

# Conversations from a Room



by Tom Chaffin

"It's a conventional story — just a variation of the Faust legend. A young singer who asks for audiences and women and songs. Just the old stuff." Leonard Cohen, in that low stranger's voice that even he admits has ruined more than a few parties, is looking for words to describe his latest opus. "It's not a rock opera . . . It's not even an opera. It's . . . something else. It will involve a corps de ballet, three principal players, backup singers. It's going to be highly choreo-

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graphed. It's designed to be done on video tape — maybe a stage production later in Montreal or New York . . . Yes, we hope to do it later in New York."

The described grandiosity contrasts harshly with the setting of our conversation — the kitchen of Cohen's small second-storey flat. Tucked away on a side street in one of east Montreal's working-class, ethnic enclaves, the apartment, two rooms and a kitchen, could have been lifted straight from the text of a Leonard Cohen song ("That's what everybody says when they come here"). Fake oriental carpets cover grey floorboards. Ceilings are low, the walls white and bare except for a few prints. Furnishings are sparse — no bric-a-brac here, no book-lined shelves. There are worktables in the front room; a brass bed, a dresser, a chair in the bedroom; a wooden table with two chairs in the kitchen.

Cohen wrote the opera with Montreal composer Lewis Furey. He wrote it in Spenserian stanzas. It will last an hour and a half and is now titled "I Am a Hotel." "This Spenserian stanza creates its own tone, and Furey is a composer of some formality. So it has a formal tone to it." Cohen tells me these things, but there is no sense of urgency. "I really don't know what to say in these interview situations. I work on songs and poems and prose. I just generally do the same thing all the time. When there seem to be enough poems for a book, or I can discover some theme running through a large number of pieces, then I collect them in a book. Or when I have about ten songs — that usually takes several years to write — I go into the studio and record them."

Grey only faintly streaks Cohen's thick mane of hair that is combed straight back, still black as a Labrador retriever. The face is long, Modigliani-sad, almost handsome. Deep lines reinforce the chiseled, hawk-like visage from which even sadder hazel eyes look out. He wears his constant uniform — black shirt and grey wool suit. He is five feet eight, medium build, and there is a suggestion of a paunch. Manners are courtly, Old World. At 49, Leonard Cohen looks and acts the part.

What part? That's the question. Poet, novelist, singer, songwriter, musician, resident of Greek islands, Columbia University law school dropout, dubious revolutionary (he left Cuba on the eve of the Bay of Pigs), Canadian nationalist, secular mystic (he claims he once fired a guru when he caught him worshipping him), high priest of austerity, self-described ruined ladies' man, the identity of Cohen the man often seems dispersed — concealed, finally, by the contradictory fragments of his legend.

But there is the resumé: Born in

Montreal, 1934, the son of a prominent Jewish clothier of that city, Cohen graduated from McGill University in 1955 with a degree in English literature. The following year, he published *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, his first collection of poems. Other volumes followed, including his 1963 autobiographical novel, *The Favorite Game*. Cohen's literary reputation grew, nourished by critical accolades and literary awards

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until firmly secured by the 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*. "An hallucinogenic religious epic," as one critic called it, the book, still a standard on university reading lists, gained for the poet both a mass audience and a reputation as literary *enfant terrible*.

*Like an empty telephone booth  
passed at night  
and remembered  
like mirrors in a movie palace  
lobby consulted  
only on the way out  
like a nymphomaniac who binds a  
thousand  
into strange brotherhood  
I wait for each one of you to  
confess*

from "What I'm Doing Here."  
Selected Poems 1956-1968

A few weeks ago Cohen received in the mail a newspaper clipping from a South African newspaper, a story about a surgeon named Leonard Cohen who specializes in restoring severed limbs. Scrawled across the sheet was an inscription: "We knew you could do it, Lenny."

Cohen told me about it in a bar several nights before, and we are laughing about it again. "You know," I say, "you bring it on yourself, Leonard."

"Yeah," he says with a smile. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Cohen relishes and takes with good humour the bleak proportions of his artistic persona — "I've had people tell me that my records have made their lives not worth living."

The poetic landscape, crowded with suicides, beautiful losers, hopeless wanderers — people on the edge — partakes of a lyric fusion of conflict and



Pat Morley

grace, eroticism and spirituality. It's as if all those shadowy people of Edward Hopper's canvases suddenly got tired of waiting around and went out and got themselves into trouble. "Why don't you come on back to the war," he sings, "let's all get nervous." While some of these creatures may be ready for the Hieronymus Bosch Mental Hygiene Award, the lyrics can, at their best, cast a spell at once depressing and arresting, nihilistic and celebratory.

