

Leonard Cohen in Quebec – Lessons from a Master Dec 9 2012

If the question is what could possibly induce me to visit Quebec in late November with the daytime temperature reaching minus 16 then the answer is to watch one of the most talented artists in the world perform in his home town of Montreal.

Firstly I must declare an interest – as for many others Leonard Cohen has long been both an idol and an icon for me and his music has accompanied me through life's journeys since I first played his debut LP 'The Songs of Leonard Cohen' back in 1967. Since Leonard resumed performing in 2008 I have attended 30 of the 300 concerts he has performed.



Leonard and his girls

Together with Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan and Mick Jagger, Leonard is one of four giants that emerged in the 60s to change the course of popular music and who are still performing today. Dylan broke the mould musically but it was the Beatles whose innovative music personified the 1960s and provided the backdrop to the significant social changes as the Woodstock generation emerged. The Stones were gifted blues singers who were the perfect foil to the Beatles musically and outlasted them by decades. By contrast Leonard Cohen always struggled for mainstream acceptance and was always an acquired taste, but unjustifiably so as his current popularity has demonstrated.

I have described Leonard Cohen above as one of the most talented artists in the world and I am not exaggerating – he was a national figure in Canada as both a writer and poet and his motivation to start singing, as he has often commented, was purely because poetry did not pay the bills and guys with guitars were always more likely to pick up women! His drawings have

been displayed at Galleries, illustrated his anthologies of poetry and sold to collectors. Yet as a singer, who has never pretended to be anything more than adequate, he is the consummate professional who has attracted millions to his concerts in the past four years.

However it is almost certainly as a songwriter that history will judge Leonard Cohen not as one of the giants from the 60s but as one of the great songwriters of the 20th century alongside George Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein, Paul McCartney and Andrew Lloyd Webber. One cannot and should not attempt to rank artists but it can certainly be argued that Cohen's songs stand alongside Gershwin's as a body of work containing an extensive range of beautiful and sophisticated melodies.

It is ironic that whilst Cohen was the least successful of the four artists mentioned above in the 60s and despite being the oldest it he who has gathered accolades of outstanding reviews for his work in recent years. Paul McCartney still performs with enthusiasm, Bob Dylan's concerts are of a variable standard and his reviews mixed at best and the Stones are likely to start touring again but Cohen has put out three acclaimed albums in the last 12 years, one collection of poetry and has delivered one of the most memorable concert tours in the history of popular music. If any artist on the planet is deserving of the term "Renaissance Man", a man of consummate and varied talents it is surely Leonard Cohen.

And so the chance to see the Master return and perform in his home town was an opportunity that could not be scorned and my wife and I attended both concerts in Montreal and then continued to Quebec City to attend the 3rd concert. I flew up from Virginia and Sharron flew to Montreal from the UK and she was certainly not the only Cohen aficionado to do so.



Neil Larsen looks on

We had not been in Montreal and Quebec since 1982 and I can be specific about the date because we enjoyed our first wedding anniversary in Quebec with dinner at the Chateau Frontenac courtesy of Sharron's parents. As a nation Canada has a lot of strengths: the people are courteous and worldly, the scenery is impressive and Canada has a strong musical heritage. No one can deny that each of Neil Young (Rock), Diana Krall (Jazz), Shania Twain (Country) and Celine Dion (Pop!) are near the summits of their particular musical genre.

However Canada's cities, east of spectacularly located Vancouver and quaint Victoria generally have little to distinguish them but Montreal and especially Quebec are the exceptions.

Old Montreal has many impressive buildings and the adjacent Old Port area has been tastefully restored as an attractive recreational area though not perhaps at its best at midnight with the temperature at -14 when I chose to explore it! However I could see there were many impressive buildings including the almost parliamentary Bonsecours Market Building which we returned to visit the following day and the City Hall. Before coming to Montreal I was not aware that there was virtually another city underground with a network of passages and walkways connecting the various underground malls, shopping centres and Metro stations. Indeed we descended from our hotel and walked all the way to the concert venue several blocks away for the second concert rather than brave the arctic temperatures above ground as we had done the previous night.

Everyone knows that officially Canada is a bilingual country but I know very few Canadians in Western Canada who can speak more than a word or two at best of French so I was expecting to have to rely on my limited French in Montreal and Quebec but I was pleasantly surprised to find that when most people heard my faltering French they readily replied in English and often asked where we were from and why were we visiting. The subplot to these questions was 'We don't normally see tourists in late November' and when I explained we had come to see Montreal's most famous son perform the reply was often 'You too? Those people over there are also visiting for the concert(s)'

I wrote earlier that the 2008 – 12 Leonard Cohen tour was one of the most memorable tours in the history of popular music and perhaps I should explain the reasoning to justify my comments..

