

Almost a Miracle

A review of Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, New York: Ecco, 2012

Written for the *Leonard Cohen Files* by Doron B. Cohen

Four years ago I concluded my review of the second edition of Ira Nadel's biography of Leonard Cohen (*Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen*, 2007) saying that as far as a really satisfying biography of LC is concerned, "we are still waiting for the miracle". Since then we've had two distinctly non-miraculous biographies (Tim Footman, *Leonard Cohen: Hallelujah*, 2009 and Anthony Reynolds, *Leonard Cohen: A Remarkable Life*, 2010). We now have in our hands a very promising third one. Did the miracle finally happen? Well, near enough. Perhaps not a genuine Crossing of the Sea miracle, but magical all the same.

When I learned about the biography being written by Sylvie Simmons, I did not expect it to be the final, definitive biography (if such a thing is possible at all), but I did have several expectations: that the book would be well-written; that it would speak intelligently about the music; that it would reveal some new information; that it would be free of most of the errors which plagued the earlier biographies. These expectations were, to a great extent, met by the book. The fact that I am still left with a taste for more does not detract from the author's achievement.

First, a formal "Disclosure" is required: I met Sylvie Simmons in Las Vegas after the last concert of the 2010 world tour and had a long and lively conversation with her. Later I corresponded with her by email, read several paragraphs of her manuscript, and commented on various points. In her "Author's Note" she thanked me along with several other Forum members who assisted her in various ways (p. 532). Still, due to the importance of the subject for me, I shall do my best to remain as objective as possible under the circumstances.

Sylvie Simmons is a very experienced music journalist. She also has experience in writing biographies of musicians, albeit not as ambitious as the current one (I read her illuminating and entertaining book on Serge Gainsbourg; I have not read the one about Neil Young). She has interviewed LC several times over the years, was given access to his archive material, and spoke with more than one hundred people, some of them long and deeply connected with LC and others who encountered him briefly in various circumstances. She has done a very good job in tracing LC's whereabouts and activities over the years; during the 1960's and 70's particularly, she managed to trace his steps year by year and almost month by month (although the reader would have benefited by more frequent indications of the year under discussion). She tells a clear, well-organized story, into which she regularly inserts her observations about LC's personality, relationships, writing and music.

Simmons writes like a true fan; she calls the subject of her book “Leonard” throughout (I’m using the initials “LC” since I don’t know him personally, and “Cohen” sounds too stiff). She evidently loves his work and admires his personality. It is very hard to find any word of criticism expressed against him in the book, certainly not in her own words. The only person who speaks ill of LC (as he did in Reynolds’ book) is Steven Machat, the son of LC’s long-time manager Marty, who seems to be the only person in the world to know LC personally and dislike him. Even the long-suffering John Lissauer, who had a record he made with LC shelved and who did not receive sufficient payment or credit on several occasions, would not speak ill of him but put the blame on Marty Machat instead. Can the lack of criticism be considered a fault? Probably not with the fans, but the uninitiated may find the author’s drift somewhat one-sided.

As expected, the book is very well-written, witty and engaging. Simmons comes up with some memorable sentences, often including sharp observations of her subject’s life and character. For example:

Lorca [...] wrote as if song and poetry were part of the same breath. Through his love for Gypsy culture and his depressive cast of mind he introduced Leonard to the sorrow, romance and dignity of flamenco. Through his political stance he introduced Leonard to the sorrow, romance and dignity of the Spanish Civil War. Leonard was very pleased to meet them both (p. 26).

Or another one:

Survival, in discussions of the mystery and motivations of Leonard Cohen, has tended to be left in the corner clutching and empty dance card while writers head for the more alluring sex, God and depression and haul them around the dance floor. There is no argument that between them these three have been a driving force in his life and his work. But what served Leonard best was his survival instinct. Leonard had an instinct for self-protection that not all writers – or lovers, or depressives, or spiritual seekers, or any of those creative types that nature or nurture made raw and sensitive – possess. Leonard was a lover, but when it comes to survival he was also a fighter (77-78).

And if a whiff of criticism can be detected in this observation, it is a very mute one, and may be compared with a few other places in which the author hints at some objectionable traits in her subject without resorting to literally finding fault in him.¹

There are to be found in the book many small gems of expression worth repeating. For example:

[In 1975, collaborating with Phil Spector] Leonard was not a teenager. It is quite possible he never was a teenager (295).

¹ It is noteworthy that some readers – for example, the reviewer for the *Guardian* (November 25, 2012) – came out with the impression of LC being “selfish”, which is the opposite impression to the one the author apparently wished to make.

Other than finding themselves the last two left at a key party, it is hard to picture Leonard Cohen and Phil Spector ever ending up as musical bedfellows (295).

“There was an English magazine that printed pictures of us and said ‘Beauty and the Beast,’” says Rebecca [De Mornay]. How mean of them to call her a beast (383).

The years Leonard has spent in the monastery had done nothing to dull his talent at sniffing out a nondescript hotel room (419).

But here he stood in the spotlight in his sharp suit, fedora and shiny shoes, looking like a Rat Pack rabbi, God’s chosen mobster (489).

The room was so completely silent during the performances of the songs that you could hear the hairs stand up on people’s arms (492).

Occasionally Simmons inserts little jokes for the knowledgeable fans, which might be lost on less informed readers:

In 1962, when Roshi was fifty-five, just a kid with a crazy dream, he left Japan for Los Angeles [...] (222).

