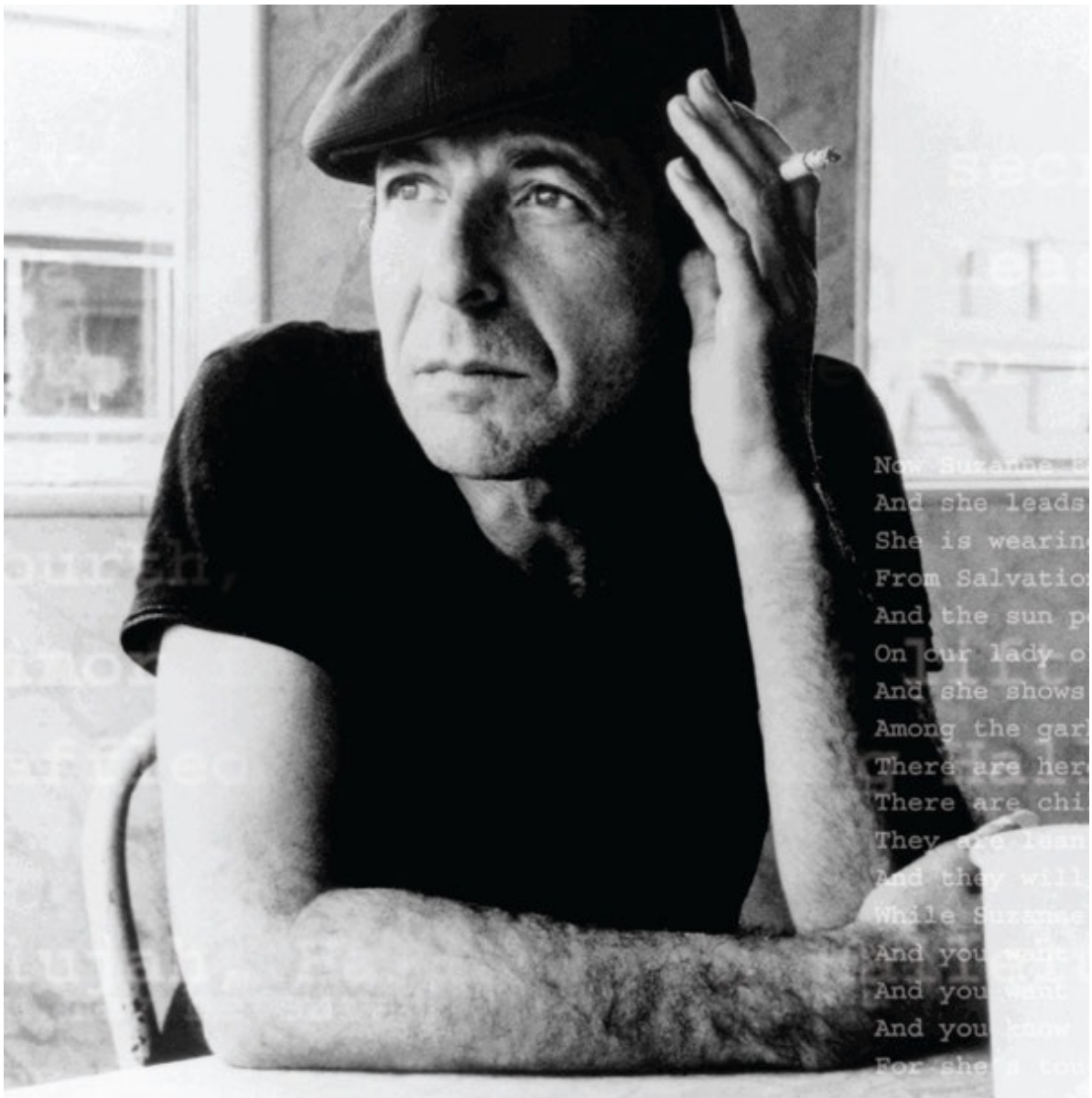
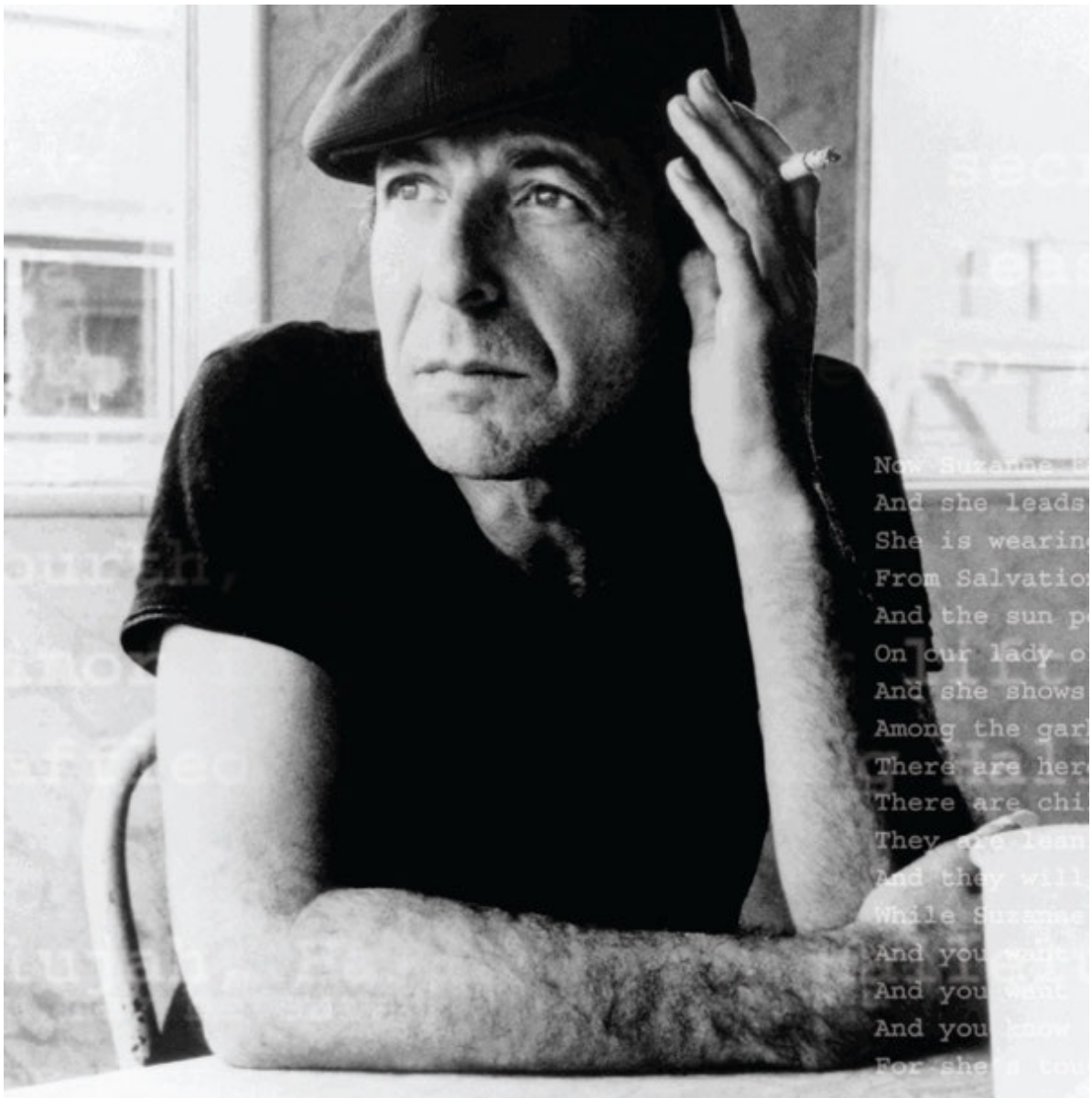


The Lyrics of LEONARD COHEN

Over 100 song lyrics by the legendary singer songwriter



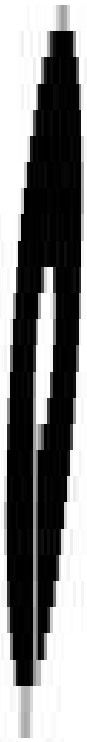
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OMNIBUS PRESS

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Introduction

Leonard Cohen claimed that as a young man he had turned from writing poetry to writing songs as a way of making money. Looking back on this career move he wryly acknowledged the foolishness of such a plan. Nevertheless, he did eventually become wealthy in the music business before being cheated out of his retirement fund by a dishonest manager. Even this catastrophe had benign consequences, obliging him to start touring again in his seventies to great acclaim and triggering a long and triumphant final chapter in a distinguished career.

All of this was prefigured some 40 years earlier in the circumstances surrounding his famous song ‘Suzanne’ which started life as a 1966 poem, ‘Suzanne Takes You Down’ and became a 1967 song to be included on his first album and released as a single. In time, it would become one of his most covered songs. He claimed the song had been stolen from him (‘Someone smarter than me got me to sign the publishing over to them’) but concluded that this was perhaps fitting since its subject, Suzanne Verdal, had been another man’s wife. In fact she was the partner of a Québécois artist Armand Vaillancourt at the time Cohen enjoyed his platonic trysts with her in ‘her place by the (St. Lawrence) River’.

Cohen was born in 1934 to a middle-class Jewish family in Montréal. His parents were Marsha (née Klonitsky) and Nathan Cohen, the proprietor of a clothing store. Leonard’s progress through local elementary and high schools was engaged but unremarkable. Musically he had been much influenced by his mother’s singing of Russian melodies around the house. He learned to play acoustic guitar, first flamenco style then classical, although the amateur band he organised while at school was a country-folk outfit called The Buckskin Boys. At McGill University he was president of the debating society but a post-graduate course at Columbia University left him unsatisfied, so he left New York

and returned to Montréal in 1957.

Cohen soon moved from Montréal to London and then to the Greek island of Hydra, writing poetry and prose in a cheap house he bought there. He had enjoyed some international success with his poems and with two novels, The Favorite Game and the sexually explicit Beautiful Losers. In Hydra his muse was Marianne Ihlen, a Norwegian he had met on the island and her influence would permeate both his literary output and his emergent song writing. Of the ten songs on his first album, Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), the one most obviously influenced by her was ‘So Long, Marianne’, a romantically philosophical farewell which he wrote when they parted. In fact he was devastated by the break-up and so perhaps ‘Hey, That’s No Way To Say Goodbye’ from the same album better captured his mood. Marianne also sparked the image of ‘Bird On The Wire’, first a poem and later a song to appear his second album, Songs From A Room (1969). She had casually likened birds perching on a newly-installed telephone wire in Hydra as resembling notes on a musical staff. Leonard Cohen, it was clear, always needed muses. ‘Sisters Of Mercy’, from the first album, was the result of Cohen offering two young women backpackers refuge in his hotel room during an Edmonton snowstorm. They slept in his bed while he spent the night in an armchair and wrote the song which he played for them when they woke next morning. Over the years there would be many inspirational lovers some of whom became collaborators.

When Cohen finally left Hydra he was determined to try to make a living as a songwriter. Back in North America the ex-Buckskin Boy first headed straight for Nashville, Tennessee, the home of country music. He has since said that he simply thought that Nashville was where the songwriters lived. In any case was soon tempted away from it by cosmopolitan New York. He became loosely attached to Andy Warhol’s Factory milieu but in the end, it was folk singer Judy Collins’ recording of ‘Suzanne’ that kick-started his career in music. Cohen started to perform at folk festivals and eventually Columbia’s John H. Hammond gave him a record deal. In 1970 Cohen began a relationship with artist Suzanne Elrod with whom he would have two children, a son Adam and a daughter Lorca.

After the first two Columbia albums had put him on the map as a seductively thoughtful folk-ish performer, the third, Songs Of Love and Hate (1971) seemed tinged with more abrasive emotions. ‘Avalanche’ was a compellingly spare but opaque song featuring Cohen’s distinctive Spanish guitar playing, but the standout track was ‘Famous Blue Raincoat’. It consisted of thoughts on a love triangle and was structured like a sorrowful letter, perhaps to a brother, a love rival or perhaps to himself. Cohen’s liner notes declared that the raincoat in question had really existed; it was a Burberry he had bought in London in 1959. ‘It hung more heroically when I took out the lining’ he wrote. ‘And achieved glory when the frayed sleeves were repaired with a little leather. Things were clear. I knew how to dress in those days’.

New Skin For The Old Ceremony, Cohen’s fourth studio album, was released in 1974 and represented a move towards a more orchestrated sound even as the songs became, variously, more confessional (‘Chelsea Hotel #2’), more liturgical (‘Who By Fire’) and more enigmatic (‘Lover, Lover, Lover’). Cohen was now 40 and his fascination with the complementary and antagonistic nature of the carnal and the spiritual was never more obvious than in this album with its sleeve illustration depicting a sexual coupling on a celestial cloud. ‘Chelsea Hotel #2’ told of a hotel bedroom encounter with Janis Joplin, and Cohen later came to regret ever making the late singer’s identity public; he simply saw it as a lapse of manners on his part. ‘Who By Fire’ is a hypnotic laundry list of different ways to die set to the Hebrew melody for the prayer Unetanneh Tokef sung at the noontime service of the High Holy Days. ‘Lover, Lover, Lover’ sets off a repetitive and maddeningly catchy lover’s plea to come back against howls of spiritual anxiety. Leonard Cohen, never one to flinch at the uncomfortable, was getting darker by the album even as his voice got deeper. At about this time his popularity started to wane, particularly among audiences who had not been born when he first arrived on the music scene, a man already in his early thirties.

Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977) was an ill-judged bid to revive his commercial fortunes by means of a collaboration with producer Phil Spector, an episode that

turned into a famous psychodrama. The result won Cohen the worst reviews of his career. In contrast Recent Songs (1979) steadied the ship even if it was never in danger of setting the album charts alight. With the sort of positive review unlikely to send record buyers flocking to the stores, The New York Times said that Cohen's latest album supplied 'an ideal musical idiom for his idiosyncrasies'.

By 1984 the prospect of a new Leonard Cohen album failed to enthuse even his own record label. Sony refused to put out Various Positions in the US on the grounds that it wasn't good enough. The company president allegedly called Cohen, saying 'Look, Leonard; we know you're great, but we don't know if you're any good'. Perhaps Cohen's sudden fondness for a Casio keyboard instead of a Spanish guitar had something to do with executive ambivalence. In any case an independent label picked up the album and it sold respectably, making the top ten in Spain, Portugal, and Scandinavia, and doing quite well in the UK. Ironically it contained what would become Leonard Cohen's most recorded song of all – 'Hallelujah'. Cohen wrote some 80 verses before paring 'Hallelujah' down to manageable size. His principal preoccupations – religion, sex and redemption – were all distilled into an elegant variation on the four-chord trick embellished with playful rhymes for the title word. It was already a truly great song well before John Cale, Jeff Buckley, Allison Crowe, Rufus Wainwright, Alexandra Burke and innumerable movies and TV shows featured it. Even Cohen himself has gently speculated that perhaps too many people sing it.

So Various Positions, that rejected seventh album, should have been the start of a revival in the fortunes and reputation of Leonard Cohen who had not recorded anything during the previous five years, working instead on other projects and visiting his children in the south of France. The album that Sony spurned became a curio despite being in the opinion of some people one of his best for years. As well as 'Hallelujah' it contained the deceptively jaunty tune 'Heart With No Companion' which begins 'Now I greet you from the other side/ of sorrow and despair/ with a love so vast and so shattered, it will reach you everywhere'. You want it darker? 'Dance Me To The End Of Love' sounds like a musical love letter to Hydra with its Greek hassapiko dance structure… except that Cohen says that its grain of inspiration was the Holocaust where executions somehow

surpassed what already seemed to be unsurpassable horror when orchestras were deployed to accompany the proceedings.

Leonard Cohen's rehabilitation was boosted when Jennifer Warnes, once one of his backup singers and now with a successful career of her own, seemed prepared to take the risk of putting out an entire album of Leonard Cohen songs. Cohen said he took her stated intention to do this simply as a gesture of friendship that would remain unrealized, but the album – officially called Famous Blue Raincoat but unofficially known as Jenny Sings Lenny – was made, released and raised his profile just before his own new album I'm Your Man came out in 1998. Now with a voice so deep it was almost sub-sonic, Leonard Cohen returned to form with an album featuring a synthpop sound recorded in Los Angeles and Montréal. His subject matter was now terrorism ('First We Take Manhattan'), cynicism ('Everybody Knows') and the excesses of lovers' promises ('I'm Your Man'). Appropriately enough, looming over a fine collection of material was 'Tower Of Song', a laconic, comic and ironic assessment of those who feel called upon to make music… including himself. 'I was born like this/ I had no choice/ I was born with the gift of a golden voice' are lines that always got a laugh from live audiences. But no one laughed at the preceding ones: 'I said to Hank Williams, how lonely does it get?/ Hank Williams hasn't answered yet/ But I hear him coughing all night long/ A hundred floors above me/ In the tower of song'.

I'm Your Man was a renaissance of the old singer poet and following it in 1992 came The Future,, another well-received album. 'Waiting For The Miracle' is its existential exploration of the idea of postponing commitment on the grounds that perfection awaits even the most dispossessed. 'Anthem' is a glorious song in praise of the imperfection of everything. It is saved from being perfectly pessimistic by one magical couplet: 'There is a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in'. 'Closing Time' would have become the ultimate show-stopper even if Cohen had not been in the habit of ending his live shows with it. Complete with a great tune and a romping, stomping lyric depicting a thrillingly hellish nightclub that sounds a lot like some sort of purgatory, 'Closing Time' is an irresistible song.

In 1996, Cohen was ordained as a Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk in the Mt. Baldy Zen Center near Los Angeles and the general feeling among his fans and occasional collaborators was that he had withdrawn for good from writing and recording. However he returned to the city in 1999 and seemed to be re-engaging with his former career. Three albums that emerged from 2001 onwards were variously experimental, none moreso than Dear Heather (2004) which baffled almost everyone. Leonard Cohen was now 70 and was obliged to restore his lost retirement fund by embarking on that punishing series of international tours. It might have seemed unreasonable to expect any more albums from him at all, let alone great ones. Then, when Cohen reached 80, along came Popular Problems (2014) featuring the darkly mischievous ‘Almost Like The Blues’, a musical essay about life’s tragedies imitating art. Still it was not the end. Two years later, in the year of his death, came You Want It Darker (2016), an album that would have stood out at any stage of Leonard Cohen’s long tenure in the tower of song. The title song, ‘You Want It Darker’, evokes a greater power that seems to demand that enlightenment should always be extinguished. Given that Cohen knew he was dying, it is hard to interpret the repeated lines ‘Hineni, hineni/ I’m ready my Lord’ as anything but a cry of acceptance. Hineni means ‘Here I am’. With typical grace and in one of the final acts of his life, he sent the dying Marianne Ihlen a loving note wishing her a good journey and saying that he would be joining her very soon.

Graham Vickers

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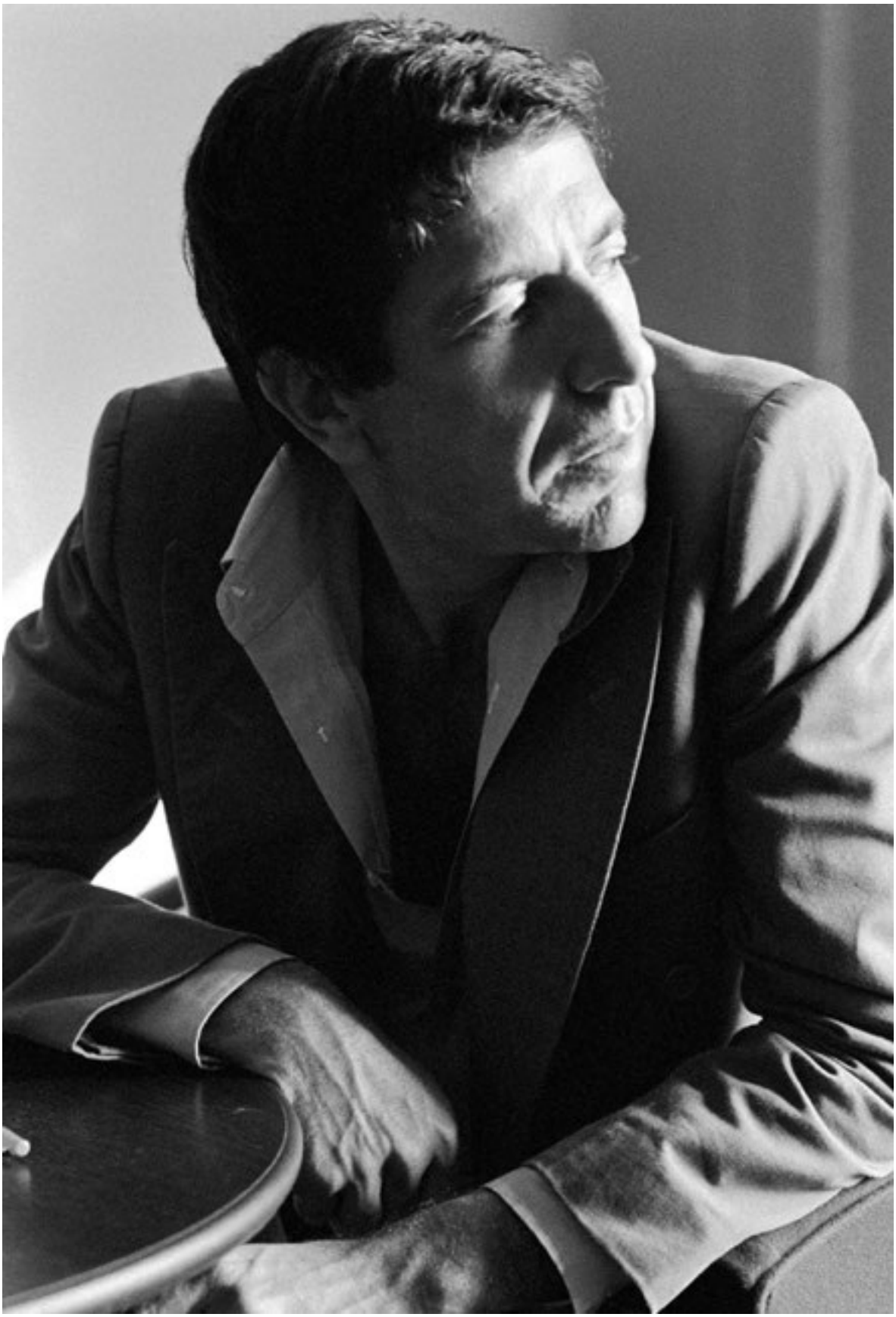
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Digital Timeline

Click below for an interactive Digital Timeline of Leonard Cohen's life and experience his poetry through music and video ...