Leonard Cohen first toured in 1970 when he gave his famous performance at 4am at the Isle of Wight Festival, which I was fortunate enough to attend, and toured on a further 8 occasions up to 1993 when he retreated (literally) and made the Monastery (Zen Centre) at Mount Baldy close to Los Angeles his home for much of the following five years. Famously, whilst in retreat his Manager appropriated the majority of his assets. Cohen was allegedly down to his last \$100,000 and it was common belief that this, in part contributed to his decision to resume touring in 2008 at the age of 73. His Manager Robert Kory advised me in 2009 that this was not the case as he had restored much of Leonard's financial health but Cohen has himself alluded to his financial misfortune when discussing the decision to tour again so it appears it influenced his motivation without being a necessary step.

But if the genesis of the tour remains blurred the result is unquestioned because under the masterful stewardship of Leonard's new Manager and Lawyer Robert Kory the tour has been an ongoing triumph. Initially planned to encompass some 32 dates in Eastern Canada, Britain and Ireland over the late Spring and Summer of 2008 the tour was extended to include 19 dates in Europe. And then in response to an unprecedented demand from fans who could not get enough of Cohen, the tour seemingly took on a life of its own and was extended time and time again and continued until December 2010 to include some 256 performances in Europe, North America and Australasia. This meant a concert every three and a half days even allowing for a six month interregnum whilst Cohen recovered from a strained back.

Along the way Cohen performed at many of the world's most famous venues including the Glastonbury Festival, the O2 and Royal Albert Hall in London, The Montreux Jazz Festival, St Marks Square in Venice, the Kremlin Palace, L'Olympia in Paris, the Sydney Entertainment Centre, The Rod Laver Arena Melbourne, The Beacon Theatre, Radio City Hall and Madison Square Garden in New York and incongruously but to great acclaim, three performances at the Coliseum at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas. I must confess to making my own road trip around Europe in 2009 attending concerts in cities I had never previously visited like Nimes, Bratislava and Budapest and twice flying to Las Vegas to combine a few days at the tables with the concerts in the acoustically outstanding Coliseum.



With the newcomers – Mitch Watkins and Alexander Bublitchi

The tour won numerous awards for being the 'Best concert of the Year' in several of the countries it visited and attracted outstanding reviews wherever it went and one that gained some notoriety (but which was not untypical) was from the Dominion Post in New Zealand where the reviewer Simon Sweetman wrote *"It is hard work having to put this concert into words so I'll just say something I have never said in a review before and will never say again: this was the best show I have ever seen."*



With Javier Mas

I mention this because my own personal experience after attending many of these concerts is that I often heard two comments after concerts. Firstly many people agreed with Simon Sweetman and commented ‘That was the best concert I have ever attended’. And the second comment was ‘The quality of the sound and Leonard’s band was amazing’. This testimony was as true in venues as big as London’s O2 or the Sant Jordi Olympic Arena in Barcelona as well as for many of the ‘smaller’ venues.

Cohen is known to be a perfectionist and he has always had the quaint and old fashioned idea that one has to have ten good songs to put out an album with the ‘right’ lyrics combined with carefully crafted melodies. That is why in a recording career spanning 45 years he has produced the ‘relatively sparse’ output of just 12 studio albums. A Cohen album can take years to conceive, write and produce and a complex song like Hallelujah can take almost two decades of work and effort before the writer is satisfied with the results.

It is this attention to detail and ongoing quest for perfection which results in Cohen attracting the very best of award winning musicians to play and sing with him and to produce the outstanding and balanced sound which perfectly complements his vocals. His Musical Director Roscoe Beck has been playing with Cohen since 1979, Bob Metzgar toured with him in the 80s and the current tour has featured several outstanding musicians in their own right including Javier Mas, the acclaimed Spanish guitar player on the acoustic guitar and oud, Dino Soldo on the sax and other wind instruments and Neil Larsen on the Hammond guitar.



Acknowledging the band

When I met with Leonard's Manager Robert Kory he commented that a third feature that characterises a Cohen concert was that *'It is a spiritual experience for most of the audience'*. I am not a spiritual person but I agree that both Leonard's songs, the lyrics and his eventual triumph over his personal struggles is something his audience can relate to and understand on an almost spiritual level..

Furthermore his journey to finally emerge late in life as a revered father figure influencing and admired by hundreds of artists the world over is one that everyone can appreciate and enjoy. I cannot think of any other contemporary artist who has had cover versions of so many of their songs recorded. We all have our favourite Cohen songs, we can all relate a Cohen song to an event or period of our lives so Yes we can all relive part of our lives with Cohen and so his concerts with his deeply personal songs become a personal experience for all of us.

The Montreal Concerts were held in the cavernous Bell Centre, an arena of similar size to London's famous O2 and home to Canada's most famous and beloved sports team – the Montreal

Canadians Ice Hockey team. The arena was configured to hold about 15,000 and was virtually full the first night and about 80% on the second night that was added after the first show sold out. I thought the audience was a little more restrained on the first of the two nights in Montreal night and as the first concert unfolded I was a little disappointed that the set list was very similar to the 2008 – 10 tours and I was wishing that Leonard had taken the opportunity to introduce more gems from his back catalogue. At the same time whilst lamenting the lack of change on one hand it was perhaps slightly incongruous to be wishing for the return of the ‘missing’ Dino Soldo whose magnificent saxophone playing had been a highlight of the previous tour.

