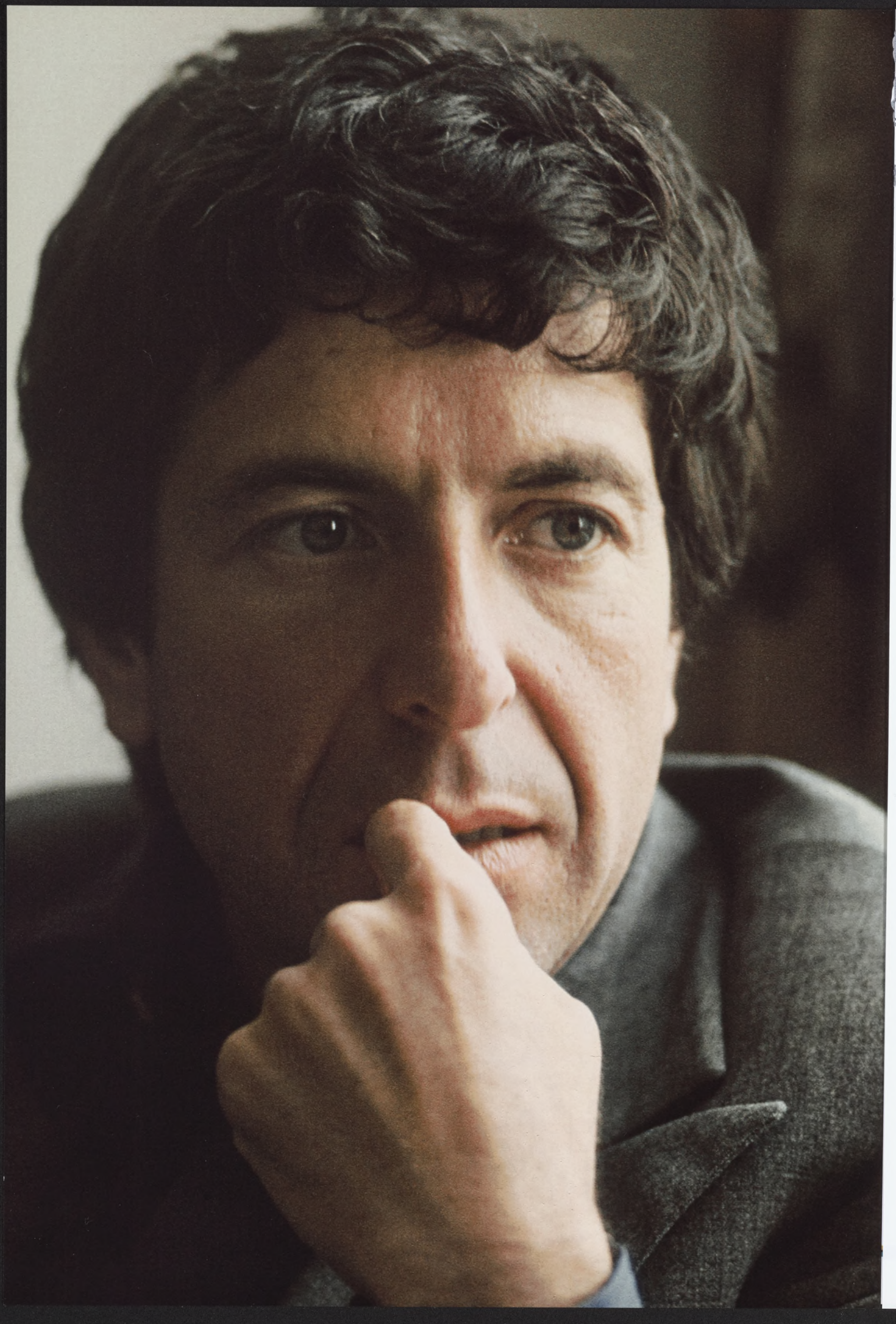


Leonard Cohen

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

"I always experience myself as falling apart, and I'm taking emergency measures," Leonard Cohen said fifteen years ago. "It's coming apart at every moment. I try Prozac. I try love. I try drugs. I try Zen meditation. I try the monastery. I try forgetting about all those strategies and going straight. And the place where the evaluation happens is where I write the songs, when I get to that place where I can't be dishonest about what I've been doing."

