

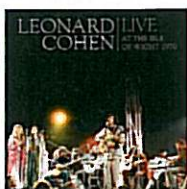
# LEONARD COHEN

## Live At The Isle Of Wight 1970

COLUMBIA LEGACY



His legendary performance, delivered in full on audio, and in part on DVD. *By Neil Spencer*



It was gone two in the morning by the time he finally got on stage after being woken from a nap in his trailer. Out front the mood among the throng—

an astonishing 600,000 strong—was a mixture of blissed-out and fired-up after five days of music, ragged sleep and running battles between the organisers and the 'free festival radicals' occupying 'Desolation Row', the hill overlooking the site. Backstage there were jitters—already that night there had been an onstage fire, a wilful act of arson, during Jimi Hendrix's slot.

Unfazed, Leonard Cohen wandered onstage cool as an English summer. Shaggy, stubbled, tanned, and sporting a tightly belted safari suit (possibly the only time said garment has seemed dashing), he looked more film star than rock icon. At almost 36, he was, Miles Davis aside, the oldest act on a sprawling, stellar bill.

Cohen's subsequent performance was remarkable for its poise, its passion and the way it defused the tension crackling in the air. Before he had even played a note Cohen had seized his moment by reminiscing about his childhood visits to the circus and getting the audience to hold up a lighted match (a gesture yet to descend into cliché) and by singing, ad lib, "*It's good to be here alone in front of 600,000 people*".

When Cohen finally swoops into a solemn "Bird On A Wire", the crowd's collective exhalation is almost tangible. Thereafter, Cohen never lets his grip slacken over 80 minutes, towing his audience through songs that were already *causes célèbres*—"So Long Marianne", "Suzanne", "Lady Midnight"—and startling them with introductions that are sometimes poems, sometimes narratives. "I wrote this in a peeling room in the Chelsea hotel... I was coming off amphetamine and pursuing a blonde lady whom I met in a Nazi poster," is his lead-in to "One Of Us Can't Be Wrong".

The confidential introductions and Cohen's tousled appearance lend proceedings a drowsy intimacy, though whether Len's half-closed eyes and sleepy manner are due to his recent nap or the ingestion of some festive substance is unclear. In this early part of his career, long before the more detached and oblique commentator of the 1980s emerged, the confessional was, in any case, Cohen's



default position, the sense of his nakedness enhanced by minimal backings. Here he's accompanied by a classy quartet of US session players (including producer Bob Johnston) whose acoustic guitars strum and ripple gently behind him while Johnston sounds hymnal organ parts and a trio of female singers provide harmony and gospel choruses. Incongruously, Cohen dubbed the group 'The Army'.

### The band seem as mesmerised by Cohen's startling spoken forays as the audience...

The commanding presence, though, remains Cohen's voice, never a thing of supple beauty for sure, and prone to wander into the wrong key, but by turns sensual and fervid and always perfectly paced for lyrics that chime with poetic grace. The versions here of "The Stranger", "The Partisan", and "You Know Who I Am", to mention just three, have a steely exuberance absent from the more mannered takes on his first two albums. Whether

singing, reciting or talking, Cohen never misses a phonetic beat. At times even the band, who had just accompanied him on a European tour, seem as mesmerised by his spoken forays as the crowd.

There's a clever underlying structure to the set, too, that alternates a jolt or two of slow, lingering romance with more uptempo offerings. Hence, after "...Marianne" comes a bounding "Lady Midnight", while "The Stranger" is followed by a countrified take on "Tonight Will Be Fine" featuring banjo and fiddle, the latter by Charlie Daniels. In a wry preface to "Tonight", Cohen sings of his "*sad and famous songs*" alongside a cheery dedication to "the poison snakes on Desolation Hill". Ouch!

"That's No Way To Say Goodbye", forlorn as ever, is pursued by a riotous version of "Diamonds In The Mine", one of three tracks here that would ultimately see release on 1971's *Songs of Love And Hate*, said album also including the Isle of Wight performance of "Sing Another Song Boys". This would have been the crowd's first encounter with both songs, as with "Famous Blue Raincoat", rendered here with gruff, arresting determination. After that, "Seems So Long Ago, Nancy" seems almost an afterthought to a set that, across a 40-year chasm, still astonishes.