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DIGITAL TIMELINE

Click here

Hear the Music

Click below to listen to the songs included in The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen. Additionally, click the Spotify logo at the head of each chapter to hear the song, as originally sung by Leonard Cohen and as interpereated by others.



Click here



A Bunch Of Lonesome Heroes

A bunch of lonesome and very quarrelsome heroes

were smoking out along the open road;

the night was very dark and thick between them,

each man beneath his ordinary load.

“I’d like to tell my story,”

said one of them so young and bold,

“I’d like to tell my story,

before I turn into gold.”

But no one really could hear him,

the night so dark and thick and green;

well I guess that these heroes must always live there

where you and I have only been.

Put out your cigarette, my love,

you’ve been alone too long;

and some of us are very hungry now

to hear what it is you’ve done that was so wrong.

I sing this for the crickets,

I sing this for the army,

I sing this for your children

and for all who do not need me.

“I’d like to tell my story,”

said one of them so bold,

“Oh yes, I’d like to tell my story

‘cause you know I feel I’m turning into gold.”

Included on Songs From A Room (1969), the third stanza had previously appeared as the second stanza of ‘New Poem’ in Cohen’s Selected Poems 1956-1968. There are no reports of Cohen ever singing this song in public.



A Singer Must Die

Now the courtroom is quiet, but who will confess.

Is it true you betrayed us? The answer is Yes.

Then read me the list of the crimes that are mine,

I will ask for the mercy that you love to decline.

And all the ladies go moist, and the judge has no choice,

a singer must die for the lie in his voice.

And I thank you, I thank you for doing your duty,

you keepers of truth, you guardians of beauty.

Your vision is right, my vision is wrong,

I’m sorry for smudging the air with my song.

Oh, the night it is thick, my defences are hid

in the clothes of a woman I would like to forgive,

in the rings of her silk, in the hinge of her thighs,

where I have to go begging in beauty’s disguise.

Oh goodnight, goodnight, my night after night,

my night after night, after night, after night,

after night, after night.

I am so afraid that I listen to you,

your sun glassed protectors they do that to you.

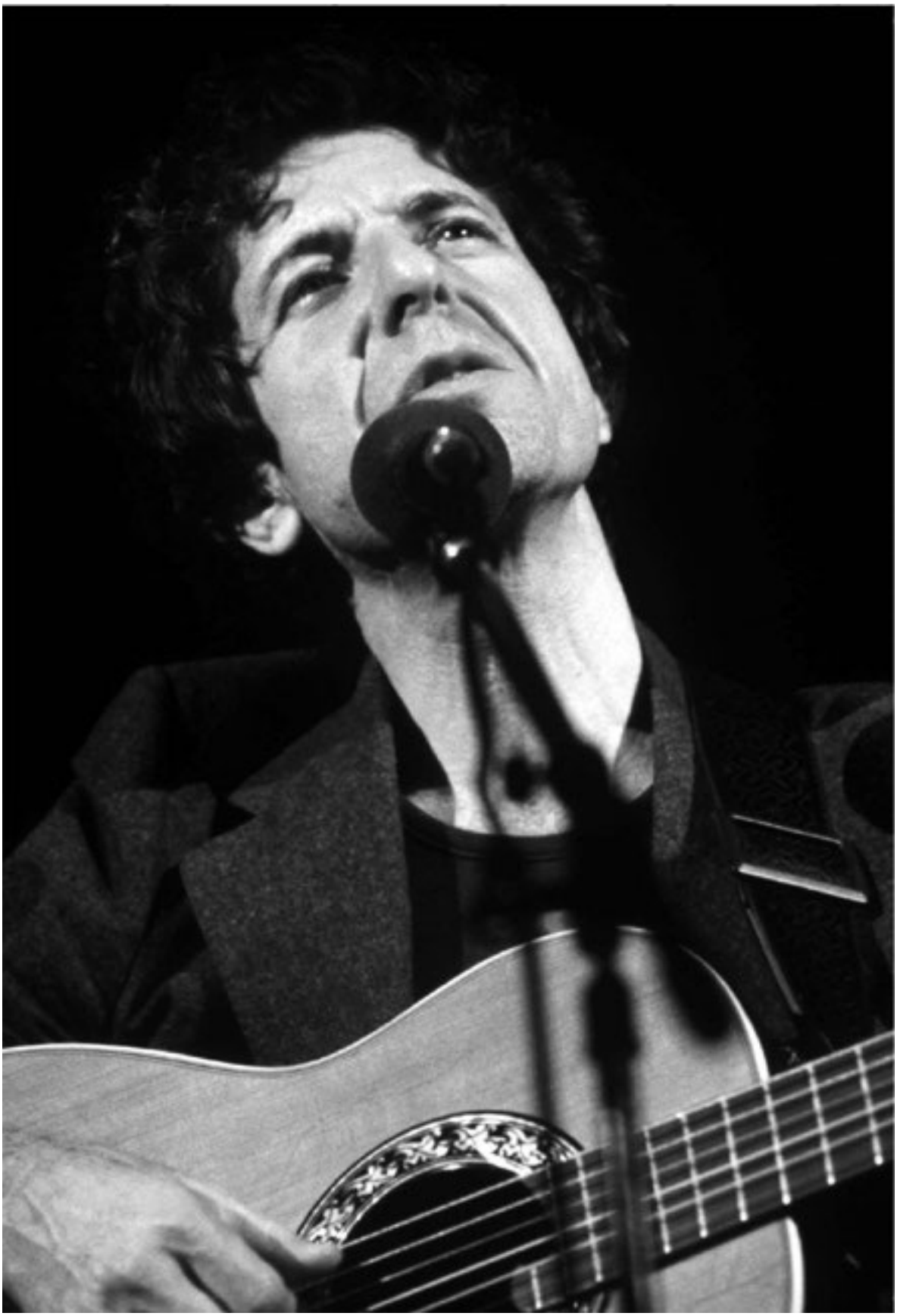
It’s their ways to detain, their ways to disgrace,

their knee in your balls and their fist in your face.

Yes and long live the state by whoever it’s made,

sir, I didn’t see nothing, I was just getting home late.

Included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974), Cohen has claimed that this song is “political in a certain way” – though perhaps not in a way that a politician or a lexicographer would recognize.





A Thousand Kisses Deep

for Sandy

The ponies run, the girls are young,

The odds are there to beat.

You win a while, and then it’s done –

Your little winning streak.

And summoned now to deal

With your invincible defeat,

You live your life as if it’s real,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

I’m turning tricks, I’m getting fixed,

I’m back on Boogie Street.

You lose your grip, and then you slip

Into the Masterpiece.

And maybe I had miles to drive,

And promises to keep:

You ditch it all to stay alive,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

And sometimes when the night is slow,

The wretched and the meek,

We gather up our hearts and go,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

Confined to sex, we pressed against

The limits of the sea:

I saw there were no oceans left

For scavengers like me.

I made it to the forward deck

I blessed our remnant fleet –

And then consented to be wrecked,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

I’m turning tricks, I’m getting fixed,

I’m back on Boogie Street.

I guess they won’t exchange the gifts

That you were meant to keep.

And quiet is the thought of you

The file on you complete,

Except what we forgot to do,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

And sometimes when the night is slow,

The wretched and the meek,

We gather up our hearts and go,

A Thousand Kisses Deep.

The ponies run, the girls are young,

The odds are there to beat…

One of Ten New Songs (2001) co-written by Sharon Robinson, this song is a good late-period example of Cohen's world-weary stance and lyrical inventiveness. The song is dedicated to Sandy Merriman (1945-1998) of whom Cohen has said: "She was a woman in her middle fifties, and she committed suicide at a certain point. We corresponded and she kind of indicated that my work kind of got her through the night. But, I guess itfailed. I just wanted to keep her memory alive. She was an American woman. She had cancer and as in a lot of pain". (For a description of Boogie Street, see the song of that name.)



Ain’t No Cure For Love

I loved you for a long, long time

I know this love is real

It don’t matter how it all went wrong

That don’t change the way I feel

And I can’t believe that time’s

Gonna heal this wound I’m speaking of

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure for love

I’m aching for you baby

I can’t pretend I’m not

I need to see you naked

In your body and your thought

I’ve got you like a habit

And I’ll never get enough

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure for love

There ain’t no cure for love

There ain’t no cure for love

All the rocket ships are climbing through the sky

The holy books are open wide

The doctors working day and night

But they’ll never ever find that cure for love

There ain’t no drink no drug

(Ah tell them, angels)

There’s nothing pure enough to be a cure for love

I see you in the subway and I see you on the bus

I see you lying down with me, I see you waking up

I see your hand, I see your hair

Your bracelets and your brush

And I call to you, I call to you

But I don’t call soft enough

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure for love

I walked into this empty church I had no place else to go

When the sweetest voice I ever heard, whispered to my soul

I don’t need to be forgiven for loving you so much

It’s written in the scriptures

It’s written there in blood

I even heard the angels declare it from above

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure,

There ain’t no cure for love

There ain’t no cure for love

There ain’t no cure for love

All the rocket ships are climbing through the sky

The holy books are open wide

The doctors working day and night

But they’ll never ever find that cure,

That cure for love

The title derives from a comment Cohen made to the singer Jennifer Warnes during a discussion of the then newly emerging AIDS phenomenon. The original version was recorded by Warnes on her album Famous Blue Raincoat (1986). A revised version, with the chorus and final two stanzas rewritten, was included on I’m Your Man (1988).



Alexandra Leaving

Suddenly the night has grown colder.

The god of love preparing to depart.

Alexandra hoisted on his shoulder,

They slip between the sentries of the heart.

Upheld by the simplicities of pleasure,

They gain the light, they formlessly entwine;

And radiant beyond your widest measure

They fall among the voices and the wine.

It’s not a trick, your senses all deceiving,

A fitful dream, the morning will exhaust –

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving.

Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

Even though she sleeps upon your satin;

Even though she wakes you with a kiss.

Do not say the moment was imagined;

Do not stoop to strategies like this.

As someone long prepared for this to happen,

Go firmly to the window. Drink it in.

Exquisite music. Alexandra laughing.

Your firm commitments tangible again.

And you who had the honor of her evening,

And by the honor had your own restored –

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving;

Alexandra leaving with her lord.

Even though she sleeps upon your satin;

Even though she wakes you with a kiss.

Do not say the moment was imagined;

Do not stoop to strategies like this.

As someone long prepared for the occasion;

In full command of every plan you wrecked –

Do not choose a coward’s explanation

that hides behind the cause and the effect.

And you who were bewildered by a meaning;

Whose code was broken, crucifix uncrossed –

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving.

Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

And you who were bewildered by a meaning;

Whose code was broken, crucifix uncrossed –

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving.

Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

Say goodbye to Alexandra leaving.

Then say goodbye to Alexandra lost.

This song, co-written by Sharon Robinson, was included on Ten New Songs (2001). It is a re-working of the poem 'The God Abandons Antony' by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy. The original poem was based on Plutarch's story about how Mark Antony, besieged in Alexandria by Octavian, hears the sound of music passing through and out of the city and realises it is the god Bacchus deserting him. Recasting the story as one about the end of an affair, Cohen provides a well-written late example of one of his regular themes – stoicism in the face of love's disappointment.



Anthem

The birds they sang

at the break of day

Start again

I heard them say

Don’t dwell on what

has passed away

or what is yet to be.

Ah the wars they will

be fought again

The holy dove

She will be caught again

bought and sold

and bought again

the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.

We asked for signs

the signs were sent:

the birth betrayed

the marriage spent

Yeah the widowhood

of every government --

signs for all to see.

I can’t run no more

with that lawless crowd

while the killers in high places

say their prayers out loud.

But they’ve summoned, they’ve summoned up

a thundercloud

and they’re going to hear from me.

Ring the bells that still can ring ...

You can add up the parts

but you won’t have the sum

You can strike up the march,

there is no drum

Every heart, every heart

to love will come

You can add up the parts

but you won’t have the sum

You can strike up the march,

there is no drum

Every heart, every heart

to love will come

but like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.

That’s how the light gets in.

That’s how the light gets in.

Regarded by Cohen as “one of the best songs I’ve written, maybe the best”, it had a long gestation. He recorded versions of it during the sessions for both Various Positions (1985) and I’m Your Man (1988) but “there was a lie somewhere in there … a disclosure that I was refusing to make … a solemnity that I hadn’t achieved”. Finally realised to his satisfaction, it was included on The Future (1992).



Avalanche

Well I stepped into an avalanche,

it covered up my soul;

when I am not this hunchback that you see,

I sleep beneath the golden hill.

You who wish to conquer pain,

you must learn, learn to serve me well.

You strike my side by accident

as you go down for your gold.

The cripple here that you clothe and feed

is neither starved nor cold;

he does not ask for your company,

not at the centre, the centre of the world.

When I am on a pedestal,

you did not raise me there.

Your laws do not compel me

to kneel grotesque and bare.

I myself am the pedestal

for this ugly hump at which you stare.

You who wish to conquer pain,

you must learn what makes me kind;

the crumbs of love that you offer me,

they’re the crumbs I’ve left behind.

Your pain is no credential here,

it’s just the shadow, shadow of my wound.

I have begun to long for you,

I who have no greed;

I have begun to ask for you,

I who have no need.

You say you’ve gone away from me,

but I can feel you when you breathe.

Do not dress in those rags for me,

I know you are not poor;

you don’t love me quite so fiercely now

when you know that you are not sure,

it is your turn, beloved,

it is your flesh that I wear.

Based on the poem ‘I Stepped Into An Avalanche’ (included in Parasites Of Heaven), this song was included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971).



Ballad Of The Absent Mare

Say a prayer for the cowboy

His mare’s run away

And he’ll walk till he finds her

His darling, his stray

but the river’s in flood

and the roads are awash

and the bridges break up

in the panic of loss.

And there’s nothing to follow

There’s nowhere to go

She’s gone like the summer

gone like the snow

And the crickets are breaking

his heart with their song

as the day caves in

and the night is all wrong

Did he dream, was it she

who went galloping past

and bent down the fern

broke open the grass

and printed the mud with

the iron and the gold

that he nailed to her feet

when he was the lord

And although she goes grazing

a minute away

he tracks her all night

he tracks her all day

Oh blind to her presence

except to compare

his injury here

with her punishment there

Then at home on a branch

in the highest tree

a songbird sings out

so suddenly

Ah the sun is warm

and the soft winds ride

on the willow trees

by the river side

Oh the world is sweet

the world is wide

and she’s there where

the light and the darkness divide

and the steam’s coming off her

she’s huge and she’s shy

and she steps on the moon

when she paws at the sky

And she comes to his hand

but she’s not really tame

She longs to be lost

he longs for the same

and she’ll bolt and she’ll plunge

through the first open pass

to roll and to feed

in the sweet mountain grass

Or she’ll make a break

for the high plateau

where there’s nothing above

and there’s nothing below

and it’s time for the burden

it’s time for the whip

Will she walk through the flame

Can he shoot from the hip

So he binds himself

to the galloping mare

and she binds herself

to the rider there

and there is no space

but there’s left and right

and there is no time

but there’s day and night

And he leans on her neck

and he whispers low

“Whither thou goest

I will go”

And they turn as one

and they head for the plain

No need for the whip

Ah, no need for the rein

Now the clasp of this union

who fastens it tight?

Who snaps it asunder

the very next night

Some say the rider

Some say the mare

Or that love’s like the smoke

beyond all repair

But my darling says

“Leonard, just let it go by

That old silhouette

on the great western sky”

So I pick out a tune

and they move right along

and they’re gone like the smoke

and they’re gone like this song

Included on Recent Songs (1979), the song is based on Cohen’s teacher Roshi’s exposition of the twelfth-century text by the Chinese master Ka-Kuan, which is variously known as ‘Ten Ox-Herding Pictures’ or ‘Ten Bulls’, the oxen representing the ten steps on the road to (Buddhist) enlightenment.



Because Of

Because of a few songs

Wherein I spoke of their mystery,

Women have been

Exceptionally kind

to my old age.

They make a secret place

In their busy lives

And they take me there.

They become naked

In their different ways

and they say,

“Look at me, Leonard

Look at me one last time.”

Then they bend over the bed

And cover me up

Like a baby that is shivering.

Sketched with deftness of a Zen painter, this slight but intriguing (and perhaps touch-in-cheek) summary of Cohen’s career and its consequences was included on Dear Heather (2004).



Bird On The Wire

Like a bird on the wire,

like a drunk in a midnight choir

I have tried in my way to be free.

Like a worm on a hook,

like a knight from some old fashioned book

I have saved all my ribbons for thee.

If I, if I have been unkind,

I hope that you can just let it go by.

If I, if I have been untrue

I hope you know it was never to you.

Like a baby, stillborn,

like a beast with his horn

I have torn everyone who reached out for me.

But I swear by this song

and by all that I have done wrong

I will make it all up to thee.

I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch,

he said to me, “You must not ask for so much.”

And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,

she cried to me, “Hey, why not ask for more?”

Oh like a bird on the wire,

like a drunk in a midnight choir

I have tried in my way to be free.

A classic Cohen song, whose themes of freedom and infidelity are core subjects of his work, it was originally included on Songs From A Room (1969). The title image derives from Cohen's time living on the Greek island ofHydra in the early Sixties. After the first telegraph wires were installed, birds began to use them as a perch. "I would stare out of the window and think how civilisation had caught up with me and I wasn't going to be able to … live this eleventh-century life I had found for myself."

A live version, included on Live Songs (1973), contains some lyrical revisions. In the first stanza, the phrase "I have saved all my ribbons for thee" is replaced by "it was the shape of our love [that] twisted me", while in the second "I hope you know it was never to you" gives way to "I thought a lover had to be some kind of liar too". In the live version included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001), the "knight from someold-fashioned book" is replaced by " a monk bending over the book"

A later live version, included on Live In Concert (1994), replaces the fourth stanza with "I don't cry, don't..., don't cry, I don't cry no more / It's all over now, it's over babe, don't cry no more / I say don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry anymore / It's over, it's finished, it's completed, it has..., it has been paid for". It is doubtful that these amendments significantly improve the song.



Boogie Street

O Crown of Light, O Darkened One,

I never thought we'd meet.

You kiss my lips, and then it's done:

I'm back on Boogie Street.

A sip of wine, a cigarette,

And then it's time to go

I tidied up the kitchenette;

I tuned the old banjo.

I'm wanted at the traffic-jam.

They’re saving me a seat.

I’m what I am, and what I am,

Is back on Boogie Street.

And O my love, I still recall

The pleasures that we knew;

The rivers and the waterfall,

Wherein I bathed with you.

Bewildered by your beauty there,

I’d kneel to dry your feet.

By such instructions you prepare

A man for Boogie Street.

O Crown of Light, O Darkened One…

So come, my friends, be not afraid.

We are so lightly here.

It is in love that we are made;

In love we disappear.

Though all the maps of blood and flesh

Are posted on the door,

There’s no one who has told us yet

What Boogie Street is for.

O Crown of Light, O Darkened One,

I never thought we'd meet.

You kiss my lips, and then it's done:

I'm back on Boogie Street.

A sip of wine, a cigarette,

And then it's time to go…

Co-written by Sharon Robinson, this song was included on Ten New Songs (2001). The real Boogie Street is Bugis Street in Singapore, by day a mainstream commercial and retail area but by night the centre of the transgender sex bazaar culture. The metaphorical Boogie Street Cohen has described as a "street of work and desire, the ordinary life and also the place we live in most of the time that is relieved by the embrace of your children, or the kiss of your beloved, or the peak experience in which you yourself are dissolved … We all hope for those heavenly moments, which we get in those embraces and those sudden perceptions of beauty and sensations of pleasure, but we're immediately returned to Boogie Street".





By The Rivers Dark

By the rivers dark

I wandered on.

I lived my life

in Babylon.

And I did forget

My holy song:

And I had no strength

In Babylon.

By the rivers dark

Where I could not see

Who was waiting there

Who was hunting me.

And he cut my lip

And he cut my heart.

So I could not drink

From the river dark.

And he covered me,

And I saw within,

My lawless heart

And my wedding ring,

I did not know

And I could not see

Who was waiting there,

Who was hunting me

By the rivers dark

I panicked on.

I belonged at last

To Babylon.

Then he struck my heart

With a deadly force,

And he said, ‘This heart:

It is not yours.’

And he gave the wind

My wedding ring:

And he circled us

With everything.

