

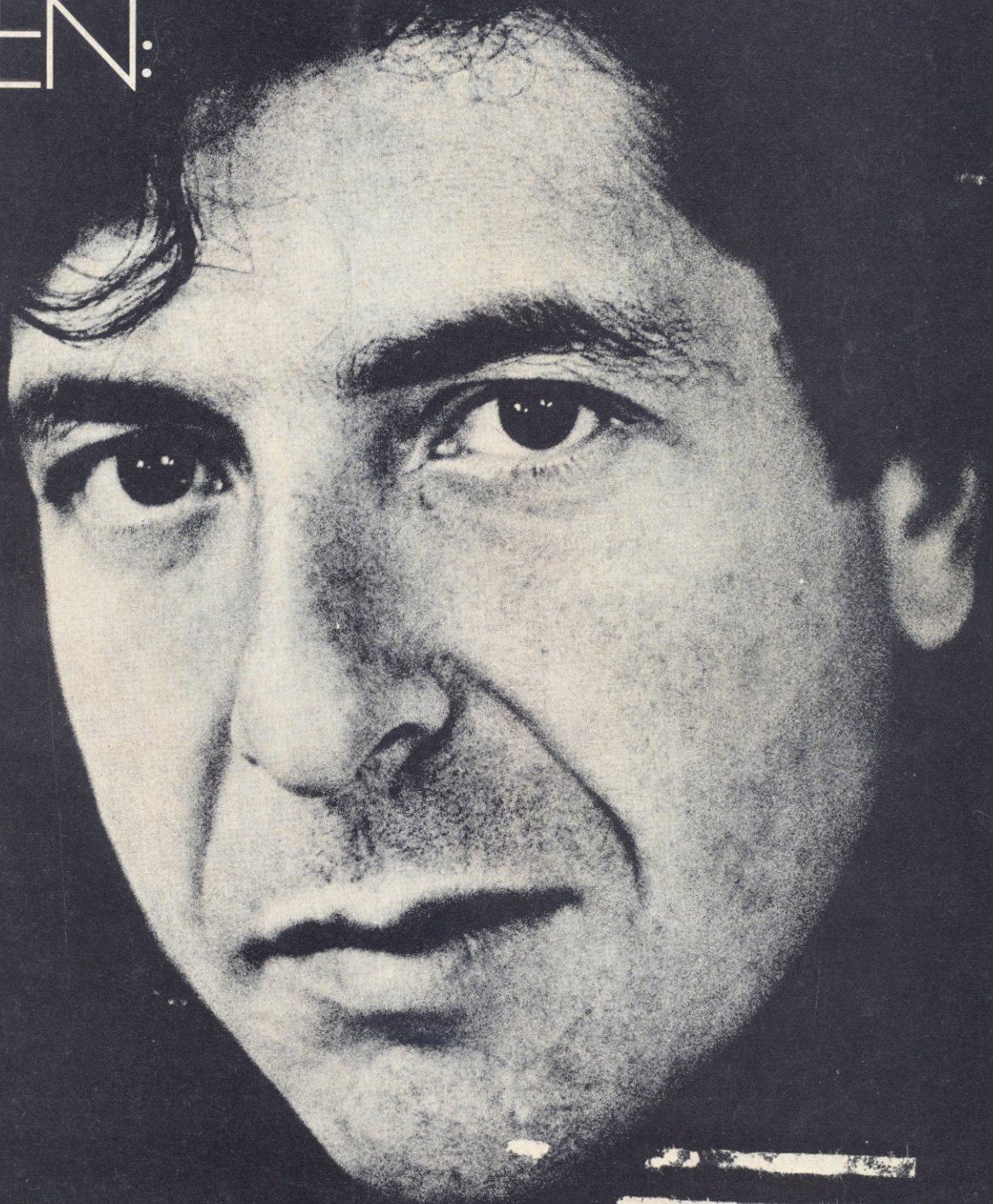
Mordecai Richler on
The frightened Wasps of Westmount

Saturday Night

June 1969 35 cents

LEONARD
COHEN:

the
poet
as
hero



Articles by Gordon Fairweather, Ken Lefolij, Mary Lowrey Ross

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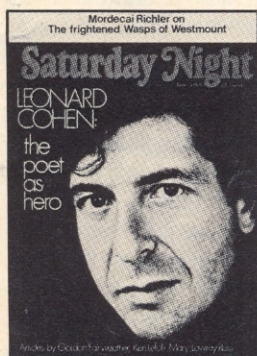
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THREE WRITERS contribute to our ten-page celebration of the work and life of Leonard Cohen: Jack Batten, who with this issue rejoins the SATURDAY NIGHT masthead as associate editor; Michael Harris, who is a young Montreal poet and who originally conducted the interview with Cohen for *Duel*, a literary magazine at Sir George Williams University; and Don Owen, who is the director of, among other films, *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and *The Ernie Game*. ★ Ken Lefolii offers some free advice to the Davey Committee on page 35; he's now at work on a book about the corporate press in Canada and elsewhere. ★ Gordon Fairweather ("Foreign Affairs," page 20) is a Progressive Conservative member of parliament. ★ George Jonas, whose poem, "For a liberal leader," is on page 38, is the author of a collection, *The Absolute Smile*. ★ After too long an absence, Mary Lowrey Ross returns to SATURDAY NIGHT with her review of the new Hemingway biography, on page 41.★

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The first Canadian to emerge as a major figure in the world of pop lyricism, Cohen is here viewed by a critic, by a friend, and by himself

