hitler* is all about. It's taking the mythology of the concentration camps and bringing it into the living room and saying, "This is what we do to each other." We outlaw genocide and concentration camps and gas and that, but if a man leaves his wife or they are cruel to each other, then that cruelty is going to find a manifestation if he has a political capacity and he has.

There's no point in refusing to acknowledge the wrathful deities. That's like putting pants on the legs of pianos like the Victorians did. The fact is that we all succumb to lustful thoughts, to evil thoughts, to thoughts of torture.

**SD:** In this admission you're suggesting that you're working in the same structure as are the contemporary writers—maybe it starts with [Louis-Ferdinand] Celine—[William] Burroughs, [Hugh] Selby, Gunter Grass, and for that matter, [Jean-Paul] Sartre in *Nausea*.

**LC:** The only thing that differs in those writers and myself is that I hold out the idea of ecstasy as the solution. If only people get high, they can face the evil part. If a man feels in his heart it's only going to be a mundane confrontation with feelings, and he has to recite to himself Norman Vincent Peale slogans—"Be better, be good"—he hasn't had a taste of that madness.

He's never soared, he's never let go of the silver thread and he doesn't know how it feels to be like god. For him, all the stories about holiness and the temple of the body are meaningless.

**SD:** When Sartre talks about the salauds, the cowards who are us all, they're the ones who refuse the experience of nausea. There's some point at which you allow yourself to go or you don't. [D. H. Lawrence talks about this too.

**LC:** The thing about Sartre is that he's never lost his mind. He represents a wonderful Talmudic sense of human possibility, but I know he's never going to say "and then the room turned to gold." He'll say "The room turned to shit." But the room sometimes does turn to gold and unless you mention that your philosophy is incomplete. Like Bertrand Russell, he hasn't flipped out. Anybody who has flipped and survived, who hasn't been broken by conformity or pure madness like an incapacity to operate, knows the ecstasy and the hallucination and the whole idea of the planets and of the music of the spheres and of endless force and life and god— enough to blow your head off. And Sartre never had h

head blown off. The thing that people are interested in doing now is blowing their heads off and that's why the writing of schizophrenics like myself will be important.

## COHEN CLIP

### On Writing *Beautiful Losers*

"I wrote *Beautiful Losers* on [the Greek island of] Hydra, when I'd thought of myself as a loser. I was wiped out; I didn't like my life. I vowed I would just fill the pages with black or kill myself. After the book was over, I fasted for ten days and flipped out completely. It was my wildest trip. I hallucinated for a week. They took me to a hospital in Hydra. One afternoon, the whole sky was black with storks. They alighted on all the churches and left in the morning ... and I was better. Then I decided to go to Nashville and become a songwriter."

—from "Beautiful Creep," by Richard Goldstein, the *Village Voice* (New York), December 28, 1967

## COHEN CLIP

### On Women

"When I see a woman transformed by the orgasm we have reached together, then I know we've met. Anything else is fiction. That's the vocabulary we speak in today. It's the only language left ... I wish the women would hurry up and take over. It's going to happen so let's get it over with. Then we can finally recognize that women really are the minds and the force that holds everything together; and men really are gossips and artists. Then we could get about our childish work and they could keep the world going. I really am for the matriarchy."

—from "I've Been on the Outlaw Scene Since 15," by William Kloman, the *New York Times*, January 28, 1968

## COHEN CLIP

### On Revolution

"I have the feeling that every time you mention the word revolution you delay it twenty-five seconds. I've just found that abstract thought and talk about the revolution—and I see it in big red letters—doesn't really serve any purpose. Somehow each man has to determine what kind of life he's going to lead in terms of what he thinks a good life is. As for a political program, I'd have to leave that to the theoreticians. As for street action, I'd have to leave that to the tacticians. Wherever I happen to find myself I try to lead my life as decently as I can, generally falling along those lines. Somehow just to conduct your life as if the revolution had already taken place."

—from "Leonard Cohen," by P. Dingle, *Rat Subterranean News* (New York), 1967

## COHEN CLIP

### On Buying Clothes

"I've had that raincoat for ten or twelve years now. That's *my* coat. I have one coat and one suit because, for one thing, I find it very difficult to buy clothes at a time like this. I somehow can't reconcile it with my visions of a human benefactor, to be buying clothes when people are in such bad shape elsewhere; so I wear out the old things I've got. Also, I can't find any clothes that represent me. And clothes are magical, a magical procedure, they really change the way you are in a day. Any woman knows this, and men have discovered it now. I mean, clothes are important to us and until I can discover in some clearer way what I am to myself I'll just keep on wearing my old clothes."