By the rivers dark,

In a wounded dawn,

I live my life

In Babylon.

Though I take my song

From a withered limb,

Both song and tree,

They sing for him.

Be the truth unsaid

And the blessing gone,

If I forget

My Babylon.

I did not know

And I could not see

Who was waiting there.

Who was hunting me.

By the rivers dark,

Where it all goes on:

By the rivers dark

In Babylon.

Included on Ten New Songs (2001) and co-written by Sharon Robinson. In ancient Jewish history, Babylon was the centre of a hostile regional superpower. During the Babylonian Captivity, the Jewish people were involuntarily transported and held there. In modern Rastafarian parlance, Babylon is the name used for the white-controlled and, as they see it, morally bankrupt culture of the western world.



Came So Far For Beauty

I came so far for beauty

I left so much behind

My patience and my family

My masterpiece unsigned

I thought I’d be rewarded

For such a lonely choice

And surely she would answer

To such a very hopeless voice

I practiced all my sainthood

I gave to one and all

But the rumours of my virtue

They moved her not at all

I changed my style to silver

I changed my clothes to black

And where I would surrender

Now I would attack

I stormed the old casino

For the money and the flesh

And I myself decided

What was rotten and what was fresh

And men to do my bidding

And broken bones to teach

The value of my pardon

The shadow of my reach

But no, I could not touch her

With such a heavy hand

Her star beyond my order

Her nakedness unmanned

I came so far for beauty

I left so much behind

My patience and my family

My masterpiece unsigned

This song, co-written by John Lissauer, was originally recorded in 1974 for the abandoned album Songs For Rebecca. Having subsequently been played in concert, it was re-recorded for Recent Songs (1979). Note Cohen's re-use of the phrase "for the money and the flesh" originally found in 'Chelsea Hotel # 2'.



Chelsea Hotel # 2

I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel,

you were talking so brave and so sweet,

giving me head on the unmade bed,

while the limousines wait in the street.

Those were the reasons and that was New York,

we were running for the money and the flesh.

And that was called love for the workers in song

probably still is for those of them left.

Ah but you got away, didn’t you babe,

you just turned your back on the crowd,

you got away, I never once heard you say,

I need you, I don’t need you,

I need you, I don’t need you

and all of that jiving around.

I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel

you were famous, your heart was a legend.

You told me again you preferred handsome men

but for me you would make an exception.

And clenching your fist for the ones like us

who are oppressed by the figures of beauty,

you fixed yourself, you said, “Well never mind,

we are ugly but we have the music.”

And then you got away, didn’t you babe...

I don’t mean to suggest that I loved you the best,

I can’t keep track of each fallen robin.

I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel,

that’s all, I don’t even think of you that often.

This song, a reworking of ‘Chelsea Hotel # 1’ with revised lyrics and a faster tempo, was included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974). Cohen has stated that the song derives from his affair with Janis Joplin (though he has since regretted this ungallant revelation), but it is perhaps better read less as autobiography than as a hymn to the freedom of simple, uncomplicated sex. Indeed, it is likely that the woman he had in mind when writing the song was less Joplin than Suzanne Elrod, from whom we can be sure Cohen then felt he was suffering a great deal of “jiving around”.



Closing Time

Ah we’re drinking and we’re dancing

and the band is really happening

and the Johnny Walker wisdom running high

And my very sweet companion

she’s the Angel of Compassion

she’s rubbing half the world against her thigh

And every drinker every dancer

lifts a happy face to thank her

the fiddler fiddles something so sublime

all the women tear their blouses off

and the men they dance on the polka-dots

and it’s partner found, it’s partner lost

and it’s hell to pay when the fiddler stops:

it’s CLOSING TIME

Yeah the women tear their blouses off

and the men they dance on the polka-dots

and it’s partner found, it’s partner lost

and it’s hell to pay when the fiddler stops:

it’s CLOSING TIME

Ah we’re lonely, we’re romantic

and the cider’s laced with acid

and the Holy Spirit’s crying, “Where’s the beef?”

And the moon is swimming naked

and the summer night is fragrant

with a mighty expectation of relief

So we struggle and we stagger

down the snakes and up the ladder

to the tower where the blessed hours chime

and I swear it happened just like this:

a sigh, a cry, a hungry kiss

the Gates of Love they budged an inch

I can’t say much has happened since

but CLOSING TIME

I swear it happened just like this:

a sigh, a cry, a hungry kiss

the Gates of Love they budged an inch

I can’t say much has happened since

CLOSING TIME

I loved you for your beauty

but that doesn’t make a fool of me:

you were in it for your beauty too

and I loved you for your body

there’s a voice that sounds like God to me

declaring, declaring, declaring that your body’s really you

And I loved you when our love was blessed

and I love you now there’s nothing left

but sorrow and a sense of overtime

and I missed you since the place got wrecked

And I just don’t care what happens next

looks like freedom but it feels like death

it’s something in between, I guess

it’s CLOSING TIME

Yeah I missed you since the place got wrecked

By the winds of change and the weeds of sex

looks like freedom but it feels like death

it’s something in between, I guess

it’s CLOSING TIME

Yeah we’re drinking and we’re dancing

but there’s nothing really happening

and the place is dead as Heaven on a Saturday night

And my very close companion

gets me fumbling gets me laughing

she’s a hundred but she’s wearing

something tight

and I lift my glass to the Awful Truth

which you can’t reveal to the Ears of Youth

except to say it isn’t worth a dime

And the whole damn place goes crazy twice

and it’s once for the devil and once for Christ

but the Boss don’t like these dizzy heights

we’re busted in the blinding lights,

busted in the blinding lights

of CLOSING TIME

Oh the women tear their blouses off

and the men they dance on the polka-dots

It’s CLOSING TIME

And it’s partner found, it’s partner lost

and it’s hell to pay when the fiddler stops

It’s CLOSING TIME

I swear it happened just like this:

a sigh, a cry, a hungry kiss

It’s CLOSING TIME

The Gates of Love they budged an inch

I can’t say much has happened since

But CLOSING TIME

I loved you when our love was blessed

I love you now there’s nothing left

But CLOSING TIME

I miss you since the place got wrecked

By the winds of change and the weeds of sex.

Cohen had already recorded a version of this song, which had taken him two years to write, when he came to “the painful decision that I hadn’t written it yet”. He started again and the result, now judged a success, was included on Recent Songs (1979). It is not a song that could have been written by a teetotaller!



Coming Back To You

Maybe I’m still hurting

I can’t turn the other cheek

But you know that I still love you

It’s just that I can’t speak

I looked for you in everyone

And they called me on that too

I lived alone but I was only

Coming back to you

Ah they’re shutting down the factory now

Just when all the bills are due

And the fields they’re under lock and key

Tho’ the rain and the sun come through

And springtime starts but then it stops

In the name of something new

And all the senses rise against this

Coming back to you

And they’re handing down my sentence now

And I know what I must do

Another mile of silence while I’m

Coming back to you

There are many in your life

And many still to be

Since you are a shining light

There’s many that you’ll see

But I have to deal with envy

When you choose the precious few

Who’ve left their pride on the other side of

Coming back to you

Even in your arms I know

I’ll never get it right

Even when you bend to give me

Comfort in the night

I’ve got to have your word on this

Or none of it is true

And all I’ve said was just instead of

Coming back to you

Included on Various Positions (1984), this song raises the question “coming back to whom?’. It could be an ex-lover, but there is little sense of an individual personality in the lyrics; it could be Love itself. Another plausible reading is that the song’s subject is the art of songwriting – a subject Cohen was thinking a great deal about at the time he wrote this and has dealt with elsewhere, notably on ‘Tower Of Song’ – and that it is his Muse to whom he is “coming back”.



Dance Me To The End Of Love

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin

Dance me through the panic ‘til I’m gathered safely in

Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

Oh let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone

Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon

Show me slowly what I only know the limits of

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on

Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long

We’re both of us beneath our love, we’re both of us above

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the children who are asking to be born

Dance me through the curtains that our kisses have outworn

Raise a tent of shelter now, though every thread is torn

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin

Dance me through the panic till I’m gathered safely in

Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the end of love

A tender, sensual song of great poetic felicity, it was included on Various Positions (1984) and also, in a live version, on Live In Concert (1994). The importance of this song in Cohen’s catalogue can be judged from it having been his usual concert opener ever since he recorded it.



Dear Heather

Dear Heather

Please walk by me again

With a drink in your hand

And your legs all white

From the winter

The shortest lyric in Cohen's songbook, it sketches its subject with all the deftness of a Zen painter's single stroke. It is the title track on Dear Heather (2004).



Death Of A Ladies' Man

Ah the man she wanted all her life was hanging by a thread

"I never even knew how much I wanted you," she said.

His muscles they were numbered and his style was obsolete.

"O baby, I have come too late." She knelt beside his feet.

"I'll never see a face like yours in years of men to come

I'll never see such arms again in wrestling or in love."

And all his virtues burning in the smoky Holocaust

She took unto herself most everything her lover lost

Now the master of this landscape he was standing at the view

with a sparrow of St. Francis that he was preaching to

She beckoned to the sentry of his high religious mood

She said, “I’ll make a place between my legs,

I’ll show you solitude.”

He offered her an orgy in a many mirrored room

He promised her protection for the issue of her womb

She moved her body hard against a sharpened metal spoon

She stopped the bloody rituals of passage to the moon

She took his much admired oriental frame of mind

and the heart-of-darkness alibi his money hides behind

She took his blonde madonna and his monastery wine --

“This mental space is occupied and everything is mine.”

He tried to make a final stand beside the railway track

She said, “The art of longing’s over and it’s never coming back.”

She took his tavern parliament, his cap, his cocky dance,

she mocked his female fashions and his working-class moustache.

The last time that I saw him he was trying hard to get

a woman’s education but he’s not a woman yet

And the last time that I saw her she was living with some boy

who gives her soul an empty room and gives her body joy.

So the great affair is over but whoever would have guessed

it would leave us all so vacant and so deeply unimpressed

It’s like our visit to the moon or to that other star

I guess you go for nothing if you really want to go that far.

It’s like our visit to the moon or to that other star

I guess you go for nothing if you really want to go that far.

It’s like our visit to the moon or to that other star

I guess you go for nothing if you really want to go that far.

A bleak and somewhat ungallant song, it was recorded in chaotic circumstances and included on the album of the same name (1977).





Democracy

It’s coming through a hole in the air,

from those nights in Tiananmen Square.

It’s coming from the feel

that this ain’t exactly real,

or it’s real, but it ain’t exactly there.

From the wars against disorder,

from the sirens night and day,

from the fires of the homeless,

from the ashes of the gay:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

It’s coming through a crack in the wall;

on a visionary flood of alcohol;

from the staggering account

of the Sermon on the Mount

which I don’t pretend to understand at all.

It’s coming from the silence

on the dock of the bay,

from the brave, the bold, the battered

heart of Chevrolet:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

It’s coming from the sorrow in the street,

the holy places where the races meet;

from the homicidal bitchin’

that goes down in every kitchen

to determine who will serve and who will eat.

From the wells of disappointment

where the women kneel to pray

for the grace of God in the desert here

and the desert far away:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

Sail on, sail on

O mighty Ship of State!

To the Shores of Need

Past the Reefs of Greed

Through the Squalls of Hate

Sail on, sail on, sail on, sail on.

It’s coming to America first,

the cradle of the best and of the worst.

It’s here they got the range

and the machinery for change

and it’s here they got the spiritual thirst.

It’s here the family’s broken

and it’s here the lonely say

that the heart has got to open

in a fundamental way:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

It’s coming from the women and the men.

O baby, we’ll be making love again.

We’ll be going down so deep

the river’s going to weep,

and the mountain’s going to shout Amen!

It’s coming like the tidal flood

beneath the lunar sway,

imperial, mysterious,

in amorous array:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

Sail on, sail on ...

I’m sentimental, if you know what I mean

I love the country but I can’t stand the scene.

And I’m neither left or right

I’m just staying home tonight,

getting lost in that hopeless little screen.

But I’m stubborn as those garbage bags

that Time cannot decay,

I’m junk but I’m still holding up

this little wild bouquet:

Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

Included on The Future (1992), the recorded song is a selection from eighty-odd stanzas that Cohen had written. It dates from around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the pro-democracy protests, brutally suppressed, in Tiananmen Square. As a foreign national who has long lived and worked in the USA, Cohen reflects in this song the ambiguities of the “candid friend” – admiring and critical, hopeful and unillusioned.



Diamonds In The Mine

The woman in blue, she’s asking for revenge,

the man in white -- that’s you -- says he has no friends.

The river is swollen up with rusty cans

and the trees are burning in your promised land.

And there are no letters in the mailbox,

and there are no grapes upon the vine,

and there are no chocolates in the boxes anymore,

and there are no diamonds in the mine.

Well, you tell me that your lover has a broken limb,

you say you’re kind of restless now and it’s on account of him.

Well, I saw the man in question, it was just the other night,

he was eating up a lady where the lions and Christians fight.

And there are no letters in the mailbox

and there are no grapes upon the vine,

and there are no chocolates in the boxes anymore,

and there are no diamonds in the mine.

Ah, there is no comfort in the covens of the witch,

some very clever doctor went and sterilized the bitch,

and the only man of energy, yes the revolution’s pride,

he trained a hundred women just to kill an unborn child.

And there are no letters in the mailbox,

oh no, there are no, no grapes upon your vine,

and there are, there are no chocolates in your boxes anymore,

and there are no diamonds in your mine.

And there are no letters in the mailbox,

and there are no grapes upon the vine,

and there are no chocolates in your boxes anymore,

and there are no diamonds in your mine.

Included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971), this song marks an evolutionary stage in Cohen's songwriting. There is a greater sense of humour here than is expressed in his earlier songs, an effect perhaps easier to achieve because the writer/singer is not a protagonist in the song.

Do I Have To Dance All Night

I’m Forty-One, the moon is full,

you make love very well.

You touch me like I touch myself,

I like you Mademoiselle.

You’re so fresh and you’re so new,

I do enjoy you, Miss.

There’s nothing I would rather do

than move around just like this

But do I have to dance all night?

But do I have to dance all night?

Ooh tell me, Bird of Paradise,

do I have to dance all night?

You never really have to tell me what

you really think of me - alright.

Let’s say I’m doing fine,

but do I have to dance all night?

Do I have to dance all night? ...

I learned this step a while ago.

I had to practice it while everybody slept.

I waited half my life for you, you know,

I didn’t even think that you’d accept.

And here you are before me in the flesh

saying “Yes, yes, yes!”

But do I have to dance all night? ...

I learned this step a while ago ...

But do I have to dance all night? ...

Cohen recorded this song live in Paris in 1976. It was released as a single sold only in Europe and has not been included on any of his albums.



Don’t Go Home With Your Hard On

I was born in a beauty salon

My father was a dresser of hair

My mother was a girl you could call on

When you called she was always there

When you called she was always there

When you called she was always there

When you called she was always there

When you called she was always there

Ah but don’t go home with your hard-on

It will only drive you insane

You can’t shake it (or break it) with your Motown

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

I’ve looked behind all of the faces

That smile you down to you knees

And the lips that say, Come on, taste us

And when you try to they make you say Please

When you try to they make you say Please

When you try to they make you say Please

When you try to they make you say Please

When you try to they make you say Please

Ah but don’t go home with your hard-on ...

Here come’s your bride with her veil on

Approach her, you wretch, if you dare

Approach her, you ape with your tail on

Once you have her she’ll always be there

Once you have her she’ll always be there

Once you have her she’ll always be there

Once you have her she’ll always be there

Once you have her she’ll always be there

Ah but don’t go home with your hard-on ...

So I work in that same beauty salon

I’m chained to the old masquerade

The lipstick, the shadow, the silicone

Yes I follow my father’s trade

Ah but don’t go home with your hard-on

It will only drive you insane

You can’t shake it (or break it) with your Motown

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

You can’t melt it down in the rain

This catalogue of wise and useful advice was included on Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977).



Dress Rehearsal Rag

Four o’clock in the afternoon

and I didn’t feel like very much.

I said to myself, “Where are you golden boy,

where is your famous golden touch?”

I thought you knew where

all of the elephants lie down,

I thought you were the crown prince

of all the wheels in Ivory Town.

Just take a look at your body now,

there’s nothing much to save

and a bitter voice in the mirror cries,

“Hey, Prince, you need a shave.”

Now if you can manage to get

your trembling fingers to behave,

why don’t you try unwrapping

a stainless steel razor blade?

That’s right, it’s come to this,

yes it’s come to this,

and wasn’t it a long way down,

wasn’t it a strange way down?

There’s no hot water

and the cold is running thin.

Well, what do you expect from

the kind of places you’ve been living in?

Don’t drink from that cup,

it’s all caked and cracked along the rim.

That’s not the electric light, my friend,

that is your vision growing dim.

Cover up your face with soap, there,

now you’re Santa Claus.

And you’ve got a gift for anyone

who will give you his applause.

I thought you were a racing man,

ah, but you couldn’t take the pace.

That’s a funeral in the mirror

and it’s stopping at your face.

That’s right, it’s come to this,

yes it’s come to this,

and wasn’t it a long way down,

ah wasn’t it a strange way down?

Once there was a path

and a girl with chestnut hair,

and you passed the summers

picking all of the berries that grew there;

there were times she was a woman,

oh, there were times she was just a child,

and you held her in the shadows

where the raspberries grow wild.

And you climbed the twilight mountains

and you sang about the view,

and everywhere that you wandered

love seemed to go along with you.

That’s a hard one to remember,

yes it makes you clench your fist.

And then the veins stand out like highways,

all along your wrist.

And yes it’s come to this,

it’s come to this,

and wasn’t it a long way down,

wasn’t it a strange way down?

You can still find a job,

go out and talk to a friend.

On the back of every magazine

there are those coupons you can send.

Why don’t you join the Rosicrucians,

they can give you back your hope,

you can find your love with diagrams

on a plain brown envelope.

But you’ve used up all your coupons

except the one that seems

to be written on your wrist

along with several thousand dreams.

Now Santa Claus comes forward,

that’s a razor in his mit;

and he puts on his dark glasses

and he shows you where to hit;

and then the cameras pan,

the stand in stunt man,

dress rehearsal rag,

it’s just the dress rehearsal rag,

you know this dress rehearsal rag,

it’s just a dress rehearsal rag.

One of Cohen’s earliest songs, it was covered by Judy Collins in 1966 and

performed by Cohen himself on BBC TV in 1968. On that occasion he introduced the song as one "that I have banned for myself – I sing it only on extremely joyous occasions when I know the landscape can support the despair that I'm about to project into it". He recorded the song for Songs Of Love And Hate (1971) but is not known to have sung it since.



Everybody Knows

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded

Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed

Everybody knows that the war is over

Everybody knows the good guys lost

Everybody knows the fight was fixed

The poor stay poor, the rich get rich

That’s how it goes

Everybody knows

Everybody knows that the boat is leaking

Everybody knows that the captain lied

Everybody got this broken feeling

Like their father or their dog just died

Everybody talking to their pockets

Everybody wants a box of chocolates

And a long stem rose

Everybody knows

Everybody knows that you love me baby

Everybody knows that you really do

Everybody knows that you’ve been faithful

Ah give or take a night or two

Everybody knows you've been discreet

But there were so many people you just had to meet

Without your clothes

And everybody knows

Everybody knows, everybody knows

That's how it goes

Everybody knows

Everybody knows, everybody knows

That's how it goes

Everybody knows

And everybody knows that it’s now or never

Everybody knows that it’s me or you

And everybody knows that you live forever

Ah when you’ve done a line or two

Everybody knows the deal is rotten

Old Black Joe’s still pickin’ cotton

For your ribbons and bows

And everybody knows

And everybody knows that the Plague is coming

Everybody knows that it’s moving fast

Everybody knows that the naked man and woman

Are just a shining artifact of the past

Everybody knows the scene is dead

But there’s gonna be a meter on your bed

That will disclose

What everybody knows

And everybody knows that you’re in trouble

Everybody knows what you’ve been through

From the bloody cross on top of Calvary

To the beach of Malibu

Everybody knows it’s coming apart

Take one last look at this Sacred Heart

Before it blows

And everybody knows

Everybody knows, everybody knows

That’s how it goes

Everybody knows

Oh everybody knows, everybody knows

That’s how it goes

Everybody knows

Everybody knows

Co-written by Sharon Robinson and included on I’m Your Man (1988), this

song's bitter-sweet cynicism is mitigated by its suggestion that we, his audience, share the knowledge the singer imparts; it is not just a dispatch from a lone reporter at the far frontier of despair.



Famous Blue Raincoat

It’s four in the morning, the end of December

I’m writing you now just to see if you’re better

New York is cold, but I like where I’m living

There’s music on Clinton Street all through the evening.

I hear that you’re building your little house deep in the desert

You’re living for nothing now, I hope you’re keeping some

kind of record.

Yes, and Jane came by with a lock of your hair

She said that you gave it to her

That night that you planned to go clear

Did you ever go clear?

Ah, the last time we saw you you looked so much older

Your famous blue raincoat was torn at the shoulder

You'd been to the station to meet every train

And you came home without Lili Marlene

And you treated my woman to a flake of your life

And when she came back she was nobody's wife.

Well I see you there with the rose in your teeth

One more thin gypsy thief

Well I see Jane's awake --

She sends her regards.

And what can I tell you my brother, my killer

What can I possibly say?

I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you

I’m glad you stood in my way.

If you ever come by here, for Jane or for me

Your enemy is sleeping, and his woman is free.

Yes, and thanks, for the trouble you took from her eyes

I thought it was there for good so I never tried.