LEONARD COHEN: THE POET AS HERO

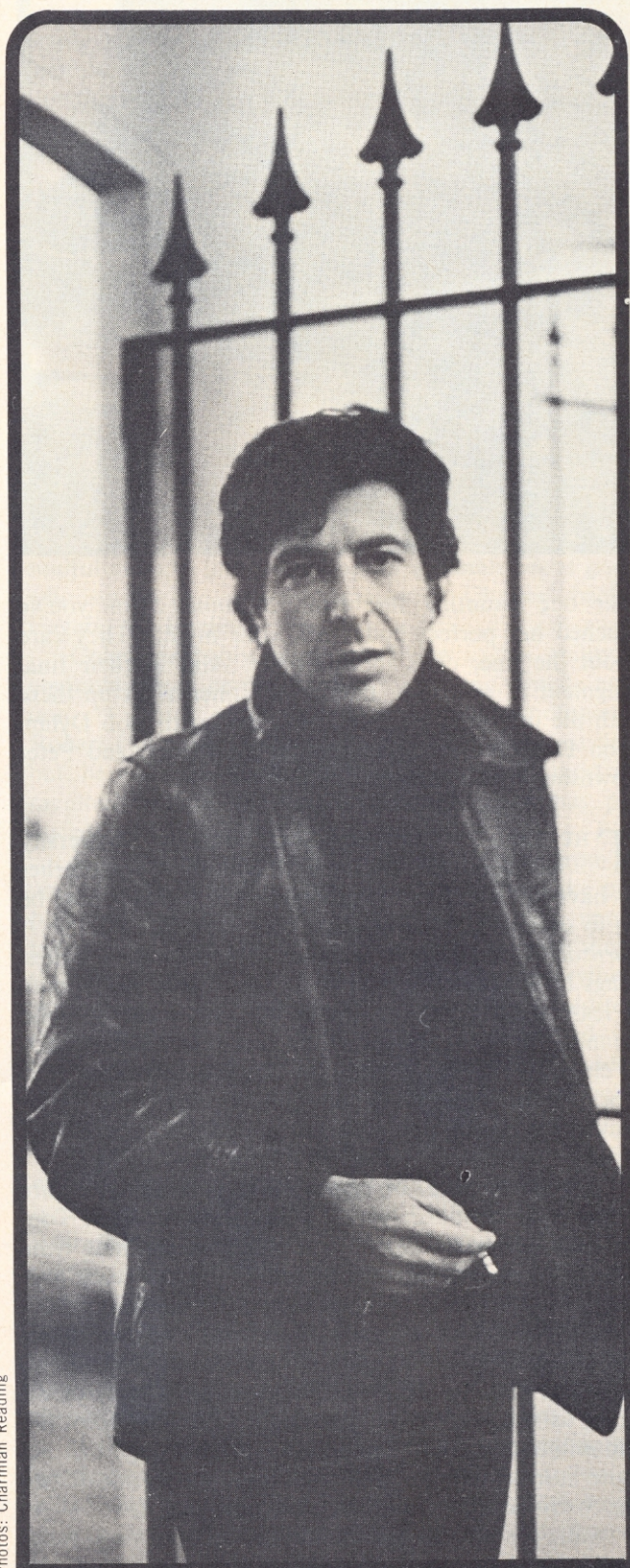
By Jack Batten

THERE'S A LARGE and important and noisy crowd of Leonard Cohen admirers out there who don't care, or maybe even know, that he won a 1969 Governor-General's Award for his poetry. They revere and adore Cohen as a poet, but few of them are among the fifteen thousand Canadians and more thousands of Americans who have bought his *Selected Poetry* this year and elevated the book to best-seller status. And their concept of Cohen's poetry, in fact of all poetry, and of the milieu in which it should naturally flourish, hardly squares with the view conventionally entertained by Eng. Lit. majors and poets-in-residence at leafy eastern colleges.

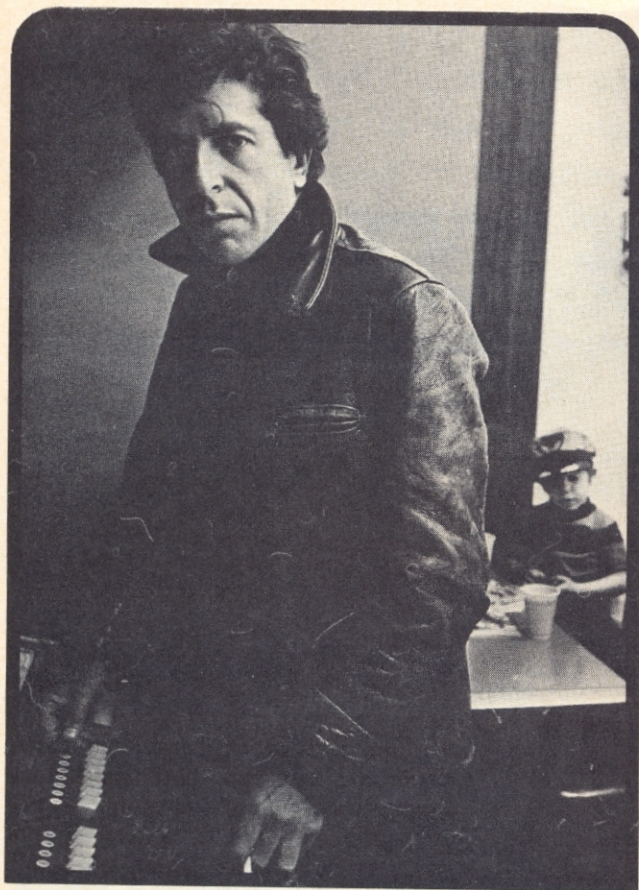
This different Cohen crowd is made up mostly of kids, of hard-core rock 'n' roll fans, of folkies, hippies and groupies, of young people who wear long hair and clothes that are, in a current favourite adjective of theirs, freaky. They take their Cohen, not off the printed page, but from record albums, and for exegeses of his work, they look, not to literary quarterlies, but to a San Francisco pop-music magazine called *Rolling Stone*. To them, Leonard Cohen is not the distinguished Canadian poet, not the respected Canadian novelist — he is something grander: Leonard Cohen, the stone-perfect (to quote more jargon) Canadian folk-rock singer and writer.

The kids have made Cohen a pop star and have made his songs pop classics. They first recognized his special genius during his first important public appearance as a musical performer, at the 1967 Newport Folk Festival, when Cohen stole the audience's cheers from Joan Baez and Pete Seeger and the other established stars. When he cut his first record album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, on Columbia, shortly after the festival, the kids bought it, and in 1969 they are still buying it at the rate of three thousand copies per week in North America. Now they're sending his second album, *Songs From A Room*, released early this spring, toward a Gold Record, symbol in the recording biz of a million sales.

What is perhaps more significant is that this young Cohen crowd has taken passionately to his "poetry" — for to them, of course, the lyrics of all rock and folk songs are as poetic as anything in an anthology on a freshman English course. They discuss, analyze and agonize over the images in Cohen's songs, most especially



Photos: Charmian Reading



over one haunting line from *Suzanne*: "For you've touched her perfect body with your mind." They care about the line, care about Cohen. And in their final judgment of priorities, they rank Cohen right up there with the other great poets of the day, with Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jim Morrison of The Doors, and Peter Dinklage of The Who.