A decision to drop Soldo had been made during the rehearsals and he was replaced by the Moldovian Violin player Alexandru Bublitchi. During the summer this had provoked considerable debate and speculation in the world wide Cohen community and Cohen’s management was quick to stress that Soldo was still to receive remuneration for the tour although he would not be part of the backing group on this occasion. The addition of the Violin certainly gave Cohen’s music a different feel to the 2008 – 10 tours and took it back closer to the sound on some of the tours of the 70s and 80s and perhaps better reflected the influence of Cohen’s long sojourn in Greece through the 60s that was discernible through many of his early records. And given that Cohen’s long term guitarist Bob Metzger was also missing from this tour due to illness and had been replaced by Mitch Watkins the ‘right’ side of the stage seemed to be lacking a little energy without both Soldo and Metzger. Both Sharron and I commented on this at the interval and felt something was ‘lacking but after the two Montreal Concerts we also agreed that on several numbers Bublitchi’s haunting violin added something extra and enhanced several numbers. Perhaps having the saxophone and violin is the best option for future tours!

I am still a regular attendee at Europe’s biggest Rock festival at Glastonbury in the UK and the Montreux Festival in Switzerland and have been attending rock concerts since I saw the Beatles and Stones in the early 60s and it is my experience that a Leonard Cohen concert is quite unlike anything else in the genre of popular music.

And why is this?



With long time collaborator Sharon Robinson

It is not because (wherever the venue) the sound quality is consistently outstanding with the technicians ensuring that the balance between the voices and instruments is always complementary and neither dominates the other. Indeed every word that Cohen sings is clearly audible which of course is no less than what a poet and writer deserves!



'You may not have seen one of these before'

Nor is it because despite the highest price tickets on the concert circuit the concerts still offer outstanding value with upwards of 26 songs sung every night and each concert lasting almost last 4 hours (and let us not forget the man is 78!)

And nor is it because much of the content of his songs relate to issues, feelings and demons we can all relate to.

It is because every audience member always feels as if they have been on their own personal visit with Leonard because of his humble bearing, frequently acknowledging and thanking the audience as if each is an individual friend and indeed Cohen always addresses the audience as 'Friends'.

This is enhanced by Cohen's unique speaking voice which is so slow and thoughtful that it makes every person feel Leonard is talking to them personally. He has a speaking voice that resonates, no drips, with sincerity and thoughtfulness. I often think that audiences would be equally spellbound if Cohen read the local Telephone Directory out loud, such is the power of his delivery and the respect that audiences have for his words. Indeed when Cohen recites his famous poem 'A 1000 kisses deep' during the Montreal concerts you could hear a pin drop as the audience hung on every word, even if most did not understand the content but that's poetry for you! And indeed it is a rare event in the world today for a poet to recite to a crowd of 15,000 so this recitation is always a magical highlight of each Cohen concert.

Make a visit to You Tube and play Cohen's unscripted acceptance speech when accepting Spain's highest literary honour, The Prince of Asturias award in 2011 for an example of his presentation. His delivery is mesmerising.

And because he is a writer and a poet Cohen thinks very carefully about his use of words. Not a single word is wasted and each word used is relevant and part of a carefully constructed sentence. His actions throughout his concerts, bowing to his audience respectfully with a hand on his heart after every song and always removing his trademark fedora is his way of expressing gratitude and indeed at many of his concerts he thanks his audience 'for keeping my songs alive all these years.' And he means it – these are not words of platitude and his words always appear sincere and meaningful. It is no wonder that Cohen audiences love their Man in return.

All artists appreciate acknowledgement because any artist worth their salt will worry about how their work will be received. So Cohen always remembers to thank his audiences for their support over the years and for attending the concert. After almost four hours Cohen could be excused with a 'Thanks for coming everyone' but at the end of a Cohen concert it is 'It has been a great pleasure, privilege and honour to perform for you tonight friends' and delivered in a way in which each audience member feels they are being awarded their own personal note of thanks! Early on in his gigs Cohen usually tells audiences that it was 15 years since he previously toured and he did not know 'when I will be back this way again so we are going to give you everything tonight' and after showing their appreciation audiences learn that he was not kidding and that 'everything' was to encompass over three hours of performing songs from every stage of his career and a demonstration of musicianship of the highest order.

In 2009 and 2010 fans from around the world journeyed to San Jose and Las Vegas (twice) having purchased tickets to the last concert of the year speculating that it might be the last ever Cohen concert but in Montreal after touring for 4 of the last 5 years Cohen announced 'We have been on the road for a few years now and I hope to keep going for a few more years. I'd like to start smoking again when I'm 80!' So it seems that after his 15 year hiatus this wandering gypsy is now very much at home with being on the road for much of each year.

One comment that is guaranteed to provoke ire or at least raised eyebrows amongst those attending a Cohen concert is that old chestnut sometimes made by their friends and colleagues

who forever associate Cohen with sombreness – ‘A Leonard Cohen concert? I don’t think so, that must be so depressing’.