—from "An Interview with Leonard Cohen," by Michael Harris, *Duel* (Canada), Winter 1967

# LADIES & GENTS, LEONARD COHEN

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JACK HAFFERKAMP | Late 1970, interview | February 4, 1971, *Rolling Stone*

Cohen, who moved to the United States in 1967 to pursue a career in music, began to garner attention in the pop arena after the December 27 release that year of his debut album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*. The record—which spent fourteen weeks on the charts, where it peaked at number eighty-three—featured such now-classic tunes as “Suzanne,” “Sisters of Mercy,” “So Long, Marianne,” and “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Goodbye.”

A second album, *Songs from a Room*, followed on April 7, 1969. Though arguably just a bit weaker than its predecessor, it contained the highly popular “Bird on the Wire” (often referred to as “Bird on a Wire”) plus such masterworks as “A Bunch of Lonesome Heroes” and “The Old Revolution.” This disc charted for seventeen weeks and reached number sixty-three.

Perhaps one reason these albums didn’t sell better is that Cohen granted few interviews to promote them and in fact performed only occasionally between 1967 and 1971. In late 1970, however, he did talk about *Songs from a Room* and an about-to-be-released third LP, *Songs of Love and Hate*, with *Rolling Stone* writer Jack Hafferkamp. The new album, which came out March 19, 1971, included such tours de force as “Joan of Arc” and “Famous Blue Raincoat,” the latter a song/letter about a love triangle that ends “Sincerely, L. Cohen.” Clearly the artist had reached a new creative peak.

Hafferkamp, whose article includes a description of one of Cohen’s early concerts, conducted the interview in Berkeley, California. “At the time,” he told me, “I was in a period of great turmoil: I’d recently been dumped by my young wife, was dodging the draft, and was wondering where and how I would find rent money. Cohen’s studied craziness seemed like an island of sanity. Not much has changed since then.” —Ed.

Leonard Cohen’s fans are word people. They believe a song’s lyrics are more important than its instrumentation, packaging, or the lead singer’s crotch. It could even be that for most of them, words have become the first-aid station in the preventive detention camp of their feelings. Certainly they are a helpless romantics, trapped by rage in the age of efficiency.

Cohen, of course, is crazy, but he is cunning enough to keep on the loose. A mystery man with a big nose, he is a “beautiful creep.” He wants to be handsome, but settles for looking better than he expected. And wishing to be slick, he succeeds just enough to keep on wishing. He has no desire to be a pop star yet he wants to sell records.

Over the house phone at Berkeley’s stately old Claremont Hotel, he agrees to a few questions only after I assure him that we will meet on equal terms. “I never do interviews,” he says. “I prefer a interviewer to take the same risks that I do. In other words, not to make a question-and-answer kind of scene, because I’m interested in ... like a description from your side ... to practice the novelist’s rather than the interviewer’s art. Say, like what was the feeling of the interviewer and how does that relate to the work we all know. Rather than like ... put me on the line for this or that type of question ...”

Cohen ordered a scotch and soda for me from room service—at the time it seemed like the perfect drink. He introduced me to Charlie Daniels, a member of his touring band, the Army. Once an eight-cigarette-a-day addict, Charlie is now down to five sticks of gum at once.

As I set up the tape recorder, Cohen turned down the sound from the TV. He left the picture tuned to *Lassie*. A definite feeling of uncertainty settled around us, the intruders. Cohen carefully scrutinized us. He repeated his insistence that our meeting be held on common ground. “I had to be reminded of other things I’ve said. It’s just sheer fatigue which has allowed me to conduct this whole scene. I don’t believe in it.

“One of the reasons I’m on tour is to meet people. I consider it a reconnaissance. I consider myself like in a military operation. I don’t feel like a citizen. I feel like I know exactly what I have to do. Part of it is familiarizing myself with what people are thinking and doing. The kind of shape people are in is what I am interested in determining ... because I want to lay out any information I have and I want



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