"I like austerity," Cohen says. "I like it as a style. It's the opposite of abundance." But he denies that melancholia grips all of his work. "Bird on the Wire" is quite an affirmative song. It has an anthem-like sound to it sometimes. I've found that songs are quite hospitable to different interpretations. When you're on the road for a long period of time, you tend to sing songs in different ways. You can bring a certain kind of nobility to a depressed lyric, or you can deliver a very affirmative statement like a lamentation. I've found there's a certain emptiness to my songs that allows for a lot of interpretations."

Cohen denies any grand mission behind his work. Refusing gambits that might lead toward aesthetic theorizing, he talks only nuts and bolts. "I tend to feel more like a worker — a cabinet maker or something — with little things to do. And I find it takes tremendous



amounts of concentration and energy just to get those little things done.

"You realize that whoever you are, Goethe or Edgar Guest, you're just really a guy hauling his guitar around. There's a certain shabbiness to the whole enterprise: seeking to be noticed enters into the work. On one side, you're the acknowledged legislator of mankind. On another, you're trying to cope — get through it all, make a living, keep the wheels turning. You can't have a too exalted description."

"I find myself giving a lie to almost everything I say," he interrupts himself, "if I don't say — from my point of view — we're in the midst of catastrophe. And what is the appropriate behaviour in a catastrophe? I mean, you're hanging on to a bit of wood in a torrent and somebody else passes by clinging to another piece of wood. What is the appropriate behaviour in these circumstances? What is the proper salutation? Sometimes you're strong, sometimes you're weak. The grand perspective is somehow destroyed. Maybe a new generation, other men and women, will come up with a grand design — but from my personal point of view, it's a matter of determining appropriate behaviour in a catastrophe."

In a week of conversations, Cohen returns often to the idea of The Catastrophe. Is it post-War? post-Biblical Flood? Did it happen yesterday? The day before? He is vague. "I'm too much involved with it to know when it happened," he says, adding that much of his life has been an attempt to get out of it. "I've always been interested in what we call sacred materials: synagogues, zendos, whatever. I've never felt my faith was very strong. I've always felt myself a lazy practitioner of whatever discipline I was approaching. I still do. I don't consider myself a practicing Jew in the sense of many of my coreligionists. I don't identify myself on the same plane."

Was there ever complete disillusionment? "Every day. Whatever I'm studying, I have the sense that this isn't it. One is always wrestling with one's doubt and indifference and Dionysian appetite: You know — let's go get drunk and forget this stuff. Maybe this doesn't lead to anywhere. These are just the elements of my work. I don't think they're great. They're just all I have."

There is a lull in the conversation that the low hum of the refrigerator fills. "What keeps you from going under," I ask after a moment.

Cohen smiles. "Oh, I don't know — charity and mercy, I suppose. Where does mercy come from? The angels of mercy are other people. That's what it feels like to me. I mean, I..." He pauses. "I have a good time, also."

Cohen's gaze turns to his tiny bed-

room just off the kitchen. In preparation for a guest who is to arrive tomorrow, he spent the morning mopping and scrubbing the flat. The smile now could be measured in foot candles. "The room really looks good," he says, then pauses again, not quite through with an earlier matter.

"I'm taking antibiotics now, and also a decongestant that my doctor tells me has some speed in it, and my vision

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tends to become bleaker," he says, then adds with the irony of a pro, "It might not be this bleak, actually."

*And Jesus was a sailor  
when he walked upon the water . . .  
from "Suzanne,"  
The Songs of Leonard Cohen*

In 1966, returning to New York from Greece, Cohen met singer Judy Collins. She encouraged him to perform publicly the songs he had for years been writing and playing for friends. The following year, Collins introduced several Cohen songs on her new album. One of these, "Suzanne," became an instant hit — for her and others. Academic poet became pop star as many singers clamoured to record such Leonard Cohen efforts as "Sisters of Mercy," "The Story of Abraham and Isaac," and "Stories of the Street." In 1968, he recorded for Columbia *The Songs of Leonard Cohen*, his first album.

