

# COHEN'S AGE OF REASON

At 71, this revered Canadian artist is back in the spotlight with a new book of poetry, a CD and concert tour – and a new appreciation for the gift of growing older | by Christine Langlois

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hen I mention that I will be interviewing Leonard Cohen at his home in Montreal, female friends – even a few younger than 50 – gasp. Some offer to come along to carry my nonexistent briefcase. My 23-year-old son, on the other hand, teases me by growling out “Closing Time” around the house for days. But he’s interested enough in Cohen’s songs to advise me on which ones have been covered recently.

The interest is somewhat astonishing given that Leonard Cohen is now 71. He was born a year before Elvis and introduced us to “Suzanne” and her perfect body back in 1968. For 40 years, he has provided a melancholy – and often mordantly funny – soundtrack for the loves, losses and longings of his legion of fans. And he still packs a powerful emotional wallop. Speaking at his induction this year into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, former broadcaster and Governor General Adrienne Clarkson put it this way: “He gets inside your brain, your heart, your lungs – you remember him, you feel him, you breathe him. He is our connection to the meaning of ecstasy, our access to another world we suspected existed but which he puts into song.”

Worldwide, almost 20 million Cohen albums have been sold and more than 1,000 covers of his songs, in several languages, have graced the airwaves. With his *Book of Longing* – a new collection of poetry and witty drawings, many self-portraits – and *Blue Alert* – a CD of new songs written collaboratively and performed by his partner in love and work, 46-year-old Anjani Thomas – and a fresh CD of his own expected out by late fall, Cohen is back in the spotlight.

Senior statesman of song is just the latest of many incarnations for Cohen, who brought out his first book of poetry while still a student at McGill University and, in the heady burst of Canada Council-fuelled culture of the early '60s, became an acclaimed poet and novelist before turning to songwriting. Published in 1963, his first novel, *The Favourite Game*, is a semi-autobiographical tale of a young Jewish poet coming of age in 1950s Montreal. His second, the sexually graphic *Beautiful Losers*, published in 1966, has been called the country’s first post-modern novel (and, at the time, by Toronto critic Robert Fulford, “the most revolting novel ever published in Canada”).

When he couldn’t make a living as a poet and novelist, Cohen (founding member of a country-and-western band called the Buckskin Boys while at McGill) turned his talents to the more lucrative music business, just when Bob Dylan was elevating the singer-songwriter’s status to that of minor god. At first, he wrote and others sang. Judy Collins, who performed his breakthrough song “Suzanne,” was introduced to Cohen by a mutual friend and picked the song up after Cohen sang it to her over the phone. With Collins’s encouragement, he soon moved from reading his poetry in Montreal coffeehouses to singing it on stage, accompanying himself on his guitar. Cohen appeared at the Newport Folk Festival in 1967 where he attracted the attention of John Hammond of Columbia Records, who had also signed Dylan. Columbia produced his first album, *The Songs of Leonard Cohen* that year, followed by *Songs from a Room* in 1969. The soulful singer with his obscure but compelling

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songs about sexual politics soon had a large following in both North America and Europe. His career ebbed and flowed – he attracted huge audiences in the '60s and '70s, lost his lustre in the early '80s when one critic famously described his work as music “to slit your wrists to,” then rebounded with the *I'm Your Man* album in 1988 and *The Future* in 1992 with backup female vocalists singing a lush counterpoint to his increasingly gravelly bass. Then, in 1993, he decided to live in seclusion at a monastery on California's Mount Baldy to plumb his spirituality. Ordained with the Buddhist name of Jikan, Cohen emerged six years later and resumed recording.