And Jane came by with a lock of your hair

She said that you gave it to her

That night that you planned to go clear --

Sincerely, L. Cohen

On of Cohen's best-known songs, and one of his most technically accomplished lyrics, it was included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971). Cohen's friends from the time all report his attachment to a much-repaired Burberry coat, originally bought in London in 1959. The phrase "to go clear" is a term of art in Scientology, a movement with which Cohen was briefly involved in 1968. The clues suggest that the letter is written not only by but to "L.Cohen", that he is writing a past self – the "brother" and "killer" of a still living only son. Clinton Street is a street in the Brooklyn Heights area of New York City. 'Lili Marlene' was a song popular on both sides during World War II.



Field Commander Cohen

Field Commander Cohen, he was our most

important spy.

Wounded in the line of duty,

parachuting acid into diplomatic cocktail parties,

urging Fidel Castro to abandon fields and castles.

Leave it all and like a man,

come back to nothing special,

such as waiting rooms and ticket lines,

silver bullet suicides,

and messianic ocean tides,

and racial roller-coaster rides

and other forms of boredom advertised as poetry.

I know you need your sleep now,

I know your life’s been hard.

But many men are falling,

where you promised to stand guard.

I never asked but I heard you cast your lot along with

the poor.

But then I overheard your prayer,

that you be this and nothing more

than just some grateful faithful woman’s favourite

singing millionaire,

the patron Saint of envy and the grocer of despair,

working for the Yankee Dollar.

I know you need your sleep now ...

Ah, lover come and lie with me, if my lover is who you are,

and be your sweetest self awhile until I ask for more, my child.

Then let the other selves be rung, yeah, let them manifest

and come

till every taste is on the tongue,

till love is pierced and love is hung,

and every kind of freedom done, then oh,

oh my love, oh my love, oh my love,

oh my love, oh my love, oh my love.

Cohen visited Israel in 1973, as the storms clouds gathered that would eventually precipitate the Yom Kippur War. After his visit, he flew to Ethiopia where, ensconced in the Imperial Hotel in Asmara, he worked on several songs – among them this one, which was included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974). A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



Fingerprints

Touched you once too often

Now I don’t know who I am

My fingerprints were missing

When I wiped away the jam

Yes I called my fingerprints all night

But they don’t seem to care

The last time that I saw them

They were leafing through your hair

Fingerprints, fingerprints

Where are you now my fingerprints?

Yeah I thought I’d leave this morning

So I emptied out your drawer

A hundred thousand fingerprints

They floated to the floor

You know you hardly stopped to pick them up

You don’t care what you lose

Ah you don’t even seem to know

Whose fingerprints are whose

Fingerprints, fingerprints

Where are you now my fingerprints?

And now you want to marry me

You want to take me down the aisle

You want to throw confetti fingerprints

You know that’s not my style

O sure I’d like to marry you

But I can’t face the dawn

With any girl who knew me

When my fingerprints were on

Fingerprints, fingerprints

Where are you now my fingerprints?

Fingerprints, oh fingerprints

Where are you now my fingerprints?

Based on an earlier poem ‘Give Me Back My Fingerprints’ from Parasites Of Heaven, this song was included on Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977). It ends with one of the more unusual excuses a man has given a woman for not marrying her.



First We Take Manhattan

They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom

For trying to change the system from within

I’m coming now, I’m coming to reward them

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

I’m guided by a signal in the heavens

I’m guided by this birthmark on my skin

I’m guided by the beauty of our weapons

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

I’d really like to live beside you, baby

I love your body and your spirit and your clothes

But you see that line there moving through the station?

I told you, I told you, told you, I was one of those

Ah you loved me as a loser, but now you're worried that

I just might win

You know the way to stop me, but you don't have the discipline

How many nights I prayed for this, to let my work begin

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

I don't like your fashion business mister

And I don't like these drugs that keep you thin

I don't like what happened to my sister

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

I’d really like to live beside you, baby ...

And I thank you for those items that you sent me

The monkey and the plywood violin

I practiced every night, now I’m ready

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

I am guided …

Ah remember me, I used to live for music

Remember me, I brought your groceries in

Well it’s Father’s Day and everybody’s wounded

First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin

The opening song on I'm Your Man (1988), the album that marked the beginning of Cohen's re-emergence as a popular and critically respected artist. Coinciding with a change in his music-writing technique (using a synthesizer instead of a guitar to compose with) and a noticeable lowering of his vocal register (which he attributed to "50,000 cigarettes and a lot of booze"), what he has described as "a demented manifesto" of "enlightened bitterness" presents a much more worldly-wise, cynical and at times angry point of view than the more melancholy, spiritual or philosophical songs he had previously produced. The particular significance of Manhattan and Berlin to Cohen is that they are, respectively, the nerve-centre of the music industry and the city he has found it hardest to play in. The song also played a bit-part in the cultural history of Athens– hip young Greek dudes of the day would test the mettle of their contemporaries by greeting them with "first we take Manhattan"; only the response "then we take Berlin" demonstrated the required level of coolness.



God Is Alive, Magic Is Afoot

God is alive, magic is afoot

God is alive, magic is afoot

God is alive, magic is afoot

God is afoot, magic is alive

Alive is afoot, magic never died

God never sickened

Many poor men lied

Many sick men lied

Magic never weakened

Magic never hid

Magic always ruled

God is afoot, God never died

God was ruler

Though his funeral lengthened

Though his mourners thickened

Magic never fled

Though his shrouds were hoisted

The naked God did live

Though his words were twisted

The naked magic thrived

Though his death was published

Round and round the world

The heart did not believe

Many hurt men wondered

Many struck men bled

Magic never faltered

Magic always lead

Many stones were rolled

But God would not lie down

Many wild men lied

Many fat men listened

Though they offered stones

Magic still was fed

Though they locked their coffers

God was always served

Magic is afoot, God is alive

Alive is afoot

Alive is in command

Many weak men hungered

Many strong men thrived

Though they boast of solitude

God was at their side

Nor the dreamer in his cell

Nor the captain on the hill

Magic is alive

Though his death was pardoned

Round and round the world

The heart would not believe

Though laws were carved in marble

They could not shelter men

Though altars built in parliaments

They could not order men

Police arrested magic and magic went with them

Mmmmm.... for magic loves the hungry

But magic would not tarry

It moves from arm to arm

It would not stay with them

Magic is afoot

It cannot come to harm

It rests in an empty palm

It spawns in an empty mind

But magic is no instrument

Magic is the end

Many men drove magic

But magic stayed behind

Many strong men lied

They only passed through magic

And out the other side

Many weak men lied

They came to God in secret

And though they left Him nourished

They would not tell who healed

Though mountains danced before them

They said that God was dead

Though his shrouds were hoisted

The naked God did live

This I mean to whisper to my mind

This I mean to laugh within my mind

This I mean my mind to serve

Til’ service is but magic

Moving through the world

And mind itself is magic

Coursing through the flesh

And flesh itself is magic

Dancing on a clock

And time itself

The magic length of God

God is alive, magic is afoot . . .

Cohen himself has never recorded this song. It has been recorded twice by Buffy Sainte-Marie – on Illuminations (1970) and Up Where We Belong (1996).



Hallelujah

1984 version

Now I've heard there was a secret chord

That David played, and it pleased the Lord

But you don't really care for music, do you?

It goes like this

The fourth, the fifth

The minor fall, the major lift

The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Your faith was strong but you needed proof

You saw her bathing on the roof

Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you

She tied you

To a kitchen chair

She broke your throne, and she cut your hair

And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

You say I took the name in vain

I don’t even know the name

But if I did, well really, what’s it to you?

There’s a blaze of light

In every word

It doesn’t matter which you heard

The holy or the broken Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

I did my best, it wasn’t much

I couldn’t feel, so I tried to touch

I’ve told the truth, I didn’t come to fool you

And even though

It all went wrong

I’ll stand before the Lord of Song

With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah …

1988 version

Baby, I’ve been here before.

I know this room, I’ve walked this floor.

I used to live alone before I knew you.

Yeah I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch,

But listen, love is not some kind of victory march,

No it’s a cold and it’s a very broken Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

There was a time you let me know

What’s really going on below,

Ah but now you never show it to me, do you?

Yeah but I remember, yeah when I moved in you,

And the holy dove, she was moving too,

Yes every single breath that we drew was Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

Maybe there’s a God above,

As for me, all I’ve ever seemed to learn from love

Is how to shoot at someone who outdrew you.

Yeah but it’s not a complaint that you hear tonight,

It’s not the laughter of someone who claims to have seen the light

No it’s a cold and it’s a very lonely Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah

I did my best, it wasn’t much.

I couldn’t feel, so I learned to touch.

I’ve told the truth, I didn’t come all this way to fool you.

Yeah even tough it all went wrong

I’ll stand right here before the Lord of Song

With nothing on my lips but Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah …

Originally included on Various Positions (1984), a substantially different version (dating from 1988) was included on Live In Concert (1994). One of Cohen's finest songs, it has been extensively covered by other artists, with notable versions by John Cale, Jeff Buckley (a posthumous American # 1), Rufus Wainwright and Alexandra Burke (who had an unlikely UK number one with it after winning The X Factor talent show).



Heart With No Companion

I greet you from the other side

Of sorrow and despair

With a love so vast and shattered

It will reach you everywhere

And I sing this for the captain

Whose ship has not been built

For the mother in confusion

Her cradle still unfilled

For the heart with no companion

For the soul without a king

For the prima ballerina

Who cannot dance to anything

Through the days of shame that are coming

Through the nights of wild distress

Tho’ your promise count for nothing

You must keep it nonetheless

You must keep it for the captain

Whose ship has not been built

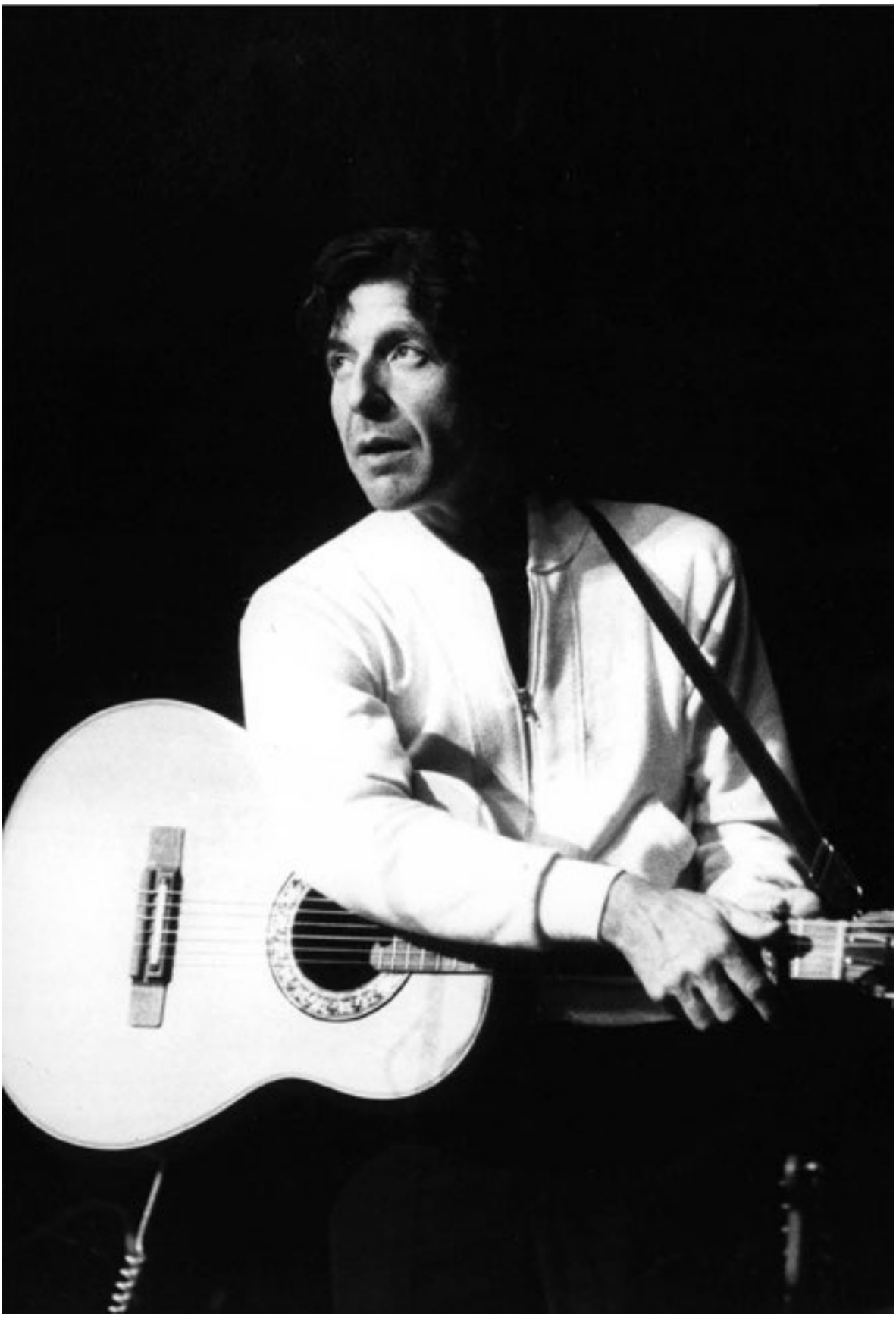
For the mother in confusion

Her cradle still unfilled

For the heart with no companion ...

I greet you from the other side ...

Included on Various Positions (1984), and in a live 1988 version on Live In Concert (1994), this song expresses Cohen's Buddhism and in particular the compassion which is a major element of that faith. As often with his most spiritual songs, Cohen uses no explicitly religious language in it.





Here It Is

Here is your crown

And your seal and rings;

And here is your love

For all things.

Here is your cart,

And your cardboard and piss;

And here is your love

For all of this.

May everyone live,

And may everyone die.

Hello, my love,

And my love, Goodbye.

Here is your wine,

And your drunken fall;

And here is your love.

Your love for it all.

Here is your sickness.

Your bed and your pan;

And here is your love

For the woman, the man.

May everyone live,

And may everyone die.

Hello, my love,

And my love, Goodbye.

And here is the night,

The night has begun;

And here is your death

In the heart of your son.

And here is the dawn,

(Until death do us part);

And here is your death,

In your daughter’s heart.

May everyone live,

And may everyone die.

Hello, my love,

And my love, Goodbye.

And here you are hurried,

And here you are gone;

And here is the love,

That it’s all built upon.

Here is your cross,

Your nails and your hill;

And here is your love,

That lists where it will.

May everyone live,

And may everyone die.

Hello, my love,

And my love, Goodbye.

Included on Ten New Songs (2001), this song was co-written by Sharon Robinson. The phrase "the love / that it's all built upon" eloquently expresses a perennial Cohen them, and would be a suitable description of his songwriting.



Hey, That’s No Way To Say Goodbye

I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,

your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,

yes, many loved before us, I know that we are not new,

in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,

but now it’s come to distances and both of us must try,

your eyes are soft with sorrow,

Hey, that’s no way to say goodbye.

I’m not looking for another as I wander in my time,

walk me to the corner, our steps will always rhyme

you know my love goes with you as your love stays with me,

it’s just the way it changes, like the shoreline and the sea,

but let’s not talk of love or chains and things we can’t untie,

your eyes are soft with sorrow,

Hey, that’s no way to say goodbye.

I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,

your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,

yes many loved before us, I know that we are not new,

in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,

but let’s not talk of love or chains and things we can’t untie,

your eyes are soft with sorrow,

Hey, that’s no way to say goodbye.

One of the finest and most famous songs from Cohen’s early period, it was included on his debut album Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967) and, in a live version, on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



Humbled In Love

Do you remember all of those pledges

That we pledged in the passionate night

Ah they’re soiled now, they’re torn at the edges

Like moths on a still yellow light

No penance serves to renew them

No massive transfusions of trust

Why not even revenge can undo them

So twisted these vows and so crushed

And you say you’ve been humbled in love

Cut down in your love

Forced to kneel in the mud next to me

Ah but why so bitterly turn from the one

Who kneels there as deeply as thee

Children have taken these pledges

They have ferried them out of the past

Oh beyond all the graves and the hedges

Where love must go hiding at last

And here where there is no description

Oh here in the moment at hand

No sinner need rise up forgiven

No victim need limp to the stand

And you say you’ve been humbled in love...

And look dear heart, look at the virgin

Look how she welcomes him into her gown

Yes, and mark how the stranger’s cold armour

Dissolves like a star falling down

Why trade this vision for desire

When you may have them both

You will never see a man this naked

I will never hold a woman this close

And you say you’ve been humbled in love...

Included on Recent Songs (1979), this deals with a familiar early period Cohen theme – the failure of a relationship – but with a less astringent, more adult attitude than had tended to muster previously.



Hunter’s Lullaby

Your father’s gone a-hunting

He’s deep in the forest so wild

And he cannot take his wife with him

He cannot take his child

Your father’s gone a-hunting

In the quicksand and the clay

And a woman cannot follow him

Although she knows the way

Your father’s gone a-hunting

Through the silver and the glass

Where only greed can enter

But spirit, spirit cannot pass

Your father’s gone a-hunting

For the beast we’ll never cannot bind

And he leaves a baby sleeping

And his blessings all behind

Your father’s gone a-hunting

And he’s lost his lucky charm

And he’s lost the guardian heart

That keeps the hunter from the harm

Your father’s gone a-hunting

He asked me to say goodbye

And he warned me not to stop him

I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t even try

This song, included on Various Positions (1984), seems at first a simple re-working of an old folk song. But it is much more complex than that. For what has the hunter gone “a-hunting”? Who, and of which gender, is the narrator? The context suggests she is the wife-and-mother of the hunter and his child, and that he has not gone hunting for food or fur or the necessaries of life. One plausible reading of the song is that it is the carnal world which the hunter is seeking, the mother and child left behind representing the spiritual world abandoned in that quest. Such an interpretation would certainly be consistent with Cohen’s known themes and interests at the time wrote the song.



I Can’t Forget

I stumbled out of bed

I got ready for the struggle

I smoked a cigarette

And I tightened up my gut

I said this can’t be me

Must be my double

And I can’t forget, I can’t forget

I can’t forget but I don’t remember what

I’m burning up the road

I’m heading down to Phoenix

I got this old address

Of someone that I knew

It was high and fine and free

Ah, you should have seen us

And I can’t forget, I can’t forget

I can’t forget but I don’t remember who

I’ll be there today

With a big bouquet of cactus

I got this rig that runs on memories

And I promise, cross my heart,

They’ll never catch us

But if they do, just tell them it was me

Yeah I loved you all my life

And that’s how I want to end it

The summer’s almost gone

The winter’s tuning up

Yeah, the summer’s gone

But a lot goes on forever

And I can’t forget, I can’t forget

I can’t forget but I don’t remember what

This song, included on I'm Your Man (1988), originally had an entirely different set of lyrics, entitled "Taken Out Of Egypt" and dealing with the Jewish Exodus as a 'metaphor for the journey of the soul from bondage into freedom". This had taken Cohen several months to write, but in the studio he found himself unable to sing it. These lyrics were hastily written so as not to waste the melody, with a somewhat less august and portentous theme. Perhaps, in what is essentially an extended literary riff on an old joke, the song itself journeyed out of bondage!



I Left A Woman Waiting

I left a woman waiting

I met her sometime later

She said, I see your eyes are dead

What happened to you, lover?

What happened to you, my lover?

What happened to you, lover?

What happened to you?

And since she spoke the truth to me

I tried to answer truthfully

Whatever happened to my eyes

Happened to your beauty

Happened to your beauty

What happened to your beauty

Happened to me

We took ourselves to someone’s bed

And there we fell together

Quick as dogs and truly dead were we

And free as running water

Free as running water

Free as running water

Free as you and me

The way it’s got to be

The way it’s got to be, lover

The first two stanzas were taken from “Poem # 2” in his collection The Energy Of Slaves; the third was newly written for this song, which was included on Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977). In the original poem, the protagonist tells his “faithless wife” to go to sleep. In the song, he suggests they stay awake.



I Tried To Leave You

I tried to leave you, I don’t deny

I closed the book on us, at least a hundred times.

I’d wake up every morning by your side.

The years go by, you lose your pride.

The baby’s crying, so you do not go outside,

and all your work it’s right before your eyes.

Goodnight, my darling, I hope you’re satisfied,

the bed is kind of narrow, but my arms are open wide.

And here’s a man still working for your smile.

Included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974), this is one of the shortest songs Cohen has recorded, although in concert it is often one of the longest, Cohen using it as a vehicle for introducing the band.