"I thought I'd do just one album. I'd published *Beautiful Losers*, and I really couldn't meet any of my own bills. So I thought, I'm going to become a country and western singer. I was on my way to Nashville. I'd written some songs that I thought were country songs. That was the kind of music I'd grown up with. So on the way to Nashville, I came across some people in New York and somebody

introduced me to Judy Collins, and I somehow got into the New York musical scene, which I knew nothing about at the time. I didn't know that there was Dylan and Phil Ochs and Judy Collins and Joan Baez."

Looking back, he says he was intimidated — by his own inexperience in the studio and by producers who did not understand what sound he wanted. "I got stuck in New York and started



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creating art songs. They (the producers) didn't give me the kind of bottom I wanted on the music. They tended to not get past what they thought was poetry. The arrangers and the producers I ended up with would get me very delicate musical arrangements. I wanted something a lot fiercer."

If the arrangements producers saddled Cohen with on those first albums lacked the cutting edge, there was nothing delicate about the voice. While Cohen's fluid, opulently lyric guitar work is of studio musician calibre, his voice is deep, untrained, often off-pitch, sometimes unmercifully rasping — and somehow the perfect foil for his soft Debussy-like melodies. "I've heard it described as a monotone," he says with a smile. "I remember one review in the *Rolling Stone*, when they reported a concert at the Isle of Wight that a few of us played. They said, 'Leonard Cohen is a boring old drone and should go the fuck back to Canada where he belongs.'" He laughs. "That's the statement from the *Rolling Stone*."

"Sometimes I think my voice is very bad. I can almost make myself cry with it very early in the morning. I definitely don't have much of a voice, but it's suitable for the songs I do. I think that everybody has a voice. And the people we consider significant singers are the people who decided to go with their own

voice and did not decide to sound like what they thought a singer should be. That notion is very current in popular music now. Leadbelly was one of the first. I think that people whom we call singers — people that we love — are singing right out of the center of their own voices, and we use that same term in literary criticism. Like, 'He found his own voice.' That's what a singer is in some ways: He's found his own voice."

Cohen took piano as a child and played clarinet in the school band and guitar in a country and western group. "Music was always the thing closest to me, and I saw poetry as part of that. My early poetry was very much influenced by Scottish Border ballads, the Spanish flamenco songs, the Portuguese fado."

He brings to his records that musicologist's sense of eclecticism. His last album, *Recent Songs*, arranged and coproduced by Cohen, drew on the services of an oud player, a string section, and a mariachi band (recruited from one of Cohen's favourite Los Angeles Mexican restaurants). Lyric sources ranged from the biblical to Quebecois folk — all intoned over piano, bass, and guitar in Cohen's dark, plaintive *Sprechstimme* style of vocalizing.

Growing up, he read widely, soaking up the King James Bible, Yeats, Whitman, and Henry Miller, among others. But his eclecticism, he claims, comes primarily out of Montreal and from his experiences singing with friends there during the 1950s. "Eclecticism is the situation in Montreal continually. It's because the cultures are distinct. You're taking something from the English, something from the French, something from the Jews — something from the past, something from the future. That's what makes it a good city for poets. Things are still distinct. You do know that you're penetrating into other sensibilities. It isn't blurred, like in America, where the American idea is so strong."

*my brothers come  
our serious heads are waiting for  
us somewhere  
like Gladstone bags abandoned  
after a coup d'etat  
let us put them on quickly,  
let us maintain a stony silence  
on the St. Lawrence seaway.*

from "The Only Tourist in Havana  
Turns His Thoughts Homeward,"  
Selected Poems 1956-1968

Cohen has recorded eight albums, averaging one every two years. They are never blockbusters, but his fans loyally buy them — just as they attend his concerts, just as they buy his novels and collections of poems.

Europe, especially France ("That's

my main audience," he says), accords Cohen and his work a regard not dissimilar to that given Bob Dylan in the United States during the sixties and seventies — the artist as political icon. Travellers tell of Cohen songs that are staples for Irish barroom singing, of how police had to be called in to control crowds at a recent concert in the south of France, of Cohen works that have an underground circulation in the Soviet Union. Before decla-

Cohen's Montreal flat wears the unclutter of a man who never quite puts away his suitcase. This tidy perch is, after all, just one shard of a life spent between countries and continents.

ration of martial law in Poland, a Solidarity official had requested Cohen's appearance before a union rally in Warsaw.

"I guess the tone of my work has a certain European flavor. And the intellectual climate there — especially in France — tends to filter things in a political way. I didn't plan it that way. Perhaps it was growing up in Montreal with a Russian mother who had gone through the revolution."

