

Burger, Jeff. *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014.

Jeff Burger is a contributor to various musical periodicals. He has already published a book of collected writings, *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, in 2013 at Chicago Review Press, and this year gives us *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, a collection of more than fifty interviews, carried out between the years 1966 and 2012, enriched by personal reminiscences of some of the inquirers themselves.

Burger's compilation is diligent. The selection aims to mirror major events in Cohen's life, such as tours, new poetry or album releases, and importantly, downfalls and rises. He even includes transcriptions of some of the TV appearances and radio programmes, and supplements some of the interviews with explanatory information and even corrections. Some of them appear for the first time in English translation, but some of the great ones are missing, such as "The Confessions of Leonard Cohen" published in *Toronto Life* in 1978 by Stephen Williams, which is, in my opinion, one of the greatest interview articles ever done on the singer.

It is true that the majority of the published encounters can be already found on-line at <http://www.webheights.net/speakingcohen/archives.htm>, but what distinguishes this book is the character of the interviews selected, and making them accessible in chronological order. In its six hundred pages, this book contains something ingenious. It presents the main themes permeating Cohen's life: love, sex, religion, depression, war, aggression, aestheticism, and tradition, in his own words. Therefore, it brings more to a reader than a scholarly analysis, since the space for speculation gets considerably limited.

In those interviews, Leonard Cohen appears at times an elegant man, but at other times, a debauchee. Fortunately, for most of his admirers, he shows the former persona most often and tends to obliterate the latter. These interviews are a far greater form of "biography" than any of the recent books published. The artist can be seen in the process of shaping his persona through carefully weighed words, and he lets us have a glimpse into his life in song, while maintaining clear distance between himself and his output. One will even be surprised to find that the notion of a "ladies' man" is very "inaccurate," according to him (464).

It is interesting to trace his development from the first interview in which he did not know yet what was ahead of him, and his mentioning of poetic principles he was to follow later, such as the importance of voice in poetry, or modesty in life; war with all the connotations it can have in his work; and the discipline he has pursued ardently. Some interviewers want to investigate his Jewish origins and compare him to a prophet, the meaning of which he constantly modifies. They want him to speak on the disintegration of the psyche which one undertakes in order to become whole. He says: "I hold out the idea of ecstasy as the solution.

If only people get high, they can face the evil part” (14). We also learn that Cohen accepts the role of a public persona and fulfils *people’s* expectations: “I like to be created by pop because it’s an ally in my own time. My time says it’s beautiful and it’s part of me and I want to be created by it” (13). So Cohen gives himself to the culture, and distances himself from his private life in order to fulfil *popular* demand. “The thing that people are interested in doing now is blowing their heads off and that’s why the writing of schizophrenics like myself will be important” (15). The fact that this may not be a safe thing to do when one experiences a period of weakness, is revealed in later interviews when he makes known that show business is harmful to him. Next, a reader can find the importance of clothes for Cohen, divine and revengeful aspects of the feminine in his work, and what friendship means to him. It’s surprising that this all comes from a man who is famous for never having any “idea¹”. Other well-known topics such as Cohen in Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Yom Kippur War, mental hospital performances, Mediterranean influences, marriage, being a Canadian, his view of the US, slaving over the song, drug experience, women that Cohen courted, and many many more, are treated in the course of the book.

An interesting fact to notice is that almost all of his interviewers are totally mesmerised by him, and these are the leading journalists and scholars. Cohen’s career is displayed in a great light and to avoid a certain seduction by the man is difficult. One asks if this effect is the consequence of the carefully built persona, or whether it is transmitted by the serenity and experience emanating from the singer. His compatriot, Northrop Frye, who reviewed Cohen’s first book of poetry, says: “There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be improved in his humanity as a result of reading him².” And when Cohen proclaims that we are divine beings (246), one can really feel that he has become our inborn desire personified. Someone who has the potential to *improve* our humanity.

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¹ “I don’t have ideas. I don’t really speculate on things. I get opinions but I’m not really attached to them. Most of them are tiresome” (266).

² Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000. 344. Print.