



A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen

Liel Leibovitz

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Why is it that Leonard Cohen receives the sort of reverence we reserve for a precious few living artists? Why are his songs, three or four decades after their original release, suddenly gracing the charts, blockbuster movie sound tracks, and television singing competitions? And why is it that while most of his contemporaries are either long dead or engaged in uninspired nostalgia tours, Cohen is at the peak of his powers and popularity?

These are the questions at the heart of *A Broken Hallelujah*, a meditation on the singer, his music, and the ideas and beliefs at its core. Granted extraordinary access to Cohen's personal papers, Liel Leibovitz examines the intricacies of the man whose performing career began with a crippling bout of stage fright, yet who, only a few years later, tamed a rowdy crowd on the Isle of Wight, preventing further violence; the artist who had gone from a successful world tour and a movie star girlfriend to a long residency in a remote Zen retreat; and the rare spiritual seeker for whom the principles of traditional Judaism, the tenets of Zen Buddhism, and the iconography of Christianity all align. The portrait that emerges is that of an artist attuned to notions of justice, lust, longing, loneliness, and redemption, and possessing the sort of voice and vision commonly reserved only for the prophets.

More than just an account of Cohen's life, *A Broken Hallelujah* is an intimate look at the artist that is as emotionally astute as it is philosophically observant. Delving into the sources and meaning of Cohen's work, Leibovitz beautifully illuminates what Cohen is telling us and why we listen so intensely.

A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen Details

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From Reader Review A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen for online ebook

Kent Winward says

The biography isn't as good as the songs and poetry, but the background casts shadows and gives a little bit of a crack where even more light can get in.

Jake says

I won this book from a goodreads giveaway. I really didn't know a whole lot about Leonard Cohen aside from that he wrote Hallelujah, which I think is probably the best song ever written. The book outlines his 50 year career writing poetry, novels, stories and music. He was too young to be a beat and too old for the '60's folk scene, always a bit of an outsider. Cohen was a well respected poet and author of novels and short stories when he heard Bob Dylan and decided to be a singer/song writer. There is plenty of rock history, from the Beatles to prog rock to punk and grunge. What I enjoyed even more than the usual rock biography run-ins with celebrities (Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, etc...) was reading about his philosophy of art. This is an atypical rock biography. I recommend it whether you are into Leonard Cohen or not!

"To enjoy music, and to enjoy life, is to enjoy tension and see it not as a boulder blocking the path to a desired goal but as the path itself." page 151

Kdorman says

Lets just say that I care about a number of people that are Leonard Cohen fanatics and though I never previously understood their rabid fascination, Liel Liebowitz's biography "A Broken Hallelujah" made me fall in love with Cohen.

How could you not when to quote the Kirkus Review "In an account of a 2009 performance, Leibowitz writes : "In true Zen fashion, it turned out that all he needed to do to let his songs state their case was nothing but accept Lorca's definition of duende and allow the tightly closed flowers of his spare arrangements bloom into a thousand petals" 3/16/14

Contrary to the Kirckus review that says "Liebovitz delivers a different sort of biography that Cohen fanatics should appreciate" I thought of this book as an introduction to Cohen for people that either didn't get him or were unfamiliar with him.

Though at times academic with many biblical references, it offers an irreverent approach to biography writing that I feel perfectly represents a man between times, Leonard Cohen.

Christine says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0458063>

As Leonard Cohen turns 80, a new biography by Liel Leibovitz explores the life, work and passion of the poet-turned-musician. What makes Cohen such an enduring international figure in the cultural imagination?

Granted extraordinary access to Cohen's personal papers, Leibovitz evokes a complicated, sometimes contradictory figure. Born into a Canadian religious Jewish family, for years a reclusive lyricist on the Greek island of Hydra, known for his bold political commentary, his devotion to Buddhist thought and his later despair over contemporary Zionism, Cohen hardly follows the rules of a conventional rock star.

An intimate look at a man who, despite battles with depression and years spent in hermit-like isolation, is still touring and now seems to be reaching a new peak of popularity.

Read by Julian Barrett, with Leonard Cohen quotes read by Colin Stinton.

Abridged by: Jo Coombs

Producer: Pippa Vaughan

A Loftus Media production for BBC Radio 4.

Maria Roxana says

O carte de citit pe melodii "?optite" de Leonard Cohen..

Bruno Martinez-Leo says

"...he believes, like Arendt, that there's no inherent evil in the world, just thoughtless men in precarious circumstances..." Page 95

Not quite a biography, much more than an essay and a very good recollection of chronologic events that explain a little of Cohen's hypnotising words -whether recited or sung.

If you are mesmerised by Cohen's work; you'll definitely will be much more after reading this.

Definitely recommend it.

Peggy says

A beautifully written biography of Leonard Cohen that pays particular attention to the influence of Jewish thought on his work. Recommended for anyone who wonders just how his unique and powerful vision of song developed.

Trevor Gardner says

I was introduced to Leonard Cohen when I was 19 by my girlfriend at the time. We sat in her bedroom and listened to The Best of Leonard Cohen and as soon as I heard his voice enter in over the classical strumming of "Suzanne", I understood I was listening to something different, something I had never encountered before. I couldn't explain at the time what it was but I was okay "traveling blind" because his voice and his words sounded like the truth.