THE USUAL CUSTODIANS of poetry — university lecturers, literary critics, editors of quarterlies — have lately begun to appreciate that the kids may be on to something, that perhaps rock lyrics *are* poetry. A *Partisan Review* writer recently compared the Beatles' songs to Shakespeare, and at the University of Toronto at least one English lecturer is teaching songs by John Lennon and Mick Jagger in his first-year modern-poetry class. At the New School for Social Research in New York, meanwhile, learned symposia on rock lyrics make up a crucial part of a course called Expanded Poetry.

It's hardly true, of course, that all rock lyrics are consistently poetic or even literate. Indeed, most Top-40 songs are pure *shlock*, as moronic as anything from the *Rock Around the Clock* era of fifteen years ago. And even the "serious" rock writers, Dylan not excluded, are capable on occasion of turning out pretentious and dreadfully literary stuff. Then too, all pop songs, good and bad, have the superb advantage simply of existing as songs. A lyric that might otherwise look flat and without logical meaning on a printed page can acquire at least an emotional meaning from the music and the rhythmic momentum that accompanies it.

Still, for all the qualifications, the best rock lyrics of the last half-dozen years constitute a powerful, im-

mediate, lively and colourful poetic form. They deal with an astonishing range of topics — the delights and risks of drug-taking, explicit sex, revolution (very fashionable at the moment), infidelity, poverty, politics — and convey a broad and unprecedented, at least for pop music, sweep of moods and emotions: alienation, fear, emptiness.

Perhaps the most effective lyrics leave aside specific subjects in favor of attempting to reflect the very essence and feel of today's world, to tell us all "where it's at." John Lennon, in his efforts to project the fragmented, disjointed chaos of the 1960s, has worked his way through surrealism (*I Am A Walrus*), social commentary (*Eleanor Rigby*), floating fantasy (*Strawberry Fields Forever*) and ornate, druggy escapism (*Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*). Lennon's images are invariably wild and flashing, and though they may not always make narrative sense, they capture almost exactly the swift, confusing whirl of our world.

Dylan, the other master of rock poetry, as well as Jim Morrison, Paul Simon (of Simon and Garfunkel), Peter Dinklage, Mick Jagger (of the Rolling Stones) and a few others share Lennon's preoccupations and methods, but Leonard Cohen covers a slightly different corner of the pop music scene. Cohen explores and chronicles a smaller world than the others, a place where people actually fall in love but are unable to sustain their love. Men and women, in Cohen's songs, are always separating, at least physically. But they aren't necessarily experiencing a breakdown in their loving relationship; rather they're suffering a failure of commitment. And that, in 1969, is a subject that intrigues all the kids.

ALICE FREEMAN first met Leonard Cohen in a room at the Four Seasons Motel in Toronto one morning around eight o'clock. The meeting happened six years ago when Alice was eighteen and at university; she was just as pretty then and as fiercely intelligent as she is now, but she also had a dreamy, romantic streak that she prefers to deny today. Like a lot of other bright young girls, who make up the largest part of Cohen's pop audience, she got to him simply by phoning him, and when he said (as he invariably does) sure, come around and talk, she found herself knocking on his motel-room door and feeling very comfortable about it.

"I remember looking at his feet for a long time after he asked me into the room," Alice says of the first meeting. "He was wearing just socks and his feet were very attractive, and then I noticed that he wasn't as tall as I expected. He acts taller than he really is. I've heard other women say the same thing.

"I stayed for two hours and we talked about absolutely everything. It was a terrifically intense conversation and I went through two complete packs of cigarettes while we talked. He had a guitar beside him on the bed. I'd read *The Favorite Game* and *The Spice Box of Earth*, and I knew him as a novelist and poet but not as a musician or song writer. At one point, he picked up the guitar and sang a poem he'd set to music — it was the one from *Spice-Box* that begins 'Hold me hard light, soft light hold me' — and it was a totally beautiful moment.

"But mostly, that first time, it was the talk. You

have to be very alert with Leonard because he jumps topics all the time. His mind slides back and forth in subjects and in time and even in the sort of language he's thinking in. He's so intense, and I remember after I went home from the motel, I got into bed and slept for the rest of the day."

Alice has met, phoned and written to Cohen many times since the first meeting. She once addressed a letter to him c/o General Post Office, Athens, Greece, and it found him. She saw him in a bar in New York near the Chelsea Hotel, and she has had coffee with him in half a dozen different places in Toronto. And one time she phoned a furnished apartment in Montreal where Cohen was staying. Marianne answered; she was the lovely blonde Norwegian girl Cohen lived with for many years and, Alice recalls, "she had a voice like an angel — really, when she talked, you could hear little bells tinkling."

Then there was the concert at York University a couple of years ago, just before his first record came out.

"What he did, he mesmerized the five hundred people in the hall," Alice says. "He walked on to the stage and lit some incense and looked out in the audience and said very quietly, 'The person here in the most pain is me.' Then he went into a soft chant and got everybody in a nice trance. After that, he talked and read and sang for three hours and every single person worshipped him. It turned into a Leonard Cohen love-in night."

When the concert was over, Cohen did something characteristic that both disturbs and attracts Alice — he got up and walked away, leaving behind everything, his books, his incense, his guitar. He vanished so successfully that the girl who promoted the concert couldn't find him to hand him his fee for the night.

"He's always doing that, disappearing and deserting his people and his possessions," Alice says. "He's always alone, and he does almost all of his living inside his own head. He never really lives anywhere physically and I always wonder where he changes his clothes and what he does with his underwear."

"He actually does see himself as a constant wanderer, as a kind of travelling body of pain. You can hear all of that in the words to his songs, and I think the image of Leonard in pain, in danger, attracts a lot of girls. I mean, it isn't a big sex thing with most of them. They want to mother Leonard and protect him."

"I worry about Leonard — like, is he going to be alive next year?"

COHEN HAS ALWAYS made it clear that he feels more comfortable in the bright, airy, emotional world of pop music than he does in the more intellectual world of poetry.

"I've always felt very different from other poets I've met," he said a couple of years ago. "I've always felt that somehow they've made a decision against life. I don't want to put any poets down, but most of them have closed a lot of doors. I always felt more at home with musicians. I like to write songs and sing and that kind of stuff."

