

# Ten or More Questions I *Should* Have Asked Leonard Cohen

by Ira B. Nadel

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Writing the biography of a living person is very much like going on a first date: there is the nervousness of the first call; the agony over what to say; the anxiety over what to do. Then, there is the date itself, which usually begins with a fumbling speech that sounds at best like the unrehearsed opening of *Twelfth Night*; this is quickly followed by the realization that you're underdressed and the certain knowledge that you've (a) taken him or her to the absolutely wrong movie ("Indecent Proposal," when it should have been "Much Ado About Nothing") and (b) forgotten to take enough cash. At the end of the evening, assuming you've survived, there is the pain of separation — that is, the attempt — or avoidance — of an embrace and, perhaps, if lucky, a kiss (how many of us remember those early but tentative gropings?). Finally, there is the agony and worry over whether or not to call again and what to say when she tells you "she's busy" as you hesitatingly ask for a second date — although she kindly repeats that the first was fun! In secret elation you turn away because, frankly, it *wasn't* that much fun.

My first — and only — date with Leonard Cohen occurred this past May in London, the 11th to be exact. It took place in a subterranean dressing room backstage at the venerable Royal Albert Hall, a marvellous, round concert theatre built in 1871. The encounter was spontaneous and memorable. And given that I am writing a literary life of Cohen, necessary.

The balmy May evening began casually — with 6500 fans eagerly vying for Leonard Cohen T-shirts, tapes, and posters. Vendors were well-supplied and anxious to do business, although \$26 for T-shirts advertising "The Future" seemed slightly high and self-serving. But then Sony International had a lot of expenses for the thirty-eight city tour: two moving vans, countless grips, flashy programs at \$10 each, and even bodyguards. However, the crowd, which combined the old and the young, the well-dressed and the look-a-likes, didn't mind the prices. Long hair and no hair, ties and

tattoos were everywhere as the jostling crowd entered the hall to find a stage carefully arranged with equipment which convinced me that the London Philharmonic had become the opening act. But despite the three synthesizers, four guitars, one sax, one violin, one bass, one drum set, two backup singers, and numerous sound personnel, by the end of the night, it was just Leonard and I.

Well, o.k., four or five others were also present, but after the raucous, applauding crowd, who gave him a standing ovation at the **beginning** of the show and stood ten deep at the stage during his seven encores, it seemed pretty intimate when we met and shook hands. And I'll never forget his first words to me: "Have something to eat." My mind raced through his poems, songs and fiction — had I heard those words before? While still dazed by his language, he pointed me towards the refreshment table in the dressing room, urging me to take some fresh fruit, peanuts, or drink. But we quickly got down to basics, as I offered platitude upon platitude to this solicitous, well-dressed man who didn't hide his fifty-eight years following an energetic if slightly mannered performance. After once more repeating how much I enjoyed the show and that, ironically, I would not be in Vancouver for his June 30th performance, I ventured to ask an overwhelming question: "Would you mind signing my program?"

Gracefully refusing my blue-green Papermate, he sought his own black felt pen from a canvas bag and carelessly yet distinctively wrote across the glossy cover, "To Ira, fraternal greetings, Leonard Cohen." I was stunned. "Fraternal greetings." What could this mean? But before I could say any more, he thanked me for coming, offered me his hand, and politely turned to another well-wisher who entered the dressing room behind the stage. Steve Meador, his drummer, charitably took over, made some jokes about my coming to London to see Leonard rather than waiting for the tour to visit Vancouver and led me to the stairs. And that was it, except for avoiding three hundred fans who stood at the only open exit door. I waved, refused all requests for autographs, and searched for another escape on the other side of the building. And then, as I headed down Cromwell Road in the darkness, it dawned on me: all the questions I *should* have asked Leonard Cohen!

In the tradition of *l'esprit d'escalier*, then, let me share with you some of my post-event questions and examine the answers drawn from statements by, and interviews with, Leonard Cohen. Although the discussion is fictitious, quotation marks indicate the words of Leonard Cohen.