Exactly twice the age I was when I first heard Leonard Cohen, there is still much he writes and sings that is beyond my understanding – but Liel Leibovitz's wonderful biography "A Broken Hallelujah" offers some thoughtful insights into Cohen's life and his music, as well as the unnamed spaces in between. Dexterously balancing his personal life and the music, the spiritual and the mundane, Leibovitz captures Cohen's many-masked journey as an artist and a seeker. I found myself stopping mid chapter to grab my ipod and play whatever song or album Leibovitz was describing at the moment, hearing both the word and the music with new ears.

Dave Donahoe says

Read as a first reads selection.

This is a wonderfully poetic book about the poet musician Leonard Cohen. Leibovitz explores the many influences of Leonard Cohen's career, from his Jewish background to his Buddhist exploration. Cohen is a bit of an enigma, he is a reluctant musician that began his career as a poet and novelist and turned to music when words were no longer enough. He fought for control over his vision, and was largely uncompromising in the final revelation of his songs. His voice and words speak to the soul and transcend genre and time.

The early portion of Cohen's talent, and influences, is examined thoroughly, with his recording career reviewed in the second portion of the book. This is definitely a man with excess of talent, and the author does not relegate himself to only one aspect, though possibly the reason for which he is most famous, of it.

Liebovitz's book brings into view some of Cohen's shortcomings as a person and artist, but ultimately reveal the beauty of the man and his craft. An artist that hit his stride in his 50's and continues to produce meaningful works into his 70's, Cohen is a force to be reckoned with. His concerts often exceed three hours in length and put to shame other performers more interested in spectacle than substance.

Read the book for understanding. See the performer live for enlightenment.

Laura says

A Cohen fan before, now I have acquired a much deeper appreciation and awe of the artist. The author masterfully balances the genre's need to expose with respecting Cohen's privacy -- I never felt like I was imposing on him. A beautiful and elegant review of the artist's life and work.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Joe Kraus says

Sometimes when you're a hardcore fan of a band or a singer, a completist, you come across the old "B-Sides and Demos" style release and just have to have it. There are usually some familiar songs in their original unproduced incarnations, a promising song that never made it onto any of the official releases, and a lot of things you tell yourself – for as long as it takes to justify the price of the album – are OK.

This book reads a lot like a B-Sides and Demos release.

On the one hand, Leibovitz has an intriguing fundamental take on Cohen. He sees him as a kind of wannabe prophet, someone pushing popular music to more authentically spiritual dimensions than anyone else. He has a number of striking readings of Cohen songs, and he adds some real depth to a few. I've been listening to a lot Cohen's music in the last several weeks – more than at any other time in my life – and Leibovitz gives me a few new ways to listen to something like "Famous Blue Raincoat" as a song vacillating between an abstract philosophical inquiry and a personal, signed letter.

But...much of the rest of this feels like filler, like the demo tracks that might have sounded good at the time and now don't feel fleshed out.

To take a representative example, we get an extended description of the Isle of Wight Music Festival. We hear about its promoter, about the anarchists resolved to overturn it, about the performers' reactions to hostile crowds. For 20+ pages, it feels as if the book is going to talk just about the festival. And then, near the end of the section, Cohen emerges and calms the audience by talking to them. It's a great scene, and it led me to what my favorite music books do: to track down the track described on Youtube and enjoy it in a new way.

I expect that exegesis to be emblematic of how Leibovitz sees Cohen on stage, but it turns out to be mostly anomalous. Cohen was not generally able to connect with crowds in those days. It's a great story, but the first two-thirds feel like digression and the final third doesn't seem to connect to the rest of the portrait Leibovitz is painting.

We get similar digressions all the time. We hear about Jewish religious practices, about the rise of punk or prog rock, about the zeitgeist of 1975 or 1984. There are places for that kind of work. Greil Marcus – widely quoted here and a clear inspiration – has a knack for doing what we might call rock criticism's version of literary theory's new historicism, of taking a small cultural moment and demonstrating how it reflects larger political and aesthetic tensions of its age. But Leibovitz – as well and as insightfully as he writes in small sections – doesn't quite have that same breadth of vision for his subject. (At least not here. I get the impression I'd enjoy spending time with this guy.)

The largest problem here, however, is that the book can't quite decide what it wants to be. It isn't quite a

biography though we do get substantial pieces of Cohen's life. It isn't quite a literary analysis because it jumps from one era to another too markedly, never quite developing its core argument but applying it in repeated (if interesting) ways. And it isn't quite a music history since we hear anecdotes of performance but no sustained description of Cohen as performer.

In the end, this works to take me back to Cohen's music, but it seems more an invitation to return to the greatest hits – to the songs I already know – than to explore more rarities from the, sadly, now deceased master. Leibovitz has some tunes that I think could be polished and produced into hits, but they feel too much like unfinished demos for me to recommend this as highly as its best parts make me want to.

