

FLAVOURS FROM THE PAST AND INTRIGUING NEW IDEAS

Javier Mas and Alexandru Bublitchi talk about their collaboration with Leonard Cohen

By Francis Mus

I interviewed Javier Mas and Alexandru Bublitchi in Amsterdam on September 17, 2013. Javier Mas, who plays the bandurria, laud, archilaud and 12 string guitar, joined Leonard Cohen's band in 2008. In 2012, Mas's recommendation led to the addition of the Moldavian violist Alexandru Bublitchi to the Unified Heart Touring Company. Given this background, it was unsurprising that they came to the interview together.

Although their perspectives differ – Mas has been a professional musician for many years while Bublitchi's professional career is still in its early stages – they are obviously comfortable with each other, each often completing the other's sentences. Characteristically, the elder musician refers to "Leonard" in a matter of fact way while the younger violinist expresses himself more carefully, respectfully addressing the Canadian singer-songwriter as "Mr. Cohen." Nonetheless, their views are not so much different as complementary. They are united by congruent feelings about their art and their reverence for Cohen as the old master. Both are loathe to criticize Leonard Cohen or his work. After several months of rehearsals and dozens of concerts, the two musicians have developed intuitive, intimate ties with the music that cannot be easily articulated, especially to an outsider.

While their passion for their work and their respect for Leonard Cohen would have been insurmountable obstacles to the discovery of titillating backstage gossip, this combination made for an insightful, enlightening, and sometimes fascinating conversation.

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THE NEW BUT SOMEHOW FAMILIAR IMAGE OF LEONARD COHEN

FM [Francis Mus]: You are two musicians of different generations, both performing for Leonard Cohen. Do you view Leonard Cohen the same way? Many people see him as the perfect example of the classic singer-songwriter, i.e. the traditional folk singer accompanying himself on the guitar.

JM [Javier Mas]: We think about him as a songwriter like Jacques Brel, Georges Brassens, or Paco Ibáñez in Spain. These people pick up a guitar or get behind a piano and sing a song. They don't need anything else. It's amazing.

AB [Alexandru Bublitchi]: He can tell a story using only his guitar. It conveys the complete story, the complete song. He doesn't need any other instrument.

FM: Wasn't that the prevalent image of Cohen in the sixties and the seventies? In the eighties Cohen started using a synthesizer and much later on (in *Ten New Songs*) he was creating entirely electronic music. How would you connect the Leonard Cohen who plays and composes on synthesizer and works with electronic music to that first image of the traditional artist?

JM: It's the same man. People asked Herbie Hancock the same question. He played jazz with a piano, upright bass and drums - a jazz trio. When he began playing electric piano with a funky band, people wondered if he did it because it's more commercial. "No," he says. "I do this because I like this music." For me, Leonard is the same man, whether he plays *Tower Of Song* or *Sisters Of Mercy*.

FM: But one cannot deny that his work and his performances underwent significant changes over the years. If you compare the 1972 concerts in the *Bird On A Wire* documentary to recent concerts, you can see an artist who has always been very much engaged with his art, but today his methods are radically different, no?

JM: An artist and his work are like a tree. Under the surface, the roots are constantly drawing the same nourishment from the same ground but above the surface, the tree may change with the seasons just as the songs (*Suzanne, Sisters of Mercy...*) may sound different or as times change. For instance, Leonard found a great composer in Sharon Robinson and together they created all these new songs we admire.

AB: The energy he projects now, I think, is the same he has projected all his life. The changes in his instruments and sound are just a matter of musical development. Of course he's different now than he was in the sixties because he passed through so many different stages. It's like in classical music – there are so many works that someone may be physically able to play but lacks the maturity to transmit the underlying meaning of the work. But the artist's message is still the same.

FM: How would you, as members of the band, describe Leonard Cohen's message? Cohen once told Roscoe Beck that he believed everyone has *one* particular song and that he or she writes the same song over and over again [see my interview with Roscoe Beck, www.leonardcohenfiles.com/francismus.pdf].

AB: It's a different message for listeners because everybody understands it in his or her own way. That is the interesting thing: he gives you the opportunity to make your own story. For me, when it comes to the violin, I think he uses it to provide exactly the sound and the energy he needs to project in his songs. The sound of the violin is melancholic, sad and emotional. At the same time, he also likes to experiment with new things. Maybe in the future we will hear more and different instruments.

JM: When I was 25 years old, I saw him perform in Barcelona with an acoustic band. Now, in 2013, at the end of this European tour, I notice that we are again playing more and more as an acoustic band. We didn't pursue this as a conscious goal but the songs come out like that. Before Alex came to the band, they tried to put in synthesizers but now there's a real musician which makes for more intriguing harmonics, fill-ins, and sound and makes the music more interesting for the audience.

People don't know the instruments I play because this kind of music is never been played on the radio, but inside... it's like there's something inside the brain. I remember when I played in a church in a little town in Cataluña for very old people who had never heard the music before, but they felt their country, their own history in the music. It was new, but at the same time it felt familiar. The same thing has happened with Leonard. In 2013 his songs sound new: there is a beautiful sound, a bass player, and drums... but the ground remains the same. The people don't know it, but they have it somewhere inside. What they receive is the old flavor, the flavor of the past. It's nothing that you make consciously, it's something that you feel.

