

**Review: Anthony Reynolds, *Leonard Cohen: A Remarkable Life*, London: Omnibus Press (2010)**

**Doron B. Cohen**

I read Anthony Reynolds' *Leonard Cohen: A Remarkable Life* with interest, but with ever growing misgivings and disappointment. It is certainly an improvement on its immediate predecessor, Tim Footman's *Leonard Cohen: Hallelujah*, which hardly merited a review, but it still does not meet expectations. I am not going to elaborate on all the problems in this book or give extensive examples, but some comments and a few examples cannot be avoided.

The book is not truly a new biography, because it tells us nothing new of its subject's life, except, perhaps, the allegations by Steven Machat (pp. 225-7 etc.) that LC stole money from him, allegations that were not corroborated by any other evidence and at least to me were new. Other than that, most facts of LC's life presented in this book are familiar to those who have followed his career and read earlier biographies. But even if we consider the uninitiated readers, who are not familiar with LC's life, I would hesitate to put this book in their hands. The first few chapters about LC's background, childhood and early life are extremely derivative and also manage to leave out many important details. The chapters about his later life do not tell us much about the person either, apart from some basic facts (with a specifically strong emphasis on his drug and booze habits). Apparently, the book brings events up to date, but several things are left hanging in the air (for example, the story of LC's money embezzlement by his former manager, for which Reynolds says there are various versions, but he never mentions the trial that took place and the verdict in the artist's favor). LC's books are mentioned, sometimes a review or two are quoted briefly, but no attempt has been made by the author to analyze LC's literary work or even describe it. The records are the focus of the book, but many songs are left unmentioned (and the remastered three earliest albums with their additional material are not mentioned either). Films and videos are constantly described, but here too Reynolds has managed to leave unmentioned two substantial documentaries, the BBC's *Songs from the life...* (1988), and Armelle Brusq's portrait (1997).

As mentioned above, LC's music is the focus of Reynolds' interest, and one cannot but wish that he'd dedicated his book to this subject, rather than attempt to write a biography. His interviews with several of LC's musicians, producers and collaborators are often quite informative and interesting, although occasionally repetitive (especially the long chapter on the recording of *Death Of A Ladies' Man*; however, this chapter is interesting for revealing the inadequacy of human memory, and how several witnesses to a certain event describe it quite differently, as with those who remembered Phil Spector snorting cocaine regularly during the sessions, as opposed to those who were adamant that he never touched the stuff, sticking to alcohol). One might often disagree with some of Reynolds' opinions on certain albums and songs, but at least in this respect he had done a meaningful job. Still, I would like to take issue with one point; Reynolds refers to "Hallelujah" as LC's "most beloved and worthy song" (p. 189). Is this song truly worthier than dozens of other beautiful LC songs? It certainly made him familiar to many who didn't know his work, and was one of the main reasons for his recent universal popularity, but the notion that this song - with perhaps two or three others - is his only claim to greatness is very disturbing for those who have followed and admired - and occasionally criticized - his work for several decades.

To me, the book's most infuriating fault is the author's failure to indicate his references. It is usually clear (not always) when Reynolds is quoting from his own interviews with various people, but all other quotes from books, newspapers, magazines etc., remain unreferenced, and the reader has no idea where the author is quoting from, and cannot check after him. On p. 108 Reynolds asserts that following the 1972 concert in Tel Aviv LC "vowed never to return to Israel again". How or where did he learn of this vow? Reynolds also does not bother to mention that had he indeed made such a vow, which is highly improbable, LC has broken it again and again. The very following year he returned to Israel during the Yom Kippur War and appeared for several weeks before the soldiers, and Israel was included in his tours of 1980, 1985 and 2009. As for what happened at that Tel Aviv concert, Reynolds seems to have relied solely or mainly on the footage in Tony Palmer's film, which includes only part of the picture (it's been often misunderstood that since the concert was taking place in a sports arena with

a new parquet floor, the management instructed the security men not to allow the audience to step down on it, and that is why they were pushing back the people who tried to do so; it looks bad on film, but no one was seriously harmed). Reynolds got other things wrong regarding the film; on p. 112 he writes that LC could be seen in it “shaving before an encore”, but in fact he was shaving after quitting the stage early during the Jerusalem concert, which he nearly abandoned, and before going back on stage following the audience’s singing to him. This emotional concert was the peak of the 1972 tour and of Palmer’s film, but Reynolds fails to relate to it.

The book also required the work of a capable, knowledgeable editor, who might have spotted the numerous errors of fact and narration, far too many to list here. To give just a few examples: since LC was born in 1934, how could his father be “a recent veteran of World War One” which ended 16 years earlier (p. 1)? Similarly, his mother could not have fled the “Stalinist” regime in the early 1920’s (rather than “Bolshevik”), and at that time Lithuania was not part of Russia (it had been independent since 1918) (p. 2). On the top of p. 114 it is stated that “by September” LC was back in Montreal, but on the previous page Reynolds deals with LC’s participation in the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, prior to which he was on Hydra, so which September was that?

The problem of the embarrassing amount of typos in this book has been raised previously on the LeonardCohenForum, but frankly, I was astonished by Anthony Reynolds putting the blame on the publishers and their proofreaders (who are, of course, also responsible). I believe it is the author’s self evident prerogative and duty to proofread his own work and nobody else should be trusted with this task. Whenever I publish anything in print I insist on getting several proofs, making sure that all my corrections were followed. The readers judge the author by the work available to them, and if this work is sloppy, the author can hardly expect to be taken seriously.

When I wrote my detailed review of the second edition of Ira Nadel’s biography of LC for the Files (it appears in the “Analysis” section) I said regarding a truly satisfying biography of LC that we were still waiting for the miracle. I am afraid that we must go on waiting, and that the miracle

might never occur. Regarding Reynolds' book, I am sorry to have been so negative; it is unpleasant to criticize someone else's sincere efforts, and I would much rather praise than denigrate other people's work, but the subject is too important for me to gloss over the necessary criticism. It is obvious that this book was rushed to print while yet underwritten, unedited and un-proofread. Its valuable parts are thus diminished by the overall debacle. What a shame.