

Leonard Cohen Interview with Jarvis Cocker

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Jarvis Cocker

People say things like you should never meet your heroes you know you will be disappointed all that kind of thing he certainly has been a great formative influence on my work I think when I left school and was wanting to keep on doing a group I vividly remember first being played a Leonard Cohen record and suddenly thinking, you know it was one of those records when you suddenly think music can be different to how you thought it had to be you know you don't get that many of those moments in your life so you should cherish them

Anyway, so this is a roundabout way of saying that I was pretty nervous, quite scared, we sat there in the dim light of a basement in a posh hotel in Mayfair listened to the record, the record finished we sat went up to the stage and I began my line of questioning

Jarvis Cocker

How is it for you to listen to your own record I was just wondering about that as I was sat there

Leonard Cohen

I wasn't listening. (laughs)

Jarvis Cocker

Well you did a good impression of listening

Leonard Cohen

That's right (laughs)

Jarvis Cocker

Obviously when you are making a record you have to listen to it to make sure it is right

Leonard Cohen

Of course

Jarvis Cocker

Then you perform something, I guess sitting in a room with other people listening, does it feel strange does it feel like you.

Leonard Cohen

I guess I am testing it over and over again hoping that it will find favour with the listeners, also listening from a technical point of view wondering if I have ratcheted it up to exactly the right degree of excellence, so there are critical faculties that are engaged but mostly I was wondering if I myself could be swept along with it

Jarvis Cocker

And do you find that

Leonard Cohen

I think this particular record invites one to be swept along with it even if you happen to have written it yourself

Jarvis Cocker

It's an intimate record a lot of your records have been like that I suppose when someone first played me one of your records many years ago that was one of the things I was very impressed by, that where a lot of music tries to hit you over the head with something your music in some ways works the other way that you kinda have to, it draws you in because you have to pay attention to tell what's going on.

Leonard Cohen

You know you just work with what you go

Jarvis Cocker

Sometimes instruments are quite, everything kind of frames the voice and I find that that happens so you are straining to hear and that kinda makes you pay attention to the voice. I find that anyway

Leonard Cohen

I never had a strategy I always felt I was kinda scraping the bottom of the barrel just trying to get the song together trying to find a beginning, a middle and an end so I never had the sense that I was standing in front of a buffet table where there were a multitude of choices I felt I was operating on more like what Yates used to say "working in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart", you know, not really a sense of abundance at all just trying to pick it together that's the feeling I have. Now there are

people that work that have a great sense of abundance and I would love to be one of them but I am not

Jarvis Cocker

But I do think its an effective thing and one of the things I suppose for everybody here listening is the voice we have to mention the voice it seems to be getting even deeper do you think there is a bottom that its going to get to or can it go all the way

Leonard Cohen

(laughs)

I don't know you know that's what happens when you give up cigarettes contrary to public opinion I thought I would destroy my whole position when I gave up smoking I thought my voice would rise to a soprano

Jarvis Cocker

It doesn't seem to have happened that way

Leonard Cohen

Its not going in that direction

Jarvis Cocker

Again that's another thing I think you can hear every aspect of it and its really like, you know, well obviously today we are in the room with you normally when you listen to a record you wouldn't be but you get that feeling that's it very

Leonard Cohen

I intend to be in the room with every single person (laughs) listening to this record.

Song - "Going Home"

Jarvis Cocker

I thought maybe rather than me coming up with any crackpot theories or anything like that I would maybe fire some of the lines that stuck out to me on listening to the record back to you and see if that takes us somewhere. Starting with the first song

“Going Home” you kind of go in hard there with probably not the most flattering self assessment ever “I love to speak with Leonard he is a sportsman and a shepherd he’s a lazy bastard living in a suit” that’s within the first 25 seconds.

Leonard Cohen

Its pretty good though you know, I got the suit

Jarvis Cocker

How come the third person thing, I am not going to ask you who it is but it seems a strange way to start a record you start talking about yourself in the third person straightaway.

Leonard Cohen

I know that is a strange song and I don’t think it ever would have become a song without Pat Leonard. Pat Leonard and I put that song together he just saw these verses that I had written, many more than are included in that song and he said this would make a great song and I said are you mad this is not a song this is a self indulgent piece of introspective writing that doesn’t deserve to see the light of day, he said no, this could really be the great song of the album I said well I don’t see that at all, so he wrote a kind of sketch for it and then I tried to apply the lyric to the sketch that he had written and then I saw there might be a possibility of an ironic, humorous take on, on the writer’s conversation with himself and then under his prodding I finally began to see that there might be a song there and then we went through that give and take of adjusting the musical line to the lyric line back and forth until it came like that

Jarvis Cocker

Do you think writing allows you to kinda access different parts of yourself I mean I imagine you don’t walk into a room and introduce yourself and say “hi I’m Leonard I am the lazy bastard in the suit”.

Leonard Cohen

I am going to now, from now on.

Jarvis Cocker

Is that one of the things you like about writing that it gives you a chance to try out different personas and things like that.