HE KILLS US! HOW LEONARD COHEN CONNECTS TO HIS AUDIENCE

FM: Maybe these are the *Old Ideas* that he is referring to in the title of his last album? Maybe it is also the idea of an irrational, emotional or even subconscious way of trying to make a connection – especially on the musical level? Some critics wrote that the music of Leonard Cohen has a hypnotic quality.

JM: I agree. In rehearsals, he repeats the song so many times that he kills us! Sometimes we play the same song for half an hour. It's like Arabian art, where one meaning is repeated 200 000 times. Every time he repeats the song he puts a little thing on the lyric, he adds a little change in the singing. That's the way he works: repetition. So at the end, we pay attention to the music but at the same time we listen to what he's singing.

AB: In the music, everything is about a connection: a connection between the musicians and with the audience. I don't think there is hypnosis. I don't know if there is anyone else in the musical world able to connect directly with the audience as he does. In all his tours when I play I can see that the people in the audience identify with the story, with the message he is giving.

JM: Like the wind. He has a connection.

FM: And *how* does he connect? Is it the voice, the content, the story, the music?

JM: It's all together. It's his body. It's the center of himself. If he came outside for a gig and he didn't play any songs but just told a story on the microphone, it would be the same.

AB: It's the way he talks, the way his voice sounds. It's just the way he is; together all these qualities make him Leonard Cohen.

FM: You wouldn't differentiate between Leonard Cohen *the man* and Leonard Cohen *the artist*? When I read his work, I am struck by this struggle between the man and the artist.

JM: No. In my very first rehearsal with him, he sang *Dance Me To The End Of Love* in the same way as he would sing it in front of 20 000 people. And it was only a rehearsal with five musicians. And he sings for real. It's not only Leonard. There are many artists who don't know the difference between just playing and work. The music is the music. When they play or sing, they play for real.

AB: In *I'm Your Man*, for instance, he's making a presentation of himself in all aspects. He presents himself as he is, and in all his songs he's talking about human things: that we can be beautiful, miserable, ugly... but music and the art can save us. He is talking about the balance. Because all of us have positive and negative parts.

JM: I think Leonard's strength now is his acceptance of life, including his problems and mistakes.

AB: In this world of people trying to project themselves as what they would like to be, not what they really are, he is the one who is not afraid to show himself and through himself, through his example, he's shown us what we are, all of us.

NEW SONGS AND FUNNY NEW IDEAS

FM: Do you sometimes talk about the significance of the lyrics?

JM: I always ask him the significance because the music will vary depending on the meaning. Normally, when I hear the song I follow instantly and I play. But I feel better if I know the story. Sometimes the lyrics don't *tell* the whole story: you have to *search* it out. It's like a piece of theater. In theater you would change your costume, whereas in music, sometimes I change my instrument or the way I play. Every song opens a completely different world.

AB: The message is very important because we are all working for the song. The violin, for instance, can translate so many things: the spirituality in *Come Healing*, the energy in *I'm Your Man*, the Jewish and gypsy sound in *Dance Me To The End Of Love* ... I remember when we were playing *The Partisan* once we were not really paying attention to the lyrics. We were smiling to each other, but when I started to really get into the lyrics, I realized that this was no place for smiling!

JM: I remember that; I was just happy with the way we played the music. I know *The Partisan*: I was playing it in my house when I was 15 years old. We know the meaning and we have conversations about the new songs. *The Darkness*, for example, is telling that this is the end: "In my life I've been living a lot and now I'm in another position. I want to create as much as I can because I don't have much time. My time is gone so I have to carry on." That's what he's doing. He's doing a lot of writing and a lot of new songs.

FM: That sounds great! Can you tell something about the new album?

JM: We listen to the new songs...

AB: No, we listen to the new ideas, because they're not really finished songs.

FM: Will it be different from *Old Ideas*? To me, *Old Ideas* sounded like a testament: *Amen, Going home...* When I heard about the new album, I was forced to think about *Old Ideas* in a different way.

AB: I'm sure that in the new album he's going to be like a Phoenix. He will arise out of his ashes. He is singing about the end, about going home but nobody knows when the end is going to come. This is what he's saying at every show: "I don't know."

JM: *Old Ideas* was a kind of ending, but now he's becoming funnier. He can talk about disaster and at the same time he's joking with you.

FM: At the end of *I'm Your Man* (the biography written by Sylvie Simmons), Cohen talks about struggling with one particular song that he wants to finish before he dies. Do you have an idea what that's about or what he's referring to?

AB: His whole life is a song for him, I guess. A story he hasn't ended yet. I guess he's talking about that. He's very aware that his message has to be the real message. That's why he works so hard on any song, I guess.

FM: Do you have a favorite song or a favorite album?

JM: Yes. *New Skin For The Old Ceremony* and *Songs From A Room*. *Songs From A Room* was my first album. I bought it in Spain when I was a child. I found the lyrics and learned English by translating them and playing the songs. I also did that with Bob Dylan and many others. The songs in *New Skin For The Old Ceremony* are beautifully arranged.