He started playing his guitar in 1950 when he spent the summer at a socialist camp near Montreal, but he wasn't attracted to the instrument for purely musical

reasons. In his early teenage years, he tended to be the fat little kid that nobody liked, and a guitar seemed an instant-popularity device. "I used it as a courting procedure," Cohen says. "Probably I got down on my knees to serenade a girl. I was shameless in those years."

To this day, his guitar playing suggests a skill acquired around campfires and honed at solemn gatherings of folk-song devotees, and for all its aptness and, at times, funky spirituality, it remains rather rudimentary and functional. So, for that matter, does his singing. Cohen's voice is hardly a smooth, practiced, musicianly instrument; most often, in quality, it's strongly reminiscent of Bob Dylan's essentially unmusical voice. But then, an enormous number of today's pop singers sound like Dylan simply because he was the first to realize that you could take an ordinary voice and, by adding some honestly felt emotion, by working in a few phrasing tricks perfected by older country-and-western singers, by throwing in some inflections familiar to Negro city blues shouters, you could create an extraordinary vocal style. Cohen has followed something of the same process, adding for extra effect a handful of licks from Ray Charles, the black singer and pianist who evolved, out of the blues, gospel music and jazz, the style known today as soul. Cohen has said that for one long period he listened to old Ray Charles records until they warped. And the Charles influence is obvious, for instance, in Cohen's recording of his own song, *So Long Marianne*, especially in the chorus with its dying, soulful melodic line and its use of a female vocal group who sound like a white version of Charles' backup singers, the Raelets.

Cohen probably surpasses Dylan in his ability to communicate a certain hushed, appealing, fragile emotion. "Cohen's voice has been called monotonous," Robert Christgau wrote, correctly, in *Esquire* last year; but, he went on, also correctly, "it is also the most miraculous vehicle for intimacy the new pop has produced."

Part of Cohen's impact of intimacy stems from the absolute clarity of his voice. His words ring like pebbles dropped in a brook — neat, clean, trim, unmistakable — and his diction never falters, an essential skill for a singer to whom the lyrics are everything. Well, perhaps not quite *everything*: Richard Goldstein, in his recent book, *The Poetry of Rock*, noted that "Cohen's rock songs have the consistency of modern verse, but unlike linear poetry, they are wrapped tightly around a rhythmic spine."

Truly, Cohen's best songs are perfect little units of melody, metre and verse, but finally the message of the lyrics contains for most listeners Cohen's basic appeal. And the message is intense, personal and private, drawn out of Cohen's own soul: more than any other song writer, Cohen is at the dead centre of almost everything he sings and writes. Most of his songs are first-person narratives, and the more you listen to them and absorb them, the more you become convinced that they are an autobiography of Cohen's emotions.

Taken altogether, the songs set up a wounding ambivalence, which explains much of his attraction for kids today. On the one hand, Cohen sings, he loves his women deeply, sexually, romantically — loves them in every conceivable way, in fact, except in some domes-

tic, monogamous sense — but, on the other hand, he will eventually, inevitably leave them. He has no choice — he *must* leave them, as he makes clear in *So Long Marianne*:

*Well, you know that I love to live with you,
But you make me forget so very much.
I forget to pray for the angel
And then the angels forget to pray for us.*

Separation, Cohen says, isn't a disaster anyway. In fact, leaving someone you love may be a downright beneficial step, and he asks his women to understand that new fact of life. *Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye* makes his point:

*But let's not talk of love and chains
And things we can't untie,
Your eyes are soft with sorrow,
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.*

But maybe it's all a brave front; maybe the cool and the bravado about leaving love behind, moving on, is a cover for something real and painful inside Cohen's own head. Maybe he's the suffering one. He suggests this may be exactly true in *Bird On The Wing*:

*Like a baby stillborn
Like a beast with his horn
I have torn
Everyone who reached out for me.*

AFTER AWHILE it all begins to tumble into place — the private, intense man, Alice Freeman's image of this travelling body of pain, the Ray Charles soul and the Bob Dylan sound, the urgency, the intimacy, the adoration of the ambivalent kids. It all adds up. Leonard Cohen is a poet. ★

LEONARD COHEN: THE POET AS HERO-2



"I wanted very much to have this conversation"

Interview by Michael Harris

INTERVIEWER: So most important now is the record. What kind of things are you going to do in the record?

COHEN: I have no idea of the sound I'm looking for.

INTERVIEWER: It is a sound, and not words?

COHEN: No, I don't think too much about the words because I know that the words are completely empty and any emotion can be poured into them. Almost all my songs can be sung any way. They can be sung as tough songs or as gentle songs or as contemplative songs or as courting songs.

INTERVIEWER: I've always thought *Suzanne* was a song which should be sung by yourself someplace. I was quite surprised with the back up music.

COHEN: I was quite surprised.

INTERVIEWER: Have you any idea of the kind of sound this record you're working on now is going to have?

COHEN: It's very hard to say because it all happens in the studio. I'm working with some very good musicians and sometimes I ask them to go home and just sing it myself; or sometimes something good happens and we play it together.

I had some trouble with my first record in getting the kind of music I wanted because I hadn't worked with men for a long time. I had worked by myself and I forgot what was necessary to work with men. I forgot how to make your ideas known to other people. The fault was completely mine. I was unaware of the techniques of collective enterprise, I just didn't know then. I'm a little more aware of them now.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of a person being secretive, singular, being uncollective or without men?

COHEN: I don't think anyone is that way. Their style may appear that way but their style is just a method of relating to others. I often feel that for me to really join I have to be away. And whatever sounds I project when I'm away I feel reach the marketplace.

INTERVIEWER: Do you style yourself after anybody?

COHEN: No, I wish there was someone I could style myself after. But when I came of age there were very few models around. Somehow there are many models around now for people assuming manhood to model themselves after.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have, or did you have, a magic age when this coming of age happens?

COHEN: I feel I'm on the edge of it.

INTERVIEWER: Have you always been on the edge of it?

COHEN: Sometimes I've been in it, sometimes I've been past it.

INTERVIEWER: When were you past it?

COHEN: Around the time the record was being made I had very unclear ideas of almost anything.

INTERVIEWER: Do you call this despair?