Leonard Cohen

Well you know when I was interested in those matters it was agreeable to have some kind of reputation or some kind of list of credentials so you didn’t have to start from scratch with every woman you bumped into now it doesn’t really matter one way or the other

Jarvis Cocker

I mean the album is called "Old Ideas I suppose I have to ask you how old are the ideas.

Leonard Cohen

They are about 2,614 years old, most of them, some of them a little older and some of them fresher

Jarvis Cocker

But I guess in some ways you must like that phase because I think your publishing Company is also called Old Ideas. Is this like a thing that you have always wanted to call an album that.

Leonard Cohen

Well you know I don't have that many ideas, so if I get a good idea I name everything

Jarvis Cocker

I was going to ask you about how you kept track you said that you let Pat Leonard look at your notebooks I was going to ask you about that because I have heard that sometimes it take a long time for a song to come to fruition how do you keep tabs on where things are if you work on them over the years are you scared that you are going to lose a notebook or something like that

Leonard Cohen

Oh yes I live in deep fear of losing a notebook but I have lost a lot of them

Jarvis Cocker

Yeah

Leonard Cohen

There are some masterpieces there

Jarvis Cocker

And is it strange letting someone like you say you didn't think that song particularly had potential obviously so you let him look through your stuff do you find it easy to do that or

Leonard Cohen

Yeah well you always feel that you are kind of at the end of the line I don't know how you feel I mean you put out a lot of work yourself so you are as competent an authority on this as I am

Jarvis Cocker

I am trying to get some tips

Leonard Cohen

I always find that there is no sense of abundance I blacken a lot of pages and it is my work and I try to do it every day but most of the time one is discouraged by the work that you have done and now and then by some grace something stands out and something invites you to work on it or to elaborate it or to animate it in some way it's a mysterious process I don't think I can add anything significant to the process the place is filled with writers here so we all know that the activity depends not just on perseverance, perspiration but also a certain kind of grace and illuminations we depend on that

Jarvis Cocker

Yeah you touched on that in the speech that you gave when you accepted that award in Spain the Prince of Asturias this idea that you can't own the source of inspiration or whatever, I can't remember your exact phrase its like you can't conquer or command the source of poetry but do you think that is what kind of makes you keep coming back to it because it is always mysterious you don't feel in control of it

Leonard Cohen

Well this is really a mysterious and somewhat dangerous territory I think if you look too deeply into this process you will probably end up in a kind of state of paralysis

Jarvis Cocker

We don't want that

Leonard Cohen

We don't no

Jarvis Cocker

No OK

Leonard Cohen

It's rough enough as it is

Jarvis Cocker

I was wondering about the song “Crazy to love you” are you playing the guitar on that?

Leonard Cohen

Yes

Jarvis Cocker

How did that song come about

Leonard Cohen

Well that’s a song that was written by my dear friend Anjani Thomas and it’s on a record that she put out called “Blue Alert” it’s quite a different treatment but I always loved the song and I asked her to write a guitar part for it or at least to reduce it to guitar chords that I could master because her piano is so much more subtle and the chords are so much more sophisticated than the ones that I could even finger on my guitar so she reduced it to chords that she knew I could play and I rehearsed it for a while and then we did it in one take.

Song – “Crazy to love you”

Jarvis Cocker

Sometimes you are very self deprecating about your guitar playing but I think that there is something very, I don’t know, something very touching about it I think

Leonard Cohen

Well I appreciate that thank you

Jarvis Cocker

Because again going back to that speech at the Prince of Asturias you were saying that you were kind of stuck with six chords which I would like to ask you which six they are later. No, but did you feel that in a way you know it can help that you know your limits you know where you can go so you just make it work with what you are going I suppose its what you say at the start about not working with an over abundance

Leonard Cohen

Well journalists, especially the English journalists were very cruel to me they said I only knew three chords when I knew five

Jarvis Cocker

In another song "Come Healing" there's a line the penitential Hymn and it struck me that could, in a way, apply as a label to quite a lot of your songs

Leonard Cohen

I am not quite sure what it means no seriously I mean is the penance appropriate to God or to man, I mean like who's to blame in this catastrophe. I never figured that out.

Jarvis Cocker

But maybe you don't have to figure it out in that that's another feature of your songs, I think, that the scared and the profane and all the things of the spirit and the things of carnality are always mixed together, in my opinion

Leonard Cohen

As good as mine thank you

Jarvis Cocker

But that does seem to be something that you explore that in some ways it doesn't matter how you get to that state of grace or state of something, it could be fair means or foul

Leonard Cohen

We have got to be really carefully really exploring these scared mechanics because somebody will throw a monkey wrench in to the thing and we will never write another line again either of us.

Jarvis Cocker

OK I am going to talk about banjos then, if I may

Leonard Cohen

Sure

Jarvis Cocker

Because there is a song called "Banjo" on the record and that's a very arresting image which I wondered about the idea of the broken banjo bopping on the sea is this something that you actually saw?