**Scene:** The dressing room of the Royal Albert Hall, London.

**Time:** 11 May 1993, following a concert.

**Cast:** **Naive Interviewer**, in nervous voice with pad, pen and irregularly working tape recorder.

**Leonard Cohen**, darkly dressed, relaxing in a chair, answering in a deep and thoughtful voice.

## **1. How did a nice Jewish boy from Westmount become a brooding poet-sage-singer and property owner in Greece?**

— Was it the desire to rebel, and the power of art to free me from the restrictions of Westmount? Was it the influence of McGill, coupled with the need to find a voice? Was it the limited success of my early country and western band, the Buckskin Boys, or my abilities as a teenage hypnotist? Probably all of them, coupled with having some wonderful teachers, especially Louie Dudek, F.R. Scott and Irving Layton, acting in many ways as my absent father, who died, remember, when I was nine. Greece I discovered in 1959 when it was cheap, and I still recall its solitude. It was a good place to write.

I started to write, by the way, at sixteen "sitting down at a card table on a sun porch one day when I decided to quit a job. I was working in a brass foundry [of my uncle's] at the time and one morning I thought, I just can't take this anymore, and I went out to the sun porch and I started a poem. I had a marvellous sense of mastery and power, and freedom, and strength, when I was writing this poem. I haven't had that feeling too often since. As a matter of fact, now when I write, what turns out to be a poem, or what other people call a poem, it's because I can't say anything . . . . I want my poems to be, I don't even think of them as poems, when I wrote those things they were techniques to get myself together. But I found I can't use any ornaments, I can't use tricks" (Harris 30-31).

## **2. Why did you leave Canada in 1956?**

— I left for the typical reasons: to find myself and pursue the Romantic's quest, first to NY, in Columbia University's General Studies Program in 1956-57 which was something of a lark, since I had finished McGill only by supplemental examinations and getting bare passes; I then went to England on a Canadian Arts Council grant, and then, by 1959, to Greece, chosen, as I like to say, because of the tan on a Greek bank official in London during a particularly

dreary year. Canada left me, and my constant travel, which also meant Cuba in 1961 (like Lorca, I had to go there), was crucial for my vision. Now, I admit a preference for living in LA, because it is on "the edge of destruction; even the ground is shifting" (BBC 2, 14 May 1993). But if anything, I am a Montrealer, not a Canadian. Montreal still remains for me "the poem factory" although its also a song factory as well (*FG* 151). When I turned down the Governor General's Award in 1969 I said, "there's nobody in Canada who can judge my work" (Williams 49). Today I'm not sure if that remark is Chutzpah or folly. But I still have "foolish dreams about Canada. I believe it could somehow avoid American mistakes . . ." (Harris 28).

### **3. Did you consciously give up writing literature for song?**

— The two have always co-existed. I just started to publish before my songs were recognized. My songs are now my poetry, and I work as hard on them as I ever did on my other writing. But "it isn't quite accurate to say that I started as a musician and moved over to poetry. They arose at the same time. I was interested in the kind of language that went well with the guitar" (Pearson 76). I was thirty-three when my first album appeared in 1967 — "trying to come up with a solution to being a writer and not having to go to a university to teach" (Browne 28) — and that age gave me experience which I think the songs conveyed. I also now believe that songs communicate more directly, and accurately, my feelings to a larger audience in a more dramatic manner, although "I always had the idea of poetry for many people" (Harris 27). But I also realized early that I couldn't make a living from poetry or fiction. So singing became my trade. "Words" remember, "are completely empty and any emotion can be poured into them. Almost all my songs can be sung any way. They can be sung as tough songs or as gentle songs or as contemplative songs or as courting songs" (Harris 26). "The news is sad but it's in a song so its not so bad" as I wrote in *The Favorite Game*. And I have, as you know, a sense of drama satisfied by song and performance, although I admit that "there are only about four notes I can claim with a certain authority. I've never had the luxury of the buffet table" (Walsh 39). Yet my new album doesn't fall into the vortex of despair: "if I'd just nailed the lyrics of *The Future* to a church door in Wittenberg, it would be a heavy and foreboding and sinister document — but it's married to a hot little dance track. So the music dissolves in the lyric and the lyric dissolves in the music, and you're left with a kind of refreshment, a kind of oxygen" (Walsh 39).

