

# Legend of the month – Leonard Cohen



Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen was born in 1934. An early writer and guitarist, Cohen began to compose and release folk-rock and pop songs by the mid-1960s. One of his most famous compositions is “Hallelujah,” a song released on 1984’s *Various Positions*. Cohen was inducted into the Rock and Roll

Hall of Fame in 2008, and he received a Grammy Award for lifetime achievement in 2010. Cohen died in 2016 at the age of 82.

## Buckskin Boy

Leonard

Cohen was born on September 21, 1934, in a suburb of Montreal, Canada.

Part of an intellectual, middle-class Jewish family, he was encouraged

by his parents to pursue his interests in poetry and music and was also

thoroughly immersed in Jewish theology and the stories of the Old

Testament. In many ways, these early interests and influences provided

the blueprints for much of his later work, which straddles the worlds of

literature, mythology, poetry and song with a masterful lyricism that

is one of its defining features.

Another of Cohen's primary lifelong interests—women—led him to take up the guitar at age 13, and he was soon playing country music in Montreal's cafes, eventually forming a group called the Buckskin Boys. Their gigs typically involved performing traditional numbers at square dances. However, at this early stage, it was still poetry that most consumed Cohen, driven by his affinity for the likes of Federico García Lorca and Jack Kerouac, and when he attended McGill University to study English beginning in 1951, his writing would often take priority over his other studies. Cohen graduated in 1955, and

the following year the university published his first collection, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, which received good reviews but did not sell particularly well, setting yet another precedent for Cohen's future career.ADVERTISEMENT

## Beautiful Loser

Around this time, Cohen briefly attended Columbia University before returning to Montreal, where he worked various jobs while continuing to write poetry. However, when his next book, *The Spice-Box of the Earth*, was published in 1961, it marked the beginning of what would be one of Cohen's most fruitful periods. Both a critical and commercial success, *Spice-Box* established Cohen as an important literary voice and also earned him enough royalties that combined with the proceeds from a Canadian writing grant and a small family inheritance allowed him to buy a modest house on the Greek island of Hydra, where he would live on and off for much of the next seven years and "write and swim and sail."

Cohen's output from this time includes the poetry collections *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) and *Parasites of Heaven* (1966), as well as the novels *The Favorite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966), the latter earning Cohen lofty comparisons to James Joyce, and public outrage in Canada for the book's

overtly sexual content. Despite all of the attention, however, Cohen was beginning to feel that he would not be able to make his living as a writer alone, and he began to explore music again, seeing it not only as a natural vehicle for his poetry but also a potentially more lucrative one. He would not be wrong on either count.

## First We Take Manhattan

Returning to the United States, Cohen settled in New York and began to explore the city's music scene. By this time well into his 30s, Cohen was significantly older than his contemporaries and was on more than one occasion discouraged by agents from attempting a career as a performer. However, fellow folk singer Judy Collins had already recognized Cohen's significant talents, performing covers of his songs "Suzanne" and "Dress Rehearsal Rag" on her popular 1966 album *In My Life*. With her encouragement, Cohen made his debut at the 1967 Newport Folk Festival, where among the audience members was A&R rep John Hammond, who quickly added Cohen to his impressive roster—which already included such superstars as Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan—by signing him to Columbia Records.

Released later that year, Cohen's debut album, *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, is among his very finest, combining soft, sparse arrangements with his distinctive, untrained baritone to deliver masterful, melancholy lyrics about sexuality, love, spirituality and despair in songs that somehow manage to be simultaneously simple and complex. Based on the

strength of tracks such as "Suzanne," "So Long, Marianne" and "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye"—to name just a few—the album just barely cracked the Top 100 but earned Cohen a devoted following.

After publishing a new poetry collection in 1968, Cohen followed up with *Songs from a Room*, which although not quite as strong overall as his debut effort, surpassed it on the charts by reaching No. 63. It contains the classic Cohen tracks "The Partisan," "Lady Midnight" and "Bird on a Wire," which has been covered by countless artists over the years, most notably Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson. It would also be one of the tracks Cohen performed the following year at the Isle of Wight Festival in England, where he appeared alongside such big-name acts as Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, Miles Davis and many others.

Another of the numbers he performed during his Isle of Wight set was "Famous Blue Raincoat." A song about a cuckolded husband writing to his wife's lover, it is one of Cohen's best and among the highlights—with "Avalanche" and "Joan of Arc"—from his third album, 1971's *Songs of Love and Hate*. That same year, Cohen's music reached an even wider audience when three of his songs were featured on the soundtrack of the Robert Altman western *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, starring Warren Beatty and Julie Christie, but it would be another three years before he would return to the studio.

However, Cohen was far from inactive during this stretch, releasing a new book of poetry, *The Energy of Slaves*, in 1972, the same year that his girlfriend, Los Angeles artist Suzanne

Elrod, gave birth to their first child, Adam, followed two years later by their daughter, Lorca. Cohen also continued to tour, released a live album and had his songs featured in a 1973 musical called *The Sisters of Mercy*.