This oft repeated comment dates from his early reputation based on the content of his first three albums in particular and often overlooks the fact that those same albums contained tunes such as Suzanne, Bird on the Wire and Sisters of Mercy that are now established classics of the 20th Century Songbook. Nevertheless the reputation has accompanied Cohen throughout his career so it is ironic that his concerts are such an positive and uplifting experience as well as a testimony to musical excellence.



Tower of Song

Indeed, Leonard Cohen has written some of the most uplifting melodies of the past 50 years, and one immediately thinks of Hallelujah, Take this Waltz and Anthem all of which he performed in Montreal and Quebec. And although he always thanks the audience ‘for keeping my songs alive all these years’ his fellow artists have certainly done their bit as well in this regard. With over 300 recordings of Hallelujah it has become one of the most covered songs of the last 50 years and there are well over 1000 cover versions of his songs recorded by other artists whilst tribute albums and tribute concerts have been produced and performed around the world.

My conclusion is that other artists are more likely to cover outstanding melodies and songs rather than depressing songs and my case rests!

In fact for a man whose destiny it is to be forever associated with the word depression Leonard Cohen is a very amusing presence on stage and despite his status as a poet and writer he can never be accused of taking himself too seriously, not a common trait amongst the literary glitterati.



A man at peace with what he is doing

In Montreal he thanks the audience for staying after the intermission and earlier when he described how he struggles out of bed in the morning, wanders across the room to find the mirror, stares into it and poking fun at his own reputation comments to his reflection in the mirror 'Lighten up Cohen.....'

but as a consummate showman and a master of timing he continues

'.....when will you finally realise that "There ain't no cure for love"'

which is of course the perfect introduction to his next number.

So whilst much of the world will still think of Cohen as The Bard of the Bedsits' writing 'Music to slit your wrists' the reality is a Cohen concert is an entry ticket to a showcase of song writing and musical excellence that is an unequalled uplifting experience – partly because of the musical content and partly in admiration and the shared pleasure at what Cohen has achieved.

The only other artists that have a comparable body of their own work and who are still performing today are Neil Young, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, Elton John and Paul McCartney. I have omitted Springsteen, Jagger and Richards because I do not believe their song writing is comparable with their reputations as performers, a point reinforced by the absence in serious numbers of other artists recording their songs.

I have seen all of these artists perform including Neil Young, Paul Simon and Bruce Springsteen in recent years and none come close to delivering a performance as memorable as an evening with Leonard Cohen that unfailingly, night after night, leaves the audience feeling they have been privileged to be in the presence of a genius. Springsteen puts on a good show and Neil Young, interestingly enough a fellow Canadian, always delivers a great performance and is uniquely the one artist who is always challenging himself, being continuously innovative and courageously never afraid to make mistakes.



The Partisan – a highlight of each concert

But even allowing for the fact that a Cohen concert is in a different genre musically, an evening with Leonard is something quite different from anything the others deliver because quite simply it is more than a concert, it is an experience and I have already referred to the oft repeated comments from both audiences and reviewers – ‘That was the best concert I have attended’. And that explains why I have been motivated to attend 29 of these concerts in the past four years and found myself in freezing Montreal in late November.

And like the almost 30,000 who attended the concerts over two nights in Montreal (OK there were probably a few hundred who went on both nights) I was enthralled yet again. With the best tickets at \$275 we had originally only booked for the first show but I bought a front row ticket from the Cohen Forum (from one of the Irish fans who could not travel over because of illness) and purchased a second VIP ticket that had been unallocated and returned to the Box Office for sale in the days before the concert. So we were seated in Rows 1 and 4 on the second night and planned to swap seats at the interval but gentleman that I am (or rather as I owe my wife big time

for so much) I told Sharron to stay on the front row throughout the second concert as I had a great view from the 4th row which was ideal for photography. Cohen and his management always arrange for the front section of tickets to be initially made available to his hard core fans and have no objection to pictures being taken for non-commercial purposes although venue management and staff are not always so accommodating!

It is always interesting to go to the same concert on successive nights. Like a play you will discover that something you may have considered to be original or unscripted is built into the performance and this is quite understandable. I once gave a lecture at 70 venues and could not make an original insight, comment and joke each night so if it works keep it in! But one also appreciates the significance of any changes and nuances that are introduced.



Acknowledging Alexander Bublitchi

As a performer Cohen is fairly conservative, relying on a body of little over 30 songs for the current tour with another half dozen being added or dropped here and there. Given that 60 – 70% of his repertoire has been standard for the past four years there are times I wish for a little more variety but lets not forget that most people go to just one or two concerts and understandably, and quite rightly, expect to hear the classics – Suzanne, Bird on the Wire, Hallelujah etc. Until he surprisingly added ‘Save the last dance for me’ to his repertoire for the current tour (not played in Montreal or Quebec) Leonard only performs one song that he has not written and that is his version of ‘The Partisan which he first recorded in 1969 on his second album. The song was written in London by Anna Marley in 1943 and describes the heroics of the French Resistance during the Second World War. Beloved by Cohen fans everywhere the energetic yet haunting guitar introduction is always warmly greeted by audiences but especially in France where the tune was considered as a national anthem in the post war years and in Poland, where it was

adopted by the Solidarity Union whose protest movement in the 1980s triggered the collapse of post war socialist Eastern Europe.

