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Cohen's darkness lets the light in

As he nears 80, seminal singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen is still 'getting on with it'

JANE CORNWELL

A DISEMBODIED baritone rolled around the screening room at the May Fair Hotel, in London on Wednesday night. "I caught the darkness, it was drinking from your cup," it rumbled over stately guitar-and-organ backing, the lyrics projected over line drawings of faces and watercolours of nudes and Montreal kitchens. "I said is this contagious? You said drink it up."

A hundred journalists sighed. Some sipped their wine, blackened their notebooks. Others rested their heads on the backs of the pink leather seats, at once familiar and startling — swirled around them. With the composer sitting, tribly tilted forward, in the front row, songs with titles such as *Amen*, *Anyhow* and *Crazy to Love* You felt especially profound.

Leonard Cohen means many things to many people. There are those for whom he's a sage, a mystic, a melancholic messiah. His gloomy but beautiful monotone ballads have soundtracked lives for decades, sometimes aiding depression, sometimes curing it.

For Wednesday's host Jarvis Cocker (who bounced on in dark-rimmed glasses clutching a box of popcorn) Cohen represented "education, inspiration and infor-

mation about the world. My first band's record," he says, "was a blatant Leonard Cohen rip-off".

Old Ideas is Cohen's first album of new material since 2004's *Dear Heather*. With the Canadian singer-songwriter, poet, novelist and visual artist now pushing 78 years of age, it may well be his last. Sony Music has declared *Old Ideas* the most overtly spiritual of his records, what with its 10 songs addressing such existential quandaries as love and sexuality, loss and death, even the relationship to a transcendental being. It was no wonder we all came armed with questions. Cohen, we felt, would have all the answers.

"I love to speak with Leonard/ He's a sportsman and a shepherd/ He's a lazy bastard/ Living in a suit," run the lyrics to *Going Home*, the album's opener. Not the most flattering self-assessment, Cocker later suggests.

"It's a humorous take on a writer's conversation with himself," Cohen replies, shrugging off hidden meanings.

"Let's not examine the nature of images that seem to have their own validity," he says later. "If you look too deeply into things you get into a state of paralysis."

Given all this projection, a screening room is an appropriate

venue for one of the press junkets of the year. The Belgian journalist next to me has several Cohen CDs in his bag — including 1967's seminal *The Songs of Leonard Cohen*, with its brooding masterpieces *Suzanne* and *So Long Marianne* — just in case the great man deigns to sign them.

The rest of us, including a preponderance of middle-aged men, are content simply to be here, listening to songs of experience sung by a man who has lived what he sings. And just maybe, we'll get to touch the hem of his garment.

This turns out to be his trademark black suit, which he's topped with his trademark black tribly.

"Thank you all for coming" he says as he ambles onstage, raising his hat and twinkling through the awed silence, aware of and bemused by his impact.

"I will not be facing you while you listen to this playback, so you don't have to guard your expressions," he says.

He and Cocker sit side-by-side, with the gangly Englishman a full head above him.

Cohen rarely gives interviews. Even when he dusted himself down after declaring himself bankrupt and embarked on an epic 250-date world tour between 2008 and 2010 (including sold-out dates in Australia, where he donated \$200,000 to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal in the wake of Black Saturday), the face time he gave the media was minimal. The world got to know Cohen through his songs, two of which — *The*

Darkness and Lullaby — appear on *Old Ideas*, which was produced in part by Cohen's girlfriend (or if you like, "my very dear friend"), singer Anjani Thomas, and features artwork (drawings and watercolours) by Cohen.

As befits an artist who has wrestled with depression, drawn freely from Jewish religious and cultural imagery and spent a few years living in a Zen Buddhist monastery — oh, and who in 1984 wrote the hymn-like *Hallelujah*, which was subsequently covered by a host of singers including a 2009 *X Factor* winner ("I think it's a good song," Cohen once said, "but I think too many people sing it") — *Old Ideas* is an intimate work.

"It draws you in, makes you pay attention," Cocker asserts.

"You just work with what you got," Cohen says. "I've never had a strategy. I operate in what Yeats called 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'. I just pick it together. I don't work with a sense of great abundance. Now and then something invites you to animate it, which you try and do with grace and illumination."

The son of a Montreal clothing store merchant who died when the singer was nine, Cohen became especially interested in poetry at high school — the work of Yeats and Federico Garcia Lorca in particular — and had published two poetry books when barely out of his teens. Their work continues to resonate: "Yeats had a willingness to put his personal life on the line. He and Lorca I understood,"

says Cohen, who named his now 36-year-old daughter after the Spanish poet (last February Lorca Cohen gave birth to a baby girl fathered by singer Rufus Wainwright, who is co-parenting with his partner, "deputy dad" Jorn Weisbrodt). His son Adam Cohen, 40, is also a musician.