As every fan knows, the same dark thread of love and lovers lost runs throughout Cohen's work. Lyric after lyric bares Cohen's painful history and, some would say, torturous efforts to transcend his sexual desires and arrive at spiritual enlightenment, even as he woos, then parts from a series of beautiful women. In the '60s, he lived in Greece with Marianne Jensen, then ended it (“*Now so long, Marianne, It's time we began to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again*”). There were the inevitable one-night stands (an early song, “Chelsea Hotel,” chronicles singer Janis Joplin “*giving me head on the unmade bed*”). A relationship with Suzanne Elrod – not *the* Suzanne but the mother of his two children, Adam and Lorca – broke up in the late '70s to the tune of his laments against the strictures of domesticity (“*I touched you once too often. Now I don't know who I am. My fingerprints were missing when I wiped away the jam*”). Perhaps his highest profile relationship was with Hollywood actress Rebecca De Mornay; Cohen's despondency at their breakup in the early '90s didn't lift until he retreated to Mount Baldy.

It has been a truism that Cohen has “always relied on the kindness of women” yet must sequester himself to write. This truism is tough to square with the domestic scene that greets me in the tiny sun-filled kitchen of his Montreal duplex on the spring morning we meet. Looking jaunty in cap and plaid scarf, Cohen sits at the table with Thomas, drinking espresso, eating bagels and talking about their life together in Montreal and Los Angeles. Thomas, originally from Hawaii, sang backup on “Hallelujah” on the 1984 *Various Positions* album, and the two have been a couple since 1999. When they're at home in Los Angeles, they host Cohen's daughter, Lorca (who owns an antique shop and lives in the apartment downstairs), and son, Adam, also a singer-songwriter, and his girlfriend for the Jewish Shabbat every Friday night. They light the candles, say a Hebrew prayer and share a leisurely dinner. “We look forward to it all week,” Thomas says.

So, how is it that Cohen can work in this cocoon of familial comfort? Not surprisingly, “everything changes as you get older,” he says. “I never met a woman until I was 65,” he deadpans. “Instead, I saw all kinds of miracles in front of me.” He says he always loved women, “always appreciated what they could do for me” but always saw them through his own “urgent needs and desires. Once that started to dissolve, I began to see the woman standing there.” And, interjects Thomas with a laugh, “I was the one standing there when that idea occurred to him.”

Although they share an intimate personal and professional relationship – Cohen collaborates more closely with Thomas than he has with anyone else – Thomas lives a minute-and-a-half away in Los Angeles. He says it makes their arrangement “unusually harmonious.” She says it's just far enough “to be able to run to your own cave if you need to.”

Old age has been good to Cohen. “Best thing that ever happened to me,” he says. Plagued by depression most of his life, he has been free of the black moods for several years. “I don't want to talk of it – God may take it away,” he says. “But the state of mind I find myself in is so very different than most of my life that I am deeply grateful.” The years of holing up in a cheap hotel room to drink and write or the experiments with speed and LSD are long gone. Now, he doesn't even smoke, although he misses it. “I said I'd start again when I was 75, but now that's getting too close,” he says.

Even the loss of his wealth doesn't dampen his good mood. Since 2004, he has been embroiled in legal wrangling with his former manager along with an investment adviser over the loss of his retirement savings. He brought a civil suit against his former manager alleging fraud and negligence among other claims and, in March, he won a \$9 million US judgment. He is now attempting to recover some of the missing money. When he first discovered that his \$5 million in savings had shrunk to \$150,000, his first instinct was to cut his losses, walk away and start again. “I've still got my health and a few skills. I could cobble together a little nest egg again,” he says. But his lawyers told him he couldn't. “You can't just tell the IRS that someone else has your money. You have to be actively pursuing it,” he says. So he and Thomas began sorting through mounds of bank statements and e-mail records. “I didn't know how much money I had. I didn't even know where the bank was,” he admits.

Although he had to mortgage his duplex in Los Angeles to cover his legal costs and although the suits and countersuits could grind through the courts for years, Cohen says he's back in the black

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## THE LEONARD COHEN FILES

● When Finnish accountant Jarkko Arjatsalo and his teenage son, Rauli, first connected to the Internet in 1994, they built their own site as an exercise to learn about the web. Focusing their site on Leonard Cohen was a natural since Jarkko was a fan. Twelve years later,

www.leonardcohenfiles.com has more than 1,000 pages, including "Blackening Pages" (previously unpublished poems and drawings posted by Cohen himself). Much of *Book of Longing* first appeared on the site, and Cohen has posted such treasures as his handwritten first draft of "Suzanne." The poet began contributing when the Mount Baldy monastery connected to the Internet three years after the Arjatsalos' site was up and running.

