

THE MUSIC SCENE

November-December, 1984

The logo features a stylized musical note symbol (a vertical line with a curved top) that frames the text "PRO Canada SDE".

Leonard Cohen

P.R.O. Canada's 1984 Music Awards

THE MUSIC SCENE

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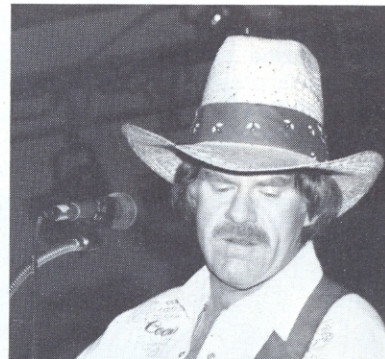
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Wm. Harold Moon Award winner



Leonard Cohen

Canada's troubadour of song & verse

Apparently, **Leonard Cohen** has no intention of fading quietly into the fine print of literary and music reference books. After a four-year silence, the singer, songwriter, poet, novelist and infamous lady's man from Montreal is speaking loudly and confidently again. "I'm feeling quite violent now," he confides in that measured, even-toned way of his. "I'm going to push around guys who abuse me."

It's not as if anybody has breathed a negative word about Cohen in recent months. His edgy aggression is a by-product of a spate of Cohen-authored and Cohen-associated projects, all of which have emerged to unanimous praise in the past year. *Book of Mercy*, his first collection of poetry since *Death of a Lady's Man* in 1977, was published in the spring; *Quill & Quire* described it as "surprisingly devout and stunningly eloquent." The much-delayed half-hour video of Cohen's songs from a hotel room, *I Am A Hotel*, earned Cohen and its musical-chair producers (C-Channel, CITY-TV and the CBC were all involved) critical huzzahs and the presti-

gious Golden Rose award at the Montreux International Television Festival. A musical-drama Cohen wrote in collaboration with old friend **Lewis Furey**, and starring Furey and Carole Laure, began filming in Montreal in September. And now Cohen is gearing up for an international concert tour early in 1985 to support the imminent release of *Various Positions*, his eighth LP and first since 1979's *Recent Songs*.

by Jeff Bateman

Why the sudden burst of activity? "Poverty," Cohen laughs. "Seriously, though, it usually takes me three or four years to bring to a conclusion all the things I've been working on. It's the way I work; I keep quiet and emerge with a bang."

Even if he had laid low another year, Cohen would remain a natural choice for the 1984 Wm. Harold Moon Award, presented annually by P.R.O. Canada for notable achievements on the inter-

national music scene. It's no chest-thumping, flag-waving exaggeration to call Cohen one of the most important musical and literary artists of the last 20 years; he has been recognized as such the world over. In the '60s, he was a revered cultural hero, "a pilgrim in a landscape of suffering" (according to one picturesque pundit) whose books and records were standard issue for savvy college students. And while he has long outgrown the North American pop audience, he remains a star in Europe: the French treat him with the same respect they accord Jacques Brel; songs like "Famous Blue Raincoat," "Sisters of Mercy," "So Long Marianne" and "The Guests" are playlisted across the continent; and, when he chooses to tour, he packs concert halls from Paris to Vienna.

Cohen was born in Montreal 50 years ago and raised in the depression-immune neighborhood of Westmount. His first songs were written as a teenager, and his first performances were with the Buckskin Boys, a C&W bar band. At McGill University he shed the

rawhide and chanted poetry over a jazz soundtrack, a beat period prophet sprung full blown from a Jack Kerouac novel. He completed his first book of poetry (*Let Us Compare Mythologies*) in 1956. His reputation as a literary young lion soared with the 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*—one noted critic claimed he couldn't decide whether it was one of the best novels he had ever encountered, or one of the worst.

The role of the contemporary troubadour appealed more to Cohen than that of the inaccessible *artiste*. Discussing a book about Chinese poets he had recently read, he told *Poppin* magazine in 1970: "One of the poets was an intellectual poet, and the other poet, I loved his work, his songs were sung by women washing their clothes. I thought that's the kind I want to be." The popular song was a natural medium for Cohen, the would-be troubadour, to explore.

