

Leonard Cohen Interview

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Interviewers: Patricia Keeney and Robert Sward

INT: You've just released your new album, *Various Positions*. The range of styles you bring into your music is quite amazing. Some of the pieces have a folk feel, others a spiritual quality and still others a very anxious, uneasy feel. How do the styles emerge? Do you write the lyrics in conjunction with the music? What's the process?

COHEN: Well, it's not a deluxe operation. One is just trying to finish a song and when you're not trying to finish a song you're trying to start one. The form just seems to indicate itself at some point but it's always just scraping the bottom of the barrel. Sometimes you fall upon a chord change that seems to evoke something and a word or two clings to it. Then you need a resolution of the phrase and a word or a chord comes and that seems to work. It's a very rag-picking kind of operation.

INT: There's a very definite iambic meter to many of your poems and songs.

COHEN: I think that's the way we talk. The ordinary rhythm of ballads and songs is that simple way of speaking. The first song on *Various Positions* has an eastern European flavor, a marriage song. The second one has a country and western feel and there is a steel guitar, The third has a reference to reggae and the fourth is a traditional ballad where the whole story is told.

INT: Where did the title come from?

COHEN: I think when you're gathering songs together – the ones that you have and the ones you can finish – they generally fall around a certain position. This position seemed to me to be like walking around the circumference of a circle. It's the same area looked at from different positions. I like to have very neutral titles. My last album was called *Recent Songs* and that was the most perfect title I've ever come up with. But *Various Positions* is okay. My next one may just be called *Songs in English*.

INT: Very neutral.

COHEN: There's a folk song called "Spanish Is A Loving Tongue." I want to write a song like that about English with a line like: "She spoke to me in the English tongue..."

INT. Music has always been a natural language for you. Right from your teens.

COHEN: I've always fooled around with music.

INT: Did the writing of poems precede the writing of music?

COHEN: I came upon the whole enterprise all of a piece. When I started getting interested in folk music and started to collect songs and learn how to play folk music, that was also the time I started writing. And the first work I was drawn to was the Scottish border ballads, narrative poems that tell stories and have quatrains. That's what I perceived as poetry.

INT: Are there connections between the *Book of Mercy* and *Various Positions*?

COHEN: The *Book of Mercy* is a secret book for me. It's something I never considered although, I guess, it has an organic place among the things I've done. It's something to one side. It's a book of prayer, a sacred kind of conversation. The songs are related, of course. Everybody's work is all of a piece but the *Book of Mercy* is, somehow, to one side. It's a document, an important document. A popular song has to move easily, from lip to lip. Songs are addressed and conducted that way. The *Book of Mercy* is a little book of prayer that is only valuable to someone who needs it at the time. It isn't aimed the same way that a song is aimed.

INT: Yet it reads very much like a love poem-- a book of love without the kinds of tensions that are in your other love poems and songs. It's very much an I-Thou relationship.

COHEN: Well, I hope the *Book of Mercy* has those qualities because if a thing doesn't have those qualities it doesn't go anywhere. It doesn't even touch one's self. But it's a particular kind of love poem. We always have someone looking over our shoulder when we write and we always have an idea of a public. But I think in that one the process was as rarefied as possible. The *public* almost evaporated in the construction of that book. It was really meant only for people like myself who could use it at a particular time. In other words, I never had any hopes for it moving into a mass market or anything like that. Whereas songs by their nature should make that move but they often don't because they don't have the quality that appeals to everyone. But I think a song should have that large appeal. I understood from the beginning that the *Book of Mercy* would have a rather narrow appeal.

INT: Have you been surprised by the audience that book did find?

COHEN: I'm always happy when a thing finds any audience at all. I've gotten some very kind letters from people who are not readers of poetry. I've gotten letters from soldiers and other people I would ordinarily not hear from.

INT: In an early poem of yours, "Grandfather's Journal," you wrote "Even now prayer is your natural language." You seem to be saying that same thing about the *Book of Mercy*. Have you found your natural language in it? A psalm, of course, is also a song.

COHEN: I think that I was so touched as a child by the music and the kind of charged speech that I heard in the synagogue where everything was important. The absence of the casual has always attracted me and it has always stayed that way. I've always considered the act of speaking in public to be very, very important and that's why I've never been terribly touched by the kind of work that is deliberately casual, deliberately colloquial. There are many great masters of that form like Robert Creeley but it isn't the sweetness for me. It isn't delicious. I always feel the world was created through words, through speech in our tradition, and I've always seen the

enormous light in charged speech. That's what I've tried to get to. That's a hazardous position because you can get a kind of highfalutin' sound that doesn't really strike the ear very well. So it has its risks, that kind of attachment. But that's where I squarely stand.