[...] and ‘Memories’, a rambunctious burlesque number whose lyrics make wry reference to the kind of teen-angst pop in which Spector specialized and whose chorus was made for drunks in midnight choirs to sing along with (300).

Speaking of the songs and the music, Simmons once again comes up with some well-expressed insights:

[...] Leonard the poet transformed Suzanne into the metaphysical “Suzanne” and made her an angel. Leonard the magician sawed her down the middle, then put the two parts back together – the carnal and the spiritual – and made her more perfect than before. Leonard the composer made a hallowed melody for her, both implausibly intimate and ineffably spacious. “Suzanne” is a weightless, mysterious song. The great songs, the ones that keep drawing us back again and again, are mysteries. We go to them not for familiarity and solace – although there is solace in “Suzanne” – but for what is unknown, for something that’s hidden in them that continues to haunt us and makes us seekers (128).

That is one beautiful piece of writing and observation.

Even veterans who’ve been following LC’s career and what has been written about it for decades are bound to find here things that will be new to them. I may have missed some earlier reference to it, but I did not know that the original wording of “So Long, Marianne” was “Come on, Marianne”, which indeed fits the tone of the music and the following lines much more naturally (170). I also didn’t know that during his early 1970’s tours LC gave several concerts in mental

hospitals in England and North America (235-240); unlike Johnny Cash and his self-promoting prison albums, LC kept these shows private between himself, his band and the patients. Simmons was also able to track down and interview several people with interesting LC stories. On the one hand there is Suzanne Elrod, the mother of LC's children, who has rarely been interviewed before, and who tells some candid stories about their relationship. On the other hand there are persons who had but flitting contacts with LC, but their stories add color to the book; these include, among others, Thelma Blitz, who spent a memorable night with LC in New York in 1968 (209-211), Paul Body, the doorman at a Los Angeles club where LC appeared in 1974 (283-4), and Sean Dixon, who tells how he miraculously cured her cat (372-3). And while much was told and shown before about LC's life at the Zen monastery on Mt. Baldy and his almost life-long relationship with Joshu Sasaki Roshi, Simmons also manages to give a very detailed and lively description of the long months LC spent in Mumbai studying with Ramesh S. Balsekar (418-425).

Compared with earlier biographies of LC, the amount of errors I was able to detect in this one is very small, and most are relatively trivial ones that can easily be corrected in future editions. These include some typos, some small matters pertaining to Jewish custom and a few inaccuracies regarding songs or albums (a list of those has been forwarded to the author). Other readers may detect some more errors, but on the whole the author has done a very thorough job in checking her facts.

This is a very generous book in the story it tells, but, as stated earlier, one is still left with the feeling that it could have been even richer. What, then, could be missing? Sometimes it is just small details; for example: what exactly did LC's father do in First World War? We are told that he served in it but not where or for how long (8). Or Marianne Ihlen's son Axel, to whom LC must have been a kind of a father-figure; what was the nature of their relationship and what has become of him? In these and other cases, a little more information would have been satisfying.

Another point is literature. Simmons does a fine job in introducing the background to LC's emergence as a poet in Montreal, but in the biography I imagine or would wish for (which would probably be twice as long as the current one) there would be a much more detailed chapter introducing the various figures who have been LC's teachers and mentors, the general atmosphere of Canadian literature at the time and the changes it was undergoing, with examples and quotes. Similarly, LC's novels would be put in the context of contemporary English language literature. Again, I have no complaints against Simmons' work in this matter; she has done a good job in describing LC's books and the reviews that followed each one of them; I would simply like to hear more.

Yet another point, regarding the albums; Simmons describes the making of each one of them, sometimes in great detail, but she rarely or never mentions all the songs on each album, rather only those she likes best or that stand out for another reason. Naming all the songs may seem redundant, but it would not have added much to the length of the book. Simmons is careful to

name every song that has been shelved on various projects (for example, pp. 187, 213, 298), why then not name the songs that made it to the albums? In some cases this can make a difference. For example, Simmons defines the lyrics on the album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* as “mordant and black”, and observes: “The love he sings about is as violent as the war about which he also sings” (281). She hints that the reference in all those songs is to Suzanne Elrod and adds: “Although his muse is not mentioned by name, never before had Leonard treated one quite so discourteously” (282). However, she fails to mention that the album also contains the sweet and reconciliatory “I Tried To Leave You”, with lines such as “And here’s a man still working for your smile”, which make the picture more complex and less one-colored. “I Tried To Leave You” is one of several substantial songs not mentioned at all in the book (beside “Stories Of The Streets”,² “The Old Revolution”, “Love Calls You By Your Name”, “The Law”, “Here It Is” etc.) and considering the relatively small number of Leonard Cohen songs (hardly 150 all told) these omissions are to be regretted. I am aware that Simmons was constrained in time and length in writing her book, and she is of course entitled to her own preferences, but still, this point struck me as rather strange.

These and other possible omissions notwithstanding, I put down the book with great satisfaction, and soon read it once again from cover to cover, noticing some things which I had missed in the first reading. It is a great book for the fans, and an excellent introduction for the uninitiated. Sylvie Simmons deserves high praise for writing such a book, which makes the waiting for the miracle – which as miracles go, is probably just an illusion anyhow - much less urgent.

Kyoto, November 2012

² In fact, this song is briefly mentioned in passing on p. 219, but it does not appear in the Index.