> ***For four decades, Cohen has been a model of gut-wrenching emotional honesty***

For four decades, Cohen has been a model of gut-wrenching emotional honesty. He is, without question, one of the most important and influential songwriters of our time, a figure whose body of work achieves greater depths of mystery and meaning as time goes on. His songs have set a virtually unmatched standard in their seriousness and range. Sex, spirituality, religion, power – he has relentlessly examined the largest issues in human lives, always with a full appreciation of how elusive answers can be to the vexing questions he raises. But those questions, and the journey he has traveled in seeking to address them, are the ever-shifting substance of his work, as well as the reasons why his songs never lose their overwhelming emotional force.

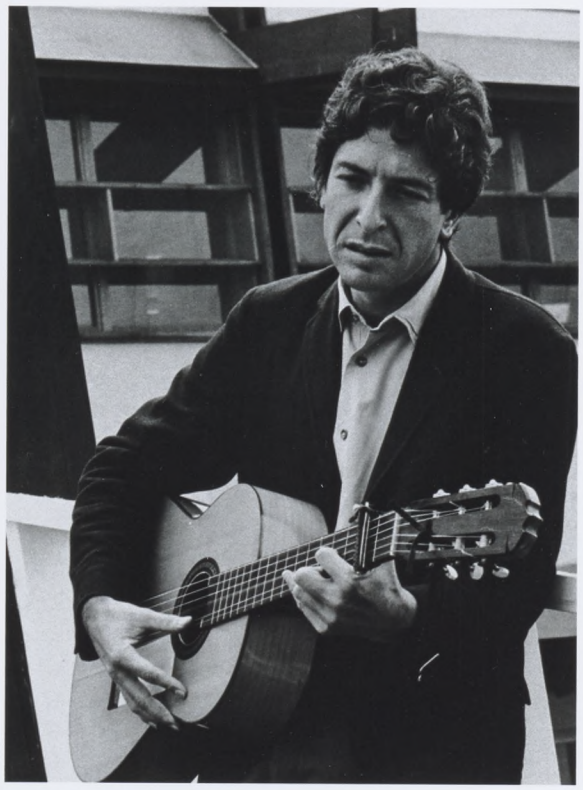
His first album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967), announced him as an undeniable major talent. All quietness, restraint, and poetic intensity, its appearance amid the psychedelic frenzy of that year could not have made a starker point. It includes such songs as "Suzanne," "Sisters of Mercy," "So Long, Marianne," and "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye," all now longstanding classics. If Cohen had never recorded another album, his daunting reputation would have been assured by this one alone. However, the two extraordinary albums that followed, *Songs From a Room* (1969), which includes his classic song "Bird on a Wire," and *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971), provided whatever proof anyone may have required that the greatness of his debut was not a fluke.

Part of the reason why Cohen's early work revealed such a high degree of achievement is that he was an accomplished literary figure before he ever began to record. His collections of poetry, including *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956) and *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), and his novels, including *Beautiful Losers* (1966), had already brought him considerable recognition in his native Canada. His dual careers in music and literature have continued to feed each other over the decades – his songs revealing a literary quality rare in the world of popular music, and his poetry and prose informed by a rich musicality.

One of the most revered figures of the singer/songwriter movement of the late sixties and early seventies, Cohen soon developed a desire to move beyond the folk trappings of that genre. By temperament and approach, he had always been closer to the European art song – he once termed his work the "European blues." Add to that a fondness for country music, an ear for R&B-styled female background vocals, a sly appreciation for cabaret jazz, and a regard for rhythm not often encountered in singer/songwriters, and the extent of Cohen's musical palette becomes clear. Each of Cohen's albums reflects not simply the issues that are on his mind as a writer but the sonic landscape he wishes to explore, as well. The through-lines in his work, of course, his voice ("I was born with the gift of a golden voice," he has sung) and lyrics (he has described

He's your man: Leonard Cohen in 1974

Cohen's Newport Folk Festival debut, 1967: With Joni Mitchell . . .



backstage with his nylon six-string . . .

and with Judy Collins and Columbia Records' John Hammond

Birds on a wire: Cohen contemplates a flock of pigeons.

himself as "the little Jew who wrote the Bible"), are as distinctive as any in the world of music.