#### **4. Who were some early musical and literary influences on your work, besides Ray Charles and Irving Layton?**

— I'll be direct. For music, patriotic tunes and country and western music: "I use to sing 'Rule Britannia' at school and 'Flow Gently Sweet Afton,' and the one that goes 'In days of yore, from Britain's shore, Wolfe the dauntless hero came.' Those rousing national hymns touched me. In fact, all expressions of a serious and committed point of view have always touched me in songs. There were several distinct folk traditions — the Quebecois, the Scottish border ballads (because the Scots settled Montreal). And a number of real Canadian folk songs were coming out, you could get country music on some of the radio stations late at night. We had a lot of music coming to us" (Walsh 40).

Literary influence: Corky Smith, aka Corlies M. Smith, my early editor at Viking who went over *The Favorite Game* page by page with me to improve the writing and structure. He was always provocative and when, for example, he asked me about including a Yeats epigram in *The Favorite Game* I remember writing "Yeats will have no quotation in my book. He has had too much already and what have I had? Do you see my poems in the front of every book? No, no, I refuse, I resist: must we be forever blackmailed by the Irish merely because a few hundred thousand perished of starvation? Haven't we paid our debt? No Yeats, no Wilde, no Behan. The book will be bare" (Viking).

In the mid-sixties, Corky courageously took *Beautiful Losers* for Viking, although he suggested I add a preface to assure readers that the book was a work of fiction. In a long letter written in the summer of 1965, I persuaded him to drop this idea while explaining to him what the book was about. He agreed.

#### **5. Were there any other "shaping forces"?**

— Lorca, of course. It's surprising how many things we shared. Ever since I read his *Selected Poems* and later *Poet in New York* I've been affected by his blend of the lyrical and surreal. And many things in my life paralleled his: he was a musician who played the guitar and piano often to the accompaniment of his poetry; he went, as I did, to New York and attended Columbia; he visited Cuba and he posed a question I am still pursuing: "What stigma has passion placed on my brow?" He, furthermore, expressed clearly what I believe a ballad should be: "the plastic algebra of a drama of passion and pain" (CP xxv, xl).

I have found his words tremendously evocative as "Take This Waltz" from *I'm Your Man* confirms. Compare the lines from Lorca's "Little Viennese Waltz" with the lines I wrote, adapted to my melody. Lorca writes

In Vienna there are ten little girls,  
a shoulder for death to cry on,  
and a forest of dried pigeons.  
There is a fragment of tomorrow  
in the museum of winter frost.  
There is a thousand-windowed dance hall.

I changed that to

Now in Vienna there are ten pretty women.  
There's a shoulder where Death comes to cry.  
There's a lobby with nine hundred windows.  
There's a tree where the doves go to die.  
There's a piece that was torn from the morning, and it  
hangs  
in the Gallery of Frost.

Different words, same tone.

## 6. How do you work on a song?

— I write in tall ledger books over a long period of time. In fact, "composing hardly begins to describe what the process is. It's something like scavenging, something like farming in sand, something like scraping the bottom of the barrel. the process doesn't have any dignity. It is a work of extreme poverty" (Pearson 76). "The whole affair is detailed and intense; the standards are severe. I wish I could be one of those guys who write good songs in the back of cabs . . . When young writers ask me all about writing, the one thing I tell them is that a song will yield itself if you stick with it long enough, but long enough is far beyond any reasonable idea of what long enough might be" (DeMuir 33). "Anthem" from *The Future* began in the early 'eighties, and I thought it might fit on *Various Positions* (1984) and then possibly *I'm Your Man* (1988). I rejected it, however, until now. The same with "Waiting for the Miracle." "Democracy" took at least three years to write — I wrote at least 50 verses to that. [But] I can't discard a verse totally until it's completely written, because it's in the writing of it that the idea that it is not your own arises, and that's the idea that you want to embrace — the one that is not conditioned by your own dismal platform, slogan or

ideology" (DeMuir 33).