And on the first night in French speaking Montreal it was when Cohen strummed the opening chords to *The Partisan* with guitar in hand that the audience really came alight. This led into Javier Mas's driving introduction on acoustic guitar standing to his left with Alexandru Bublitchi on violin, Roscoe Beck on Bass Guitar and Neil Larsen with Accordion standing to Cohen's right. The five of them standing together and driving the haunting homage on to its conclusion was a magical moment and one of the highlights of the concert.

But more was to come on the second night in Montreal when Cohen unveiled his gift to the people of Quebec. He explained that he wanted to pay tribute to his friend Georges Dor, one of the great Quebecois Chansonniers (Singer songwriters) and announced that he was going to sing 'La Manic', the lyrics of which comprise of a love letter written by a construction worker on the Manicougan Power Project.

La Manic is considered to be the most successful song ever recorded by a local Chansonnier and the audience truly appreciated this moment and it typified why a Cohen concert is such a personal experience wherever he performs. Cohen is always building bridges with his audiences and when he sings *Hallelujah* he always introduces the name of the local venue when singing 'I did not come to (insert) to fool you. In little known Bournemouth, my birthplace in the UK he sang 'I did not come to (the poet) Shelley's Grave to fool you' and in Montreal it was simply 'I did not come home to fool you'. The crowd always cheer and respond to this personal nod and the bond works both ways as audiences enthusiastically reaffirm their endorsement when Cohen sings 'I was born with the gift of a golden voice' or lifts his hat to reveal his 'old man's mask' when singing 'I'm your Man'. It is a masterful performance with ongoing interaction between Cohen and his devotees.

In Montreal I realised this first performance of 'La Manic' was something very special and by the time we got to Quebec City I fully appreciated the local significance. It is a thoughtful and simple song, perhaps easier to appreciate from its initial unveiling than many of Cohen's own songs which tend to improve with repeated listening and in Quebec when I knew what to expect the hairs on the back of my neck were prickling as Cohen delivered a superb rendition of this beautiful song. I remember thinking 'And some people say this guy cannot sing' as he delivered a masterpiece of timing and expression that was the equal of anything I have heard recorded by such great French singing chanteurs as Charles Aznavour or the Belgian Jacques Brel. To be present and aware of the significance of these first and perhaps only performances by Cohen of this beautiful song in itself entirely justified the trip to Quebec.

After almost 5 days in Montreal we took the train from the Central Station, located fortuitously under our hotel and I felt it was a city I would like to return to and explore at leisure, especially the newly restored old port area. We followed the St Lawrence River out of the city and after recently spending several days on the Trans Siberian railroad it seemed as if the three hour

journey to historic Quebec, a city unlike any other in North American, passed in a heartbeat. With its narrow cobbled streets and historic buildings Quebec City's Old Town could almost have been dropped straight into Quebec from Europe but first we had to get to our hotel in the Old City.



Take this Waltz – dueting with Hattie Webb

We arrived at the historic Gare du Palais which had the outward appearance of a grand hunting lodge, quite accurately described as Chateausque, and retrieved our checked in Bags from the Baggage Van (what a sensible and civilised idea it is to check in bags on trains as well as planes and not clutter up the passenger compartment) but actually getting to our hotel was quite a challenge. If Montreal was cold Quebec was even colder and by the time we got to the taxi rank not a taxi was to be seen and it was no fun waiting with the temperature at minus 12 when I had chosen to wear just a light windbreaker jacket on the train but eventually a passing taxi spotted us and pulled into the station area.

We were staying at the famed Chateau Frontenac that dominates the skyline of the Old City looking down on the River. The hotel has over 600 rooms, three slow gold leaved elevators, wooden panelling everywhere and excellent complementary pens (I will never need to buy another pen!). Thirty years ago we enjoyed an anniversary dinner there, and this time we were staying at Canada's most famous and iconic hotel so I guess the intervening 30 years have been good to us, although in truth the bill was paid with accumulated air miles that we inherited our former travel company and have been unable to use on flights! Sharron had the excellent idea that if we could never use them for flights we might as well get rid of them by staying good hotels, the likes of which I rarely enjoy unless provided on a complementary basis! Accumulated wealth or not all I normally need in a hotel is a bed, a desk and good lighting so a \$300 five star hotel is wasted on me when a \$70 motel is perfectly adequate.