INT: One feels the weight of your words in both your performances and in your poetry without it feeling at all artificial. One sees too the importance of naming in the *Book of Mercy*. You've just suggested that this is how the world came into being. Through incantation, through saying and naming.

COHEN: Yes, that always touches me, the capacity to create the world through speech, and my world is created that way. It's only by naming a thing that it becomes reality. A lot of people quarrel with that idea because that limits the direct perception of things. Everything is going through speech; everything is going through the idea, and a lot of people feel that things should be able to manifest *before* your awareness without the encumbrance of speech.

INT: But speech of that kind can be clarifying. It can be a window through which one can see what is out there rather than an interpretation.

COHEN: Well, you find yourself with your own nature, in those things that you experience as sweet and delicious. It's no easy thing to change your nature. I know it's a very old-fashioned idea and not popular today but the kind of speech designed to last forever has always attracted me.

INT: You once said that "angels of mercy" are other people. What does that mean? Is there a relationship between those kind of angels and language?

COHEN: I don't know. One of the things I always liked about the early Beatnik poetry – Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso – was the use of the word "angel." I never knew what they meant, except that it was a designation for a human being and that it affirmed the light in an individual. I don't know how I used the word "angel." I've forgotten exactly but I don't think it ever got better than the way they used it in the early 50s. I always loved reading their poems where they talked about angels. I don't have a clear idea of what angels are. I've read a lot of things about angels. I just wrote a song called "Angel Eyes" I like it as a term of endearment. The fact that somebody can bring you the light and you feel it, you feel healed, situated. It's a migratory gift. We can be that for other people. Sometimes we are and sometimes we aren't. I know that sometimes it's just the girl who sells you cigarettes saying "have a good day" that changes the day. In that moment, she's an angel. An angel has no will of its own. An angel is only a messenger, only a channel. We have another kind of mythology that suggests angels act independently. But as I understand it from people who have gone into the matter, the angel actually has no will. The angel is merely a channel for the will.

INT: You speak about the will in the *Book of Mercy*. There's one psalm about the will and it seems to be a wall that prevents something happening or stops some opening of a channel.

COHEN: We sense that there's a will behind all things. We're also aware of our own will. It's the distance between those two wills that creates the mystery that we call religion. It is the

attempt to reconcile our will with another will that we can't quite put our finger on, but we still feel it as powerful and existent. It's the space between those wills that creates our predicament.

INT: I'm struck by the relative absence of will in the *Book of Mercy*. One needs a thread of will to pray, to write a psalm.

COHEN: Those are really ticklish questions. Somehow, in some way, we have to be a reflection of the will that is behind the whole mess. When you describe the outer husk of that will which is yours, which is your own tiny will to succeed, to dominate, to influence, to be king, when that will under certain conditions destroys itself, we come into contact with another will which seems to be much more authentic. But to reach that authentic will, our little will has to undergo a lot of battering. It's not appropriate that our little will should be destroyed too often because we need it to interact with all the other little wills.

From time to time, things arrange themselves in such a way that the tiny will is annihilated and then you're thrown back into a kind of silence until you can make contact with another authentic thrust of your being. We call that prayer when we can affirm it and it happens rarely. It happens in the *Book of Mercy*. That's why I feel it's kind of to one side because I don't have any ambitions towards leading a religious life or a saintly life or a life of prayer. It's not my nature. I'm out on the street hustling with all the other wills. But from time to time you're thrown back to the point where you can't locate your tiny will, where it isn't functioning, and then you're invited to find another source of energy.

INT: You have to rediscover the little wills in order to take up various positions again.

COHEN: Yeah. Various positions is the position of the little will.

INT: Has there been another time in your work, in your writing, where you've discovered the will? Abandoned the little wills? Where you've been able to do that?

COHEN: I think that when you're cooking as a writer, it's a destruction of the little will. You're operating on some other fuel. But there are all kinds of writing. Charles Bukowski makes that tiny will gorgeous. That's a kind of writing I like very much. A writing in which there is no reference to anything beyond the individual's own predicament, his own mess, his own struggle. I like that kind of thing. We don't really live in Sunday School and the *Book of Mercy* is Sunday School. It's a good little book and it's a good little Sunday School but it isn't something that I could honestly stand behind all the time. I certainly wouldn't want to stand behind it publicly. It's a private book that has a public possibility. It's not my intention to become known as a writer of prayers.

