

Anthology preserves obscurity that is Leonard Cohen

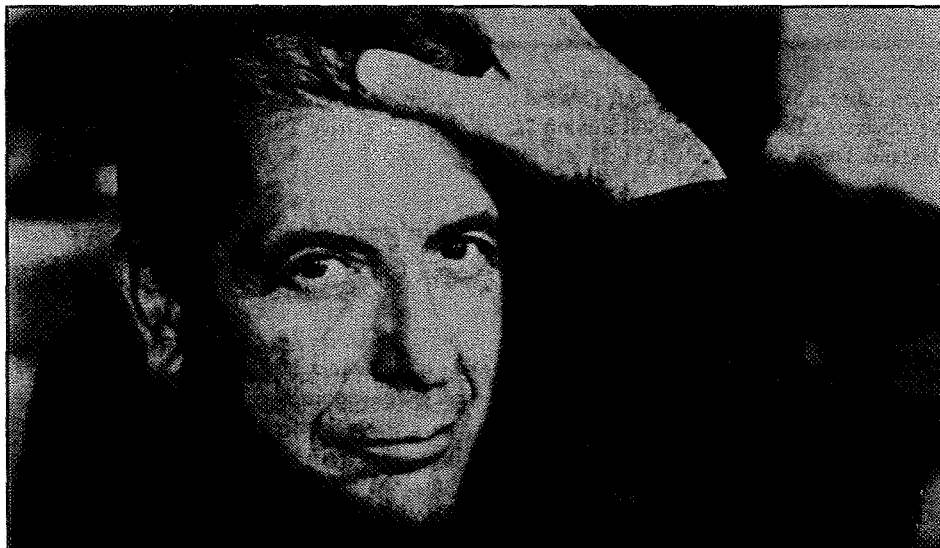
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For a writer who has produced nearly four decades of noteworthy albums, novels, and books of poetry, Leonard Cohen remains a peculiarly shadowy figure. He is frequently cited by other artists as an influence and inspiration but is rarely actually heard or seen.

In fact, Cohen deserves most of the blame for his own obscurity. His laconic singing voice, described by one critic as "a hopeful monotone," can be off-putting. At times, it has rendered his lyrical songs inaccessible to many listeners. Meanwhile, the public hasn't read his evocative writings since 1968 or so.

Cohen remains best-known for folk singer Judy Collins' bland renditions of two songs, "Suzanne" and "Bird on a Wire," as well as two of his own recordings that punctuate film soundtracks: "The Stranger Song" from *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and "Everybody Knows" from *Pump Up the Volume*.

Yet Cohen deserves more than cult-icon status. He's a seminal, even ground-breaking literary figure with an extensive body of superior work that often contains a striking Jewish element. And a new, wide-ranging anthology, titled *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, should introduce him to a fresh audience.



Although inadequate as a retrospective, *Stranger Music* is the broadest collection of Leonard Cohen's work available.

Jewish experience resonates throughout Cohen's poetry and songs, if not the novel excerpts included here. In "Song for Abraham Klein" (1961), he depicts a "weary psalmist" resting after Shabbat.

In "Isaiah" (1961), he summons up Jerusalem: "Between the mountain of spices/the cities thrust up pearl domes and filigree spires./Never before was Jerusalem so beautiful."

Even Israeli politics enter: "Enemies? Who has heard of a righteous state that has no enemies/but the young were strong, archers cunning, their arrows accurate."

A 1984 song, "The Night Comes On," takes the reader to the same place: "We were fighting in Egypt, when they signed this agreement that nobody else had to die."

Selections from *Flowers for Hitler* (1964) are highlighted by "All There Is to Know

About Adolph Eichmann," a chilling elaboration on the banality of evil: "EYES... Medium/HAIR... Medium /WEIGHT... Medium/HEIGHT... Medium/DISTINGUISHING FEATURES... None/NUMBER OF FINGERS... Ten/NUMBER OF TOES... Ten/INTELLIGENCE... Medium/What did you expect?/Talons?/Over-size incisors?/Green saliva?/Madness?"

Other poems — introspective discourses on sex, faith, passion and writing — are laced with glimpses of pogroms and Nazis.

Stranger Music is inadequate as a retrospective: It contains no photographs, no biography, no author commentary on the work (as on the back cover of the 1975 album *The Best of Leonard Cohen*) or other criticism. There is no introduction, nor even reproductions of Cohen's book jackets and album covers. The book seems to remove every trace of the author, save the portrait developed by his words (and the gloomy cover photo).

Yet as the widest-ranging collection of Cohen's work available, *Stranger Music* should grace every poetry enthusiast's night stand.

► *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs by Leonard Cohen* (415 pages, Pantheon, \$24).

The reviewer is a freelance writer in New Jersey.

book review