But on this occasion it worked a treat as we were in the hotel room for much of our time in Quebec because of the cold, although we made sure to explore Old Quebec looking down over the St. Lawrence seaway from the famous Dufferin Terrace outside our hotel and making our way around the shops and galleries that surround the Place Royal before the minus 16 degrees

centigrade cold eventually drove us inside for some French Onion soup and hot chocolate. And on the Monday before leaving Quebec we walked along the Terrace atop North America's only fortified city walls and ascended the 300 plus steps to the Plains of Abraham on Cap Diamont. I remembered being taught about General Wolfe scaling the Heights of Abraham and defeating the French in 1759 which was the beginning of the end of French rule in Canada almost 50 years ago! We returned to the hotel after walking around the Citadelle, a military installation that is one of the official residences of Canada's Governor General. The Citadelle is part of the fortifications of Quebec City which has been designated as a World heritage site since 1985. We planned to spend some of our time in Quebec in warm cinemas catching up on the latest releases until we discovered that unlike Montreal there were no 'Version Original' (ie English) films showing in strongly Francophile Quebec City and the movies were all dubbed into French so when rain set in on the milder Sunday I spent the best part of a day and a half in our hotel room attempting to synchronise two Iphones to one Itunes account!

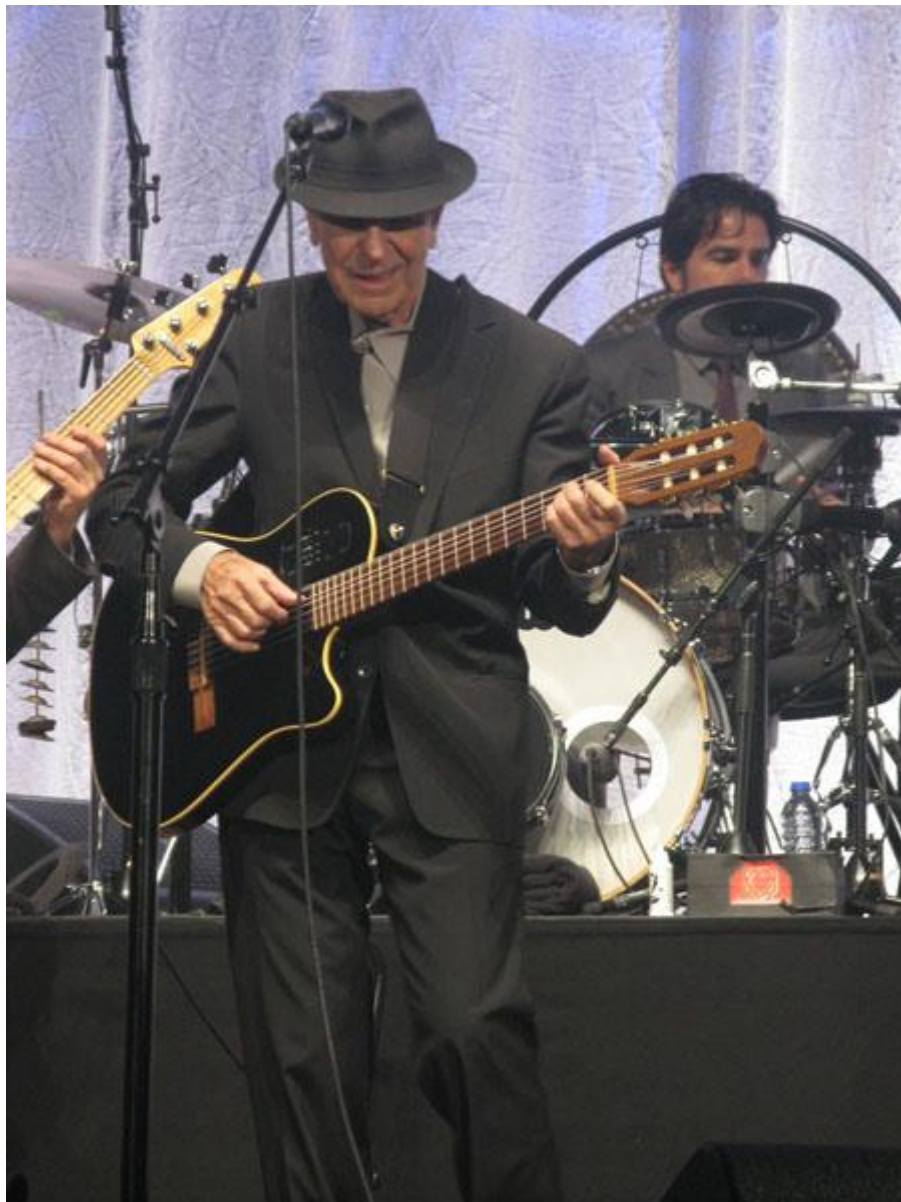


Famous Blue Raincoat

But our visit to Quebec City had never been about winter sightseeing and good food although we enjoyed what we saw of this unique outpost of Francophile culture in North America. We had come to enjoy our final Leonard Cohen concert in Quebec and again the venue was to be in an Ice Hockey arena as these indoor facilities are often the only venues that can fulfill the demand for seats. This time it was an older and smaller facility, the renamed Pepsi Coliseum which dates from 1949 and when Cohen skipped on stage he was enthusiastically greeted by a crowd reported in the local press to be around 7,000.