INT: From the *Book of Mercy* to a tour of 40 European cities giving concerts from the new album. What is that transition like?

COHEN: It's not very different. You definitely go into a concert with prayer on your lips. There's no question about that. Anything risky that you do, anything that sets you up for the possibility of humiliation like a concert does means that you have to lean on something that's a

little better than yourself. I'm always struggling with the material, whether it's a concert or a poem or a prayer or a conversation. It's very rare that I'm in a condition of grace, where there's a flow that's natural. I don't inhabit that landscape too often. I'm happy when I find myself there but usually it's a struggle.

INT: Do you really feel as though you're experiencing humiliation when you're out there?

COHEN: When you walk on a stage and 5,000 people have paid good money to hear you, there's definitely a sense that you can blow it. The possibilities for disgrace are enormous.

INT: Are your audiences in Europe very different from your audiences in North America?

COHEN: Speaking technically, like a salesman about territories, there are real differences in audiences. For instance, a Berlin audience is very, very different from a Viennese audience. A Berlin audience is very tough, very critical and sharp. It's like the edge of a crystal. You've got to be very careful and in a certain sense you have to demonstrate the capacity to master your material, yourself, the audience. There's a certain value placed on mastery. In Vienna, there's a certain value placed on vulnerability. They like to feel you struggling. They're warm, compassionate. It also changes with seasons, whether you're playing in winter or summer. There's a thousand variables but at bottom, you need to find the door into the song you're singing every night. It's necessary to find the entrance into the song and that always changes. Sometimes you betray yourself in a song. You try to sing it the way you did the night before. People can feel it. People can feel if you haven't found your way into it. That's assuming the fact that you're well-rehearsed and that the music is good and the sound system is working and the hall has been heated. There are many, many variables. But I think that at the bottom of it all is how you enter the song you've been singing so many times. If you find your way into it, people respond to that. If you don't, you feel a certain frisson of alienation that you yourself have created. It's in the air.

INT: A resentment?

COHEN: It can go from a certain absence of warmth in the applause to things being thrown on the stage.

INT: Did that ever happen?

COHEN: I think I was shot at once during a big festival in Aix-en-Provence. That was when the Maoists were very powerful in France and they resented the fact that they actually had to buy a ticket. A lot of them broke down the fence and came into the concert and I did notice one of the lights on the stage go out after a kind of crack that sounded like a gunshot. I don't know. But they're tough critics, the Maoists.

INT: What about the French generally? You've said you are French. How do they respond to you?

COHEN: My work has been well-received in France. One of the reasons is that they have a tradition that my work fits into. Here, I'm an eccentric singer. I'm out of the mainstream. There they have a whole tradition of singers who don't know how to sing. They like to hear that battle in the voice. They want to hear the real story. The well-known ones are like Jacques Brel but the French have hundreds of such singers. They don't have a preconception of what the voice should be. So my songs have struck home there.

INT: You speak of being French. Is there any connection between that and the distance you've kept between yourself and the so-called Can-lit establishment?

COHEN: I've just never really gotten into any scene although I have many close associations among people of different functions. I have never had the time really to associate myself with a specialized function.

INT: There was a lot of ferment in Montreal in the late 1940s and early '50s, a lot of excitement around poetry and figures like Irving Layton and Louis Dudek. You were connected to that.

COHEN: Very much so. Both those men were very kind to me. I studied with Louis Dudek at McGill and he, as many people have said, was a really magnificent teacher. The atmosphere of his classes. He gave a sort of dignity, an importance to the whole enterprise of writing that enflamed young people. You wanted to write. You wanted to be a poet. He looked at your poems and spoke about them and criticized them in a very, very accurate and compassionate way, which was his style. He allowed friendships to develop between himself and his students. I never studied with Irving Layton. I never felt influenced though by Irving or Louis Dudek as models and there was never any attempt by Irving or Louis to influence their students toward a certain kind of writing. They enlightened the process. They brought tremendous goodwill. Whether it was in their classroom or their living room, their hospitality was impeccable.

INT: Irving once called you the High Priest of poetry, himself the Prophet and A.M. Klein the Archivist. How do you respond to such descriptions?