If It Be Your Will

If it be your will

That I speak no more

And my voice be still

As it was before

I will speak no more

I shall abide until

I am spoken for

If it be your will

If it be your will

That a voice be true

From this broken hill

I will sing to you

From this broken hill

All your praises they shall ring

If it be your will

To let me sing

From this broken hill

All your praises they shall ring

If it be your will

To let me sing

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

And draw us near

And bind us tight

All your children here

In their rags of light

In our rags of light

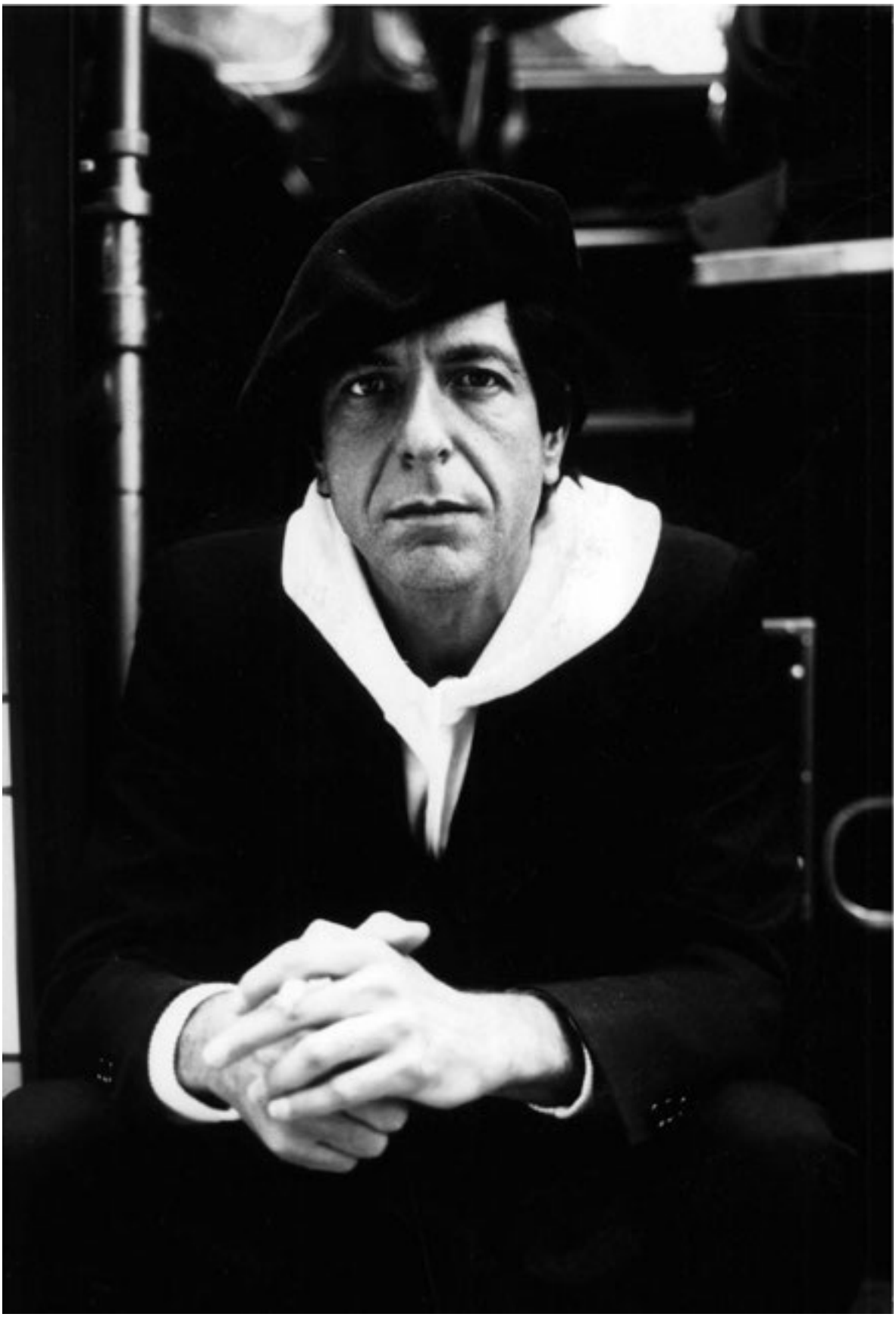
All dressed to kill

And end this night

If it be your will

If it be your will.

One of Cohen's most overtly religious songs, it is based both musically and lyrically on the synagogue prayer " May it therefore be Your will, Lord our God" recited on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Perhaps for this reason, it is more monotheistic than, for example, "Heart With No Companion" which was the preceding track on Various Positions (1984). Cohen has said that the song "took a long time to write because the lyric and the melody are so simple that if there were a false step it would really collapse the structure … but I think it's probably one of the best songs I've ever written".





I’m Your Man

If you want a lover

I’ll do anything you ask me to

And if you want another kind of love

I’ll wear a mask for you

If you want a partner

Take my hand

Or if you want to strike me down in anger

Here I stand

I’m your man

If you want a boxer

I will step into the ring for you

And if you want a doctor

I’ll examine every inch of you

If you want a driver

Climb inside

Or if you want to take me for a ride

You know you can

I’m your man

Ah, the moon’s too bright

The chain’s too tight

The beast won’t go to sleep

I’ve been running through these promises to you

That I made and I could not keep

Ah but a man never got a woman back

Not by begging on his knees

Or I’d crawl to you baby

And I’d fall at your feet

And I’d howl at your beauty

Like a dog in heat

And I’d claw at your heart

And I’d tear at your sheet

I’d say please, please

I’m your man

And if you’ve got to sleep

A moment on the road

I will steer for you

And if you want to work the street alone

I’ll disappear for you

If you want a father for your child

Or only want to walk with me a while

Across the sand

I’m your man

If you want a lover

I’ll do anything you ask me to

And if you want another kind of love

I’ll wear a mask for you

The title track on I’m Your Man (1988), this song was also included on Live In Concert (1994). In the live version Cohen adds a couple of adjectives – “I’ll wear a leather mask for you” in the first stanza and “if you want a Jewish doctor” in the second. However, these are best considered an entertainer’s ad lib rather than a definitive emendation of the text.



In My Secret Life

I saw you this morning.

You were moving so fast.

Can’t seem to loosen my grip

On the past.

And I miss you so much.

There’s no one in sight.

And we’re still making love

In My Secret Life.

I smile when I’m angry.

I cheat and I lie.

I do what I have to do

To get by.

But I know what is wrong.

And I know what is right.

And I’d die for the truth

In My Secret Life.

Hold on, hold on, my brother.

My sister, hold on tight.

I finally got my orders.

I’ll be marching through the morning,

Marching through the night,

Moving cross the borders

Of My Secret Life.

Looked through the paper.

Makes you want to cry.

Nobody cares if the people Live or die.

And the dealer wants you thinking

That it’s either black or white.

Thank G-d it’s not that simple

In My Secret Life.

I bite my lip.

I buy what I’m told:

From the latest hit,

To the wisdom of old.

But I’m always alone.

And my heart is like ice.

And it’s crowded and cold

In My Secret Life.

Co-written by Sharon Robinson, this song was included on Ten New Songs (2001, though Cohen had begun work on it (under the title ‘My Secret Life’ as early as 1988). The final phrase – “it’s crowded and cold in my secret life” – is an intriguing observation by an artist who has lived in and reported on both the social world and solitude.



Iodine

I needed you, I knew I was in danger

of losing what I used to think was mine

You let me love you till I was a failure,

You let me love you till I was a failure --

Your beauty on my bruise like iodine

I asked you if a man could be forgiven

And though I failed at love, was this a crime?

You said, Don’t worry, don’t worry, darling

You said, Don’t worry, don’t you worry, darling

There are many ways a man can serve his time

You covered up that place I could not master

It wasn’t dark enough to shut my eyes

So I was with you, O sweet compassion

Yes I was with you, O sweet compassion

Compassion with the sting of iodine

Your saintly kisses reeked of iodine

Your fragrance with a fume of iodine

And pity in the room like iodine

Your sister fingers burned like iodine

And all my wanton lust was iodine

My masquerade of trust was iodine

And everywhere the flare of iodine

Cohen played an earlier version of this song, co-written by John Lissauer, on his 1975 tour, when it was title ‘Guerrero’. It was completely rewritten for its inclusion on Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977).



Is This What You Wanted

You were the promise at dawn,

I was the morning after.

You were Jesus Christ my Lord,

I was the money lender.

You were the sensitive woman,

I was the very reverend Freud.

You were the manual orgasm,

I was the dirty little boy.

And is this what you wanted

to live in a house that is haunted

by the ghost of you and me?

Is this what you wanted ...

You were Marlon Brando,

I was Steve McQueen.

You were K.Y. Jelly,

I was Vaseline.

You were the father of modern medicine,

I was Mr. Clean.

You where the whore and the beast of Babylon,

I was Rin Tin Tin.

And is this what you wanted ...

And is this what you wanted ...

You got old and wrinkled,

I stayed seventeen.

You lusted after so many,

I lay here with one.

You defied your solitude,

I came through alone.

You said you could never love me,

I undid your gown.

And is this what you wanted ...

And is this what you wanted ...

I mean is this what you wanted ...

That’s right, is this what you wanted ...

Based on ‘Poem # 31’ from The Energy Of Slaves, this song was included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974). Though its structure is simple, the song exemplifies a technique Cohen has frequently used – a series of different examples or images of a basic motif, in this case the “you were … I was …” formula.

It Just Feels

It feels so good

And it feels so right

It feels like I’ve been rescued

In the middle of the night

And all the tricks and all the angels

And all the dirty rotten deals

They don’t count now

They’ve been cancelled

And it feels, it just feels

Thank you Babe, thank you Babe

It feels so good

And it feels so right

It feels like I’ve been rescued

In the middle of the night

And the sweetest voice has spoken

And the deepest wound is healed

And the darkness is exploding

And it feels, it just feels

Thank you Babe, thank you Babe

It comes so sweet

And it comes so fast

It comes like windows breaking

I can take a breath at last

Thank you for the breaking

And thank you for the breath

And for sayin' it was nothing

Nothing meaning life or death

Thank you Babe…it just feels

Written by Cohen and David A Stewart, Cohen himself has never recorded it. It was recorded by Sylvie Marechal and included on her album Voie Lactée (1992).



Jazz Police

Can you tell me why the bells are ringing?

Nothing’s happened in a million years

I’ve been sitting here since Wednesday morning

Wednesday morning can’t believe my ears

Jazz police are looking through my folders

Jazz police are talking to my niece

Jazz police have got their final orders

Jazzer, drop your axe, it’s Jazz police!

Jesus taken serious by the many

Jesus taken joyous by a few

Jazz police are paid by J.P. Getty

Jazzers paid by J. Paul Getty II

Jazz police I hear you calling

Jazz police I feel so blue

Jazz police I think I’m falling,

I’m falling for you

Wild as any freedom loving racist

I applaud the actions of the chief

Tell me now oh beautiful and spacious

Am I in trouble with the Jazz police?

Jazz police are looking through my folders ...

They will never understand our culture

They’ll never understand the Jazz police

Jazz police are working for my mother

Blood is thicker margarine than grease

Let me be somebody I admire

Let me be that muscle down the street

Stick another turtle on the fire

Guys like me are mad for turtle meat

Jazz police I hear you calling

Jazz police I feel so blue

Jazz police I think I’m falling,

I’m falling for you

Co-written by Jeff Fisher, this song’s origins lie in artistic arguments between Cohen and his musicians during the recording of I’m Your Man. The band would try to infiltrate augmented fifths and sevenths into the music, at which Cohen would object that he didn’t want that kind of jazzy sound on his songs. Teased for being a “jazz policeman”, he decided to incorporate their banter into a song. J. Paul Getty I (1892-1976) was an American industrialist, reputedly the richest living American in 1957. His son, J. Paul Getty II (1932-2003), was a philanthropist, book collector and cricket lover.



Joan Of Arc

Now the flames they followed Joan of Arc

as she came riding through the dark;

no moon to keep her armour bright,

no man to get her through this very smoky night.

She said, “I’m tired of the war,

I want the kind of work I had before,

a wedding dress or something white

to wear upon my swollen appetite.”

Well, I’m glad to hear you talk this way,

you know I’ve watched you riding every day

and something in me yearns to win

such a cold and lonesome heroine.

“And who are you?” she sternly spoke

to the one beneath the smoke.

“Why, I’m fire,” he replied,

“And I love your solitude, I love your pride.”

“Then fire, make your body cold,

I’m going to give you mine to hold,”

saying this she climbed inside

to be his one, to be his only bride.

And deep into his fiery heart

he took the dust of Joan of Arc,

and high above the wedding guests

he hung the ashes of her wedding dress.

It was deep into his fiery heart

he took the dust of Joan of Arc,

and then she clearly understood

if he was fire, oh then she must be wood.

I saw her wince, I saw her cry,

I saw the glory in her eye.

Myself I long for love and light,

but must it come so cruel, and oh so bright?

Included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971) and also on Live In Concert (1994). The live version, co-sung with Julie Christensen, is particularly interesting in that it elucidates more clearly than when Cohen sings it alone the different voices in the song. Following the live version, on can see that the first stanza has two voices (the Narrator and Joan herself), the second three (Narrator, Joan and Fire), and the third two (Joan and Narrator). The fourth stanza, all of which Cohen sings on the live voice, is more complicated. Clearly, it is begun by the Narrator. However, the final four lines were italicized on the album's sleevenotes, suggesting a fourth voice, whom we may call the Bystander and who delivers the song's "lesson".



Lady Midnight

I came by myself to a very crowded place;

I was looking for someone who had lines in her face.

I found her there but she was past all concern;

I asked her to hold me, I said, “Lady, unfold me,”

but she scorned me and she told me

I was dead and I could never return.

Well, I argued all night like so many have before,

saying, “Whatever you give me, I seem to need

so much more.”

Then she pointed at me where I kneeled on her floor,

she said, “Don’t try to use me or slyly refuse me,

just win me or lose me,

it is this that the darkness is for.”

I cried, “Oh, Lady Midnight, I fear that you grow old,

the stars eat your body and the wind makes you cold.”

“If we cry now,” she said, “it will just be ignored.”

So I walked through the morning, sweet early morning,

I could hear my lady calling,

“You’ve won me, you’ve won me, my lord,

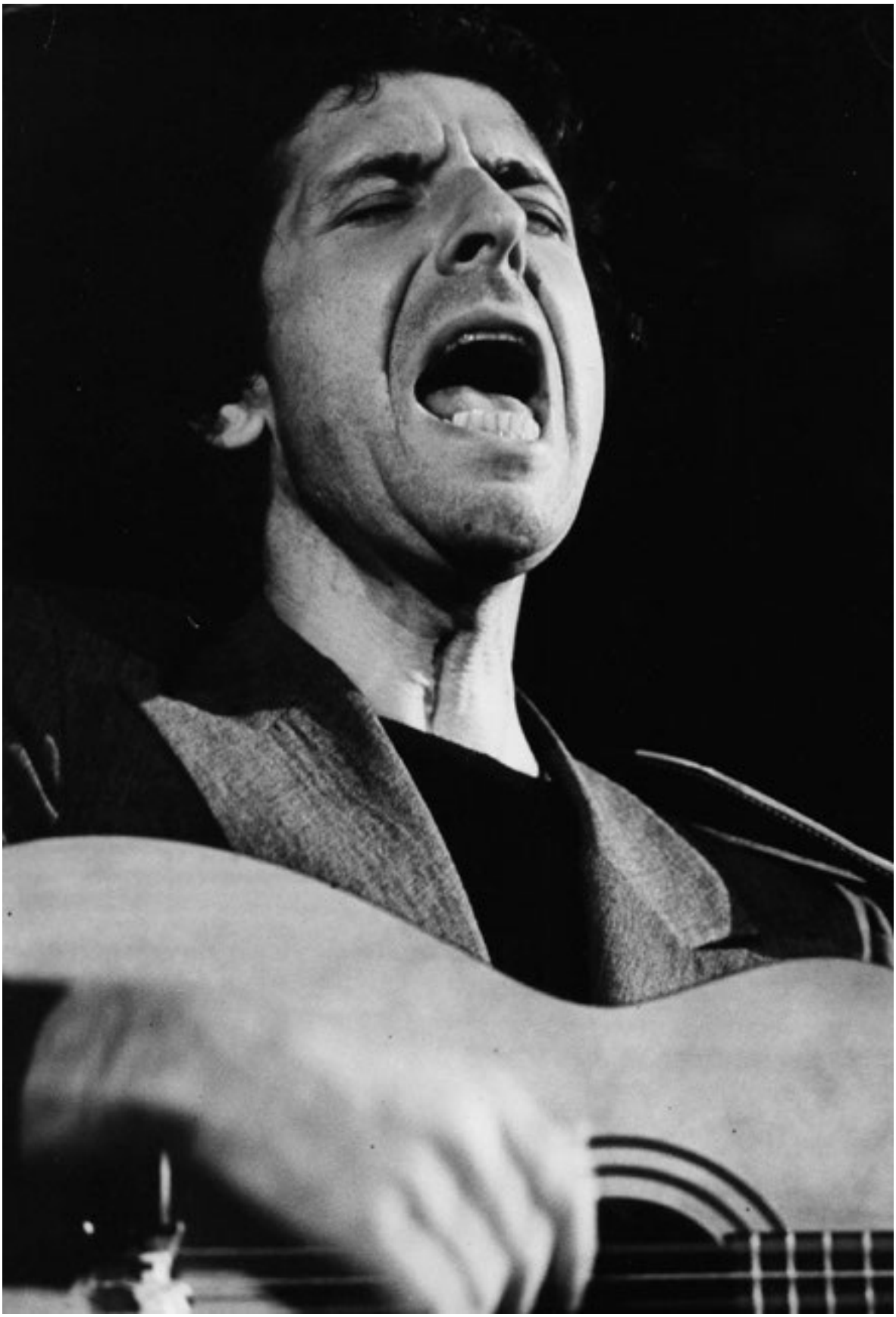
you’ve won me, you’ve won me, my lord,

yes, you’ve won me, you’ve won me, my lord,

ah, you’ve won me, you’ve won me, my lord,

ah, you’ve won me, you’ve won me, my lord.”

This deceptively simple song was included on Songs From A Room (1969). At first sight, it appears to be the simple record of a seduction. On closer reading, it is clearly much more complex than that. Who is Lady Midnight? Is she a real woman or a symbol? Does she represent “the dark night of the soul” or is she Death itself? And does the “sweet early morning” through which the singer walks signify a victory over the darkness or a surrender to it? Reader, judge for yourself.





Last Year’s Man

The rain falls down on last year’s man,

that’s a jew’s harp on the table,

that’s a crayon in his hand.

And the corners of the blueprint are ruined since they rolled

far past the stems of thumbtacks

that still throw shadows on the wood.

And the skylight is like skin for a drum I’ll never mend

and all the rain falls down amen

on the works of last year’s man.

I met a lady, she was playing with her soldiers in the dark

oh one by one she had to tell them

that her name was Joan of Arc.

I was in that army, yes I stayed a little while;

I want to thank you, Joan of Arc,

for treating me so well.

And though I wear a uniform I was not born to fight;

all these wounded boys you lie beside,

goodnight, my friends, goodnight.

I came upon a wedding that old families had contrived;

Bethlehem the bridegroom,

Babylon the bride.

Great Babylon was naked, oh she stood there trembling for me,

and Bethlehem inflamed us both

like the shy one at some orgy.

And when we fell together all our flesh was like a veil

that I had to draw aside to see

the serpent eat its tail.

Some women wait for Jesus, and some women wait for Cain

so I hang upon my altar

and I hoist my axe again.

And I take the one who finds me back to where it all began

when Jesus was the honeymoon

and Cain was just the man.

And we read from pleasant Bibles that are bound in

blood and skin

that the wilderness is gathering

all its children back again.

The rain falls down on last year’s man,

an hour has gone by

and he has not moved his hand.

But everything will happen if he only gives the word;

the lovers will rise up

and the mountains touch the ground.

But the skylight is like skin for a drum I'll never mend

and all the rain falls down amen

on the works of last year's man.

Included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971), this song is an example of a curious phenomenon that often occurs in Cohen's work – the use of overtly religious phraseology and references (as here Bethlehem, Babylon, Jesus and Cain) in songs with a secular theme, and the avoidance of them in songs with a spiritual or religious theme.



Leaving Green Sleeves

Alas, my love, you did me wrong,

to cast me out discourteously,

for I have loved you so long,

delighting in your very company.

Now if you intend to show me disdain,

don’t you know it all the more enraptures me,

for even so I still remain your lover in captivity.

Green sleeves, you’re all alone,

the leaves have fallen, the men have gone.

Green sleeves, there’s no one home,

not even the Lady Green Sleeves

I sang my songs, I told my lies,

to lie between your matchless thighs.

And ain’t it fine, ain’t it wild

to finally end our exercise

Then I saw you naked in the early dawn,

oh, I hoped you would be someone new.

I reached for you but you were gone,

so lady I’m going too.

Green sleeves, you’re all alone ...