"I didn't get Shakespeare at all," he adds. "You had to work too hard to penetrate the lines."

His own creative process is, by his own account, a little arduous. "My tiny trouble — and can I just say tiny in comparison to all the troubles in the world — is that before I can discard anything I have

the road. I'd be looking forward to that."

In the meantime there's the inevitable five-star-album reviews to read and accolades to collect, including next month's first annual PEN New England Award for Songs of Literary Excellence — a gong Cohen is sharing with Chuck Berry.

"Roll over Beethoven, tell Tchaikovsky the news," Cohen shakes his head. "I would love to have written that line."

For all the heavy-hearted lamenting of *Old Ideas*, for all its mix of sacred and profane, of heart-break and suffering and darkness, there are chinks of light. "Just written down on paper, lines such as 'I got no future/ I know my days are few/ I thought the past would last me/ but the darkness got there too,' could be said to be depressing," Cocker ventures, his understatement prompting a ripple of laughter. "But surely there's a dark humour there, daring you to laugh at it."

"I'll buy that," Cohen replies good-naturedly. "It's just the song that allows the light to come in. It's the position of the man standing up in the face of something that is irrevocable and unyielding and singing about it."

"It's the sort of position Zorba the Greek took: that when things get really bad you raise your glass and stamp your feet and do a little jig and just get on with it."

Old Ideas will be released on February 3 through Sony Music.

Resources the key to creative excellence

Support must come from public and private sources

MATTHEW VANBESIEEN



IT is time to leave behind that arcane notion known as the cultural cringe. The arts are now a global industry, meaning Australian musicians and artists can no longer think of themselves as substandard in comparison to the rest of the world nor fail to embrace what is happening here and abroad.

Excellence today is no longer defined by location. Quality is timeless and without geographic boundaries.

When I arrived in Melbourne in February 2010, I knew I had come to Australia's most serious city for the arts, and to an orchestra with a storied past and strong tradition. What I've discovered in Melbourne and across Australia is a rich landscape of performing and visual arts with great potential.

There is ample reason to continue the drive for improvement. I love the Aussie spirit of adventure, daring and the sense of the possible, but improvement cannot happen in the arts without increased resources. It is that simple, and to think otherwise is naive.

Those in the arts who would resist philanthropic endeavours because it somehow puts at risk government funding must no longer delay. Those in government who think growing private-sector support will diminish the need for public funding should also relinquish those thoughts if they truly value the arts and wish for them to thrive. The sector needs every bit of support from these two funding sources, and people in Australia should count themselves lucky to be in the enviable position to provide for both.

As governments worldwide cut back on arts support, Australia can demonstrate leadership by increasing funding. It would be a bold and audacious statement about the importance of the arts, and would say a great deal about the country's economic capacity. This would be a huge international story for Australia, and would require a relatively small amount of money in the context of federal and state budgets.

Private donors and corporations must also begin to make serious and ongoing commitments to fund the arts. Arts companies must understand that fundraising and sponsorship are paramount to their futures, not just icing on the cake, and their boards must be prepared to step up to help their respective organisations. "Give, get or get off" is the famous US saying about not-for-profit board

membership, and this will become an ever-increasing mandate for directors in Australia.

The chairman of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Harold Mitchell, will be addressing this in his philanthropy review for government, but the importance of this focus cannot be stressed enough.

I have heard it suggested that there are not enough opportunities to retain Australia's best musicians, actors, dancers and artists. Perhaps that is true on some level; however, I have been extremely pleased with both the level of talent here, our ability to recruit it and with the esprit de corps in the orchestra. We will need to be more and more competitive to acquire and hold on to the best talent in the arts, but that is a phenomenon experienced everywhere, whether in Europe, Britain, Asia or the US.

It is important not to neglect one big item of concern: performance venues and resident companies must change the way they collaborate and co-operate, and the terms under which venues are hired. Those who run important venues must understand that collaborating and partnering with venues is not only a necessity for the future, but can also result in more exciting and superior outcomes.

Governments must ensure that performing arts companies have full access and the appropriate conditions they need to succeed in our publicly funded performance venues. Otherwise, why fund them at taxpayer expense?

The next chapter for the arts in Australia will be to explore how a modern arts organisation serves the public. We are asking this question at the MSO. We will always hold true the great tradition of performing symphonic repertoire while also expanding the notion of what a symphony orchestra can be, through innovative education and community programs, forward-looking programming ideas and a compelling vision and collaborative concept for a new home in the Southbank arts precinct.

The people of Australia have created a nurturing and fertile environment for creativity and exploration, stability and tradition in the best ensembles and companies. New and better ways to tell the story of what is happening here must be found. The next step cannot happen without advocacy and support.

Matthew VanBesien, managing director of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, has been appointed executive director of the New York Philharmonic. His final day with the MSO will be on February 23.

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