To go for a song is to "go to the truth of feeling. When I inhabit that place, I discard all the alibis. I'm talking about a collapse of perspective. The catastrophe has already happened on the interior plane. The world has already been destroyed. The mental hospitals are full and people are copping to each other that they can't take it. Well what *is* it that they can't take? . . . They can't take the reality they're living in" (DeCurtis 46).

## **7. Why can't I hear your songs on popular radio?**

— The airwaves have not been my waves; my appeal is to a different audience with better ears. Or is it my voice which some say is similar to "a rusty old farm implement" rasping and creaking; or my appearance? The *New York Times* recently praised me (at least I took it as praise) by saying I "looked something like a singing Easter Island head" (Pareles).

As a young boy, I began piano lessons with Miss McDougall, moved on to the guitar and then the clarinet in the high-school marching band; the Buckskin Boys were formative and I stayed with the guitar until the mid-eighties when I discovered the electronic keyboard so my sound has been evolving and is quite eclectic, although eleven albums in twenty-five years is not a sensational output.

"From a certain point of view, my songs are free from meaning and significance. There's not a secret that is being concealed, there's nothing that I am not yielding . . . . Sometimes I feel like my work is like an ice cube . . . you can put it in a Coke or you can put it in a scotch . . . it just has an effect, it's hard to say what it's getting at, I'm not sure it's getting *at* anything *but* an effect, effect of cooling your drink, which is an urgent effect, to give comfort" (Cullman 104). I might have a credo and it now reads "There's a crack in everything, that's where the light gets in . . . . That idea is one of the foundations, one of the fundamental positions behind a lot of the songs" (Cullman 104).

## **8. Will you ever return to writing poetry?**

— Will the sea ever stop renewing the land? A new edition of my selected poems, tentatively called *Stranger Music: Poems and Songs*, has been promised for some time, but it's anybody's guess when it will be done — including mine. Even my editor in Toronto doesn't know when to expect it and this summer is devoted to the

tour with little time for writing. But I continue to compose and revise. However, for many years, I have been less compelled to write poetry.

**9. Fiction seems to have played a minor part in your career. What prompted you to start and why have you stopped?**

— I needed to test the craft, but it created problems for me from the beginning. Publishers' reactions to *The Favorite Game* and *Beautiful Losers* were equally negative and dismissive, my first work being criticized for being too restricted because it seemed too autobiographical, my second too wild because it coupled sex with religion. But writing and finishing *Beautiful Losers* taught me what I wanted to learn: "how to treat big themes with a fast, personal technique" (27 April 1965). My works also go through many transformations, especially in titles. *Plastic Birchbark* became *The History of Them All, A Pop Gothic Novel* and then *Beautiful Losers*, for example.

But my work has never been easily accepted. *Beautiful Losers* had eight readings in manuscript before Viking decided to publish it in June 1965. And even then, they were not widely enthusiastic. Even the manuscript would not cooperate: after the book had been accepted, I lost my only carbon of the original when a sudden wind sent pages scattering to the sea during an outdoor reading in Hydra. Only because my NY agent could get another copy could I proceed with revisions. But sales weren't too bad: in August of 1966, while it was being read by Otto Preminger, MCA, Ulu Grosbard, and Alexander Cohen for a possible movie, advance sales hit 2600 copies with another 500 ordered. At the same time, I couldn't sell my short story "Luggage Fire Sale": it was turned down by all the great magazines: *Playboy*, *Cavalier*, *Esquire* and *Nugget*!

**10. Unlike other Canadian poets — Dudek, Layton, Lee, Mandel, Kroetsch, and even Scobie, you have written no criticism or reviews. How come?**

— Not true. "How to Speak Poetry" in its two forms from *Death of A Lady's Man* is one example, although certainly an unconventional one. I write no criticism because, as I wrote, "the audience will know what you know because they know it already. You have nothing to teach them" (*DLM* 197). I still believe this. And why should I write criticism when I understand so little about what I read? The poet's job is to write, to create, not to criticize. I also don't understand the work of others, not even my own and I certainly don't read it. In fact, I don't even read biography,



especially when it's about me. It's usually wrong. And who has time for such reading in a period of such crisis?

Reviews? I can't write them. It would be violating the language of others and trespassing on their words. Keep off is my motto.