COHEN: I don't know what "archivist" means here.

INT: Keeper of the scrolls. Keeper of the tradition.

COHEN: Well, I wouldn't quarrel with that. It's a useful description. Irving as the Prophet. He's probably the best writer we've ever produced in this country. He does stand on a mountain. I think it's quite appropriate that he speaks of things in that way. I inhabit a different kind of landscape. I never think of myself in any particular way that holds from day to day. But I certainly admire Irving's capacity to put things in their place.

INT: Is there any tension between your role as solitary poet and your role as public performer?

COHEN: I never think of myself as a solitary poet, although I guess that's not too inaccurate. I don't feel any conflicts in what I do. I find I get myself into certain predicaments that I have to see my way out of. There are economic pressures. There's a desire too, as a musician would say,

“to keep your chops up,” to keep singing and keep playing just because that’s the thing you know how to do. So between that and the need to make a living, you find yourself putting a tour together. What the real calling behind any life is well that’s very difficult for me to determine. It goes all the way from thinking that nothing any of us do is terribly important to feeling that every person has a divine spark and we’re here to fulfill a special mission. So between those two positions, there’s lots of space. I put out a record and I know I have to go on tour or nobody will know about the record and if nobody knows about the record it defeats the idea of the song moving from lip to lip. It also makes it impossible for me to support my family. So all these things conspire to place me on a stage and hopefully be able to entertain people for an evening.

INT: So there are really very practical considerations for you as well?

COHEN: I don’t think there’s any other consideration but practical. I’ve never been able to disassociate the spiritual from the practical. I think that what we call the spirit or spirituality is the most intense form of the practical. I think you have to find those sources within yourself or there is no movement, there is no life to be led. Many people have different ways of locating that source. Some people avail themselves in traditional ways through religion or religious practice. But there are many people who have absolutely no need of those particular kinds of references. Yet that doesn’t mean that their lives are any less spiritual. On the contrary, it might mean that their lives are *more* spiritual. They are living spirits. And there’s no distance.

INT: Can we talk about irony in your work? Lines like: “an ape with angel glands erased the final whisp of pain with the music of rubber bands.”

COHEN: That’s good.

INT: There’s sometimes more irony in your songs than in your poems. “He’s just some Joseph looking for a manger.” The inflections in your singing voice convey a variety of different attitudes and the real irony comes through more clearly in the songs, songs which are intended for a large popular audience.

COHEN: Yeah, I see what you mean. I think of Bob Dylan who gets the inflections of street talk, the inflections of conversation and does that with such mastery. You can hear a tough guy talking. You can hear somebody praying. You can hear somebody asking. You can hear somebody coming on to you. I think that when you’re composing that material and you know that it’s going to occupy aural space that you can compose it with those inflections in mind. And, of course, it does invite irony because that irony can be conveyed with the voice alone whereas on the page you generally have to have a larger construction around the irony for it to come through. You can’t just write “what’s it to ya?” But if you sing “what’s it to ya?” to some nice chords it really does sound like “well. What’s it to ya, baby?” But just to see it written, it would need a location.

INT: Can you speak about the meditation you’re doing now?

COHEN: I studied with an old Japanese gentleman for many years who taught a traditional form of Zen meditation. But I’m not an incorrigible meditator. There are times when I find myself

assuming the posture that I was taught and cooling myself out. But it's nothing I do regularly. Maybe once or twice a year I'll go to one of the formal meditation periods he has and sit 13 or 14 hours a day for a week or two. That's sometimes helpful. In my ordinary daily life, I don't meditate.

INT: When you do this formal meditation, where do you go?

COHEN: The only place you can actually do something that severe or foolish is one of the formal Zen centres where they get you up at 3 in the morning and put you on a kind of bench and hit you if you fall asleep. It's only under those conditions that anyone's even going to try to sit with themselves for that long. But it is one of the more interesting, maybe the most fascinating things you can try. To study the way that thoughts arise and dissipate and feelings and emotions and sensations and all mental objects form and how they dissolve. It's a very fascinating enterprise but the conditions are severe.

INT: But a writer inevitably has to witness his own thoughts and the thoughts of others, somewhat like a meditator witnesses his own inner workings.

COHEN: That's true. But the meditative mind, that quality of meditation, is found in everybody's work. Nobody would ever call it meditation. Still, any work that has taste, that is informed, has that kind of intensity. It's behind most good work. The formal experience of meditation, however, is not designed to produce anything in the world.