Now hosted by 26-year-old Rauli's IT company, the site is currently the largest repository of Cohen material. The lyrics, tour histories, academic papers and popular writing draw visitors from all over the world – 1.7 million at last count. While Cohen has always had a huge following in Europe, he is now attracting fans in Asia, Arjatsalo says, and is being studied in universities in India and China. Cohen frequently checks the site himself – to see if a song has been covered, for instance.

Arjatsalo has two pieces of advice for fellow Cohenites: take the time to appreciate his novels and poetry along with the songs. "His work must be seen as parts of a whole. Many of his songs are based on previously written poems that have evolved over the years." And look for the humour. "There are too many who still remember him only as the depressed musician. They should go deeper into his lyrics. Many lines he has written with tongue in cheek, and they are open to many and often opposite interpretations."

through royalties. And emotionally, "I haven't suffered," he says. Cohen feels he weathered his financial crisis because he has always lived modestly, even monastically. His Montreal duplex, which he bought for \$7,000 in the early '70s, has its wooden storm windows still in place. Painted white throughout, it is graciously but sparsely furnished with old pieces, some from his parents' home in Westmount. He especially likes his ancient kitchen stove because it includes a small built-in gas heater that keeps the whole room warm in winter. An upstairs bedroom with a laptop and small keyboard serves as his studio; his sound equipment amounts to an old CD player. In Montreal, he has no car; in L.A., he drives a '95 Nissan. When he discovered his money was gone, "I didn't have to sell the yacht," he says with a grin.

What he calls "voluptuous" simplicity has always attracted him. He bought his first house on the Greek island of Hydra with a small inheritance of \$1,500. (The family, including Adam and Lorca's mother, continue to use the home.) The house had no running water or electricity then, but living simply allowed him the luxury to focus almost exclusively on his writing. He's always worked extremely hard, even obsessively, says Mort Rosengarten, a Montreal sculptor who has known Cohen since their boyhood. Both grew up in well-to-do Jewish families in the suburb of Westmount. (Kranz, a character in *The Favourite Game* is loosely modelled on the sculptor.)

Rosengarten remembers visiting Cohen on Hydra back in the '60s during the writing of *Beautiful Losers*. Cohen imposed a daily

regime: they got up at 6 a.m., had coffee, then worked until early afternoon – Cohen on his writing, Rosengarten on his drawings. After that, a swim, lunch and nap, then drinks and dinner at 5 p.m. In the years since, Cohen has stuck to a variation of the same schedule. He starts his days even earlier – 3 or 4 a.m. – and works almost every day. Over the years, he has filled hundreds of notebooks, what he calls "blackening pages," writing dozens of verses, then selecting only a few to set to music or publish. He likes to leave them for months or years before choosing and revisits his work – both published and unpublished – reworking the same words, the same themes again and again.

Cohen describes working on a poem in *Book of Longing* called "A Thousand Kisses Deep." He settled on "a thousand kisses deep" to express "what deep really is," then wrote eight-line stanzas, playing with "eep" and "eat" rhymes, "sprinkling them like [the sound of] a triangle in a children's song." They evolved into lyrics for "A Thousand Kisses Deep" on the *Ten New Songs* record-

ing of 2001. But he kept writing hundreds more verses, seven of which are in *Book of Longing*.

*"I know you had to lie to me  
I know you had to cheat  
To pose all hot and high behind  
The veils of sheer deceit  
Our perfect porn aristocrat  
So elegant and cheap  
I'm old but I'm still into that  
A thousand kisses deep"*

Much of the book is a navigation through old age and a meditation on the approach of death. "We will not be staying for the entire performance" is a wry observation written below one of his cartoon-like self-portraits.