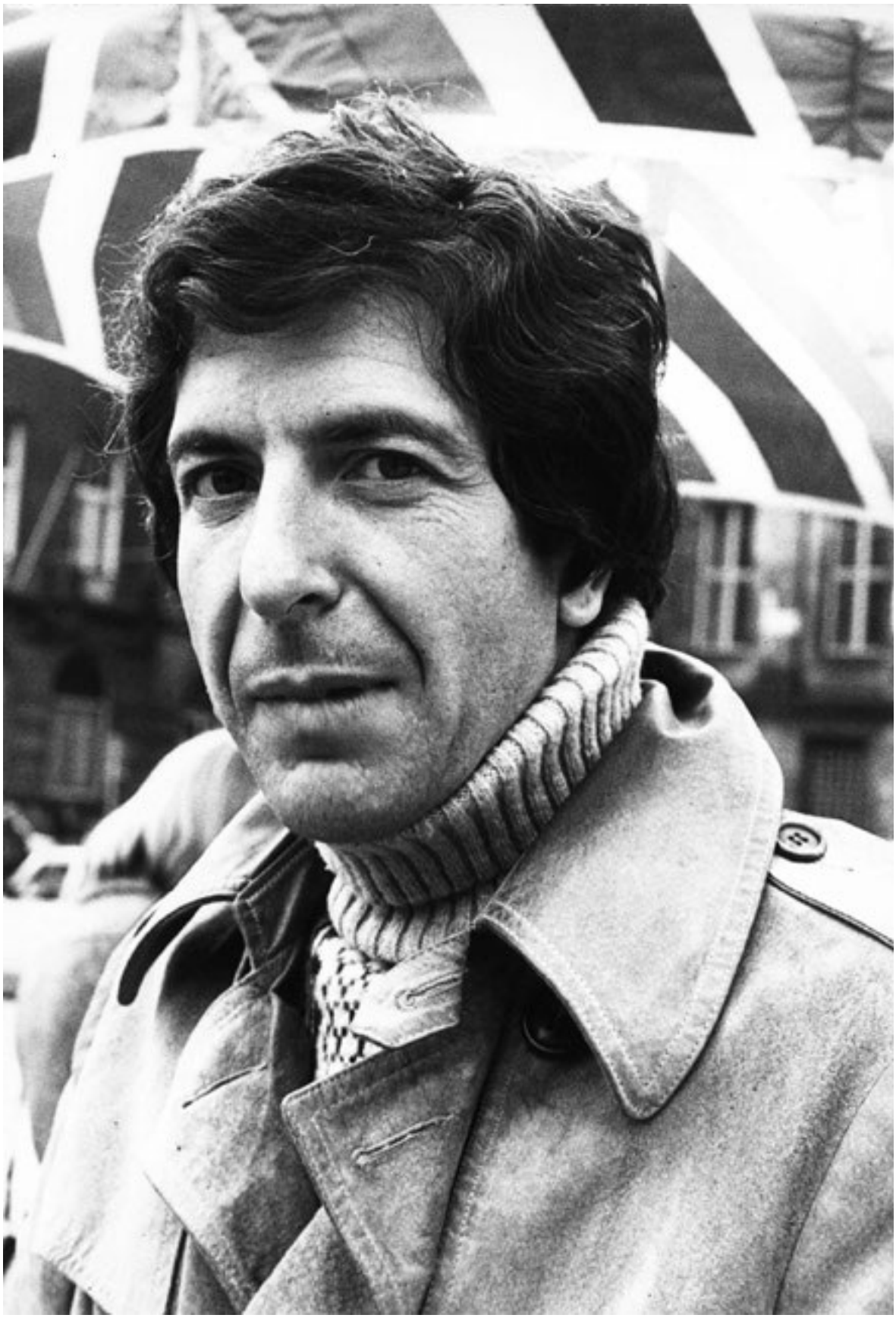
Green sleeves, you’re all alone,

the leaves have fallen, the men have all gone home.

Green sleeves, it’s so easily done,

leaving the Lady Green Sleeves.

This song, from New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974), contains echoes, both in its melody and in the consciously archaic language with which it opens, of the famous sixteenth-century air ‘Greensleeves’, allegedly written by King Henry VIII and certainly written by a member of his court.





Light As The Breeze

She stands before you naked

you can see it, you can taste it,

and she comes to you light as the breeze.

Now you can drink it or you can nurse it,

it don’t matter how you worship

as long as you’re

down on your knees.

So I knelt there at the delta,

at the alpha and the omega,

at the cradle of the river and the seas.

And like a blessing come from heaven

for something like a second

I was healed and my heart

was at ease.

O baby I waited

so long for your kiss

for something to happen,

oh something like this.

And you’re weak and you’re harmless

and you’re sleeping in your harness

and the wind going wild

in the trees,

and it ain’t exactly prison

but you’ll never be forgiven

for whatever you’ve done

with the keys.

O baby I waited ...

It’s dark now and it’s snowing

O my love I must be going,

The river has started to freeze.

And I’m sick of pretending

I’m broken from bending

I’ve lived too long on my knees.

Then she dances so graceful

and your heart’s hard and hateful

and she’s naked

but that’s just a tease.

And you turn in disgust

from your hatred and from your love

and she comes to you

light as the breeze.

O baby I waited ...

There’s blood on every bracelet

you can see it, you can taste it,

and it’s Please baby

please baby please.

And she says, Drink deeply, pilgrim

but don’t forget there’s still a woman

beneath this

resplendent chemise.

So I knelt there at the delta,

at the alpha and the omega,

I knelt there like one who believes.

And the blessings come from heaven

and for something like a second

I’m cured and my heart

is at ease

Included on The Future (1992). The St Lawrence River flows from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic, passing on its way to the south of Montreal Island.



Love Calls You By Your Name

You thought that it could never happen

to all the people that you became,

your body lost in legend, the beast so very tame.

But here, right here,

between the birthmark and the stain,

between the ocean and your open vein,

between the snowman and the rain,

once again, once again,

love calls you by your name.

The women in your scrapbook

whom you still praise and blame,

you say they chained you to your fingernails

and you climb the halls of fame.

Oh but here, right here,

between the peanuts and the cage,

between the darkness and the stage,

between the hour and the age,

once again, once again,

love calls you by your name.

Shouldering your loneliness

like a gun that you will not learn to aim,

you stumble into this movie house,

then you climb, you climb into the frame.

Yes, and here, right here

between the moonlight and the lane,

between the tunnel and the train,

between the victim and his stain,

once again, once again,

love calls you by your name.

Where are you, Judy, where are you, Anne?

Where are the paths your heroes came?

Wondering out loud as the bandage pulls away,

was I, was I only limping, was I really lame?

Oh here, come over here,

between the windmill and the grain,

between the sundial and the chain,

between the traitor and her pain,

once again, once again,

love calls you by your name.

This song, included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971), is a rewritten version of an earlier song entitled ‘Love Tries To Call You By Your Name.



Love Itself

The light came through the window,

Straight from the sun above,

And so inside my little room

There plunged the rays of Love.

In streams of light I clearly saw

The dust you seldom see,

Out of which the Nameless makes

A Name for one like me.

I’ll try to say a little more:

Love went on and on

Until it reached an open door –

Then Love Itself

Love Itself was gone.

All busy in the sunlight

The flecks did float and dance,

And I was tumbled up with them

In formless circumstance.

I’ll try to say a little more:

Love went on and on

Until it reached an open door –

Then Love Itself

Love Itself was gone.

Then I came back from where I’d been.

My room, it looked the same –

But there was nothing left between

The Nameless and the Name.

All busy in the sunlight

The flecks did float and dance,

And I was tumbled up with them

In formless circumstance.

I’ll try to say a little more:

Love went on and on

Until it reached an open door –

Then Love itself,

Love Itself was gone.

Love Itself was gone.

One of Ten New Songs (2001) co-written by Sharon Robinson. The “LW” to whom this song is dedicated is the American writer Leon Wieseltier.



Lover Lover Lover

I asked my father,

I said, “Father change my name.”

The one I’m using now it’s covered up

with fear and filth and cowardice and shame.

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me,

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

He said, “I locked you in this body,

I meant it as a kind of trial.

You can use it for a weapon,

or to make some woman smile.”

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

“Then let me start again,” I cried,

“please let me start again,

I want a face that’s fair this time,

I want a spirit that is calm.”

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

“I never never turned aside,” he said,

“I never walked away.

It was you who built the temple,

it was you who covered up my face.”

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

And may the spirit of this song,

may it rise up pure and free.

May it be a shield for you,

a shield against the enemy.

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

Yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me

yes and lover, lover, lover, lover, lover, lover,

lover come back to me.

This song, included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974), was written in the Sinai desert during Cohen's 1973 visit to Israel on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. He volunteered to help Israel in its anticipated forthcoming battle with Egypt and (in a rare example of an army deploying volunteers ina role for which they have prior expertise) was sent to entertain the troops gathered there to meet the overtly expressed threat from the Egyptian army. A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



Master Song

I believe that you heard your master sing

when I was sick in bed.

I suppose that he told you everything

that I keep locked away in my head.

Your master took you travelling,

well at least that’s what you said.

And now do you come back to bring

your prisoner wine and bread?

You met him at some temple, where

they take your clothes at the door.

He was just a numberless man in a chair

who’d just come back from the war.

And you wrap up his tired face in your hair

and he hands you the apple core.

Then he touches your lips now so suddenly bare

of all the kisses we put on some time before.

And he gave you a German Shepherd to walk

with a collar of leather and nails,

and he never once made you explain or talk

about all of the little details,

such as who had a worm and who had a rock,

and who had you through the mails.

Now your love is a secret all over the block,

and it never stops not even when your master fails.

And he took you up in his aeroplane,

which he flew without any hands,

and you cruised above the ribbons of rain

that drove the crowd from the stands.

Then he killed the lights in a lonely Lane

and, an ape with angel glands,

erased the final wisps of pain

with the music of rubber bands.

And now I hear your master sing,

you kneel for him to come.

His body is a golden string

that your body is hanging from.

His body is a golden string,

my body has grown numb.

Oh now you hear your master sing,

your shirt is all undone.

And will you kneel beside this bed

that we polished so long ago,

before your master chose instead

to make my bed of snow?

Your eyes are wild and your knuckles are red

and you’re speaking far too low.

No I can’t make out what your master said

before he made you go.

Then I think you’re playing far too rough

for a lady who’s been to the moon;

I’ve lain by this window long enough

to get used to an empty room.

And your love is some dust in an old man’s cuff

who is tapping his foot to a tune,

and your thighs are a ruin, you want too much,

let’s say you came back some time too soon.

I loved your master perfectly

I taught him all that he knew.

He was starving in some deep mystery

like a man who is sure what is true.

And I sent you to him with my guarantee

I could teach him something new,

and I taught him how you would long for me

no matter what he said no matter what you'd do.

I believe that you heard your master sing

while I was sick in bed,

I'm sure that he told you everything

I must keep locked away in my head.

Your master took you travelling,

well at least that's what you said,

And now do you come back to bring

your prisoner wine and bread?

Included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), this song is based on the poem 'I Believe I Heard Your Master Sing' from Parasites Of Heaven. Its theme – a philosophically complicated ménage a trois between the singer, his lover and her "master" – is one that Cohen had explored in his novel Beautiful Losers. It is interesting to note that, not long after writing this song, Cohen met his own "master", the Buddhist Joshu Sasaki (known as Roshi) and is not known to have sung the song since.



Memories

Frankie Lane, he was singing ‘Jezebel’

I pinned an Iron Cross to my lapel

I walked up to the tallest and the blondest girl

I said, Look, you don’t know me now but very soon you will

So won’t you let me see

I said “won’t you let me see”

I said “won’t you let me see

Your naked body?”

Just dance me to the dark side of the gym

Chances are I’ll let you do most anything

I know you’re hungry, I can hear it in your voice

And there are many parts of me to touch, you have your choice

Ah but no you cannot see

She said “no you cannot see”

She said “no you cannot see

My naked body”

So We’re dancing close, the band is playing ‘Stardust’

Balloons and paper streamers floating down on us

She says, You’ve got a minute left to fall in love

In solemn moments such as this I have put my trust

And all my faith to see

I said all my faith to see

I said all my faith to see

Her naked body

Cohen's tribute to Fifties Rock'n'Roll, this song was included on Death Of A Ladies' Man (1977). A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001). Frankie Laine (1913-2007) was an American singer with an eclectic range of styles – from crooning to rock to jazz – who had a million-selling hit with 'Jezebel' in 1951. 'Stardust' was a standard of the Great American Songbook, with music by Hoagy Carmichael and words by Mitchell Parish.



Minute Prologue

I’ve been listening

to all the dissention.

I’ve been listening

to all the pain.

And I feel that no matter

what I do for you,

it’s going to come back again.

But I think that I can heal it,

but I think that I can heal it,

I’m a fool, but I think I can heal it

with this song.

Recorded live in 1972, ‘Minute Prologue’ (as in “sixty seconds” rather than “very small”, though the ambiguity serves a poetic purpose), was included on Cohen’s first live album Live Songs (1973). The recording is the only known occasion on which Cohen has sung this song.



Morning Glory

No words this time? No words. No, there are times when nothing can be done.

Not this time. Is it censorship? Is it censorship? No, it’s evaporation. No, it’s

evaporation. Is this leading somewhere? Yes. We’re going down the lane. Is this

going somewhere? Into the garden. Into the backyard. We’re walking down the

driveway. Are we moving towards.... We’re in the backyard. ...some transcen-

dental moment? It’s almost light. That’s right. That’s it. Are we moving towards

some transcendental moment? That’s right. That’s it. Do you think you’ll be able

to pull it off? Yes. Do you think you can pull it off? Yes, it might happen. I’m all

ears. I’m all ears. Oh the morning glory!

Included on Dear Heather (2004), this "song" is recited rather than sung, hence its prosaic layout.



Never Any Good

I was never any good at loving you

I was never any good at coming

through for you

You’re going to feel much better

When you cut me loose forever

I was never any good

Never any good

I was never any good at loving you

I was dying when we met

I bet my life on you

But you called me and I folded

like you knew I’d do

You called my ace, my king, my bluff

Okay, you win, enough’s enough

I was never any good

Never any good

I was never any good at loving you

I was pretty good at taking out

the garbage

Pretty good at holding up the wall

Dealing with the fire and the earthquake

But that don’t count

That don’t count

That don’t count for nothing much at all

I was never any good at loving you

I was just a tourist in your bed looking

at the view

But I can’t forget where my lips

have been

Those holy hills, that deep ravine

I was never any good

Never any good

I was never any good at loving you

I was pretty good at taking out the garbage

Pretty good at holding up the wall

I’m sorry for my crimes against

the moonlight

I didn’t think

I didn’t think

I didn’t think the moon would mind at all

I was never any good at loving you

At doing what a woman really wants

a man to do

You’re going to feel much better

When you cut me loose forever

I was never any good

Never any good

I was never any good at loving you

Unreleased until included on More Best Of Leonard Cohen (1997), this song is an entertaining excursion to a familiar corner of the Cohen theme park. With all the confidence of a man who, having leant from his mistakes, can repeat them with precision, Cohen applies his considerable skill to seducing his beloved into leaving him. The card-playing imagery in the second stanza is a good example of Cohen’s literary skill – not only is the metaphor an effective one in itself but the ambiguity of “called” (matched a bet or telephoned/visited) and “folded” (declined a bet or crumpled) adds poetic value to the lyric.



Night Comes On

I went down to the place

Where I knew she lay waiting

Under the marble and the snow

I said, Mother I’m frightened

The thunder and the lightning

I’ll never come through this alone

She said, I’ll be with you

My shawl wrapped around you

My hand on your head when you go

And the night came on

It was very calm

I wanted the night to go on and on

But she said, Go back to the World

We were fighting in Egypt

When they signed this agreement

That nobody else had to die

There was this terrible sound

And my father went down

With a terrible wound in his side

He said, Try to go on

Take my books, take my gun

Remember, my son, how they lied

And the night comes on

It’s very calm

I’d like to pretend that my father was wrong

But you don’t want to lie, not to the young

We were locked in this kitchen

I took to religion

And I wondered how long she would stay

I needed so much

To have nothing to touch

I’ve always been greedy that way

But my son and my daughter

Climbed out of the water

Crying, Papa, you promised to play

And they lead me away

To the great surprise

It’s Papa, don’t peek, Papa, cover your eyes

And they hide, they hide in the World

Now I look for her always

I’m lost in this calling

I’m tied to the threads of some prayer

Saying, When will she summon me

When will she come to me

What must I do to prepare

When she bends to my longing

Like a willow, like a fountain

She stands in the luminous air

And the night comes on

And it’s very calm

I lie in her arms and says, When I’m gone

I’ll be yours, yours for a song

Now the crickets are singing

The vesper bells ringing

The cat’s curled asleep in his chair

I’ll go down to Bill’s Bar

I can make it that far

And I’ll see if my friends are still there

Yes, and here’s to the few

Who forgive what you do

And the fewer who don’t even care

And the night comes on

It’s very calm

I want to cross over, I want to go home

But she says, Go back, go back to the World

Though this song, included on Various Positions (1984), contains autobiographical, none of the actions ascribed to the mother, father or children specifically identify them as Cohen’s and the song’s literal suggestion that his father fought alongside him in Egypt is patently false. The family members are clearly more symbolic than flesh-and-blood. The emotional bleakness and personal despair in this song are hardly new departures for Cohen, but the knowledge that the singer must follow his mother’s injunction to “go back to the world” offers a rarer redemptive insight.



Nightingale

I built my house beside the wood

So I could hear you singing

And it was sweet and it was good

And love was all beginning

Fare thee well my nightingale

‘Twas long ago I found you

Now all your songs of beauty fail

The forest closes ‘round you

The sun goes down behind a veil

‘Tis now that you would call me

So rest in peace my nightingale

Beneath your branch of holly

Fare thee well my nightingale

I lived but to be near you

Tho‘ you are singing somewhere still

I can no longer hear you

Co-written by Anjani Thomas, this song, included on Dear Heather (2004), is a beautiful lament for the loss of … – that what is lost is unspecified (love? youth? capability?) only enhances the poetic effectiveness of this song. It is dedicated to the singer and actor Carl Anderson (1945-2004).



On That Day

Some people say

It’s what we deserve

For sins against g-d

For crimes in the world

I wouldn’t know

I’m just holding the fort

Since that day

They wounded New York

Some people say

They hate us of old

Our women unveiled

Our slaves and our gold

I wouldn’t know

I’m just holding the fort

But answer me this

I won’t take you to court

Did you go crazy

Or did you report

On that day

On that day

They wounded New York

Included on Dear Heather (2004) and co-written by Anjani Thomas, this song is Cohen's response to suicide attacks on America co-ordinated by al Qaeda on 11 September 2001, during which two hijacked aircraft were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.



One Of Us Cannot Be Wrong

I lit a thin green candle, to make you jealous of me.

But the room just filled up with mosquitos,

they heard that my body was free.

Then I took the dust of a long sleepless night

and I put it in your little shoe.

And then I confess that I tortured the dress

that you wore for the world to look through.

I showed my heart to the doctor: he said I just have to quit.

Then he wrote himself a prescription,

and your name was mentioned in it!

Then he locked himself in a library shelf

with the details of our honeymoon,

and I hear from the nurse that he’s gotten much worse

and his practice is all in a ruin.

I heard of a saint who had loved you,

so I studied all night in his school.

He taught that the duty of lovers

is to tarnish the golden rule.

And just when I was sure that his teachings were pure

he drowned himself in the pool.

His body is gone but back here on the lawn

his spirit continues to drool.

An Eskimo showed me a movie

he’d recently taken of you:

the poor man could hardly stop shivering,

his lips and his fingers were blue.

I suppose that he froze when the wind took your clothes

and I guess he just never got warm.

But you stand there so nice, in your blizzard of ice,

oh please let me come into the storm.

One of Cohen's earliest songs, included on his first album Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), it is a good example of his elegant craftsmanship. The emotion expressed undoubtedly belongs to Cohen the man but Cohen the artist, standing outside and "controlling" the work, shows that he knows and has anatomised exactly what is going on. Cohen has performed this song on all subsequent tours, which indicates that he recognises its quality. In the live version included on Live In Concert (1994), he adds the adjective "shabby" to "the details of our honeymoon".



Our Lady Of Solitude

All summer long she touched me

She gathered in my soul

From many a thorn, from many thickets

Her fingers, like a weaver’s

Quick and cool

And the light came from her body

And the night went through her grace

All summer long she touched me

And I knew her, I knew her

Face to face

And her dress was blue and silver

And her words were few and small

She is the vessel of the whole wide world

Mistress, oh mistress, of us all

Dear Lady; Queen of Solitude

I thank you with my heart

for keeping me so close to thee

while so many, oh so many, stood apart

And the light came from her body

And the night went through her grace

All summer long she touched me

I knew her, I knew her

Face to face

This song, included on Recent Songs (1979), is a longer adaption of the poem 'All Summer Long' from Death Of A Lady's Man (a verse anthology whose title's slight difference from that of his 1977 album may or may not be significant). The Montreal in which Cohen grew up was a profoundly Catholic city and he cannot fail to have noticed Catholicism's pervasive Mariolatry. In the creation of a new aspect of the multi-faceted Nôtre Dame we can see that, for all the sensuality of the song's language, the song has as much a spiritual dimension as a carnal one.



Paper Thin Hotel

The walls of this hotel are paper-thin

Last night I heard you making love to him

The struggle mouth to mouth and limb to limb

The grunt of unity when he came in

I stood there with my ear against the wall

I was not seized by jealousy at all

In fact a burden lifted from my soul

I learned that love was out of my control

A heavy burden lifted from my soul

I heard that love was out of my control

I listened to your kisses at the door

I never heard the world so clear before

You ran your bath and you began to sing

I felt so good I couldn’t feel a thing

I stood there with my ear against the wall ...