## New Skin

In 1974, Cohen returned to studio recordings with *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, which while maintaining Cohen's characteristically downbeat mood also featured fuller arrangements than his previous albums. Among the standout tracks from this offering are "Who by Fire," "Take This Longing" and "Chelsea Hotel No. 2," about a romantic encounter that Cohen once had with singer Janis Joplin. Cohen toured in support of *New Skin* before releasing a 1975 best-of album and hitting the road once again, enjoying the adoration of a devoted core of fans, if not the commercial success that his label might have hoped for.

But if Columbia was expecting different results with his next album, they were to be disappointed, as would be his fans and, indeed, Cohen himself. Working with legendary and notoriously troubled producer Phil Spector, Cohen's *Death of a Ladies' Man* was problematic from the start, with Spector's erratic behavior culminating in him holding a gun to Cohen's head. Spector also mixed the recording without Cohen's input, resulting in the overblown end product that Cohen himself has described as "grotesque" and identified as his least favorite album. Perhaps hoping to right his ship, the following year Cohen released the similarly titled collection of poetry and prose *Death of a Lady's Man*, followed by 1979's *Recent Songs*,

which, although it saw Cohen return to the sparser arrangements of his earlier work, failed to perform well commercially.

After a five-year hiatus, during which Cohen released no new material, he made up for lost time in 1984 with the publication of the poetry collection *Book of Mercy* and the album *Various Positions*, both of which focus more specifically on themes of spirituality, most notably on the song “Hallelujah.” Counted among Cohen’s best-known, best-loved and most-often-performed songs of all time, “Hallelujah” has been covered by hundreds of artists since, including Jeff Buckley and Rufus Wainwright. The album, however, failed to gain much recognition, and it would be another five years before Cohen would release anything new.

## I’m Your Man

Resurfacing in 1988, Cohen released the synth-heavy *I’m Your Man*, which although failed to chart in the United States, was a smash in Canada and Europe and features the notable tracks “Everybody Knows” and “First We Take Manhattan,” as well as the memorable title song. Introducing Cohen to a new generation of fans, the album was followed by 1992’s *The Future*, from which several songs were included in the Oliver Stone film *Natural Born Killers*, which also helped establish his standing with a younger audience.

Cohen’s relevance would be further underlined by the tribute albums *I’m Your Fan* (1992)—which included covers of his songs by alternative acts such as the Pixies, R.E.M. and Nick Cave—and *Tower of Song* (1995), which featured heavy hitters of

the rock and roll world including Billy Joel, Elton John and Peter Gabriel. But rather than bask in the spotlight, in 1994 Cohen turned inward, retreating to the Mount Baldy Zen Center, where he took a vow of silence and studied under a Zen master for the next five years.

Cohen reemerged in 1999, and two years later released his first album in nearly a decade, the plainly titled *Ten New Songs*, as well as the live recording *Field Commander Cohen*, which documented performances from a 1979 tour. Next came *Dear Heather*,

something of a departure for Cohen, in that it included songs for which

he did not write lyrics, followed by the 2005 tribute album and movie *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, which featured performances by Nick Cave, Rufus Wainwright, U2, Antony, Beth Orton and many others.

Unfortunately

for Cohen, while he was being celebrated, he also discovered he was

being ripped off, and he filed suit against former manager Kelley Lynch,

who had embezzled millions of dollars from him over the years. Though

Cohen won a \$7.9-million-dollar in 2006, he was never able to recoup the

money, and the now-72-year-old bard was left without his retirement

funds.

# Dance Me to the End of Love

Not that he was without his prospects. In 2006, Cohen also published a new collection of poetry, *Book of Longing*, and in 2008, after being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, he embarked on a two-year-long world tour to rebuild his finances, which was chronicled on the albums *Live in London* (2009) and *Songs from the Road* (2010). In the midst of the tour, Cohen received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the Songwriters' Hall of Fame, and the following year Columbia Records released *The Complete Studio Albums Collection*, gathering together all of Cohen's studio work into one box set.

By this point a grandfather and nearing his 80s, Cohen was, however, no mere relic of the past, and in early 2012 he released a new album of songs titled *Old Ideas*, which saw him return to the folk arrangements of his earlier and arguably best work. Reaching No. 3 in the U.S. and No. 1 in Canada and several European countries, it was the highest-charting album of Cohen's career, rivaled only by his 2014 album *Popular Problems*, perhaps an indication that Cohen, like a fine wine, just got better with age. Prolific till the end, three weeks before his death, Cohen released *You Want It Darker*, recorded

in his home while his health was rapidly declining. His son Adam produced the album, and told Rolling Stone magazine, "At times I was very worried about his health, and the only thing that buoyed his spirits was the work itself."

Leonard Cohen died on November 7, 2016 at the age of 82. At the time of the public announcement of Cohen's passing on November 10, few details were revealed as to the circumstances. A week later, his manager Robert B. Kory stated the songwriter had fallen during the evening of November 7 and died in his sleep that night. "The death was sudden, unexpected and peaceful," said Kory.

Fans and celebrities reacted to the music legend's passing on social media, often quoting his profound and poetic lyrics.

In January 2018, Cohen was posthumously awarded a Grammy for Best Rock Performance, for "You Want It Darker." It was his first competitive Grammy win in a career that spanned a half-century.