

An Appraisal: Leonard Cohen, Master of Meanings and Incantatory Verse



Credit

Valentin Flauraud/Reuters

Leonard Cohen, who was 82 when he [died on Monday](#), was young once. That can be hard to remember after his years of public, silver-haired eminence: touring arenas while he was in his 70s and playing leisurely three-hour-plus shows that seemed to slow down time itself. He intoned his songs with serene gravity, revealing once again how carefully chiseled every one of his quatrains is. And with every line he shared, implicitly and in his lyrics, there was a humbling knowledge of mortality: one that grows even more significant on Mr. Cohen's final studio album, ["You Want It Darker,"](#) which was released less than a month ago.

In ["Who By Fire,"](#) from 1974, one of his many songs that is both a list and an incantation, he itemized causes and sites of death, getting morbid while keeping a hint of puckishness:

Who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the nighttime,
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
Who in your merry, merry month of May,

Who by very slow decay.

Mr. Cohen was aware, always, of every option.

In his concerts, Mr. Cohen played the venerable sage, dapper in his suits and precisely angled hats. He was also sly and avuncular, making droll, deadpan comments in his sepulchral voice. He had aged to match the perspective he had brought to his lyrics since the late 1960s: a long view that stretched back to biblical and psychological archetypes and envisioned myth and history — and the mind-twisting economy of Zen koans — far more often than the everyday. Perhaps because he was already in his 30s when he set aside novels and poetry for songwriting, he was a grown-up from the start.

Mr. Cohen was a monumentally painstaking songwriter who described, in interviews, a process of endless writing and rewriting for his lyrics. By his accounts, he tinkered with some of his songs for years on end. That meticulousness was obvious in the songs he did release, which he did in no great hurry: 14 studio albums in 49 years.

Bob Dylan's semi-free associations were sometimes a too-obvious influence, particularly on Mr. Cohen's early-1970s albums, but the Cohen trademark was the knife-edged paradox, the finely balanced lyrics that can be deliberately heard (and read) in contradictory ways: reverence or blasphemy, affection or animosity, reportage or mockery, tragedy or comedy.

[“Everybody Knows,”](#) a dark masterpiece of bitter cynicism from 1988 that Mr. Cohen wrote with the singer Sharon Robinson, opens with politics that still ring unfortunately true:

Everybody knows that the war is over
 Everybody knows the good guys lost
 Everybody knows the fight was fixed
 The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
 That's how it goes
 Everybody knows

Then, because political battles are not always physically felt, the song's catalog of betrayals veers toward the personal:

“Everybody knows that you've been faithful/Ah, give or take a night or two.”

As serious as he was, Mr. Cohen was always frisky too. His first albums, especially, are suffused with appreciative eroticism and sensuality: describing a lover with “your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm” in [“Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye,”](#) or recalling, with explicit details, a tryst with Janis Joplin in “Chelsea Hotel #2,” which has her declaring, “We are ugly but we have the music.” The Cohen song that became an unlikely pop perennial, “Hallelujah,” veers between biblical allusions and ecstatic sex.

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In its melody and chord progression, [“Hallelujah,”](#) which has been subjected to renditions both humble and bombastic, points to something Mr. Cohen's countless literary admirers don't mention: He understood tunes, and he knew they were more than just backdrops to his words. It's one thing — a complicated, prodigious thing — to write such fastidious lyrics, and then to mock that fastidiousness by rhyming “Hallelujah” with “what's it to ya.” It's another to carry them in a melody that, once created, seems to sing itself.

“Hallelujah” is a near-perfect succession of tensions and releases, which stay no less magical despite the way Mr. Cohen analyzes them in the first verse of his lyrics: “the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the major lift.”

Mr. Cohen had to cope with the limitations of his vocal cords. That's why his first exposure, with songs like the infidelity-friendship-intimacy conundrums of “Famous Blue Raincoat,” came via the prettier voices of singers like Judy Collins. In Mr. Cohen's early years he was a low tenor, decent enough technically and smart enough as a melody writer to keep his songs where he could sing them. On his debut album, “Songs of Leonard Cohen,” the producer John Simon gave Mr. Cohen exactly as much counterpoint as he needed, although Mr. Cohen complained, in a 1967 interview with *The Village Voice*, “They tried to make my songs into music.” Later, as his voice plummeted down to a near-monotone bass register, he used the voices of women — as angels, consorts, muses, ghosts — to provide melodies around him.

Mr. Cohen was clearly aware of how many of his album titles insisted that his work was music above all: “Songs from a Room,” “Songs of Love and Hate,” “Recent Songs,” “Ten New Songs.” Sometimes, he tried to be palatable to pop radio. He delved widely across idioms, writing not just three-chord folk and pop but tunes that hinted at rock, blues, country, klezmer, Viennese waltzes and Greek rebetika — even disco on the hard-nosed, trenchant [“I'm Your Man”](#) in 1988. And in one of the most improbable (and mismatched) collaborations in pop history, Mr. Cohen made his 1977 album “Death of a Ladies' Man” with Phil Spector.

Mr. Cohen could frustrate his listeners by treating some albums, like the 2004 record “Dear Heather,” merely as skeletal demos. One of the benefits of his [latter-day touring](#) was that he rescued some songs from misbegotten studio arrangements. On his final studio albums — in 2012, 2014 and 2016 — he collaborated with an unexpected and adept fan: the producer Patrick Leonard, who wrote and produced “Like a Prayer,” among many other songs, with Madonna.

Yet it's inevitable that Mr. Cohen will be remembered above all for his lyrics. They are

terse and acrobatic, scriptural and bawdy, vividly descriptive and enduringly ambiguous, never far from either a riddle or a punch line. “There is a crack in everything/That’s how the light gets in,” he advised in “Anthem.”

His final ruminations on his last album, “You Want It Darker,” were on mortality, love and a divinity that he faced and questioned to the very end. “Steer your way through the pain that is far more real than you/That’s smashed the cosmic model, that blinded every view/And please don’t make me go there, though there be a God or not,” he intoned in [“Steer Your Way.”](#) In his last songs, as always, he sought stark truth before comfort.

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