AB: I don't have a favorite album, but he has so many songs! When we get the setlist every night, there are more or less 30 songs that we are going to play. But there is also another list with some 20 songs that he may start to play when we are on stage.

SOME KIND OF GYPSY BOYS: GARCIA LORCA, HUMPHREY BOGART AND LEONARD COHEN

FM: Mr. Mas, can you tell us something about how you see the influence of Garcia Lorca in the works of Leonard Cohen and in your own practice? We know he discovered Lorca when he was 15 years old and that it influenced many of his lyrics and of his poetic language.

JM: He told me that one day that he was looking for his particular voice, just as Alex and I are looking for our own sounds. It takes many years to find it. He read Garcia Lorca and found his own voice by understanding Garcia Lorca's. Moreover, he also plays a Spanish guitar.

AB: Both Lorca and Leonard have been fascinated by the same people, the gypsies.

JM: Yes, Garcia Lorca, like Manuel de Falla (the great composer who worked with Lorca), was captivated by the gypsies. Together they organized a festival which provided a venue for the new talents of flamenco. Nobody had done that before. De Falla moved to Paris where he worked with many famous people, but he spent every night in the bar, drinking and listening to the gypsies. Many of his melodies and his inspiration came from the gypsy music. The same goes for Garcia Lorca.

AB: I think they've been fascinated by these people, and especially by the freedom of the spirit they have.

FM: But still, Cohen doesn't consider himself as a gypsy. In *So Long Marianne*, for instance, he sings: "I used to think I was some kind of gypsy boy, before I let you take me home."

AB: The quote from *So Long, Marianne* is about the gypsies' completely different philosophy of the life. We see the same thing but understand it in a different way than the gypsies.

JM: A country boy and a gypsy man are similar. In the blues they also say: "I'm a country boy." It means that I go out all night and come back home late. "Don't say I don't love you because I stays out all night long. You know I'm a

country boy” sings Muddy Waters. Like Alex said, Leonard is a gypsy in the way he perceives freedom, in the way that he is different.

JM: We see the same things, but we don't see the same. They see the moonlight different than we see it.

FM: The moon is indeed a recurrent image in Cohen's poetry and songwriting, just as it is in Lorca's poetry as well. What does it mean to the gypsies – or to you?

JM: The moon is the best friend, the best mobile telephone, the best connection. It is the original connection for the humans. Before there were mobiles and telephones, people connected by the moon, you know. All my clever friends don't have a mobile. My father used to say: "If you see somebody with many keys in his pocket: it's a bad sign." I said: "Why papa, why?" "Because he's got a lot of business going on, he's got a lot of houses. He's got too much to worry about. Too many problems to worry about."

FM: What do you think is the biggest misunderstanding about the work of Leonard Cohen?

AB: There is no misunderstanding. Because if there were, he wouldn't sell so many tickets.

JM: Maybe his voice? It's very sexy.

AB: The women go completely crazy! For sure they don't have any kind of misunderstanding!

JM: For my generation, in cinema there was Humphrey Bogart and in singing there was Leonard. For all my friends – chickas – when they hear Leonard, they go: Wow! There is no misunderstanding. Everybody knows what he's saying and everybody creates his or her own ideas, different meanings of the songs... But the thing that I was telling you before, that there is something inside, that you don't realize why you like something – they have that.

FM: Roscoe Beck told me that a lot of people consider Leonard Cohen and his music depressing. He doesn't consider it depressing, but ascribes an uplifting power to it.

JM: Leonard is not depressed. Leonard is happy, sexy, a great poet. He is a human being and like every human being he has many things going on inside. It's not one thing. It's not depressing, it's not...

AB: There are many fans that are very depressed in some moment in their lives, and they identify with his music, but that doesn't mean that he was depressed at the time that he wrote it. Maybe this is a kind of misunderstanding...

JM: You know, the blues, just as flamenco, are very deep and very sad, but the music makes you happy.

FM: This is interesting because Cohen declared that in making his latest albums he has had a deep interest in the blues. Maybe that's because of this transformative power to turn depressed feelings into happy ones?

JM: You play something sad, but you can take it away by playing it. This goes for the blues, flamenco, country music, Jewish music, folk music, all the pure music... all the roots music. Sometimes it's very sad but that doesn't mean that it's depressing. When I play a Miles Davis record, I don't know what record to play next. His music was not happy at all. I'm a musician; I prefer deep and strong music over happy music. It makes me feel better.

Francis Mus is a teacher and researcher at the University of Leuven, Belgium with a doctorate in French literature. His current focus, however, is on writing a book examining recurrent themes in the work of Leonard Cohen. Research for this project has included trips to London, Montreal and Toronto and, when the 2012 Leonard Cohen Tour came to Ghent, an interview with Roscoe Beck (see www.leonardcohenfiles.com/francismus.pdf) His review of the Sylvie Simmons' biography was published on the music website Consequence of Sound (see <http://consequenceofsound.net/2012/11/thoughts-on-sylvie-simmons-im-your-man-the-life-of-leonard-cohen>)