COHEN: It's one of the things I call it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find any songs in that first album were done as well on record as they had been done by yourself?

COHEN: I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Why not, what's the reason?

COHEN: The songs had lost a lot of their energy as far as I was concerned. But all these things are very deceptive: when you have the artist talking about his product it's very deceptive to accept him at his word; because often it's just that tension of exhaustion or despair or whatever you want to call it. It's just that special magic that makes a song move from lip to lip. You know, you can never tell what energy you bestow on something. You may feel that you aren't giving enough to it, but you may be giving exactly what is necessary. Those songs are moving through people in some way, very very slowly. The record as a commercial phenomenon is very very slow, but very very steady.

INTERVIEWER: Does the same energy and flow apply to poetry?

COHEN: I think so. When I first wrote my poems not too many people were interested in them. There were some people.

I always had the idea of poetry for many people, which was very different from the kind of education I was receiving at the time, which was an elitist education. It was one of the reasons I could never make it in college.

INTERVIEWER: You made it at McGill.

COHEN: Well, I took supplementary examinations

and I got fifty percent and I passed. But that was to pay off old debts to my family and to my society. I think if there had been the kind of horizontal support for dropping out as there is today, I would have dropped out.

INTERVIEWER: When did you first go to Greece? And why?

COHEN: I went in '59. I stumbled on it, you know?

INTERVIEWER: Did any of the people at McGill help you? Did people like Irving Layton or Louis Dudek have any direct relationship with you: a mentor-student/master-pupil relationship?

COHEN: Well I think I became *friends* with Irving Layton, we became close friends, we still are close friends, and if he has exercised that master-student relationship he's done it so subtly, as he would have to do with a person like myself because I don't like taking advice. It's not that I don't like it, it seems that I somehow can't assimilate it when I get it. I never know when I'm getting advice whether it's good or bad advice. So that if Irving did in some secret part of his mind feel that he was giving me instruction, he did it in a most subtle and beautiful way. He did it as a friend, he never made me feel that I was sitting at his feet. There were many people who sat at his feet, I wasn't one of them. We very rarely discussed poetry or art. We discussed other things. In fact, we didn't discuss too much, we used to hang out together. But Dudek was a good teacher, Frank Scott was a good teacher. They set out to teach me things in more direct ways, I was in their classes.

INTERVIEWER: Do they still watch over you?

COHEN: Do they still watch over me? I hope so.

INTERVIEWER: How did you come to change styles from *The Favorite Game* to *Beautiful Losers* and then to the really simple direct poems that were sort of sandwiched in the back of your recent anthology? Why did you change?

COHEN: Well, you know, you get wiped out. And the deeper the wipe-out gets, the deeper the reluctance to use ornament or to use any of the other facilities that brought you to the wipe-out. See, if you never get wiped out then the natural assumption is the things you're doing are right.

INTERVIEWER: Doesn't this apply all the way through though?

COHEN: Yes, I mean on all levels of life. You stop doing the things that bring you into the hole and I felt that I was in a hole, that all the instruments I'd used to keep me out of the hole were somehow faulty.

INTERVIEWER: I find it's sort of funny and sort of desecrating, and in a way delicate, nice, that there are people who are going to do masters on you, they're going to do their theses on you and probably take you

apart. How do you feel about that?

COHEN: I understand the phenomenon of master theses and particularly the place I have now somehow in the cultural life of my country. I'm not very close to that, I don't think about that very very often. In fact, this is probably the first time I've thought about it in some time, when you put the question to me.

INTERVIEWER: I'm not sure of exactly what I want to say next. It has to do with maybe an image you may have formed of yourself. That has something to do with this business of coming of age. But maybe it changes, all the way through, maybe the next record will be the epitome of simplicity and will be absolutely out of the hole.

COHEN: Well, I understand what you mean. I'll try to relate it to something particular: this song, *Like a Bird on a Wire*, which I was telling you about. I tried many versions and in a way the history of that song on the record is my whole history. I tried it in many different ways. At about four in the morning I sent all the musicians home except for my friends Zev, who plays jews harp, Charlie McCoy who was playing the base, the electric base, and Bob Johnston who's the A & R man; I asked him to just sit at the organ because I'd heard him play the organ from time to time. And I just knew that at that moment something was going to take place. I'd never sung the song true, never, and I'd always had a kind of phony Nashville introduction that I was playing the song to and by the time I came around to start my own song I was already following a thousand models. And I just did the voice before I started the guitar and I heard myself sing that first phrase, *Like a Bird on a Wire*, and I knew the song was going to be true. I knew it was going to be true and new and I sang it through and I listened to myself singing, and it was a surprise. Then I heard the replay and I knew it was right. I'd never sung it true and I didn't think I could ever sing it true again because I'm not a performer. But there is one moment and if it happens to coincide with the huge mechanical facilities of Columbia Records, that's what I call magic. And it did, it happened that way. I suppose a master, a master of chance and someone who deeply understands phenomena, could see the method and technique. I learned a lot from it, I'd like to apply it right now, we may get to that moment.

Well, what do you think of my work?

INTERVIEWER: What do I think of your work? Well, you see, I went to a private school and had a good home and everything was paid for and someplace along the line something went and I moved into the Hutchison Street life for four years. And then you describe walking along Sherbrooke Street, with pieces of iron and crumbling priests' houses, and you've written several poems which I know and have always known from first reading onwards that said something I couldn't say and that did the trick and had the energy that you were talking about. And on the record, for example, there are parts which came through.

COHEN: What you said was really beautiful: "you

said something that no one else could say."

INTERVIEWER: Oh yes, but the point is that's why you remember someone else's poetry. One remembers maybe a few lines from the young poets and from the great poets; it doesn't matter, greatness has nothing to do with what you remember.

COHEN: I wanted very much to be a poet in Montreal because I wanted very much to have this conversation. When I was about eighteen I wanted very much to have this conversation. You know, to have to put out my work somehow and have it stand for a certain kind of life in the city of Montreal.

INTERVIEWER: Do you, apart from this conversation, ever turn and run from publicity, or from critical interviews.

COHEN: I think you do turn and run many times, and there is always a time to turn and run. In my own mind I have the time quite clearly set out when I have to turn and run.

INTERVIEWER: What do you feel for Montreal? I read on the back of one of the book's cover: "to renew my neuroses" or something like that.