The Buckskin Boy's way with a melody and lyric was first spotted by folk singer Judy Collins, who recorded "Suzanne" in 1966. Two years later *The Songs of Leonard Cohen* was hailed as a cornerstone in the doomed movement to transform popular music into something more weighty and substantial than an aural confection. The LP introduced Cohen to a mass audience and, not coincidentally, turned *Beautiful Losers* into a bestseller.

Cohen says he has never been enamored of his charms as a performer. "On the pure level of entertainment, I'm afraid I'm going to bore everybody," he shrugged to a reporter before a Toronto concert in 1969. "What am I? A clumsy guitar, inadequate voice, couple of good songs, books."

His first concerts were often hit and miss affairs. His New York club debut was a "catastrophe" he recalled. "I'd sung the first four bars of 'Suzanne' and reached the point of the high notes, and I knew I wasn't going to make it, so I just walked off. It was incredible, really. I couldn't believe it was happening." By the turn of the decade, Cohen's shows had become spirit-of-the-age celebrations during which he read snippets of

Mark Caporal photos

poetry and prose, led sing-alongs, and invited awe-struck fans up on stage.

It was Cohen's songs that sealed his reputation, however. *The Toronto Star's* William Littler wrote: "At his best, Leonard Cohen has digested Lorca and Pound, natural speech and formal metaphor, and come up with a measure of eloquence nothing short of dazzling. His songs, like Bob Dylan's, are the exceptions that have something to say." Reviewers were comparing Cohen's work to that of everyone from Graham

Greene to Ingmar Bergman to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Not everyone was seduced by Cohen's muse. "His lyrics," offered rock critic Dave Marsh, "are invariably fascinating for lovers of terminal depression and morbid imagery, and his Columbia albums are well worth seeking out for aficionados of gloom." Laughs Cohen: "Everything has sounded good since a British reviewer dismissed me with the line 'Leonard Cohen is a boring old drone who should go back to Canada.'"

Cohen has never bowed to pressures from the music industry. "I'm no longer a free man, I'm an exploited man," he complained to *New Musical Express* in 1973. "The record companies want me to force my songs because the stores want them to sell. I will not force my songs for them." And he's certainly been true to his word; he has released just four LPs since, including *Various Positions* (a CBS ad for *New Skin for Old Ceremony* was headed "He's not prolific, but he's good"). "Songs are hard work. It's no guarantee of excellence, but they invariably take a long time. When the writing comes it's good. It's the waiting for it, the pressing for it, the begging and soliciting and praying for it—that's the part I dislike."

Lyrics are a very different matter to his other writing. "I have always seen the difference between a lyric and a poem," he told *Quill & Quire* recently. "Usually a lyric you sing won't stand up on the page, and certainly vice versa it doesn't work. Often a beautiful lyric poem for the page has its own music involved with the black and white of the page and the silence; in the reading, it sings in the head. When I've tried to set poems to music, I can't get away with it."

Various Positions was four years in the writing. It's a bit of a change from previous works, he says, but not a radical departure like the Phil Spector-produced 1977 extravaganza *Death of A Lady's Man*. "My voice has dropped four or five octaves," he jokes, poking fun at a voice that some have likened to a particularly mournful fog horn. "The record is a little more rhythmical. There's a bit of a country tinge to some tracks." Produced by John Lissauer, the LP features vocal support from Jennifer Warnes, who first sang with Cohen on a 1972 tour. "She's less a back-up singer than a real partner. She weaves her voice with mine."

Cohen says he'd like to write a few more songs that will slip into the pop vernacular the way "Suzanne" and "Bird on a Wire" have done, the kind of songs washer women might hum. "In my terms, a hit record is horizontal rather than vertical. In other words, my songs very rarely happen all at once—the records keep going for quite a few years. I'm always going to want to write

songs that people like, rather than the contrary."

Europe will likely remain his major market. "They don't understand the words. And, I guess, I'm more in tune with the traditions they're comfortable with. I don't have the kind of sound North Americans are happy with anymore, but who knows, things may come around again here."

And, yes, there are some young North Americans who may well prefer Leonard Cohen over the newest Australian or English sensations. Cohen's son Adam, aged 12, is one. "He started off as a great Elvis Presley fan, then got into Michael Jackson, and now it's Grandmaster Flash. But he was in the studio for some of my sessions and he quite liked what he heard. He says it's time he started paying some attention and consideration to my work." ■