We had good seats dead centre about 4 rows back and although still a big crowd I thought there was a more intimate feel than in Montreal and the audience was more vocal and energetic. The

new 2012 tour has been marketed as the 'Old Ideas' Tour following the release late last year of Cohens 12th and latest studio album 'Old Ideas' but in truth the concert only features 5 songs from that album – The Darkness (which was also performed on the last tour), Tell me Again, Amen, Show me the Place and Going Home but I have to say after watching the four new songs being performed for the 3rd time in 5 days I thought all made a much greater impression on me live than they did when just being listened to at home or on my Ipod. Cohen's interpretation of each song was faultless and brought the lyrics alive and all the numbers seemed to have a fuller sound than on the CD.



Enjoying his work

Audiences always chuckle at Cohen's already immortal self descriptive line from Going Home..... 'He's a lazy bastard living in a suit' which as well as being yet another example of why Cohen can never be accused of taking himself too seriously reflects a trait in so many high

achievers. Many performers, artists, writers or entrepreneurs set a very high self imposed bar for themselves and are never satisfied with what they achieve. They feel guilty of any wasted or unproductive moments and are always concerned about where they have failed and those aims that they have not achieved rather than taking pride in what they have accomplished. In the last 12 years Cohen has produced a volume of poetry, three excellent studio albums and performed over 300 concerts which is not bad going by anybody's standards but as a creative artist there is so much more he wants to do and achieve and so as far as he is concerned he is a lazy bastard. For him, like many entrepreneurs, the glass will always be a third empty and not two thirds full and that is no bad thing despite the personal turmoil this can cause, because it is just what drives artists like Leonard Cohen on.

Leonard Cohen has been now been performing for almost 45 years and it cannot be denied he is an accomplished if understated showman skipping on stage and then skipping off with an exaggerated marching action at the end of each set after first removing his hat and giving the audience a solemn bow with his hands together in the typical Asian acknowledgement of greeting and respect particularly common in Nepal (accompanied by a spoken 'Namaste') and Thailand (where a Wai is the traditional greeting). As every concert unfolds all band members are given opportunities to showcase their talents and Cohen will remove his hat and stands unobtrusively, appreciating his own music being played to perfection by one of his colleagues and then bowing to them when they finish, his outstretched fedora inviting applause from the audience. He generously introduces each member of the band not once but twice and numerous gestures illustrate significant references in his songs – in I'm your Man he removes his hat to reveal his 'old man's mask'

Cohen has always been associated with back up female vocalists of the highest standard including Perla Batalla, Julie Christensen and Jennifer Warnes whose outstanding 1987 album Famous Blue Raincoat containing some magnificent interpretations of classic Cohen songs, did much to resurrect and maintain public interest in Cohen's career. Since 2008 Cohen has been backed up by his sometime collaborator Sharon Robinson and the instrumentally versatile and beautifully harmonising Webb Sisters from the UK and Cohen stands aside twice to allow each to perform solos during the concert.

The Webb Sisters are the perfect foil for Cohen when duetting with him in 'Take this Waltz' and harmonise delightfully to provide one of the highlights of the evening when giving a great interpretation of 'If it be your Will'.

Robinson first sang with Cohen in 1979 and in recent years has collaborated with him and shared writing credits with him on the albums Ten New Songs and Dear Heather and earlier in her career on 'Everybody Knows' and 'Waiting for the Miracle'. Cohen always attracts talent of the highest echelon and Robinson is a Grammy award winning songwriter and her voice dovetails beautifully with his, coating it like a glove when singing My Secret Life. On the 2008 -10 tour she sang Boogie St as a solo number but this time around it is the mesmerising Alexandra Leaving.

As I listened to her beautiful rendition in Quebec City I could not help myself but wonder how on earth Sharon Robinson has not established herself as one of the world's top contemporary female artists. The answer is because she has chosen to concentrate on her songwriting but I trust that when the never-ending Cohen spectacular finally circles the wagons her manager and an enterprising promoter will start booking her for solo concerts. Alexandra Leaving brings the house down, partly because the audience is aware and wants to acknowledge the important supporting role she has played throughout much of Cohen's career. and Sharon manages to both glow and look embarrassed by the sustained applause

Whenever I hear her sing I am reminded that there is a very thin line between being a world renowned vocalist and not. There are so many talented singers that we never normally get to hear but occasionally one breaks through to popular acclaim. Step forward Susan Boyle! There is often only a cigarette paper between global recognition and obscurity and it is certainly not a division demarcated by talent alone.

Cohen must spend at least 10% of the concert singing on his knees as he is up and down like a yo yo but it works. On several occasions he kneels in front of the sitting Javier Mas and sings to him, an old man singing to a middle aged man as he plays the acoustic guitar but with Cohen it looks perfectly natural. Furthermore Cohen is clearly fit. Try sinking to your knees and getting back up without using your hands and keeping a conversation going, let alone a song, in a perfectly even tempo. It's not easy I know because I tried it before writing these words and I am not 78!