COHEN: — "to renew my neurotic affiliations"—

INTERVIEWER: That's it. What do you feel about it now? Does the place ever change?

COHEN: It doesn't seem to change too much for me.

INTERVIEWER: What about the States? Does America mean something to you?

COHEN: It certainly means something. What it means is very hard to say because it's so big. But I do love Canada, just because it isn't America and I have, I suppose, foolish dreams about Canada. I believe it could somehow avoid American mistakes, and it could really be *that* country that becomes a noble country, not a powerful country.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk about your movie (*Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*). One of the striking, the more human parts, was when you were sitting in some sort of auditorium watching your own movie, in the movie. Did you know that you were being filmed at that point?

COHEN: I knew I was being filmed. It was a very clever device of Don Britain, the director.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of that film?

COHEN: Well, for one thing, I was surprised that the Film Board was treating me at all. The thing had happened in an unusual way. It had originally started off as a film on a tour of poets and I was one of those four poets. The others were Irving Layton, Earle Birney and Phyllis Gotlieb. It was a kind of promotion by McClelland and Stewart. For some technical reason only the parts of the film that dealt with me seemed to have been good so that they were stuck with a problem.

They had invested a lot of bread in it and they had to make a film, so they decided to make one on me and it was a kind of salvage job so it took all the pressure off the production in a way because it was a salvage job. But he's a very good man, Don Britain.

INTERVIEWER: I saw it in the main McGill auditorium and it was interesting. You were filmed reading your work in the auditorium. There was lots of laughter and clapping and so on. People were very very quiet when you read. It didn't look like a documentary; there was the business of your embarrassment in your underwear and stuff. Have you ever thought of film as some way of expressing you?

COHEN: I've always had a fantasy that some director will find me sitting at a drug store counter, like Hedy Lamarr or whoever it was. Who was it, who was that girl who was discovered in that drug store on Sunset Boulevard? A very famous actress, Hedy Lamarr or somebody like that. I always wanted this to happen. Some very perceptive director would see that I stood for something very very particular. It would take all the work away from it. I thought I would not have to create myself as an image. I would be cast as some kind of detective with wide lapels and then I could just put out my sound . . .

INTERVIEWER: Is that why you wear your overcoat with epaulets?

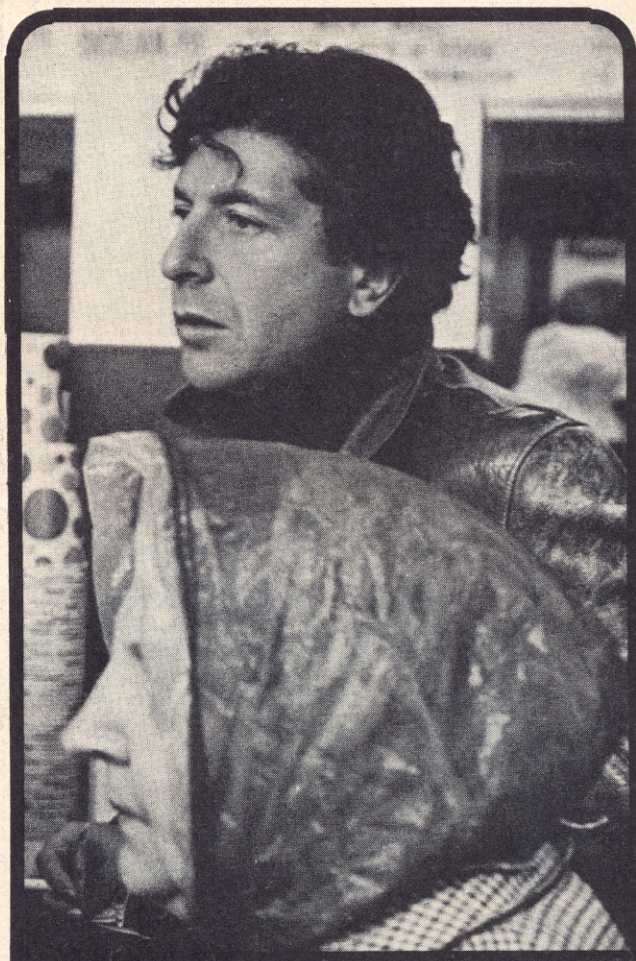
COHEN: Well, I find it very difficult to buy clothes. Because I've had that raincoat for ten or twelve years now, that's *my* coat. I have one coat and one suit because, for one thing, I find it very difficult to buy clothes at a time like this. I somehow can't reconcile it with my visions of a human benefactor. You know, 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.

INTERVIEWER: At the time you wrote *Beautiful Losers* was that when you felt yourself descending into the hole, or skirting around it?

COHEN: I felt it was the end. When I began that book I made a secret pact with myself, which I won't reveal because it really was a secret pact. But it was the only thing I could do. There was nothing I could do. I said to myself if I can't write, if I can't blacken these pages, then I really can't do anything.

INTERVIEWER: Why Catherine Tekakwitha?

COHEN: A friend of mine, Alanis Obamsawin, who's an Abénaquis Indian, had in her apartment a lot of pictures of Catherine Tekakwitha around. I inquired about them and over the years I began to know things about her and then she lent me this book, which I lost, a very rare book on Catherine Tekakwitha. I had it



with me in Greece and I also had a copy of, I think it was a 1943 Blue Beetle comic and several other books that just were on my desk. And I sat down in this very desolate frame of mind and I said, well, I don't know anything about the world. I don't know anything about myself, I don't know anything about Catherine Tekakwitha or the Blue Beetle, I said, but I've just got to begin, and I began and wrote the book.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of the various reviews of it? Does it upset you when somebody says something badly against you?

COHEN: No.

INTERVIEWER: It doesn't matter?

COHEN: No, in all honesty, I don't think I've ever been hurt by a review.

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

COHEN: Up to the past year or two I never received a good review.

INTERVIEWER: Really? Not even for *The Favorite Game*?

COHEN: Oh no, on a certain level they were all right, but nobody ever came out and said it was great.

INTERVIEWER: Does money bother you?

COHEN: Only when I don't have it.

INTERVIEWER: How do you get it?

COHEN: Well, it was always a problem until very recently, in fact, until *very* recently. I never really had any. I did the ordinary things people do to make money. I've taken jobs here and there. Then I started to sell work here and there, but I never wrote things to sell. Sometimes somebody would buy things that I'd written. I never sent things out to little magazines, poems, or anything like that. I never wanted to be in the world of letters. I wanted to be in the marketplace on a different level. I suppose I always wanted to be a pop singer.