Louise says

This unconventional artist needs an unconventional book. Author Leil Liebovitz has delivered. Mixing his chronology with artistic and social commentary he shows how Leonard Cohen was shaped by his Jewish heritage and his Canadian upbringing, how he became a poet and how he put the poems to music. At times the author is as poetic as his subject.

The book has only 246 short pages. The content is good but not all of it is on Cohen. There are pages devoted to related subjects such as Canadian literature, Jewish history and Bob Dylan. In the first chapter "Prelude", Cohen does not emerge for 12 pages.

There are some good insights such as the difference in Canadian and American artists, the concept of "duende" (which suits Cohen's voice and content) and Cohen's views on his work. There are amazing episodes such as the visit to/escape from Cuba, recording with Phil Spector (dinner with Phil Spector!) and the two performance tours in Israel.

Liebovitz, in some places uses Cohen's own words to describe him. His opening to his audience in Poland shows how he refuses to be used by anyone (to me, they related to the episode where Dylan seems to expect Cohen to perform at his concert); his speech in support of the Bereaved Parents for Peace in Israel shows his long apolitical view; and his reflection on the embezzlement of most of his assets show his forgiveness and resilience.

Each chapter is introduced with a full page photo of Cohen, so you watch him mature. As of this writing he is 80 and has maintained audiences through at least 4 generations (depending on how you count, maybe 5). He has just released a new album and in 2013 performed in tours in Europe and the US.

If you are a fan of Cohen you probably know all the biographical material that is eliminated or pruned and will appreciate the commentary and insight.

Richard White says

I'm a huge Leonard Cohen fan so I may not be totally objective, but nevertheless I have to give this book five stars. The book not only captures the essence of Leonard Cohen, it captures the essence of an era. In this case

1960 to the present. Sadly, folks in the USA never embraced Cohen like they have with Dylan. I suspect Americans have only recently come to know about Leonard Cohen due the endless renditions of Hallelujah on every talent show flooding the TV networks. Granted Cohen's songs are as Bob Dylan says, "songs to slit your wrists to" but there is so much more to this man. Discover his humorous side as he and Dylan exchange pleasantries in a Paris cafe. Leonard compliments Dylan on a particular song asking him how long it took to write. "Fifteen minutes in the back of a taxi" replied Bob, then he asked Leonard the same question regarding Hallelujah. Knowing that it took him over four years, Cohen is embarrassed and lies to Dylan and tells him two years. Why Cohen is such a huge hit in Europe but virtually unknown in the USA is a sad mystery. Read and enjoy this great insight into a man and an era. Then go out and buy some CD's. Just make sure to hide the razor blades.

Maayan K says

"We have better poets than Leonard Cohen, and more skilled novelists. Songwriters blessed with greater talent wrote songs and gained fame and withered away. But Leonard Cohen lingers and thrives because he is not really any of these things, at least not essentially. He's something more intricate, the sort of man whose pores absorb the particles of beauty and grief and truth that float weightlessly all around us yet so few of us note. He is attuned to the divine, whatever the divine might be, not with the thinker's complications or the zealot's obstructions, but with the unburdened heart of a believer. [...] Millennia ago, as we began asking ourselves the same fundamental questions we still ponder, we called men like him prophets, meaning not that they could foresee the future but that they could better understand the present by seeing one more layer of meaning to life. The title still applies."

This is about as good as nonfiction can get for me. I know Liel Leibovitz well from his political/polemical opinion journalism, which often veers to the demagogic. Here, Liel's more subtle sensibilities and skills are on display as he very readably guides us through the extraordinary life and art of Leonard Cohen. I appreciate the detailed analysis of Cohen's texts themselves as primary source material. Also media interviews from various times. Very little of the book is spent on his personal life. The correct assumption Liel makes is that the deepest way to know Cohen is through his work. Liel does spend considerable time putting Cohen in the context of his contemporaries throughout the decades, from the poet Irving Layton, to Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, and Bono. I got a bit lost in the rock and roll history at a couple points, but I'm sure that people that are music history buffs would appreciate Liel's analysis. What I did get out of the comparisons is that Cohen always seemed to be somehow out of time. His music never matched the musical or thematic trends at any point - too young to be a beat, too old to be a hippie, and never matching the zeitgeist of any decade. Yet as he got older, his popularity only grew, right up until the end. It's amazing to think, as Liel points out, that Leonard Cohen was born before Elvis. One seems like an ancient relic of the past, while the other is with us now, as vital and alive as anything.

My appreciation for Cohen only grows as I get to know more of what he created over decades of glacially-paced but ever-creative work. And also as I learn more about his life. I didn't understand before how deep and knowledgeable his Judaism was, or his biographical connection to Israel. I really like learning about Cohen's grappling with how to continue to produce and perform after being successful through the many phases of his career (from young ingenue to venerated sage). At many points he wouldn't perform certain things, or couldn't perform at all anymore. This is profound in comparison to the many creative people who turn into bad caricatures of their younger selves as they continue to perform songs that are dead to them. Not Cohen - he never stopped changing and growing right up until the release of his last album only a few months before he died last year (this book was written before, but still).