INT: Is there any way you can transfer that intensity into your work?

COHEN: The method was designed so that you could leave a meditation hall and bring that mind to your work and your love. The method was not designed to produce monks in meditation halls.

INT: What do you do to "cool out?" What is that? How can you do it?

COHEN: It's a very good system for locating some thread that you can follow because we all get lost. There's lots of things available. Traditional religion has many methods that are tested by time and that are available to us. It's good not to jump too often from one method to another because methods take a long time to learn. It's good, as they say, not to drink from two cups of tea at the same time. I've used that particular one. The teacher I studied with had no interest in creating Buddhists in North America. It was just an accident that he was born Japanese and entered into that form of teaching. If he'd been a nuclear physicist teaching at Heidelberg, I'd probably learn German. It's just that it's good to have a friend in these matters, somebody who manifests the teaching. I think what's more important than almost anything is to be exposed to an example of somebody who is navigating well.

INT: Can we speak about some of the plays you've written and the attraction of working in that form? You wrote a play called *A Man Who Was Killed* with Irving Layton. How did that come about?

COHEN: Irving and I wrote three plays for television in the 50s. But nobody wanted to put them on. I thought they were pretty good and he thinks they're great. Maybe one was put on subsequently.

INT: Did you get any feedback on them? Any sense of why they weren't produced?

COHEN: I don't know. And I can't resurrect any sense of resentment which I think both of us felt at the time. It was a long time ago. We thought they were good enough to put on.

INT: Drama is appreciably different from your other forms of writing. Do you recall the impulse that led you to try it?

COHEN: I think it was one of the forms our friendship took. We felt like meeting each other every afternoon. I think we fell in love and wanted to find some form for our friendship. Those were among the most delightful afternoons I think I've ever spent. Irving would come down to my room on Mountain Street – I lived near the top of Mountain Street – and we'd put on the tea and butter some bread and we'd take the parts of the characters. I'd write it down. It was during the winter. It would get dark early and somehow the play would end and the conversation would continue. Then the play would start again. They were just very fine afternoons of friendship that produced the plays.

INT: There was a production based on your poetry and music done at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal. What was that like?

COHEN: It was curious. I didn't write that play. I just made my work available to Centaur. I told them they could use anything they wanted and they tried several script writers. The final version of the thing, I thought, was very unfortunate. I couldn't perceive the spirit of my work in it at all. I had to take a bottle of scotch into the theatre to get through the evening.

INT: Are you happier with the videos that you're now involved in, *I Am A Hotel* for example?

COHEN: I wasn't too happy with that one either. But I am happy that people like it. I never quarrel with that. I think that if you can entertain people for a half-hour on television it's worthwhile. I think it's pretty lightweight. It's the first-time I tried something like that. It got lost somewhere along the line. But it's okay for a piece of television.

INT: You worked on a rock video in connection with the new album. What was involved with that? Does it come out of the *Hotel* piece?

Cohen: I'm making a video of the first song, "Dance Me To The End of Love." I'm making it for a number of reasons. One -- it's now a convention to make a video for a song that you want to sell. I'm not convinced that a video is appropriate to my kind of music. The music that a lot of people are making today really fits with images and there's a lot of startling good work. There's a lot of boring stuff too. I'm not convinced. But the only way you can find out is to do it. Maybe I'll stumble on a kind of imagery or style, a treatment, that is appropriate. That would be very nice.

INT: What would make it right for one of your songs?

COHEN: I don't know. I'm struggling with it. I really haven't found the right way. I think that maybe just to hold the camera for the whole four and a half-minutes on a beautiful face might be all you need. I don't know.

INT: Or two beautiful faces.

COHEN: Or two beautiful faces. In any case, I'm not convinced about the whole video enterprise. But if you listen too much to those voices that say don't do it, you can end up not doing anything. I mean, I have voices that are telling me all the time to shut up and keep still, that there's nothing to say about this world, that anything you say is a betrayal. Those voices are powerful in my mind. But these negative inclinations I think have to be ignored a lot of the time. If I'd listened to them I'd probably feel really bad about not shooting my mouth off after a while.

INT: Who are these other voices? Also Leonard Cohen?