Thanking the audience



Just working for your smile

At Quebec City the concert started at 10 past 8 and finished at ten to midnight with a 25 minute interval so that was three and a quarter hours of performing and 30 numbers in total including two solos by the Webb Sisters and Sharon Robinson and a spoken rendition of the poem A thousand kisses deep. As the second half concluded 5 minutes of 'I'm Your Man' was followed by at least 7 minutes of 'Hallelujah' and yet within seconds Cohen was closing the second half with 'Take this Waltz' his beautiful tribute to the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. That was practically 20 minutes of continuous singing after well over two hours of performing and with still another 6 numbers still to come. This is a tour de force demonstration of stamina by our favourite near octogenarian – clearly a lifelong battle with drugs, booze and tobacco have not taken their toll and Hallelujah to that.

And with Cohen the showman and perfectionist the encores are of course managed with aplomb as he skips off and returns twice to do a further 6 numbers and if time permits he comes back a

third time to follow 'Closing Time' with.....'I Tried to leave You'. These opening lines bring forth a smile from Cohen and delighted laughs from the audience. This final number is perfect as it gives every member of the group the opportunity to play or sing a verse and lasts for almost 9 minutes and I cannot believe that any artist in the history of rock and roll has ever brought a concert to a better and more fitting end than with the last lines Cohen sings after almost three and a half hours of performing 'and here's a man working for your smile'.

The audience is delighted, fully appreciating that he has been working his socks off for them for over three hours and there are final cries of 'We love you Leonard' and hat in hand Cohen is smiling, looking genuinely delighted and even after four years as if he is still taken aback by this vast outpouring of love and affection that has followed him wherever he has performed these. In truth it is the same everywhere after every concert and I have never ever experienced such love and affection between audience and performer. The experience is unique as is Leonard Cohen as a performer.

And even after almost 30 of these concerts I still feel it is a privilege to have attended and it is easy to tell that pretty much everyone else feels the same way.

Clearly the bond between Cohen and his audiences is unique and I think there are three factors that contribute to this.

First it is clear that we are in the presence of a master, one of the true giants of 20th century popular music and making a pretty good fist of putting a marker down to becoming a 21st century legend as well! The number of tribute albums, tribute concerts, cover recordings and the response to his tours confirm that the mainstream now accept what his fans have realised for years, that Leonard Cohen is a true giant in the field of music and has an impressive record as a writer and poet as well.

Secondly this is a man performing at remarkable level of musical excellence – 'the best sound I've heard' and 'the best concert I have ever attended' are heard over and over as one leaves each venue.

One sometimes hears comments like 'I saw Bob Dylan but he did not seem interested' and 'I went to see McCartney – I think his voice is going'. No one ever goes to a Cohen concert and is disappointed with what is served up.

So to see a Master on top of his game for over three hours would in itself guarantee an enthusiastic response and with Cohen there are also so many memorable tunes and beautifully written lyrics that we can all relate to (without admitting, if we are honest, that we do not always understand them!) but with Cohen there is a level of personal interaction that is rarely if ever experienced with other artists.

And I think this is because there is much we can both appreciate and learn from the Leonard Cohen we see before us in 2012.



A final farewell

Although he has gone through the routine and patter on over 300 occasions these past years the Leonard Cohen we see before us on stage comes across as 110% genuine, sincere and grateful to his audiences for sticking with him. He is humble, gracious and self deprecating. He addresses his audience as Friends, he thanks them for coming and he thanks them for their support and this is because he knows you pass the same people going down that you pass as you go up and he has had plenty of ups and downs.

We see a man who has battled depression, drink and drugs throughout his life and has emerged in one piece. Most of us have our own similar battles so we can relate to this and furthermore Leonard can give us hope because as the success of these concerts vividly demonstrate this is actually a story with an apparent happy ending and Leonard certainly looks more comfortable in his skin than perhaps at any time in his long career. He is clearly a very content and appreciative soul on stage each night and we can all take heart from his achievements.

He has looked for answers, lived as a monk on Mt Baldy for several years and indeed was ordained as a Buddhist Monk but has found no readymade answers in any religion yet life goes on, he accepts this and he is making the most of it. His body now really does 'ache in the places where I used to play' much more than almost 25 years ago when he first wrote these words but he is an object lesson on how to grow old with class and humility. And the audience reaction tells you his voice alone is more than capable of attracting 10 maidens a night to his boudoir if he so desired!

Leonard provides lessons for all of us.

He is respectful to his colleagues on stage and to his audiences.

He is a humble man who does not take himself too seriously as his self depreciating humour often demonstrates.

He has kept going withstanding the challenges of personal demons and financial loss.

He does not compromise regarding the quality of what he delivers

His gratitude forms a link with the audience and his smile and genuine pleasure demonstrates contentment with where he is and that should inspire us all. Indeed I came away from the Pepsi Coliseum in Quebec City thinking this tour could have been well named Life lessons from Leonard Cohen rather than Old Ideas!

The following day my wife Sharron returned to the UK and I took the first of three flights to return to Virginia. Quebec was well worth a visit though preferably at a milder time of the year. But a Leonard Cohen concert is always worth a visit, anywhere and anytime.

The man is 78 and there is no other contemporary performer who can offer a concert experience that combines an unequalled quality of content and performance.

Quite simply he is unique and we will not see his like again.

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This article is taken from www.notesfromanomad.net

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