Cohen's 1974 album, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, which includes "Chelsea Hotel #2," a pointedly unsentimental memoir of his early years in New York City that included a tryst with Janis Joplin, found him making bolder use of orchestration, a contrast to the more stripped-down sound he had earlier preferred. *Death of a Ladies' Man*, his 1977 collaboration with Phil Spector, constitutes his most extreme experiment. Spector's monumental "Wall of Sound" – the producer, Cohen once quipped, "was in his Wagnerian phase, when I had hoped to find him in his Debussy phase" – proved an uncomfortable setting for Cohen's typically elliptical and almost painfully intimate lyrics (terms that, admittedly, would not apply to "Don't Go Home With Your Hard-On," on which Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg provide backing vocals). Over the years, Cohen has bitterly complained about Spector's high-handed – and gun-wielding – ways, while occasionally expressing a kind of grudging affection for the album's uncharacteristic excesses. He has summed it up as "a grotesque, eccentric little moment."

Recent Songs (1979) and *Various Positions* (1984) returned Cohen to more recognizable sonic terrain, though the latter album, in a perhaps misguided nod to the trend at the time of its release, prominently incorporated synthesizers. The objections didn't particularly bother Cohen. "People are always inviting me to return to a former purity I was never able to claim," he has said. Though not initially released in the States, *Various Positions* includes "Hallelujah," which has since become one of Cohen's best-known, best-loved, and most frequently covered songs. (Versions by Jeff Buckley and John Cale are especially notable.)

As the eighties and their garishness began to wane, Cohen's star began to rise once again. The listeners who had grown up with him had reached an age at which they wanted to reexamine the music of their past, and a new generation of artists and fans discovered him, attracted by the dignity, ambition, and sheer quality of his songs. It is remarkable to this day how often Cohen's name comes up when young songwriters discuss their inspirations. Indeed, his work often seems to reside in that realm of the human heart that exists outside of time. Hence, it is timeless and always ripe for discovery and rediscovery.

Live at the Beacon Theatre, New York City

Cohen rose to the opportunity that his new audience provided by releasing two consecutive albums, *I'm Your Man* (1988) and *The Future* (1992), that not only rank among the finest of his career but perfectly capture the texture of particularly complicated times. Cohen had long documented the high rate of casualties in the love wars, so the profound anxieties generated by the AIDS crisis were no news to him. Songs like "Ain't No Cure for Love," the wryly titled "I'm Your Man," and, most explicitly, "Everybody Knows" ("Everybody knows that the Plague is coming/Everybody knows that it's moving fast/Everybody knows that the naked man and woman are just a shining artifact of the past") depict Cohen surveying the contemporary erotic battleground and reporting on it with characteristic perspective, insight, wryness, and wisdom.

Similarly, in the title track of *The Future,* his immersion in Jewish culture, obsession with Christian imagery, and deep commitment to Buddhist detachment rendered him an ideal commentator on the approaching millennium and the apocalyptic fears it generated. Along with the album's title track, "Waiting for the Miracle," "Closing Time," "Anthem," and "Democracy" limned a cultural landscape rippling with dread but yearning for hope. "There is a crack in everything," Cohen sings in "Anthem," "That's how the light gets in." Our human imperfections, he seems to be saying, are finally what will bring us whatever transcendence we can attain.

In a 1993 *Rolling Stone* profile, Cohen described writing the songs on *The Future* and revealed a good deal about his notoriously painstaking process of composition. "The song will yield if you stick with it long enough," he explained. "But long enough is way beyond any reasonable idea you might have of what long enough is. It takes that long to peel the bullshit off. Every one of those songs began as a song that was easier to write. A lot of them were recorded with easier arrangements and easier lyrics. . . . 'The Future' began as a song called 'If You Could See What's Coming Next.' That point of view was a *deflected* point of view. I didn't have the guts to say, 'I've seen the future, baby/It is murder.'"

Since then, Cohen has released *Ten New Songs* (2001) and *Dear Heather* (2004), as well as *Blue Alert* (2006), a collaboration on which Cohen produced and cowrote songs with his partner and former background singer Anjani Thomas, who provides the vocals. All three albums have only solidified his place in the pantheon of contemporary songwriters. At seventy-three, Cohen continues to produce compelling work, while enjoying the honors that deservedly come to artists who have achieved legendary status. Documentaries, awards, tribute albums, the ongoing march of artists eager to record his songs, and, finally, induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame all acknowledge the peerless contribution Cohen has made to what one of his titles aptly calls "The Tower of Song."

And he is still laboring hard in the tower. "I think as long as you can crawl into the workshop, you should do the work," he has said. "I always saw those old guys coming down to work, whatever job I happened to be in. Something about that always got to me. I'd like to be one of those old guys going to work."

ABOVE: Barefoot on the beach in 1997. OPPOSITE: Looking hands-some in 1988.