COHEN: I think we all wonder about that. Ibsen had that view of a man stripping an onion thinking that there's a core or a seed to the onion. But there is no core or seed. It's just layers and layers of wild distress all gathered in rings around nothingness. Or something. Some traditions say there is no fixed self and that the source of our suffering is the notion that there is a fixed self that you have to support and maintain and promote. Some traditions say that there is a fixed self, there is a soul, there is a part of you that is immortal and divine and you have to be able to locate the demands of that part of you. I just know that you can't stop struggling. Maybe an enlightened person or a saint does stop struggling but I don't think so. I think that the nature of our scene here, our existence, is to struggle with all these yeses and nos. I'd like to stop but I don't think it's appropriate.

INT: There's a certain sadness in some of your songs, a darkness, a heaviness of mood.

COHEN: I remember a review in *Rolling Stone* after a concert I gave at the Isle of Wight. They said that Leonard Cohen is a boring old drone who should go the fuck back to Canada where he belongs.

INT: Have your various homes influenced you? Greece, for instance?

COHEN: Greece was the first time I ever felt warm. I grew up in Montreal and my ancestors came from northern Europe. I never liked the winter. Just recently I've begun to like the winter. But even growing up and playing hockey and skiing as I did, there was always something about the winter that was very uncomfortable. When I got to Greece I basically laid on a rock for two weeks. I remember feeling some sliver of ice melt at the centre of my bones, something which had never melted before. So I began to see the world as hospitable and benign as opposed to how I had looked at it all my life. I really felt good, being warm and waking up every morning to sunlight. That was a large part of what I loved about Greece. The second thing was that I was able to live there for just a few thousand dollars a year. I was able to buy a house for \$1500 and

walk from room to room and feel all the evil sensations of proprietorship. It's something between those things – light, warmth, economy – that attracted me to the place.

INT: Robert Browning once wrote about what he called “the first fine careless rapture.” That phrase applies to your early poems, some of which were written when you were 15. That same rapture can be heard in the *Book of Mercy*.

COHEN: That's true. I think in that book I did write with that sense of urgency and abandon. A kind of startled certainty that the thing was right.

INT: Did you do a lot of revising?

COHEN: In a certain sense but nothing like the kind of carpentry I'll do on a song. Lines were transposed and there were certain things done to them but mostly that book was written one line at a time. And somehow “amen” was heard at the end of each line.

INT: There are echoes in it of the Old Testament, Whitman and even the 15th century Indian poet Kabir.

COHEN: Yes. I love Kabir. There are a few poets I've read over the past ten or fifteen years in different translations. Kabir is one of them. Robert Bly did some very fine translations. It's hard to find out what they really sound like. Another poet that I love is Rumi, the Persian poet, and also Attar, his contemporary. Rumi founded the whirling dervishes and he improvised his poems to music.

I must tell you here about a wonderful thing that happened to me. I wrote a song called “The Guests.” It was on the *Recent Songs* album. It goes “One by one the guests arrive/The guests are coming through/ The open-hearted many/ The broken-hearted few.” And I was told a story. I'll try to make it brief but it was the best thing that ever happened to me in terms of my work. That song was very much influenced by Rumi.

Well, there was a young American woman I met at some point, a professional dancer, a teacher of dance who became interested in the Sufi movement. She had gone to Turkey and she studied with the Dervishes which Rumi founded hundreds of years ago. It turned out that the son of a Sheik she met fell in love with her -- nothing was ever consummated. Then she went back to America and became the first American entitled to teach this whirling dervish dance. A couple of years later, the Sheik's son came to visit her in her home in California. He told her that his group was now dancing to a modern tune. She said, “what is it?” He answered “The Guests” and said that “the spirit of Rumi is in it.” That was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

INT: That's like the movie *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and the way your songs found their natural medium there too.

COHEN: Yeah. Robert Altman, the writer and director of that film, wrote the script for it while listening to my music. You know how that can happen when a record's on and somehow the spirit enters what you're doing. It was a very good collaboration.

INT: Did you hear any music while writing the *Book of Mercy*? Did that have a musical context?

COHEN: I wrote a lot of that in a little trailer in the south of France. I had my guitar in the trailer and I was reading, studying a number of texts, like the Psalms. But the study was not done in a scholastic way. I was really applying myself to the Psalms to derive comfort from them. This little *Book of Mercy* was also written in the same spirit. I was applying for, asking for mercy and the request was answered. The psalm would develop on the page one line after another. I could feel myself feeling a lot better.