Cohen, however, only reluctantly talks politics and takes a pox-on-both-your-houses stance when he does. On specific issues, he claims he changes his mind too often for him or for anyone else to take his positions seriously. The constants are his Canadian nationalism and a fierce dislike of communism, an antipathy that was only heightened by a visit to Cuba on the eve of the Bay of Pigs assault.

"I went down there. I don't know how much of a supporter I was. I had this mythology of this famous civil war in my mind. I thought maybe this was my Spanish civil war, but it was a shabby kind of support. It was really mostly curiosity and a sense of adventure."

Detained for several hours by government officials, he slipped onto a Canada-bound plane only hours before the US attack. "It was not a fiction. They were under a threat of invasion, so you have to take that into consideration. But just a society that well organized turned me against it. I didn't like the

loudspeakers on every corner, and the general sense of gung ho. There were articles in the journals about the bourgeois individualists — artists and that sort of thing. And I found myself characterized very accurately in a lot of these polemics. Because — that's really where I am: I am a bourgeois individualist."

*I choose the rooms I live in with care.*



Leonard Cohen on the set of "I AM A HOTEL" with director Allan Nicholls (left) and producer Barrie Wexler

*There's only one table and only one chair . . .  
—from "Tonight Will be Fine,"  
Songs from a Room*

Standing by the window, he considers the question cautiously. "Well," he says, after a moment, "I get up in the morning. I say my prayers" — he glances at the cassette machine recording his words — "but don't put that down. I don't want to sound like a sissy." He returns to the chair by the kitchen table. "I have my coffee, take out my guitar, light my cigarette. Tune my guitar. I play awhile, try to continue the work of the day before."

Cohen's Montreal flat wears the unclutter of a man who never quite puts away his suitcase. This tidy perch, with its unopened boxes in the hallway, is, after all, just one shard of a life spent between countries and continents. Cohen considers his small stucco house on the Greek island of Hydros, which he purchased for \$1,500 in 1960, his most permanent abode. Modest like his Montreal flat, and a similar one in Los Angeles, it has had running water and electricity only for the last few years. Cohen is currently separated from his wife, Suzanne (not the one of ballad fame, he says: "The song conjured her.") She lives in France with their son Adam and daughter Lorca.

Between Cohen's hemispheric wanderings and, to keep the bills paid, several months of touring with his band each



year, there are the days spent here in Montreal, in solitude, in the words.

"When I'm not with my children, when I'm putting together a book or a record, and I can see where it's going, I work every day at it," he says. "So, there'll usually be three to five months where I'm working every day. I'll usually work from six to nine in the morning. When I'm working on prose, I used to do three pages a day, however long that took. Now, it's down to one page a day — however long it takes."

Working on songs, he sits, guitar in hand, coffee and cigarette before him, in front of his typewriter at the kitchen table. How do the work demands between song and written verse differ? "It's not that different, really. I guess it's because the pace I work at is so very slow. All forms of writing tend to partake of the same activity — revision and revision."

"When you're working with just a printed text, whatever gestalt you convey has to be within the flesh of the syntax. You won't have the guitar to move the words along. It's like placing things in aspic: They live on the pages — the words and phrases — and they have to be written with that in mind. The ideas and emotions are not fluid in the sense that a song is. They have a kind of rhythm and authority, but it's a different kind of process. But I like to make sure that my lyrics stand an examination on the page."

He reacts caustically to critics who have suggested that his recent celebrity has blunted his powers on the printed page. He also rejects the notion of any tension between his roles as solitary poet and public performer.

"It's the same tension as that between being a father and an idiot," he says testily, then pauses. "I'm not sure how the analogy applies, but there's some application."

He takes a long drag on a Peter Jackson cigarette. "There's something about daily life that threatens it (artistic integrity), and you're not going to be able to do anything about that. I find that kind of speculation wholly irrelevant. You have to ham it up when you go out and apply for a job. The fact is, we live in *this* world. This is the vale of tears. This is the plane we operate on. What everybody's talking about is the loss of innocence. So — deal with your innocence as you will."

"You're probably somebody in trouble, anyway, if you're in this racket. So fame becomes just another thing to look out for."

*Tom Chaffin is a journalist based in San Francisco. "I AM A HOTEL" is being produced by Blue Memorial Video at ChumCity productions, in association with the CBC.*

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