When I say pop singer I mean somehow that the things I put down would have music and lots of people would sing them. I remember reading in an anthology of Chinese poetry many years ago they were discussing the biographies of the various Chinese poets and one of the poets was an intellectual poet and the other poet, I loved his work, his songs were sung by the women washing their clothes. I thought, that's the kind I want to be. But you know that all these descriptions of yourself, the things we're talking about now, my own description of myself, those are always after the fact.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself either religious or mystical?

COHEN: I think I went through a saintly phase where I was consciously trying to model myself on what I thought a saint was. I made a lot of people very unhappy and I made myself very unhappy.

INTERVIEWER: How about religion?

COHEN: As I see religion, it's a technique for strength and for making the universe hospitable. I think there really is a power to tune in on. It's easy for me to call that power God. Some people find it difficult. You mention the word God to them and they go through a lot of difficult reactions, they just don't like it. I mean that there's certainly no doubt about it, that the name has fallen on evil days. But it doesn't have those evil associations or those organizational associations for me. It's easier for me to say God than "some unnameable mysterious power that motivates all living things". The word God for me is very simple and useable. And even to use the masculine pronouns He and Him, it doesn't offend me as it offends many; so that I can say "to become close to Him is to feel His grace" because I have felt it.

But, you know, my training as a writer, just in the craft, I know that I'm not going to lay too much of that sound on people because it'll just be pointless. Unless I can find a *song* to place that information in; there's no point in me just writing out some religious tract.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that you write for any particular group of people?

COHEN: I just have to say simply, *no*, not a particular group. I know that a lot of people who are going through the same thing that I am going through or have gone through, will tune in on me and find me a good

companion and I'm happy to be among them. Very happy.

I think it would be very dangerous for me to think of myself as a public figure. It's one of the reasons why I stay out of things a lot. I don't like to think of myself as defining a generation or as speaking for somebody. When love, as a cultural phenomenon, came out, in many ways my work was used somehow to demonstrate it. On the contrary, I thought that we were on the edge of a very violent period, I still do. Psychic violence anyway, if not physical violence. That aspect of "defining a generation" may very well be reflected in my songs because deep in myself I know that I'm the same as everyone and what I really want to do is tune in on my *sameness*, rather than on my differences.

INTERVIEWER: Do you consider yourself a folk singer?

COHEN: When I'm not actually singing, when I don't actually have a guitar in my hand and I'm not actually singing, I don't believe that I'm a singer at all. It's like I have amnesia, when I put that guitar down and I start speaking prose, it just seems miraculous to me that I could ever actually get a song out.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know anything about William Burroughs? Have you ever read any of his work?

COHEN: I've read a lot of his stuff. I thought that *Naked Lunch* was hilarious. It isn't in my nature to examine consciously the wide implications of a piece of writing. I don't look at these things in a sociological context, nor even a literary context. You know, when I find something that makes me laugh I think it's good.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a feeling of progress?

COHEN: I don't feel I've gotten better in my work because more people know about me. As a matter of fact, I would say that, if anything, my own confidence in my work has diminished with the growth of attention to it. That's one of the reasons I can't really *be* on the scene. I wouldn't find it nourishing if I did. There are some people who move with it beautifully, who are nourished by attention and publicity.

INTERVIEWER: What about your writing, when did it start?

COHEN: Well, I do remember sitting down at a card table on a sun porch one day when I decided to quit a job. I was working in a brass foundry at the time and one morning I thought, I just can't take this anymore, and I went out to the sun porch and I started a poem. I had a marvelous sense of mastery and power, and freedom, and strength, when I was writing this poem. I haven't had that feeling too often since. As a matter of fact, now when I write, what turns out to be a poem, or what other people call a poem, it's because I can't say anything. It's because I have to struggle with coherency in its most elementary state so that the kind of things that are in the last poems of my anthology are just one degree over, or one degree on the side of coherence. If you just took that degree away I would be left in a . . . I would be disintegrated. In other words, I want my poems to be, I don't even think of them as poems,

when I wrote those things they were techniques to get myself together. But I found I can't use any ornaments, I can't use tricks.

INTERVIEWER: Can you yourself learn from what you write, I mean, teach yourself?

COHEN: I find that my work, on a personal level, for me, is prophetic. So that I read it with a very special kind of interest after I've written it. After I've finished a book I sometimes read it and I realize that what I've written has not yet come about, the sensibility is about to unfold. For instance when I wrote *Beautiful Losers* I thought I was completely broken, and on the edge of redemption. I thought I just can't feel any worse. But the actual fact was, the state of mind laid out in *Beautiful Losers* actually came to pass. A year or two later I felt myself in exactly that kind of situation. So I read my own work as personal prophecy. Like my dreams.

I think all my dreams have come through. I had a very curious and beautiful dream a month and half ago. It followed one of those times when I had an experience of total freedom. I was sitting at a café near The Bitter End in New York. I was sitting with some singers and some people in the music field and suddenly I became, although the feeling had grown by imperceptible degrees, suddenly I became aware that I felt magnificent, triumphant, free, open, warm, affectionate to everyone and everyone around me. Nothing changed, but I could see clearly what everyone was doing without any sort of judgment and loving what everyone was doing. And I almost hugged myself with pleasure, just of breathing and being with friends. And one of the really important things is that I saw what everybody was doing, you know, I saw them; I didn't think of it as their game, I just saw each person's style as a revelation of themselves. And I loved it. I loved what I saw. And I excused myself and I walked back to the place where I was staying. I walked back through the Village and it just seemed so beautiful. You know, I could see the Village as just a village on the surface of the earth and the kids walking there and the fruit sellers and the little stores. It all seemed so harmonious, like pieces of a clock and very perfect, it seemed that the world was perfect.