INT: So the communication was direct. You asked and you received.

COHEN: Exactly. Under the lifted cry. If you really can ask from the heart, I think that prayers are answered immediately. But there's so much suffering in the world and there are so many people that lift their voice to ask for things that are a lot more urgent than the things I ask for, who are not answered, that I have nothing to say about it.

INT: Michael Ondaatje in his book on you says that you've seldom strayed far from the ideas you blueprinted in your early youth. In "Stories of the Street" you write "Now the infant with his cord/Is hauled in like a kite/One eye filled with blueprints/ One eye filled with night." That is, sometimes the eye goes one way, sometimes it goes another. Grace seems to occur when the two come into alignment.

COHEN: Yeah, it's something like that. I think we're trapped in our necessities as they present themselves to us. You're really dealing with your hungers. It's sort of a luxurious position in this world to be able to deal with spiritual hungers. Maybe all our work is quite irrelevant when it's placed next to real famine and the real hunger that exists in the world. Sometimes one feels ashamed to say anything or do anything. But having said that, we find our lives as presented to us and we're not in the midst of a real famine but we do find ourselves with real hungers – the hunger for Woman, the hunger for Love, the hunger for Touch, the hunger for Meaning. Maybe all are luxuries but serious enough to the one who experiences them. I think that probably they are defined quite early in one's life.

INT: In *Flowers for Hitler* you suggest other directions – between the lyric poet and the poet with social concerns. They are one in much of your work but did you ever have a sense of division between these two directions?

COHEN: I never felt a division. I know that different expressions come out at different times, often connected with your physical well-being. If you're feeling muscular and trim and tough and snarky you write a book like *Flowers for Hitler*. It comes out of muscular well-being where you really feel you want to make a fist.

Or you want to tilt at the ugly powers. Or you want to just present yourself in a very attractive muscular light to the ladies. Whatever it is somehow comes out of the condition you are in. A *Book of Mercy*, of course, does not come out of that attitude. It comes out of a sense that you're

dying. But I never had to struggle with, never had the luxury of choosing what kind of stuff I want to write. There seems to be only one thing at a time that you can write. I've tried to write other stuff at the time. But it doesn't ring true. I have records in the can that I've never put out because they were all written somehow from a point of view that wasn't true. I was trying to make a song or something.

INT: Is putting an album of songs together anything like putting a book of poems together?

COHEN: I think it's the same except that the process of making a record is so complex that you can't change your mind too often. The beautiful thing about a book, especially with our marketplace, is that you can revise it. Nobody is hanging around waiting for the next book. There's a certain sense of leisure which is one of the things I love about writing and putting out collections of poems. You really can let it hang around for quite a long time and move things back and forth and select and choose. You don't have to phone up musicians and have them at the studio. There's so many things involved in making a record that you can't... There's a real pressure involved for a lot of reasons. One is economic. You can also lose a song if you wait too long. I wait probably as long as any singer who still has a career left between records. Probably because of my training as a writer I don't have this sense of urgency about the whole thing. Although you do sacrifice a lot of your effectiveness in the marketplace by waiting so long. But with poems it seems appropriate to wait a long time to see how they stand up. You move a line here, a line there right up to the last moment. You can change things at the printers. It's a lot rougher making a record.

INT: The arrangements in *Various Positions* sound French if that makes any sense. Like it comes from the heart of Montreal.

COHEN: I think that probably we do share a lot of the influences of the place we're in. I am a Montrealer. I do listen to a lot of French music. But the arrangements themselves are never preconceived. You start with a guitar. The track. The accident of how you sing the first two or three takes. Then you start building the track up. What another musician plays might have an influence. He may play a certain lick that is very appropriate that you want to build on. The way that I made this record, I worked with a colleague, an old friend of mine named John Lissauer. He's a very fine keyboard player and arranger. We played the songs for a few months together in his living room. But even those ideas which we thought were very firm during those three months, when we got into the studio, a lot of those ideas were radically revised. We worked on them for a long time. I think it's like W.H. Auden said about poems, you don't finish a poem, you abandon it. I think with arrangements too, you put things on, you take things off, you realize you're making it worse than it was little earlier in the process. Finally you say, well that's the song. We can't stay in the studio any longer.

INT: The improvisation with the other musicians must be a kind of kick in itself.