And I can’t wait to tell you to your face

And I can’t wait for you to take my place

You are The Naked Angel In My Heart

You are The Woman With Her Legs Apart

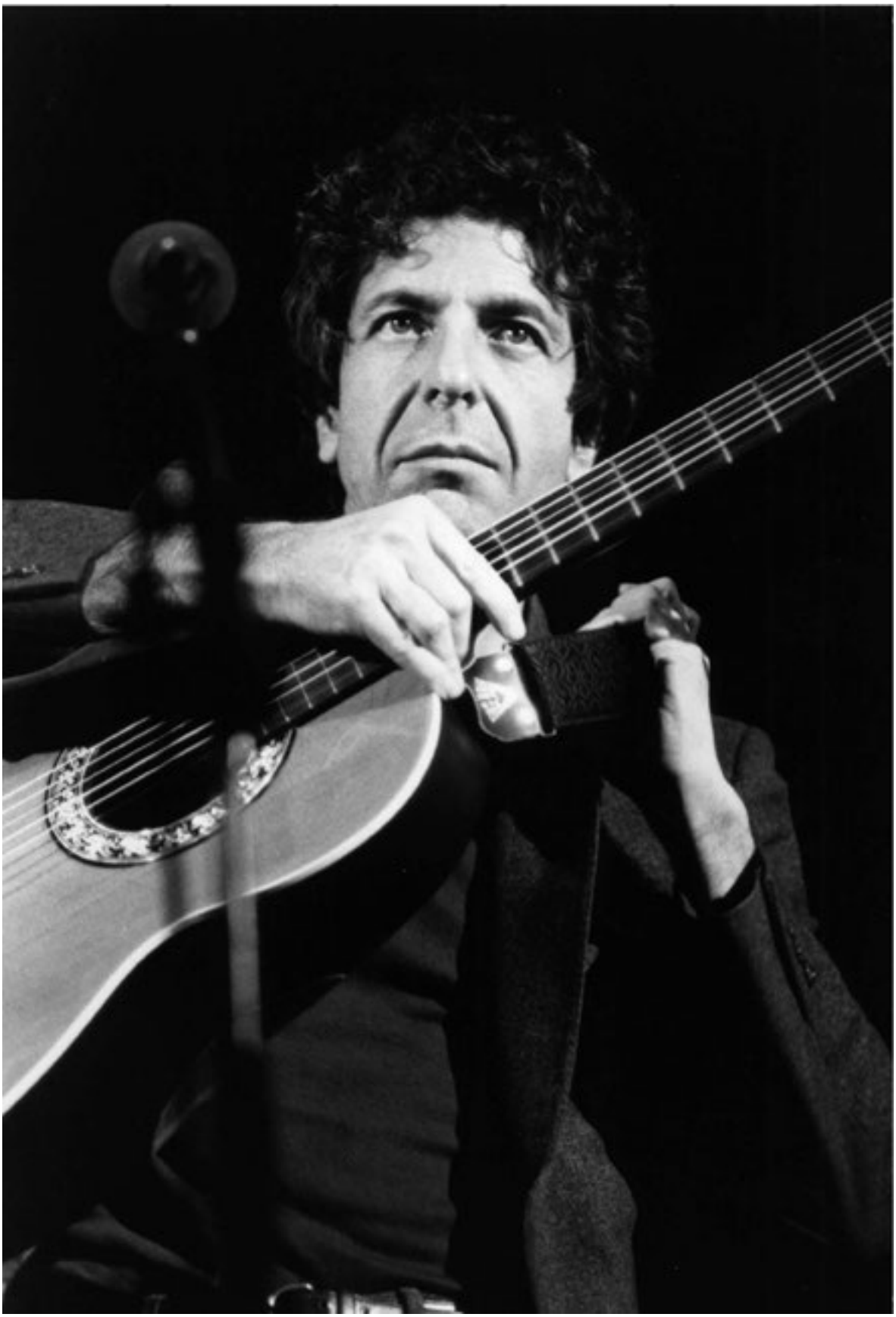
It’s written on the walls of this hotel

You go to heaven once you've been to hell

A heavy burden lifted from my soul

I heard that love was out of my control

Clearly Cohen has had some interesting experiences in hotel bedrooms although in this song of redemption, included on Death Of A Ladies' Man (1977), we may take the hotel in question not as a particularly jerry-built edifice but as a metaphorical location.





Please Don’t Pass Me By

(A Disgrace)

I was walking in New York City and I brushed up against

the man in front of me. I felt a cardboard placard on his

back. And when we passed a streetlight,

I could read it, it said “Please don’t pass me by - I am blind,

but you can see

- I’ve been blinded totally - Please don’t pass me by.” I was

walking along 7th

Avenue, when I came to 14th Street I saw on the corner

curious mutilations of the human form; it was a school for

handicapped people. And there were

cripples, and people in wheelchairs and crutches and it

was snowing, and I got this sense that the whole city was

singing this:

Oh please don’t pass me by,

oh please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, but you can see,

yes, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh please don’t pass me by.

And you know as I was walking I thought it was them who

were singing it, I thought it was they who were singing it, I

thought it was the other who was

singing it, I thought it was someone else. But as I moved

along I knew it was me, and that I was singing it to myself.

It went:

Please don’t pass me by,

oh please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, but you can see,

well, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh please don’t pass me by.

Oh please don’t pass me by.

Now I know that you’re sitting there deep in your velvet

seats and you’re

thinking “Uh, he’s up there saying something that he

thinks about, but I’ll

never have to sing that song.” But I promise you friends,

that you’re going to

be singing this song: it may not be tonight, it may not be

tomorrow, but one day you’ll be on your knees and I want

you to know the words when the time comes. Because

you’re going to have to sing it to yourself, or to another, or

to your brother. You’re going to have to learn to sing this

song, it goes:

Please don’t pass me by,

ah you don’t have to sing this .. not for you.

Please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, but you can see,

yes, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh please don’t pass me by.

Well I sing this for the Jews and the Gypsies and the smoke

that they made.

And I sing this for the children of England, their faces so

grave. And I sing

this for a saviour with no one to save. Hey, won’t you be

naked for me? Hey, won’t you be naked for me? It goes:

Please don’t pass me by,

oh please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, but you can see,

yes, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh now, please don’t pass me by.

Now there’s nothing that I tell you that will help you con-

nect the blood tortured night with the day that comes next.

But I want it to hurt you, I want it to end. Oh, won’t you be

naked for me? Oh now:

Please don’t pass me by,

oh please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, but you can see,

but I’ve been blinded totally,

oh, please don’t pass me by.

Well I sing this song for you Blonde Beasts, I sing this

song for you Venuses upon your shells on the foam of the

sea. And I sing this for the freaks and the cripples, and

the hunchback, and the burned, and the burning, and the

maimed, and the broken, and the torn, and all of those that

you talk about at the coffee tables, at the meetings, and the

demonstrations, on the streets, in your music, in my songs.

I mean the real ones that are burning, I mean the real ones

that are burnin

I say, please don’t pass me by,

oh now, please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, yeah but you can see,

ah now, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh no, please don’t pass me by.

I know that you still think that its me. I know that you

think that there’s

somebody else. I know that these words aren’t yours. But I

tell you friends

that one day

You’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down on your knees,

you’re going to get down ..

Oh, please don’t pass me by,

oh, please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, yeah but you can see,

yes, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh, please don’t pass me by.

Well you know I have my songs and I have my poems. I

have my book and I

have the army, and sometimes I have your applause. I

make some money,

but you know what my friends, I’m still out there on the

corner. I’m with the freaks, I’m with the hunted, I’m with

the maimed, yes I’m with the torn, I’m

with the down, I’m with the poor. Come on now ...

Now I want to take away my dignity, yes take my dignity.

My friends, take

my dignity, take my form, take my style, take my honour,

take my courage,

take my time, take my time, .. time .. ‘Cause you know I’m

with you singing

this song. And I wish you would, I wish you would, I wish

you would go home with someone else. Wish you’d go

home with someone else. I wish you’d go home with some-

one else. Don’t be the person that you came with. Oh, don’t

be the person that you came with, Oh don’t be the person

that you came with. Ah, I’m not going to be. I can’t stand

him. I can’t stand who I am. That’s why I’ve got to get

down on my knees. Because I can’t make it by myself. I’m

not by myself anymore because the man I was before he

was a tyrant, he was a slave,

he was in chains, he was broken and then he sang:

Oh, please don’t pass me by,

oh, please don’t pass me by,

for I am blind, yes I am blind, Oh but you can see,

yes, I’ve been blinded totally,

oh, please don’t pass me by.

Well I hope I see you out there on the corner. Yeah I hope

as I go by that I hear you whisper with the breeze. Be-

cause I’m going to leave you now, I’m going to find me

someone new. Find someone new.

And please don’t pass me by.

Recorded in 1970 and included on Live Songs (1973), this is an unusual Cohen song, both in its length and its structure – a simple chorus interspersed with ad-libbed spoken sections. It is essentially a performance piece, the text given here being taken from the live recording, the last occasion on which Cohen performed this song. The chorus is taken straight from a New York beggar’s cardboard placard.



Priests

And who will write love songs for you

when I am lord at last

and your body is some little highway shrine

that all my priests have passed,

that all my priests have passed?

My priests they will put flowers there,

they will stand before the glass,

but they'll wear away your little window, love,

they will trample on the grass,

they will trample on the grass.

And who will aim the arrow

that men will follow through your grace

when I am lord of memory

and all your armour has turned to lace,

and all your armour has turned to lace?

The simple life of heroes,

and the twisted life of saints,

they just confuse the sunny calendar

with their red and golden paints,

with their red and golden paints.

And all of you have seen the dance,

that God has kept from me,

but he has seen me watching you

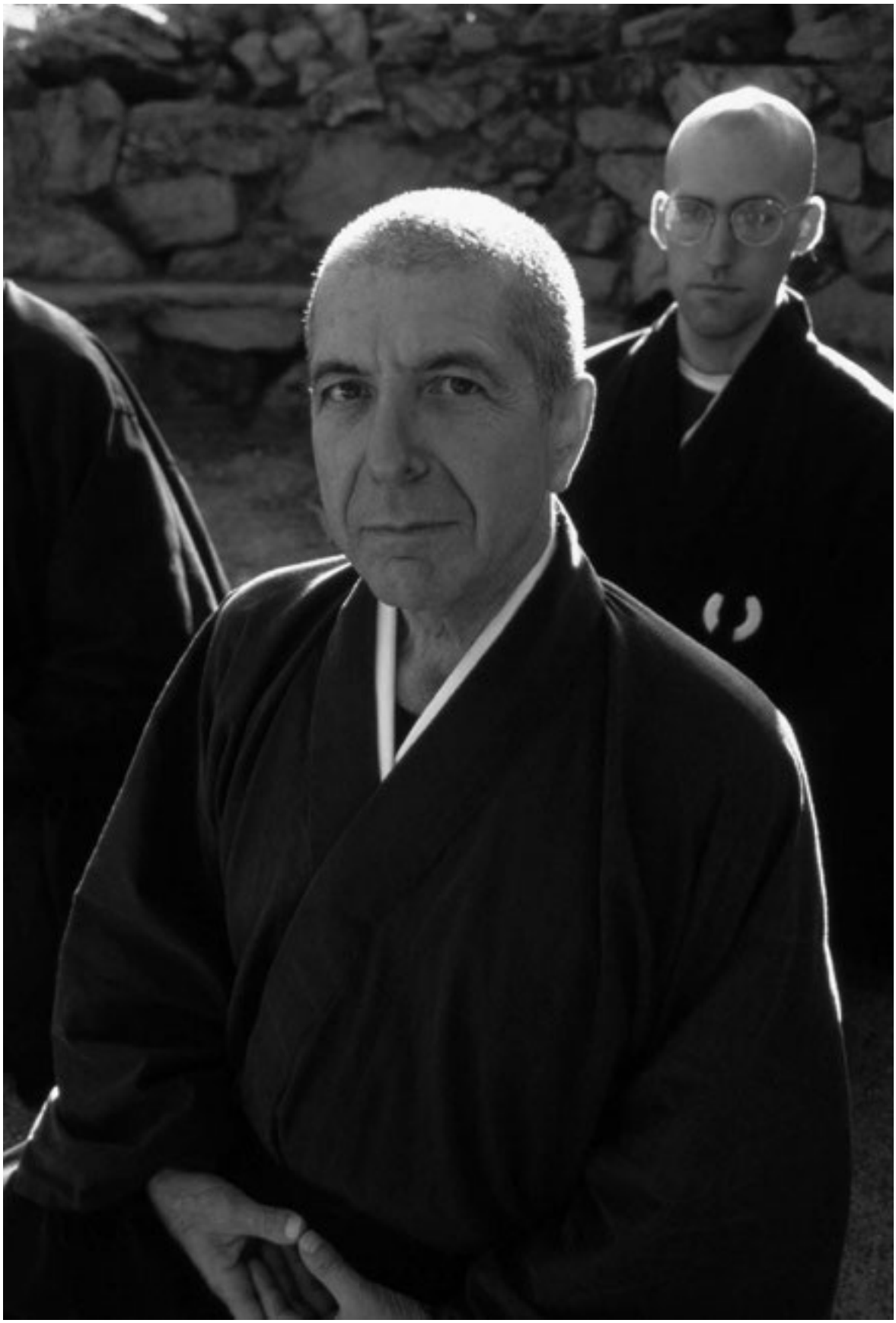
when all your minds were free

when all your minds were free.

And who will write love songs for you ...

My priests they will put flowers there ...

Cohen has not recorded this song himself. It has been covered by Judy Collins (on Wildflowers (1967)), Richie Havens (on Richard P Havens (1969)) and Enrique Morente (in Spanish on Omega (1996)).





Queen Victoria

Queen Victoria,

My father and all his tobacco loved you,

I love you too in all your forms,

the slim unlovely virgin floating among German beards,

the mean governess of the huge pink maps,

the solitary mourner of a prince.

Queen Victoria,

I am cold and rainy,

I am dirty as a glass roof in a train station,

I feel like an empty cast iron exhibition,

I want ornaments on everything,

because my love, she gone with other boys.

Queen Victoria,

do you have a punishment under the white lace,

will you be short with her, make her read those little Bibles,

will you spank her with a mechanical corset.

I want her pure as power, I want her skin slightly musty with petticoats

will you wash the easy bidet out of her head?

Queen Victoria,

I’m not much nourished by modern love,

will you come into my life

with your sorrow and your black carriages,

And your perfect

memories.

Queen Victoria,

the Twentieth Century belongs to you and me.

Let us be two severe giants not less lonely for our partnership,

who discoloured test tubes in the halls of Science,

who turned up unwelcome at every World’s Fair,

heavy with proverb and correction

confusing the star-dazed tourists

with our incomparable sense of loss.

Included on Live Songs (1973), though the song was not recorded in concert but in a cabin in Tennessee. The song is essentially a musical setting of the poem 'Queen Victoria And Me' from Flowers For Hitler. It should, of course, be read as a lyric rather than an historical portrait (in which capacity it would not score highly in an exam). known occasion on which Cohen has sung this song.



Seems So Long Ago, Nancy

It seems so long ago,

Nancy was alone,

looking at the Late Late show

through a semi-precious stone.

In the House of Honesty

her father was on trial,

in the House of Mystery

there was no one at all,

there was no one at all.

It seems so long ago,

none of us were strong;

Nancy wore green stockings

and she slept with everyone.

She never said she’d wait for us

although she was alone,

I think she fell in love for us

in nineteen sixty one,

in nineteen sixty one.

It seems so long ago,

Nancy was alone,

a forty five beside her head,

an open telephone.

We told her she was beautiful,

we told her she was free

but none of us would meet her in

the House of Mystery,

the House of Mystery.

And now you look around you,

see her everywhere,

many use her body,

many comb her hair.

In the hollow of the night

when you are cold and numb

you hear her talking freely then,

she’s happy that you’ve come,

she’s happy that you’ve come.

The basis of this song is reportage – the story of a Montreal friend (the daughter of a Judge) whose free and promiscuous life ended in suicide. (Some have suggested that the song does not entirely reflect the facts of the case, but it is of course a work of art not journalism.) The text shown is taken from the version of the song included on Songs From A Room (1969). Note that the “forty five” referred to in the third stanza is clearly a (.45 calibre) gun, not a (45 rpm) record. The version included on Live Songs (1973), under the shortened title ‘Nancy’, Cohen achieves a subtle but significant change of focus. He replaces the opening phrase “It seems so long ago” with “The morning had not come”. This change economically adds descriptive colour to the portrayal of Nancy’s loneliness, but more importantly removes the singer from the action. The song is no longer a reminiscence and becomes more purely a portrait of dysfunctional misery.



Sing Another Song, Boys

(Let’s sing another song, boys, this one has grown old and bitter.)

Ah his fingernails, I see they’re broken,

his ships they’re all on fire.

The moneylender’s lovely little daughter

ah, she’s eaten, she’s eaten with desire.

She spies him through the glasses

from the pawnshops of her wicked father.

She hails him with a microphone

that some poor singer, just like me, had to leave her.

She tempts him with a clarinet,

she waves a Nazi dagger.

She finds him lying in a heap;

she wants to be his woman.

He says, “Yes, I might go to sleep

but kindly leave, leave the future,

leave it open.”

He stands where it is steep,

oh I guess he thinks that he’s the very first one,

his hand upon his leather belt now

like it was the wheel of some big ocean liner.

And she will learn to touch herself so well

as all the sails burn down like paper.

And he has lit the chain

of his famous cigarillo.

Ah, they’ll never, they’ll never ever reach the moon,

at least not the one that we’re after;

it’s floating broken on the open sea, look out there,

my friends,

and it carries no survivors.

But lets leave these lovers wondering

why they cannot have each other,

and let’s sing another song, boys,

this one has grown old and bitter.

Included on Songs Of Love And Hate (1971) though in a live version rather a studio one.



Sisters Of Mercy

Oh the sisters of mercy, they are not departed or gone.

They were waiting for me when I thought that I just can’t go on.

And they brought me their comfort and later they brought me this song.

Oh I hope you run into them, you who’ve been travelling so long.

Yes you who must leave everything that you cannot control.

It begins with your family, but soon it comes around to your soul.

Well I’ve been where you’re hanging, I think I can see how you’re pinned:

When you’re not feeling holy, your loneliness says that you’ve sinned.

Well they lay down beside me, I made my confession to them.

They touched both my eyes and I touched the dew on their hem.

If your life is a leaf that the seasons tear off and condemn

they will bind you with love that is graceful and green as a stem.

When I left they were sleeping, I hope you run into them soon.

Don’t turn on the lights, you can read their address by the moon.

And you won’t make me jealous if I hear that they sweetened your night:

We weren’t lovers like that and besides it would still be all right,

We weren’t lovers like that and besides it would still be all right.

“I was in Edmonton, doing a tour by myself, I guess this was around ’67, and I was walking along one of the main streets of Edmonton. It was bitter cold and I knew no-one. I passed these two girls in a doorway and they invited me to stand in the doorway with them. Of course I did, and sometime later we found ourselves in my little hotel room, and the three of us were going to go to sleep together. Of course I had all sorts of erotic fantasies about what the evening might bring. We went to bed together, all jammed into this one small couch in this little hotel, and it became clear that wasn’t the purpose of the evening at all, and at one point in the night I found myself unable to sleep. I got up and by the

moonlight, it was very very bright and the moonlight was being reflected off the snow, and I wrote that poem by the ice-reflected moonlight while these women were sleeping. It was one of the few songs I wrote from top to bottom without a line of revision. The words flowed and the melody flowed. By the time they woke up the next morning, it was dawn. I had this completed song to sing to them." Included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967).



So Long, Marianne

Come over to the window, my little darling,

I'd like to try to read your palm.

I used to think I was some kind of Gypsy boy

before I let you take me home.

Now so long, Marianne, it's time that we began

to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all again.

Well you know that I love to live with you,

but you make me forget so very much.

I forget to pray for the angels

and then the angels forget to pray for us.

Now so long, Marianne, it’s time that we began ...

We met when we were almost young

deep in the green lilac park.

You held on to me like I was a crucifix,

as we went kneeling through the dark.

Oh so long, Marianne, it’s time that we began ...

Your letters they all say that you’re beside me now.

Then why do I feel alone?

I’m standing on a ledge and your fine spider web

is fastening my ankle to a stone.

Now so long, Marianne, it’s time that we began ...

For now I need your hidden love.

I’m cold as a new razor blade.

You left when I told you I was curious,

I never said that I was brave.

Oh so long, Marianne, it’s time that we began ...

Oh, you are really such a pretty one.

I see you’ve gone and changed your name again.

And just when I climbed this whole mountainside,

to wash my eyelids in the rain!

Oh so long, Marianne, it’s time that we began ...

Included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), this song took a year to write and reflects the endgame of Cohen’s relationship with Marianne Ihlen. It is an early of example of some of Cohen’s perennial themes – touching on loneliness, freedom and existential fear. A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



Song Of Bernadette

There was a child named Bernadette

I heard the story long ago

She saw the Queen of Heaven once

And kept the vision in her soul

No one believed what she had seen

No one believed what she heard

That there were sorrows to be healed

And mercy, mercy in this world

So many hearts I find

Broke like yours and mine

Torn by what we've done and can't undo

I just want to hold you

Won't you let me hold you

Like Bernadette would do

We've been around, we fall, we fly

We mostly fall, we mostly run

And every now and then we try

To mend the damage that we've done

Tonight, tonight I cannot rest

I've got this joy inside my breast

To think that I did not forget

That child, that song of Bernadette

So many hearts I find ...

Written by Cohen and Jennifer Warnes, who recorded it on Famous Blue Raincoat (1986). Cohen himself has never recorded it, though several others have.



Stories Of The Street

The stories of the street are mine,the Spanish voices laugh.

The Cadillacs go creeping now through the night and the poison gas,

and I lean from my window sill in this old hotel I chose,

yes one hand on my suicide, one hand on the rose.

I know you've heard it's over now and war must surely come,

the cities they are broke in half and the middle men are gone.

But let me ask you one more time, O children of the dusk,

All these hunters who are shrieking now oh do they speak for us?

And where do all these highways go, now that we are free?

Why are the armies marching still that were coming home to me?

O lady with your legs so fine O stranger at your wheel,

You are locked into your suffering and your pleasures are the seal.

The age of lust is giving birth, and both the parents ask

the nurse to tell them fairy tales on both sides of the glass.

And now the infant with his cord is hauled in like a kite,

and one eye filled with blueprints, one eye filled with night.