And then I went back to a girl's apartment, and then it was really beautiful, she was a beautiful girl. Probably to make love, but it was like playing games. The vision slowly melted into a dream. I was walking through a village with a group of young children, probably Jewish refugees. There was a row of houses, each one seemed to represent some alternative in my life. But each place turned us down, they didn't want to take the children. The very last house was a Swedish Red Cross Mission, where there were three beautiful women, and I fell in love with them. To me they represented Woman. And I asked, would they take the children? But they wouldn't. Even though they refused I wasn't upset. We left and walked down to the beach which was really bright, beautiful with the huge blue sky and miles of sand. I was standing with the children, and then Stuka bombers appeared on the horizon. And I said to the children: kneel, we are going to say a prayer. And the bombs started to fall, but no one cared. ★

LEONARD COHEN: THE POET AS HERO - 3



"Remaining sane in
the face of despair"

By Don Owen

I FIRST MET Leonard Cohen in the late 1950s, when he used to come down to Toronto with Irving Layton for the poetry readings that were held in the old Greenwich Gallery on Bay Street. There was a considerable literary scene in Toronto at that time, and once a month the gallery would be filled with Harris tweed jackets, Viyella shirts, Karen Bulow ties, baggy grey flannel trousers and desert boots, mixing it up with peasant blouses and skirts with lots of crinolines under them. I didn't spend much time with Leonard on those evenings, though — held back, I suppose, by a certain resentment that he was coming on so strong on my turf. I could get used to the idea that he was a better poet than I was, but he always seemed to leave the gallery with the most interesting woman there, the one I'd spent all evening trying to get up enough nerve to say hello to.

When I moved to Montreal a while later I started hanging out in the coffee houses on Stanley Street that Leonard also frequented when he was in town. He was still in his Golden Boy bag at that time. He was plump and handsome and had published his first novel, *The Favorite Game*, and all the pretty girls loved him. I'd see him come smiling along Sherbrooke Street with either Robert or Morton, his two old childhood friends. They'd be dressed impeccably in dark grey Brooks

Bros. suits and button-down Oxford Cloth shirts, on their way to the Ritz for a drink and dinner. It was too easy to resent what looked so good and you couldn't be part of.

In spite of myself I got to know and like his quiet wit and easy generosity. When one of the girls that hung out on Stanley Street became pregnant by a guy who quickly left town when he heard the news, Leonard went around and dug the money out of whoever he thought had some, giving the largest amount himself to help her out. His generosity also included being loyal to old friends who had become bores, and loving to those who had no reason to expect it.

If Leonard's easy to be with, it's not something he's always able to feel about others. If the going gets rough he might make a quick remark that nobody has to understand or laugh at, and depart abruptly for the corner drugstore to buy half a dozen strawberry ice cream cones. But though he insists on being free, he does make a point of returning for at least his share of the suffering. Leonard's very concerned with the idea of taking his share of the pain, the necessity of losing at least as much as you win. His songs are a kind of therapy he engages in to keep from going nuts while confronting his losses. This is the tragic view of life, that you are free to the extent that you are able to confront your own death.

I became one of a group of friends who met frequently in Robert Hershorn's apartment way up on Pine Avenue, a house on the hill with a white verandah, overlooking the city. Nearly everyone played an instrument — bongo, harmonica, guitar — and the music would go on till dawn. Leonard occasionally would sing one of his poems. Some of those moments are captured in spirit on the records, though the mood of 1961 was much gayer.

Then Leonard would decide that he had work to do. There would be a dinner party at the Athens restaurant on St. Lawrence Main with plenty of ouzos and retzina, and then he would be off in the morning to Greece. He would be gone for a few months or a year, and with each successive return would be thinner and more pained looking. Everything else about him would have increased.

If you listen to a Cohen song long enough it seems to lose its meaning. In the *Stranger Song* for instance, the stanzas almost cancel each other out. It's his way of insisting that nobody's to blame for the separation and loneliness.

Leonard's been writing and singing songs for a long time, since long before Bob Dylan came on the scene. But he kept going back to Greece to write his books, and few people got a chance to hear what he was doing. Had he gone to New York in the first place, Dylan might have felt no need to change his name from Zimmerman. In this context I'm reminded of that interview Beryl Fox did with Leonard a few years ago on *Seven Days*. It went something like this:

BERYL: Now that you've become a singer, are you thinking of changing your name?

LEONARD: Yes, I'm thinking of changing my name to September.

BERYL: (incredulous) Leonard September?

LEONARD: No, September Cohen.

Leonard decided to deliver his application for a Canada Council grant in person. He was broke, but he borrowed enough money to hire a huge black limousine with uniformed driver. With the glass partition firmly shut, he spent the trip in the back seat with a friend, getting stoned and having a hell of a good time singing and playing music. When they arrived in Ottawa they somehow managed to get their hands on a wheelchair, and took turns pushing each other in and around and about the Canada Council offices, serenading the secretaries and causing a big uproar. It was from this visit that he got money to go back to Hydra and write *Beautiful Losers*, in which there is a very funny scene concerning two men being driven to Ottawa in a large car.

I found *Beautiful Losers* difficult to read, it was so word-bound and awkward, and I didn't feel that the author understood the material that he was dealing with. But I was touched by the painful break between the erotic and the spiritual in the book. It isn't until much later, in the song *Suzanne*, that Leonard's work reflects some resolution of this conflict.

It's very Eastern, this idea that the erotic is at the very core of the spiritual, and that if you give yourself wholly to another person's mind, the bodies will take care of themselves. It takes a great deal of courage to confront the sexual fear that separates us all. In part, it's this sexual courage that makes Leonard so popular with the kids, who make fewer distinctions in sexual matters than we do.

Only drowning men can see him. This line suggests Leonard's notion of the religious idea being a technique for remaining sane in the face of despair. I suppose this is connected with the fact that I now hear about Leonard being involved with Scientology. The thought of Leonard holding those two cans in his hands appalls me, but I suppose it's the result of his commitment to the idea of exploring everything. I expect he'll do what he's always done, go right through it and out the other side. If I have any reservations, it's for his increasing band of admirers, few of whom are as quick on their feet as he is.

In the last few days I've met two young girls who both claimed to be in love with Leonard. One of them told me that she left her home in Vancouver and came East with the express purpose of having an affair with him. I asked her if her name was Marita, because I remembered something that occurred a few years ago. We were sitting in a sidewalk café in Montreal, talking about growing old, when Leonard took out his felt pen and wrote on the concrete wall that ran beside our table:

Marita

Please find me

I am almost thirty

It's possible that our generation (Leonard's and mine) is the first one ever to be so deeply influenced by the generations coming after it — the Beatles, Dylan, hippies and flower children, the New, New Left. In many ways we are less their teachers than they are ours. ★