

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

An Obituary for Leonard Cohen, written by Alan Branford on Saturday, 11 November 2016, the day (Australian time) that his death was announced

So Stand Me By That Column That May Take This Temple Down – A Personal Tribute to Leonard Cohen (1934 – 2016)

by Dr Alan Branford (© 11 November 2016)

Prologue

Leonard Cohen's death at the age of 82 years was announced today (Australian time) ... and part of me died too.

The world has lost one of the greatest poets of our time.

He has been variously described as a singer, a songwriter, a poet, an artist and in his own words, **“He’s a lazy bastard living in a suit”!!** ([Going Home](#), 2012) To me, he was all of those and more, but primarily a **poet**.

This post is a stream of grief-stricken consciousness, as I recall some of the memorable lines that he wrote, and what they meant to me.

Leonard Cohen (1934 – 2016)

“It is with profound sorrow we report that legendary poet, songwriter and artist, Leonard Cohen has passed away. We have lost one of music’s most revered and prolific visionaries.” (*Sony Music Canada on the singer’s Facebook page*)

Leonard Cohen was born in Quebec, Canada, in 1934. This post, however, is not a biography of the master wordsmith; there are plenty of those already, and no doubt many more to come now that he has died. As I said in the Prologue, in this post I shall recall some of the memorable lines that he wrote, and what they mean to me. These interpretations may be at odds with what the “experts” say, or even with what Leonard Cohen himself said. I don’t care – they are my interpretations.

Perhaps Leonard Cohen’s best known song is [Hallelujah](#) (1984). Ironically, it took him dozens of drafts to complete and initially it met with only muted success. A cover version by John Cale which then led to a recording by Jeff Buckley launched the song into immortality. Jeff Buckley’s version was immensely popular, and now ... well, who hasn’t recorded a cover version of [Hallelujah](#)? Another twist in this tale is that Columbia, his record label, had been reluctant to release “Various Positions”, the album on which [Hallelujah](#) appeared. In his early career as a recording artist, his critical success had outweighed the commercial success of his record albums. It seems that Columbia was particularly nervous about this one!

Leonard Cohen's poetry has often been regarded as being almost obsessed with the darker side of existence; I've heard him referred to as "the Poet Laureate of Pessimism". He was certainly unafraid to confront that which is dark in this world and where he could imagine it going. In [Take This Waltz](#) (1988) he describes what I interpret as a horror concert theatre where he languishes, lamenting a lost love. There are gruesomely evocative lyrics such as,

There's a shoulder where Death comes to cry

...

**But who is it climbs to your picture
With a garland of freshly cut tears?**

...

**This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz
With its very own breath of brandy and death**

A theme that Leonard Cohen used more than once is what he calls being "back on Boogie Street". Bugis Street in Singapore was a notorious street where any vice your mind could imagine was for sale. American servicemen, many of whom sampled the wares of Bugis Street, nicknamed it Boogie Street. Leonard Cohen uses "Boogie Street" as a metaphor for being at the bottom of the cesspit of life, a state of near hopelessness. From [A Thousand Kisses Deep](#) (2001),

**I'm turning tricks, I'm getting fixed
I'm back on Boogie Street**

The first time I saw Leonard Cohen in concert, he sang this song *a capella* in his deep sonorous voice – I was mesmerized!

The theme of Boogie Street of course pervades the song [Boogie Street](#) (2001), such as the chorus

**O Crown of Light, O Darkened One
I never thought we'd meet
You kiss my lips and then it's done
I'm back on Boogie Street**

There is also a wonderful metaphor for the hopelessness of life in one of the verses,

**I'm wanted at the traffic-jam, they're saving me a seat
I'm what I am, and what I am is back on Boogie Street**

Leonard Cohen strikes a different mood in his infamous [Chelsea Hotel #2](#) (1974), one of the indifference of life. The song tells of a loveless sexual encounter in New York's Chelsea Hotel. The woman in the song is reputed to have been Janis Joplin.

**I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel
You were talkin' so brave and so sweet
Givin' me head on the unmade bed
While the limousines wait in the street**

I am always affected by the somewhat cruel sentiment that the man (Leonard Cohen) says at the end of the song,

**I don't mean to suggest that I loved you the best
I can't keep track of each fallen robin
I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel
That's all, I don't even think of you that often**

In 2009 I had a rather bitter dispute with my employer that I shall not go into here. As well as my official letters, I also had a sign made up for my office door on which were pictured two weeping angel statues and the following lines from [Everybody Knows](#) (1988),

**Everybody knows the war is over
Everybody knows the good guys lost
Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes, everybody knows**

I also sent more personal letters to my School Dean and Faculty Executive Dean in which I quoted these lyrics! I was mightily pissed off – but I eventually won!

Notwithstanding Leonard Cohen's many observations on the grim side of life, he sometimes offers us hope of redemption. One of his famous songs is [Anthem](#) (1992) with the chorus,

**Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in**

Although Leonard Cohen was Jewish (and later a Zen Buddhist, which he was comfortable as being co-existent with his Judaism), he greatly admired the teachings of Jesus, and many of his songs had lyrics which one could interpret as theologically Christian. Consider these lines from [Amen](#) (2012),

**Tell me again when the filth of the butcher
Is washed in the blood of the lamb**

I felt a deep empathy with Leonard Cohen when I first heard the following remarkable lines from his book of poetry [Book of Longing](#) (2006); this poem was one of 23 poems from the book subsequently set to music by Philip Glass,

**I can't make the hills
The system is shot
I'm living on pills
For which I thank G-d
I followed the course
From chaos to art**

**Desire the horse
Depression the cart**

In 1960, Leonard Cohen had bought a house on the Greek Island of Hydra and retreated there. It was on Hydra that he observed a bird perching on a wire and this was the inspiration that eventually led to one of his best known songs, [Bird on the Wire](#), eventually completed in 1969.

He met a Norwegian woman, Marianne Ihlen, on Hydra. She had recently been separated from her husband, leaving her with a young son to raise. Leonard took her back to her home city of Oslo, Norway, and then later invited her and her son to live with him in Montreal, his home city. Leonard and Marianne were together through much of the 1960s and she was his muse in many of his poems and songs. She was of course the woman from the song "[So Long, Marianne](#)" (1967).

Marianne Ihlen was diagnosed with leukaemia in July 2016. On her death bed, her friend Jan Christian Mollestad informed Leonard Cohen of her impending death. Within hours, he had responded with a letter which Mollestad then read to Ihlen.

'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. And you know that I've always loved you for your beauty and your wisdom, but I don't need to say anything more about that because you know all about that. But now, I just want to wish you a very good journey. Goodbye old friend. Endless love, see you down the road.'

Reputedly, the near comatose Marianne reached out her hand as Leonard had instructed. She died two days later. There is now of course intense speculation that Leonard Cohen already knew of his own impending mortality.

So now Leonard Cohen has gone too. In contemplating this loss, I am reminded of some lines from [The Darkness](#) (2012),

**I got no future
I know my days are few
The present's not so pleasant
Just a lot of things to do
I thought the past would last me
But the darkness got that too**

As a friend of mine posted to Facebook, "Dear Alan, I feel for you: Leonard will continue speaking to you sweetly from a window in the tower of song." ([Tower of Song](#), 1988)

If I stretch out my hand, I think I can reach the hand of an old friend ...

Epilogue

So stand me by that column
That may take this temple down
([Samson In New Orleans](#), 2014)

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