Leonard Cohen

I don't know whether I actually saw it but I certainly imagined it

Jarvis Cocker

And what was it about though because the banjo in a way, do you find, can be a funny instrument

Leonard Cohen

It's hilarious

Jarvis Cocker

But to me that's what makes the image interesting it's a banjo if it was a

Leonard Cohen

Right, Stradivarius

Jarvis Cocker

Yeah that, in some way that wouldn't be interesting

Leonard Cohen

No there would be a lot of art dealers plunging in to the sea to rescue the Stradivarius

Song: Banjo

Jarvis Cocker

I read earlier this week that the song that starts the album "Going Home" is being streamed on the New Yorker website and I know that's the first time they have ever done that and I also know that you are going to be given an award by Pen New England which is like lyrics of literary excellence and I wondered how that made you feel 'cos you started as a writer, you started as a poet and I imagine when you decided to start doing music there must have been some people that thought what is this guy doing why is he playing with this lesser form and so I wonder how you felt about this recognition that's come

Leonard Cohen

Well the thing I liked about it is that I am sharing this award with Chuck Berry

Jarvis Cocker

That's pretty good

Leonard Cohen

Yeah and you know, you know roll over Beethoven tell Tchaikovsky the news, I'd like to write a line like that. So I am looking forward to meeting Chuck Berry.

Song: Roll over Beethoven

Jarvis Cocker

Fielding questions from the floor. Someone asked Leonard about his time living in London.

Leonard Cohen

*I lived at the corner of Gayton Road and Hampstead High Street in 1959 and I lived with a lady, Mrs Stella Pullman, who was my landlady and I had a bed in the sitting room and I had some jobs to do, I had to go down every morning and bring up the coal and start the fire in the sitting room and a few other tasks and if I did those tasks I was allowed to stay there. She also said to me what do you do in life, I said I'm a writer, she said well how much do you write, I said three pages a day she said I am going to check at the end of every day and if you haven't written your three pages and you don't take up the coal you can't stay here and she did that Stella Pullman and it was under her fierce and compassionate surveillance that I wrote my first novel *The Favourite Game* at the corner of Gayton Road and Hampstead High Street so I do have some deep feelings about those moments I spent there*

Jarvis Cocker

The next question that came from the floor was asking Leonard Cohen about the tour which he has been on for the last kind of 2½ years I guess

Leonard Cohen

Well one thing touched by the reception of people across the world, I am not insensitive to that kind of appreciation so that did have an invigorating effect so that when I finished the tour I didn't really feel like stopping so I wrote the record and somehow I feel energised by what went on during that tour and perhaps that will carry over into yet another record and perhaps a new tour but it did have a deep affect on me, yes.

Jarvis Cocker

When you started that tour did you have any idea that it was going to blow up into the thing that it did

Leonard Cohen

I was already graced with a certain dismantling of, my mind wasn't working too well, you know and I wasn't really able to project possibilities so I just began it and it seemed to keep on going, I don't know exactly, I think it's because of my colleague Robert Kory that it just kept on going. I don't know, you know I was ready to go home and he said no you have another concert in Perth.

Jarvis Cocker

This is what tour managers have to do. I guess as far as I know it was 247 shows altogether I mean quite an extraordinary thing

Leonard Cohen

Yes it was a wonderful tour and it really did invigorate the whole process and it really did illuminate, You know I had kinda forgotten I hadn't done anything for 15 years I kinda of remembered I felt like Ronald Regan, you know in his declining years he remembered he had had a good role he had played the role of a President in a movie and I kind of felt, you know, that I had been a singer but being back on the road really re-established me as a worker in the world and that was a very satisfactory feeling.

Song: Minute Prologue

Leonard Cohen

In the case of Hallelujah which I wrote over the space of at least four years, I wrote many many verses I don't know if it was 80 it might be more or a little less but the trouble, my trouble, it's not the world's trouble and it's a tiny trouble so I don't want you to think that this was a significant trouble but my tiny trouble is that before I can discard a verse I have to write it and I have to work on it and I have to polish it and bring it to as close to finish as I can and it's only then that I can discard it so the process takes a long, long time I can work on a verse a long long time until I understand it isn't any good but I can't discard it before its finished so for that reason it takes me a long time to finish the song

Song: Hallelujah

Song: Darkness

Jarvis Cocker

Darkness I was going to quote one verse from that. I would say that it may be the way it's delivered because "I got no future, I know my days are few, the present is not that pleasant, just a lot of things to do, I thought the past would last me but the darkness got that too" which you could say just written down on paper like that is kind of, could be said to be depressing, but, but surely it's kinda like dark humour the way the song works it's like looking at it and saying laugh at it or something

Leonard Cohen

I'll buy that (laughs), but I think Jarvis you have got a point there it is just the song that allows the light to come in it's just the position of the man standing up in the face of something that is irrevocable and unyielding and singing about it, it's a position that the Greek that Zorba had, you know, when things get really bad, you just raise your glass and stamp your feet and do a little jig and that's about all you can do

Song: Zorba the Greek in background