

Poems and Songs: Cohen (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets Series)

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A magnificent selection of song lyrics and poems from across the storied career of one of the most daring and affecting poet-songwriters in the world.

In the more than half century since his first book of poems was published, Leonard Cohen has evolved into an international cult figure who transcends genres and generations. This anthology contains a cross section of his five decades of influential work, including such legendary songs as "Suzanne," "Sisters of Mercy," "Bird on the Wire," "Famous Blue Raincoat," and "I'm Your Man" and searingly memorable poems from his many acclaimed poetry collections, including *Flowers for Hitler*, *Beautiful Losers*, and *Death of a Lady's Man*. Encompassing the erotic and the melancholy, the mystical and the sardonic, this volume showcases a writer of dazzling intelligence and live-wire emotional immediacy.

Leonard Cohen's artistic career began in 1956 with the publication of his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. He has published two novels, *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, and eleven books of poetry, most recently *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, *Book of Longing*, and *Leonard Cohen: Poems and Songs*. He has to date released fourteen studio albums, the most recent of which, *You Want It Darker*, was released in 2016. Cohen was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008, received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010, and was awarded the Glenn Gould Prize in 2011. Mr. Cohen died in 2016.

From the Foreword by Robert Faggen

Leonard Cohen has for more than five decades never ceased to surprise us. Ever new, he has eroded an artificial boundary between poetry and song, an achievement that is not merely old but ancient - as ancient as Solomon of *Songs of Songs* or David the Psalmist; as old as the French troubadours whose ballads of courtly love and songs on metaphysical as well as vulgar and humorous themes proved an important foundation of modern poetry; and as old and mystical as St John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* or St Teresa of Avila, whose mystical transformations of love poetry are beacons of religious verse.

Cohen is the poet who wrote, in "The News You Really Hate," "You fucking whore, I thought you were really interested in music. I thought your heart was somewhat sorrowful" and later transformed and compressed the sentiment into the line "But you don't really care for music, do you?" - a great dramatic gesture and a stunning hilarious rhyme (one of hundreds in Cohen's work) to "Hallelujah," his remarkable mid-rash on epic agonies of Samson and David. The sacred and the profane, the holy and the broken, the personal and the universal come in Cohen's poetry as he struggles, baffled, toward the light. Between the "Nameless and the Name" ("Love Itself") nothing can be unified before it is broken, nothing created or granted "where death is forgotten, and the new thing grin" ("All My Life").

A native of Montreal, Cohen was born into a Jewish family rich in its tradition. But the French Catholic world of Montreal also became part of his life:

We who belong to this city have never left The Church. The Jews are in The Church as they

are in the snow. . . . The Church has used the winter to break us and now that we are broken we are going to pull down your pride. The pride of Canada and the pride of Quebec, the pride of the left and the pride of the right, the pride of muscle and the pride of heart, the insane pride of your particular vision will swell and explode because you have all dared to think of killing people. ("Montreal")

A rebel student at McGill University of modernist poets R. F. Scott, A. M. Klein, and, most particularly, Irving Layton, Cohen went on to live in Hydra, New York, Tennessee, Mumbai, and, of course, Los Angeles, among the monks of Mt Baldy's Zen Center, and in the freakish world of Singapore's Bugis Sreet. Blake, Lorca, Yeats, Wildes, Auden, Ray Charles, Hank Williams, Ramesh Balsekar, and Joshu Roshi occupy perhaps the most important seats in his pantheon of poets and seers. If his first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, reveals the juxtaposition of Judeo-Christian and Eastern thought in his world, he continues to play with them twelve books later in *The Book of Longing*. For Cohen poetry and song can go places and explore contradictions lost to theology. Surprise and reversal play nimbly and often in the poems. His razor wit and irony are no less evident than his ability to make the personal and seemingly surreal widely comprehensible:

The Lord is such a monkey
He's such a woman too
Such a place of nothing
Such a face of you

May E crash into your temple
And look out thru' your eyes
And make you fall in love
With everybody you despise
("The Drunk is Gender-Free")

His poetry beguiles us; its elegance and energy encompass so much well-wrought complexity. In the prayer "If It Be Your Will," it is hard not to be stunned by a stanza that builds from a parallel but disturbing conditional line to three joyous exhortations and then falls to an enjambed line with a terrifying vision of suffering:

If it be your will,
if there is a choice,
let the rivers fill,
let the hills rejoice.

Let your mercy spill
on all these burning hearts in hell
if it be your will
to make us well.

No less remarkable are the lines in the next stanza, "in our rags of light, / all dressed to kill." These lines, like so many in Cohen, are searingly bright with the clarity of madness. They

heal and tear asunder and heal again. And they keep us listening.

Other Books

True Poetry. Focusing on the importance of traditional and popular poetry for the poets, the presenters, and the local audience, Greenhill examines the activity of creating and using poetry in a community context. She gives numerous examples of Ontario folk verse, among them twenty-one poems about Canadian runner Terry Fox, whose battle with cancer inspired many folk poets. True Poetry pioneers the examination of folk poetry in Canada and adds to a limited body of scholarship on the topic. It will be of interest to anyone concerned with Canadian society, traditional folklore, and popular culture.

Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ Ⓜ . The "Old Favorites" column published requested and submitted versions of songs and poetry . . . 2 I employ the apparently non-inclusive term "everyman" because I was unable to come up with a reasonable alternative."