A couple of poems are devoted to his Buddhist teacher, Roshi, who, at 99, is still preaching and working; several others to his old friend, the Montreal poet Irving Layton, who died at 93 earlier this year. The two met when Cohen was Layton's student at McGill. Their friendship, begun when Layton shone as the brilliant, flamboyant (and womanizing) star of CanLit, didn't waver when Cohen's renown as a poet outstripped his own. The cool hipster to Layton's hot bohemian, Cohen remembers one of the last times they met. Layton was in a nursing home, his memory faltering but his wit intact. The two snuck off for a smoke and a private chat, Cohen recounts. "And Layton asked, 'Leonard, have you noticed any decline in your sexual interest?'" When Cohen

admitted that he had, Layton replied that he was relieved to hear it. "So," Cohen said, "I take it you've noticed a similar decline. When did you notice it?" Layton joked gleefully, "Oh, at about the age of 17 or 18."

As Cohen gets older and the losses multiply, he says, "the presence of people who have died gets stronger." He often imagines how his mother would react if she were alive. "How she would love to be here having a cup of coffee, seeing the kids and Anjani, and seeing how I've finally stabilized my life," he muses.

By his son Adam's account, in spite of his parents' split and Cohen's peripatetic life as a performer, his father has been a consistent, stable and very present father, bringing his kids to him or travelling long distances to be with them for every school vacation, every birthday and every graduation, and always willing to indulge his children's whims. Adam recalls when, at 15, he decided that he and his 50-something father should leap off the peak of a rocky cliff at their summer home on Hydra. "I'm only 32 and there is not a chance in hell I'd jump off that cliff now," Adam says, with a laugh.

At 17, Adam was injured in a horrific car accident while touring the Caribbean with a calypso band. He spent a year in a Toronto hospital and, for the first three months, his father spent every day reading to him and encouraging him. Cohen, he says, is "incredibly diligent" in his love. Often asked about the influence of his famous father, now that his own songwriting career is taking

off, Adam strikes a warm and self-deprecating chord. He says he can only be grateful to be able to discuss his work with a songwriter of Cohen's calibre. "You can't buy that kind of access."

Before what he calls his "pesky" financial troubles, Cohen planned to spend more time in Montreal and much less in L.A. For now, he needs to be in California but returns to his Montreal home whenever he can. "I just love it. How can you explain love?" he says. "I was just saying to Anjani yesterday, I've written so much in this room – 'First We Take Manhattan,' 'Take This Waltz,' 'Ain't No Cure for Love.'" The city helped transform him from sheltered schoolboy to worldly poet and songwriter. Rosengarten remembers the two of them cruising the all-night bars and restaurants in the red-light district along Ste-Catherine Street and the narrow streets of the old city. Before the St. Lawrence Seaway was built, all the ocean-going freighters and cruise ships docked at the port of Old Montreal so its clubs catered to sailors and long-shoreman. Cohen and Rosengarten hit them all – jazz clubs, blues clubs and the clubs where only Québécois country-and-western was played, often meeting up with the same crowd. At 3 a.m., the streets would be filled with thousands of people. It was a different world from the Westmount neighbourhood where Cohen lived with his widowed mother (his father died when he was nine) and his sister, Esther. "Leonard grew up in a very protected environment in Westmount. We'd go out to experience what he was never allowed to do," says Rosengarten.

Cohen still wanders the city mostly on foot and mostly in his own neighbourhood near Parc du Portugal off a funky, seedy stretch of St-Laurent. Now and again, during these rambles, he'll meet a fan, who recognizes him. "It's the opposite of intrusive. It's collaborative," he says. "I can see it in their eyes. They're recalling an experience they've had with my work."

On his upcoming book and performing tour, he'll be meeting thousands of fans. He's somewhat apprehensive of the concert tour – his first in 15 years – but says, for financial reasons, "I think I have to." Thomas and Adam are encouraging him to limit his concerts to an hour and a half instead of the three-hour marathons he's known for. "Adam tells me audiences don't have the attention span for that," he says. How his signature voice will hold up is a question mark. Thomas, who will tour with him, tells him he's hitting notes she hasn't heard him hit in years. "We'll see," he says to me. "I'll croak it out."

After almost half a century, I think he can probably count on his fans to accept a few new growls and whispers. ●