COHEN: It's great playing music. It's a platitude but it's wonderful. And one of the wonderful things about being on the road is what happens to the music and what playing music with other players does, the closeness that develops and the camaraderie. You have a chance to be part of a

gang again. The music goes through many changes if you're playing every night. It's a great privilege to be able to go out on the road with good musicians.

INT: Is it true you're working on an opera?

COHEN: I wrote a musical drama. The word "opera" scares people away. It's guess it's a demotic opera. The music is complex and the lyrics are also complex. But the sound of the songs is demotic. It's popular. Lewis Furey is the director. He wrote the music. I wrote the words. Many of the lyrics are written in Spenserian stanzas, although I hope nobody can tell. You know – one rhyme four times, one rhyme three times, one rhyme twice. It's very tightly interlocking verse and his music is stunning. It started off being called *The Hall*. I wanted to call it *The Merry-Go Man*. I think it is now being called *Night Magic*. It's in its last week of filming. I've seen some of the rushes. It's really good. Lewis has done a marvelous job.

INT: Some element of collaboration has run throughout your career. The plays with Irving Layton. Being on the road with other musicians. The videos. Now the opera.

COHEN: From time to time it's pleasant to work with someone else because, as you know, as a writer you work most of the time alone. Sometimes a happy circumstance avails itself and you can work with someone else. Lewis and his wife, Carol, came to Hydra. I happened to be there. I'm not there too often. I asked him if he had any tunes because I didn't have any. I was studying the Spenserian stanza. Reading Spenser. He said that he didn't have any tunes but had an idea for a song cycle. He sketched it out. I didn't find it too interesting. But I wanted to practice writing in that particular verse form. And I was able to write a lot more freely and quickly than I usually do. So I presented him with a couple of hundred lines of songs. He liked them, went back to Paris and in about a month and a-half had produced the music for it. It was really good, the music. I was able to write in a way that I had never tried before. I usually write music with a view to my being able to sing it. My voice is very limited so I never write stuff that is too spectacular. I often hear beautiful stuff that I could never sing, certain kinds of lines that I would never attempt to sing. And he set this stuff to music and we both liked it so much that we wanted to find some way to present it. I had an idea for a kind of ballet drama. He had an idea for a movie and with tremendous diligence he set about making it into a script and forcing me to write continuity. We finally ended up with a screenplay. Then he set out to raise the money for it – not easy these days – and he did. It's a tremendous achievement doing that for so obscure a project. But the CFDC was pretty generous. It's a Franco-Canadian production. A French television network is also interested in it and a private investor. The movie looks as if it's going to be made.

INT: With Spenserian stanzas.

COHEN: Yes, and nobody will ever know.

INT: And you'll be hearing your lyrics in the mouths of other singers.

COHEN: I've already heard them because Lewis did the soundtrack. It's 85 minutes of music. The soundtrack had to be recorded before the shooting began. So I've heard the thing and it's

really good. It's really excellent. He has skills with music that I don't even approach. He trained at Juilliard. I think he debuted with the Montreal Symphony when was 11 or 12. He's a brilliant musician and a very fine director.

INT: Someone once said that you chose a path for your art that is infinitely wide and without direction. That means that there's an element of grace or mercy guiding you.

COHEN: Well, most of the time you feel you're not being terribly well-guided or that you're ignoring whatever good advice you're getting from whatever source it is. I'm grateful to be able to scratch out anything. I think that the whole thing is very tough, staying in the work for 30 years or so. I'm happy I've been able to do it. The process is very delicate and you can be overthrown by yourself at any moment. But at the end of a year or two or three, you see that you've actually blackened some pages and you can live with some of them.

INT: How much of a root has Montreal been for you?

COHEN: I love this town. I'll always keep coming back here. I'm getting very homesick now because I know that I have to go away. I've been getting very homesick for Montreal. Coming back here even for weekends when I was recording in New York. I always try to get back here. I feel really good in this town.

INT: In New York another planet?

COHEN: New York is where the grown-ups play. It's a little too tough for me I can make my way there but it's not home.

INT: What's the difference for you in functioning there?

COHEN: I don't know. It seems like people are really interested in money in a way that is probably going to eventually touch all of us. It seems to be a theocracy where money is truly worshipped. There doesn't seem to be any interest in anything that is not involved with money. But out of that severe atmosphere comes really remarkable production on all levels. I find it a little ferocious. I'm a grown-up man. I can handle myself. But it's pretty rough.

INT: Keep coming home Leonard. Thank you.

COHEN: Thank you.