### **11. Has being Jewish impeded your work in any way?**

— No, because I believe, maybe via Layton, that "the New Jew is the founder of Magic Canada" (*BL* 203). Being Jewish has given me ancestors, and its Kabbalistic imagination has influenced me; socially, however, it has marginalized me, placing me with other alienated forces in Canada and elsewhere. "I couldn't enter into the orthodox Jewish stream, the Hassidic dance — I tried, but it wasn't really my own. I couldn't really become a fighter in the Spanish Civil War, since it was over, but I did go down to Spain. I wasn't British, I didn't have the right accent or speak the kind of English my professors spoke. There was plenty of café culture in Montreal, but I wasn't welcome there. It was mainly French and I spoke English. You had more prestige if you came from the wrong side of the tracks and I came from the right side. So I was always trying to find a café that was mine, a language and style that was mine, always looking for a homeland and a position — until it became clear to me that I had no position and that nobody else did either. They'd been swept away" (Walsh 40). But Judaism did give me a sense of tradition and spirituality which I have taken into new directions and which *The Future* now summarizes: "I'm the little jew who wrote the bible / I've seen nations rise and fall / I've heard their stories, heard them all / but love's the only engine of survival."

### **12. Mordecai Richler recently described Brian Mulroney as Canada's best-dressed Prime Minister; are you our best dressed poet/singer?**

— Ah, have you been mis-reading my poem "The Suit"? Well it is true that I occasionally take the garbage out at 10AM wearing a sharply cut grey suit. My family's business was originally clothing, but I didn't always find it easy to buy clothes, especially at earlier times. I somehow couldn't reconcile it "with my visions of a human benefactor. You know, to be buying clothes when people are in such bad shape elsewhere; so I wear out the old things I've got. Also, I can't find any clothes that represent me. And clothes are magical, a magical procedure, they really change the way you are in a day. Any woman knows this, and men have discovered it now" (Harris 29). However, the magic obviously didn't work in London when *The Times* said of my recent concert that I was

"dressed in the jauntily ecclesiastic clothing that a vicar might wear to a youth club disco."

### **13. What is an average day for Leonard Cohen in the 1990s?**

— Certainly not what it was like in the 'sixties in Hydra or the 'seventies in Nashville or the 'eighties in New York. Now, in LA, I often get up early at 4:30 in the morning and go to the meditation hall — "not practising for enlightenment or visions, but trying to find the rhyme for orange — back to my house, brew a pot of coffee, drink it, keep on working, fall apart around 11 in the morning, resurrect yourself by the middle of the afternoon, and start over. But I can't complain: I think it's the nature of things to work hard, and I do" (DeMuir 33).

### **14. What advice would you give to a young poet or writer today?**

— This is difficult to answer. "I don't think anyone should try to be a poet; this is a verdict, not a vocation" (Hille 4). Language is the first pull, then experience, private and social. Look at the difference between the *Spice Box* vs. *Flowers for Hitler*, and compare that with *Book of Mercy*, a kind of culmination. It may be the move from the lyrical to the social and then the spiritual, although they are all linked in my work. However, I think it is essential for any writer to recognize the potential holiness of art: "prayer," remember, "makes speech a ceremony. To observe this ritual in the absence of arks, altars, a listening sky: this is a rich discipline" which every artist must experience (*SP* 83).

### **15. At fifty-eight, why do you work as hard as you do?**

— "The kind of work I like is the evidence of life lived, rather than some kind of abstracted conclusion of how things might be. I see a song as the ashes of existence, and if there is a light there, and you can warm yourself by it. It isn't an intellectual construction — its more like a footprint that you can stick your own foot in. Or a spike on which you can impale yourself" (DeMuir 33). I am in constant search for what I long ago described:

Let me renew myself  
in the midst of all the things of the world  
which cannot be connected.

"The Glass Dog"

### **16. How would you write your own biography?**

— Cautiously, but with pictures, song, and purity — with as little straight text as possible. I would emphasize the energy around us, although I would not neglect the gloom. Integrity would be its keynote and its title would be borrowed from Kierkegaard: "The Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing." That intensity is what I've sought, even if "I always experience myself as falling apart, and I'm taking emergency measures. 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" (DeCurtis 44). But I also must remember that "people are always inviting me to return to a former purity I was never able to claim" (DeCurtis 56). At one time I wrote, "I'm afraid to live any place but in expectation. I'm no life-risk" (*FG*). That's changed.

