

# Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) dies at 82

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Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen died in Los Angeles November 7 at the age of 82. His manager Robert Kory subsequently revealed that Cohen, who had cancer, died in his sleep after falling during the night.

Cohen had just been through one of the busiest periods of his career. In 2008, after some 15 years away from the stage, Cohen made a successful return to touring and released a number of new albums in quick succession. His most recent album *You Want it Darker* was released on October 21.

In July, Cohen penned a touching letter to an ailing Marianne Ihlen, the woman who had inspired a number of his songs, most famously “So Long, Marianne.” She died July 28. Cohen wrote to her, “Well Marianne it’s come to this time when we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon. Know that I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine.” This was Cohen at his most tender and humane.

When Cohen (born September 21, 1934 in Montreal) first emerged as an artist some 60 years ago, it was not as a musician, but as a poet and a novelist. His first book of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, was published in 1956. His sexually explicit novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966) was controversial in its day. He continued to write and publish throughout his career, but it was as a songwriter that he achieved his greatest popular success.

Cohen initially emerged as a songwriter, and then as a performer, through the efforts of folksinger Judy Collins, who was on the lookout for new songs. Collins recorded Cohen’s “Suzanne” and “Dress Rehearsal Rag” on her album, *In My Life*, a highly influential record (which also included songs by Brecht-Weill, Jacques Brel, Bob Dylan, Lennon-McCartney, Richard Peaslee [“Marat/Sade”], Donovan and Randy Newman [“I Think It’s Going to Rain today”]), released in

November 1966. The songs made an immediate impression. Collins also began performing with Cohen around this time, including a show in New York City’s Central Park in July 1967.

Cohen’s first few albums are probably his strongest. *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (1967), *Songs from a Room* (1969) and *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971) contain a number of beautiful and memorable songs, including “Suzanne,” “The Stranger Song,” “So Long, Marianne,” “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Goodbye,” “Famous Blue Raincoat” and “Bird on the Wire.”

Cohen undoubtedly represented something distinctive in popular music at the time. Montreal’s considerable Jewish population, which also produced, for better or worse, A. M. Klein, Irving Layton (Cohen’s “mentor”) and Mordecai Richler, among other “free thinking” poets and novelists, played some role in that, as did the social transformations occurring in Quebec, which would make it the most politically explosive corner of North America by the end of the 1960s.

From this complex and sometimes tormented background, Cohen brought a sophistication and seriousness, a “knowingness” about life and relationships in particular that set him apart from many of his American contemporaries. His best music demanded the listener’s attention. It was more intelligent and restrained than the “radical” and often sloppy “protest” music of his day. Like Bob Dylan before him, he often wrote long-lined verses that seemed to unfold forever, never to be interrupted by a chorus. His lyrics had a certain genuine poetry to them. He sang them gently, as if he wanted to ensure safe passage to every word.

To quote them here, torn from their melodies and Cohen’s melancholic voice, would be to drain them of much of their power, but there is something haunting about lines like this one from “Famous Blue Raincoat”: “I hear that you’re building your little house deep in

the desert / You're living for nothing now / I hope you're keeping some kind of record."

In "Bird on the Wire," he sang memorably, "Like a bird on the wire / Like a drunk in a midnight choir / I have tried in my way to be free." He communicates, with sympathy, the sincerity as well as the inadequacy of the effort.

Or these lines from "The Stranger Song":

Well, I've been waiting, I was sure  
We'd meet between the trains we're waiting for  
I think it's time to board another  
Please understand, I never had a secret chart  
To get me to the heart of this or any other matter  
Well, he talks like this you don't know what he's after  
When he speaks like this you don't know what he's after

Cohen's most famous song, "Hallelujah," reveals a similar sensitivity toward "broken" people. Its final verse is perhaps its best: "I did my best, it wasn't much / I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch / I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you / And even though / It all went wrong / I'll stand before the Lord of Song / With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah."

There was something attractive and vaguely dangerous about the "holiness" of his various obsessions. Moreover, in Cohen's best work one came across the element of acceptance of human faults and imperfections and of genuine empathy, the impulse to forgive—and a belief, however naïve or sometimes abstract (and therefore not always entirely convincing), in the redemptive power of love and companionship. Despite the occasionally obscure lyric, his music was relatively sober and self-critical.

However, there was also an unsatisfying and even sometimes irritating quality to his music. While Cohen may have been more sophisticated (and better-dressed) than many of his "flower-child" rock and roll contemporaries, where their music was animated by a sense of protest, Cohen's tended to be characterized by wise, informed resignation. In later years, this sometimes turned into cynicism and pessimism.

It can be difficult to listen to even the very best Leonard Cohen albums in one sitting. The songs tend to be set at the same tempo and survey the same, ultimately narrow, emotional range. Cohen cast himself as the (self-consciously) world-weary poet, head cocked to one side, staring off into the distance, singing

mournfully of the foibles of mankind (including, in fairness, his own). Lacking a deeper or deepening understanding of social life, it was an act that eventually wore a bit thin.

Cohen turned further inward, and toward mysticism. His "holiness," which at one time seemed merely a synonym for the purity and fierceness of certain emotions, threatened to become the real thing. For a time, he was in full retreat.

After 1992's *The Future*, on which he sang "I've seen the future, brother: it is murder," he stopped performing. Starting in 1994, he lived in seclusion for five years as a Buddhist monk at the Mount Baldy Zen Center on the outskirts of Los Angeles. He served as the cook and personal assistant to "Zen master" Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi. When a documentary film crew visited him there in 1996, he told them he liked the silence. "I like to be in a place where people cherish the idea of a clean table and of a meal that has been carefully cooked and carefully served and carefully eaten," he said.

It didn't last, fortunately. In 2001, Cohen returned with *Ten New Songs*, his first album since 1992. When Swedish journalist Stina Dabrowski interviewed him that year, she suggested, "In a way, you can say that you failed as a monk." Cohen replied, "Yeah. Thank God."

Even with his weaknesses and annoyances, it was good to see Leonard Cohen trade in his monk's robes for a suit and hat and go prowling around the stage again. Footage from some of his more recent tours is captivating. He will understandably be missed by large numbers of people around the world.



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