**17. All of the following adjectives have been used to describe you; are any correct?**

bard of the bedsits	apocalyptic lounge lizard
durable hipster	Jeremiah of Tin Pan Alley
legendary ladies man	amiable gangster
existential comedian	poetic playboy
spin doctor for the Apocalypse	emotional imperialist
grizzled prophet	restless pilgrim
damaged priest	the Godfather of Gloom
hippie icon	patron saint of angst
	the prince of bummers

— "All of them."

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Mr. Cohen, do you have any questions for me?

**Only one: why are you writing this book?**

— It's not because of a publisher's advance, nor the hope that it will get me promoted (what will get anyone promoted these days?). It is, I suppose, the determination to chart the progress of your style (recalling, from *The Energy of Slaves*, "The Progress of My Style") and the belief that what you have undertaken and accomplished is important not only for Canadian writers but for the forms you have engaged. And that the trajectory of your career carries with it either something symptomatic of our age, moving from an impatience

with writing to an engagement with song, or something out of step with the time. There is also the enigma of your reception, excessive in Europe, tempered in North America and limited in Canada; London raves, New York questions, and Toronto tries to understand. Of course, Juno awards and the like are beginning, but they are long overdue. Yet, why this slow acknowledgement?

The question interests me. Is the intensity of your experience and use of language too much for Canadians? Is Canada disenchanting in that you no longer write but only sing? Is it your unorthodox style, and less than melodic singing voice, what has been called "a low kippered croak"? Is it our inability to identify with your angst and spiritual struggle or unwillingness to believe that one from Montreal could equal the dilemmas of a Lorca, Rilke, or even Brecht? Or is it our inability to light the "Mosaic bush each of us grows in our heart but few of us care to ignite" (*FG* 195)? Is it our blindness to see the spiritual power of the culture you seek and our failure to undergo the questions of faith and desire you have engaged? Is it the unwillingness to let experience with its contradictions and confusions buffet us?

These are the questions I am pondering — and, I suppose, why I am reading your life and waiting, as you said in your poem "What I'm Doing Here," "for each one of you to confess."

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Walking down Cromwell Road after my lengthy but fictitious interview with Leonard (as I felt I could now call him), I recalled an article I saw last January in *Entertainment Weekly*. It had a remarkable headline: "7 Reasons Leonard Cohen is the Next-Best Thing to God" and offered these flippant reasons:

1. Rebecca de Mornay wears his sweatshirts.
2. Brooding is fundamental.
3. They don't make bohemians like him anymore.
4. He makes hunger sound apocalyptic.
5. He has great bathroom reading material.  
(Spenser's Poetry and American Indian Mythology!)
6. He's actually a funny guy. (In response to a comment that he possesses a lovely companion, the adulation of hipsters and relative success, Cohen replied in a deadpan manner: "Solid-gold artists would kill for this kind of anguish" [Browne]).
7. Rebecca De Mornay makes his travel plans, too.

Leonard offered me no such explanations, serious or otherwise.

But I still had more questions — and I may title his biography, *Leonard Cohen, A Life with Questions*. But then, as I write this final paragraph in Southern California, at John Wayne International Airport no less, I still have time to find out more answers from the hero of angst. Leonard Cohen is to conclude his world concert tour July 5th at the Wiltern Theatre in Los Angeles; if I'm quick, I just might be able to find a ticket.

2 July 1993

**Post Script:** No luck. Sold out; and, besides, I had to get back to Vancouver to finish this talk. But there'll be another chance, I'm sure. Once Leonard learns of my soon-to-be finished book, he'll no doubt be calling me — not for a second date, I'm afraid, but for *me* to answer lots of questions about what I did or didn't say. And I better start preparing my replies *now* because if I'm not careful, the next thing I know is that his lawyer will be calling and then I'll really find someone questioning my answers. In fact, I think it's time to leave before it's too late to prepare for a possible courtroom appearance. Thank you.

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