O come with me my little one, we will find that farm

and grow us grass and apples there and keep all the animals warm.

And if by chance I wake at night and I ask you who I am,

O take me to the slaughterhouse, I will wait there with the lamb.

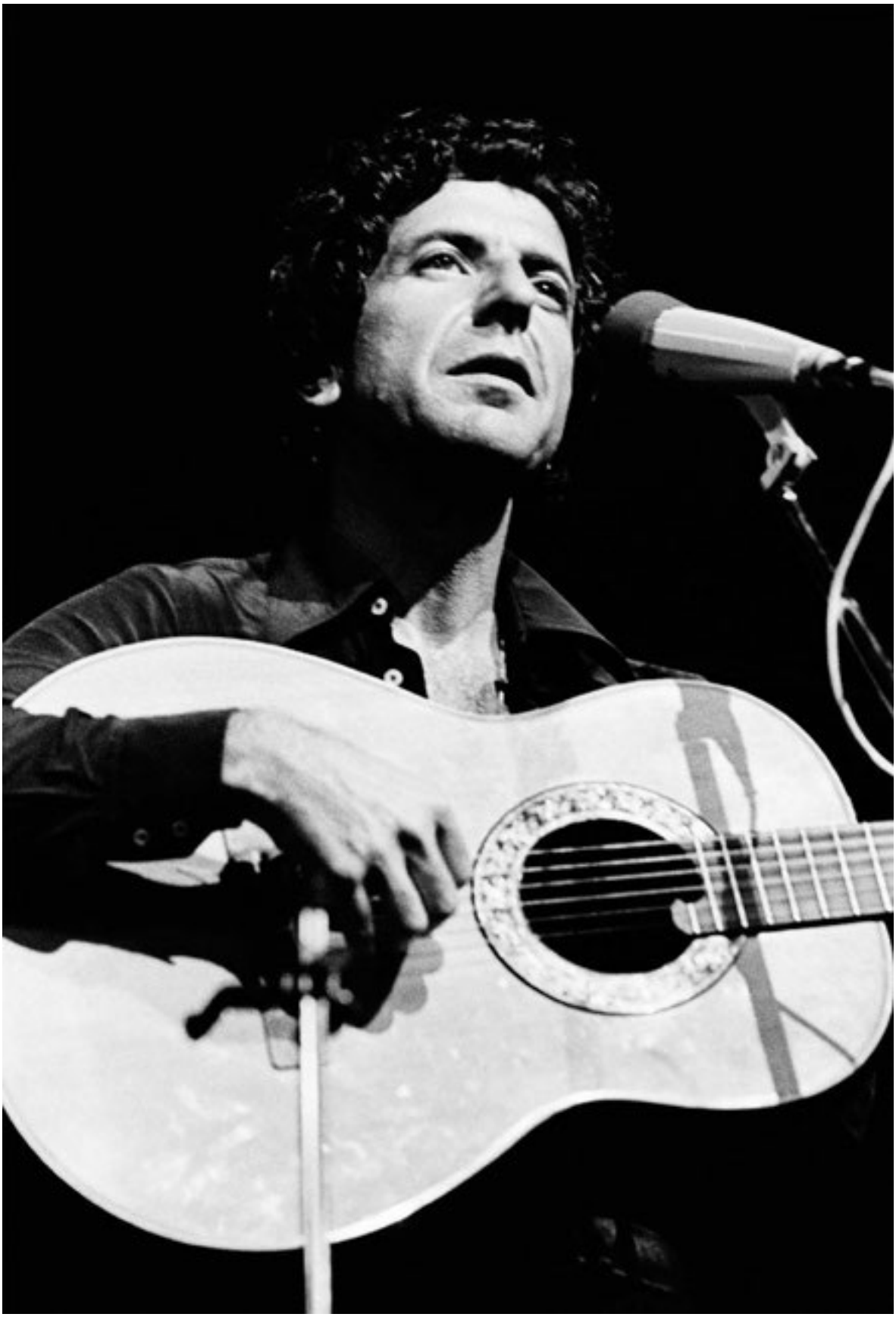
With one hand on the hexagram and one hand on the girl

I balance on a wishing well that all men call the world.

We are so small between the stars, so large against the sky,

and lost among the subway crowds I try to catch your eye.

This song, included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967) documents the despair and dislocation Cohen experienced in New York where he lived in the late Fifties. It is a somewhat immature song in that the singer's personal pain is expressed too personally and too desperately to achieve the distillation of raw experience into poetry.





Story Of Isaac

The door it opened slowly,

my father he came in,

I was nine years old.

And he stood so tall above me,

his blue eyes they were shining

and his voice was very cold.

He said, “I’ve had a vision

and you know I’m strong and holy,

I must do what I’ve been told.”

So he started up the mountain,

I was running, he was walking,

and his axe was made of gold.

Well, the trees they got much smaller,

the lake a lady’s mirror,

we stopped to drink some wine.

Then he threw the bottle over.

Broke a minute later

and he put his hand on mine.

Thought I saw an eagle

but it might have been a vulture,

I never could decide.

Then my father built an altar,

he looked once behind his shoulder,

he knew I would not hide.

You who build these altars now

to sacrifice these children,

you must not do it anymore.

A scheme is not a vision

and you never have been tempted

by a demon or a god.

You who stand above them now,

your hatchets blunt and bloody,

you were not there before,

when I lay upon a mountain

and my father’s hand was trembling

with the beauty of the word.

And if you call me brother now,

forgive me if I inquire,

“Just according to whose plan?”

When it all comes down to dust

I will kill you if I must,

I will help you if I can.

When it all comes down to dust

I will help you if I must,

I will kill you if I can.

And mercy on our uniform,

man of peace or man of war,

the peacock spreads his fan.

Based on the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, this song from Songs From A Room (1969) reflects the contemporary conflict between the emerging counter-culture, with its demands for social and sexual freedom, and the hide-bound traditions of mainstream North American culture. Cohen nails his colours firmly to the counter-cultural mast.



Summertime

Summertime when will you come?

I wanna put my light things on

I wanna put my winter life away

Summertime I need a sunny day

I want those peaches on the table

Want the watermelon red

And the warm sun crepping through the window

To ease the outer pain

I want the sand out there to lie on

And the sea out there to swim

So my heart can take a holiday

From breaking over here

Summertime when will you come?

I wanna put my light things on

Wanna put my winter life away

Summertime I need a sunny day

And I wanna it dry forever

Wanna roll those windows down

Get the breeze back on my body

Get my feet back on the ground

I want the sand out there to lie on

And the sea out there to swim

So my heart can take a holiday

From breaking over here

Summertime when will you come?

I wanna put my light things on

I wanna put my winter life away

Summertime I need a sunny day

Written by Cohen and Sharon Robinson, it has been recorded by Diana Ross (on Red Hot Rhythm And Blues (1987)) and Roberta Flack (on Set The Night To Music (1991)), but never by Cohen himself.





Suzanne

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river

You can hear the boats go by

You can spend the night beside her

And you know that she’s half crazy

But that’s why you want to be there

And she feeds you tea and oranges

That come all the way from China

And just when you mean to tell her

That you have no love to give her

Then she gets you on her wavelength

And she lets the river answer

That you’ve always been her lover

And you want to travel with her

And you want to travel blind

And you know that she will trust you

For you’ve touched her perfect body with your mind.

And Jesus was a sailor

When he walked upon the water

And he spent a long time watching

From his lonely wooden tower

And when he knew for certain

Only drowning men could see him

He said “All men will be sailors then

Until the sea shall free them”

But he himself was broken

Long before the sky would open

Forsaken, almost human

He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

And you want to travel with him

And you want to travel blind

And you think maybe you'll trust him

For he's touched your perfect body with his mind.

Now Suzanne takes your hand

And she leads you to the river

She is wearing rags and feathers

From Salvation Army counters

And the sun pours down like honey

On our lady of the harbour

And she shows you where to look

Among the garbage and the flowers

There are heroes in the seaweed

There are children in the morning

They are leaning out for love

And they will lean that way forever

While Suzanne holds the mirror

And you want to travel with her

And you want to travel blind

And you know that you can trust her

For she’s touched your perfect body with her mind.

One of Cohen’s most famous songs, it is based on the poem ‘ Suzanne Takes You Down’ from Parasites Of Heaven, and was the first track on his first album Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967). A live version was included on Live In Concert (1994). The Suzanne of the title was a friend from Montreal, Suzanne Vaillancourt née Verdal (not Suzanne Elrod, the mother of Cohen’s children Lorca and Adam). She was known for serving Constant Comment tea, which is flavoured with orange rind. The “lonely wooden tower” is the chapel of Nôtre

Dame de Bon Secours, the mariner's church in old Montreal which features a statue of the Virgin Mary ("our lady of the harbour") facing out to sea to bless departing ships.



Take This Longing

Many men have loved the bells

you fastened to the rein,

and everyone who wanted you

they found what they will always want again.

Your beauty lost to you yourself

just as it was lost to them.

Oh take this longing from my tongue,

whatever useless things these hands have done.

Let me see your beauty broken down

like you would do for one you love.

Your body like a searchlight

my poverty revealed,

I would like to try your charity

until you cry, “Now you must try my greed.”

And everything depends upon

how near you sleep to me

Just take this longing from my tongue

all the lonely things my hands have done.

Let me see your beauty broken down

like you would do for one you love.

Hungry as an archway

through which the troops have passed,

I stand in ruins behind you,

with your winter clothes, your broken sandal straps.

I love to see you naked over there

especially from the back.

Oh take this longing from my tongue,

all the useless things my hands have done,

untie for me your hired blue gown,

like you would do for one that you love.

You’re faithful to the better man,

I’m afraid that he left.

So let me judge your love affair

in this very room where I have sentenced

mine to death.

I’ll even wear these old laurel leaves

that he’s shaken from his head.

Just take this longing from my tongue,

all the useless things my hands have done,

let me see your beauty broken down,

like you would do for one you love.

Like you would do for one you love.

Included on New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974), this is a reworking of an earlier song ‘The Bells’, covered by Buffy Sainte-Marie on her album She Used To Wanna Be A Ballerina (1971). The principal difference between the two versions is the addition of the chorus line from which the later version takes its title.



Take This Waltz

Now in Vienna there’s ten pretty women

There’s a shoulder where Death comes to cry

There’s a lobby with nine hundred windows

There’s a tree where the doves go to die

There’s a piece that was torn from the morning

And it hangs in the Gallery of Frost

Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay

Take this waltz, take this waltz

Take this waltz with the clamp on its jaws

Oh I want you, I want you, I want you

On a chair with a dead magazine

In the cave at the tip of the lily

In some hallways where love’s never been

On a bed where the moon has been sweating

In a cry filled with footsteps and sand

Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay

Take this waltz, take this waltz

Take its broken waist in your hand

This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz

With its very own breath of brandy and Death

Dragging its tail in the sea

There’s a concert hall in Vienna

Where your mouth had a thousand reviews

There’s a bar where the boys have stopped talking

They’ve been sentenced to death by the blues

Ah, but who is it climbs to your picture

With a garland of freshly cut tears?

Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay

Take this waltz, take this waltz

Take this waltz it’s been dying for years

There’s an attic where children are playing

Where I’ve got to lie down with you soon

In a dream of Hungarian lanterns

In the mist of some sweet afternoon

And I’ll see what you’ve chained to your sorrow

All your sheep and your lilies of snow

Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay

Take this waltz, take this waltz

With its “I’ll never forget you, you know!”

This waltz, this waltz, this waltz, this waltz ...

And I’ll dance with you in Vienna

I’ll be wearing a river’s disguise

The hyacinth wild on my shoulder,

My mouth on the dew of your thighs

And I’ll bury my soul in a scrapbook,

With the photographs there, and the moss

And I’ll yield to the flood of your beauty

My cheap violin and my cross

And you’ll carry me down on your dancing

To the pools that you lift on your wrist

Oh my love, Oh my love

Take this waltz, take this waltz

It’s yours now. It’s all that there is

The lyrics of this song, included on I’m Your Man (1988), are Cohen’s translation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s poem ‘Pequeño Vals Vienès’ from his collection Poetas En Nueva York. It was written for a tribute album compiled to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Lorca’s murder by Franco’s fascist soldiers in 1936. Cohen had first encountered Lorca’s poems at the age of fifteen and, in literary terms, it was love at first sight. However, Lorca’s influence on Cohen’s work, profound thoughit is, is intellectual and emotional rather than stylistic.



Teachers

I met a woman long ago

her hair the black that black can go,

Are you a teacher of the heart?

Soft she answered no.

I met a girl across the sea,

her hair the gold that gold can be,

Are you a teacher of the heart?

Yes, but not for thee.

I met a man who lost his mind

in some lost place I had to find,

follow me the wise man said,

but he walked behind.

I walked into a hospital

where none was sick and none was well,

when at night the nurses left

I could not walk at all.

Morning came and then came noon,

dinner time a scalpel blade

lay beside my silver spoon.

Some girls wander by mistake

into the mess that scalpels make.

Are you the teachers of my heart?

We teach old hearts to break.

One morning I woke up alone,

the hospital and the nurses gone.

Have I carved enough my Lord?

Child, you are a bone.

I ate and ate and ate,

no I did not miss a plate, well

How much do these suppers cost?

We’ll take it out in hate.

I spent my hatred everyplace,

on every work on every face,

someone gave me wishes

and I wished for an embrace.

Several girls embraced me, then

I was embraced by men,

Is my passion perfect?

No, do it once again.

I was handsome I was strong,

I knew the words of every song.

Did my singing please you?

No, the words you sang were wrong.

Who is it whom I address,

who takes down what I confess?

Are you the teachers of my heart?

We teach old hearts to rest.

Oh teachers are my lessons done?

I cannot do another one.

They laughed and laughed and said, Well child,

are your lessons done?

are your lessons done?

are your lessons done?

Included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), this song is based on the poem 'I Met A Woman Long Ago' from Parasites Of Heaven. Thematically similar to "Master Song", and predating Cohen's meeting his own "master" Roshi, it is not a song (or indeed a theme) that Cohen has persisted with, not having sung it since 1968.



Tennessee Waltz

I was dancing with my darlin’

to the Tennessee Waltz

When an old friend I happened to see

Introduced him to my loved one

and while they were waltzing

My friend stole my sweetheart from me

I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz

Now I know just how much I have lost

Yes I lost my little darlin’

The night they were playing

The beautiful Tennessee Waltz.

She comes dancing through the darkness

To the Tennessee Waltz

And I feel like I’m falling apart

And it’s stronger than drink

And it’s deeper than sorrow

This darkness she’s left in my heart.

The basic song was written in 1947 by Redd Stewart and Pee Wee King, and was a favourite in both the country and popular music genres. Cohen added the third stanza for the live version (dating from 1985) included on Dear Heather (2004).



That Don’t Make It Junk

I fought against the bottle,

But I had to do it drunk –

Took my diamond to the pawnshop –

But that don’t make it junk.

I know that I’m forgiven,

But I don’t know how I know

I don’t trust my inner feelings –

Inner feelings come and go.

How come you called me here tonight?

How come you bother

With my heart at all?

You raise me up in grace,

Then you put me in a place,

Where I must fall.

Too late to fix another drink –

The lights are going out –

I’ll listen to the darkness sing –

I know what that’s about.

I tried to love you my way,

But I couldn’t make it hold.

So I closed the Book of Longing

And I do what I am told.

How come you called me here tonight?

How come you bother with my heart at all?

You raise me up in grace,

Then you put me in a place,

Where I must fall.

I fought against the bottle,

But I had to do it drunk –

Took my diamond to the pawnshop –

But that don’t make it junk.

This song, co-written by Sharon Robinson, was included on Ten New Songs (2001). Does the phrase “took my diamond to the pawnshop / but that don’t make it junk” refer to Cohen’s abandonment of the “pure” literary life in favour of a career in popular music?



The Butcher

I came upon a butcher,

he was slaughtering a lamb,

I accused him there

with his tortured lamb.

He said, “Listen to me, child,

I am what I am

and you, you are my only son.”

Well, I found a silver needle,

I put it into my arm.

It did some good,

did some harm.

But the nights were cold

and it almost kept me warm,

how come the night is long?

I saw some flowers growing up

where that lamb fell down;

was I supposed to praise my Lord,

make some kind of joyful sound?

He said, “Listen, listen to me now,

I go round and round

and you, you are my only child.”

Do not leave me now,

do not leave me now,

I’m broken down

from a recent fall.

Blood upon my body

and ice upon my soul,

lead on, my son, it is your world.

Some have claimed that this song, included on Songs From A Room (1969), is about drugs (doubtless because of the needle reference in the second stanza), but if so it is a singularly odd treatment of the subject. A better reading, remembering the prevailing attitude of Cohen and his literary confreres in Fifties Montreal, is that the lamb slaughtered in the opening lines represents personal and cultural innocence and simplicity and that it is society’s spiritual murder of the pure and the innocent that is Cohen’s subject matter. The needle is one

escape from the negative cultural condition of the times, but an unsuccessful one – "it almost kept me warm".





The Captain

Now the Captain called me to his bed

He fumbled for my hand

“Take these silver bars,” he said

“I’m giving you command.”

“Command of what, there’s no one here

There’s only you and me --

All the rest are dead or in retreat

Or with the enemy.”

“Complain, complain, that’s all you’ve done

Ever since we lost

If it’s not the Crucifixion

Then it’s the Holocaust.”

“May Christ have mercy on your soul

For making such a joke

Amid these hearts that burn like coal

And the flesh that rose like smoke.”

“I know that you have suffered, lad,

But suffer this awhile:

Whatever makes a soldier sad

Will make a killer smile.”

“I’m leaving, Captain, I must go

There’s blood upon your hand

But tell me, Captain, if you know

Of a decent place to stand.”

“There is no decent place to stand

In a massacre;

But if a woman take your hand

Go and stand with her.”

“I left a wife in Tennessee

And a baby in Saigon --

I risked my life, but not to hear

Some country-western song.”

“Ah but if you cannot raise your love

To a very high degree,

Then you’re just the man I’ve been thinking of --

So come and stand with me.”

“Your standing days are done,” I cried,

“You’ll rally me no more.

I don’t even know what side

We fought on, or what for.”

“I’m on the side that’s always lost

Against the side of Heaven

I’m on the side of Snake-eyes tossed

Against the side of Seven.

And I’ve read the Bill of Human Rights

And some of it was true

But there wasn’t any burden left

So I’m laying it on you.”

Now the Captain he was dying

But the Captain wasn’t hurt

The silver bars were in my hand

I pinned them to my shirt.

At first sight a mere piece of narrative fun, this song, included on Various Positions (1984), is clearly not the simple ditty it first appears to be. The song is overtly about inheritance, but what is the inheritance in question? One reading is that it is the Jewish tradition – the Captain's moan "complain, complain .." echoes many a Jewish joke and reflects an anti-Semitism both ancient and modern. Another is that the song deals with the passing of an artistic baton, perhaps one carved in the literary circles of Cohen's youth or perhaps a musical one being passed on by a songwriter in his fifties. Is Cohen the testator or the heir, the Captain or his truculent successor? This being a work of art, there may be more than one answer.



The Faith

The sea so deep and blind

The sun, the wild regret

The club, the wheel, the mind,

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The club, the wheel, the mind

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The blood, the soil, the faith

These words you can’t forget

Your vow, your holy place

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The blood, the soil, the faith

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

A cross on every hill

A star, a minaret

So many graves to fill

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

So many graves to fill

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

The sea so deep and blind

Where still the sun must set

And time itself unwind

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

And time itself unwind

O love, aren’t you tired yet?

Included on Dear Heather (2004), this song is comprised new lyrics sung to the tune of ‘Un Canadien Errant’, a song written in 1842 by Antoine Gerin-Lajoie to celebrate those exiled after the failed Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837/8 and covered by Cohen on Recent Songs (1979). The new song is, of course, on an entirely different subject.





The Future

Give me back my broken night

my mirrored room, my secret life

it’s lonely here,

there’s no one left to torture

Give me absolute control

over every living soul

And lie beside me, baby,

that’s an order!

Give me crack and anal sex

Take the only tree that’s left

and stuff it up the hole

in your culture

Give me back the Berlin wall

give me Stalin and St Paul

I’ve seen the future, brother:

it is murder.

Things are going to slide, slide in all directions

Won’t be nothing

Nothing you can measure anymore

The blizzard, the blizzard of the world

has crossed the threshold

and it has overturned

the order of the soul

When they said REPENT REPENT

I wonder what they meant

When they said REPENT REPENT

I wonder what they meant

When they said REPENT REPENT

I wonder what they meant

You don’t know me from the wind

you never will, you never did

I’m the little jew

who wrote the Bible

I’ve seen the nations rise and fall

I’ve heard their stories, heard them all

but love’s the only engine of survival

Your servant here, he has been told

to say it clear, to say it cold:

It’s over, it ain’t going any further

And now the wheels of heaven stop

you feel the devil’s riding crop

Get ready for the future:

it is murder

Things are going to slide ...

There’ll be the breaking of the ancient

western code

Your private life will suddenly explode

There’ll be phantoms

There’ll be fires on the road

and the white man dancing

You’ll see a woman

hanging upside down

her features covered by her fallen gown

and all the lousy little poets

coming round

tryin’ to sound like Charlie Manson

and the white man dancin’

Give me back the Berlin wall

Give me Stalin and St Paul

Give me Christ

or give me Hiroshima

Destroy another fetus now

We don’t like children anyhow

I’ve seen the future, baby:

it is murder

Things are going to slide ...

When they said REPENT REPENT ...

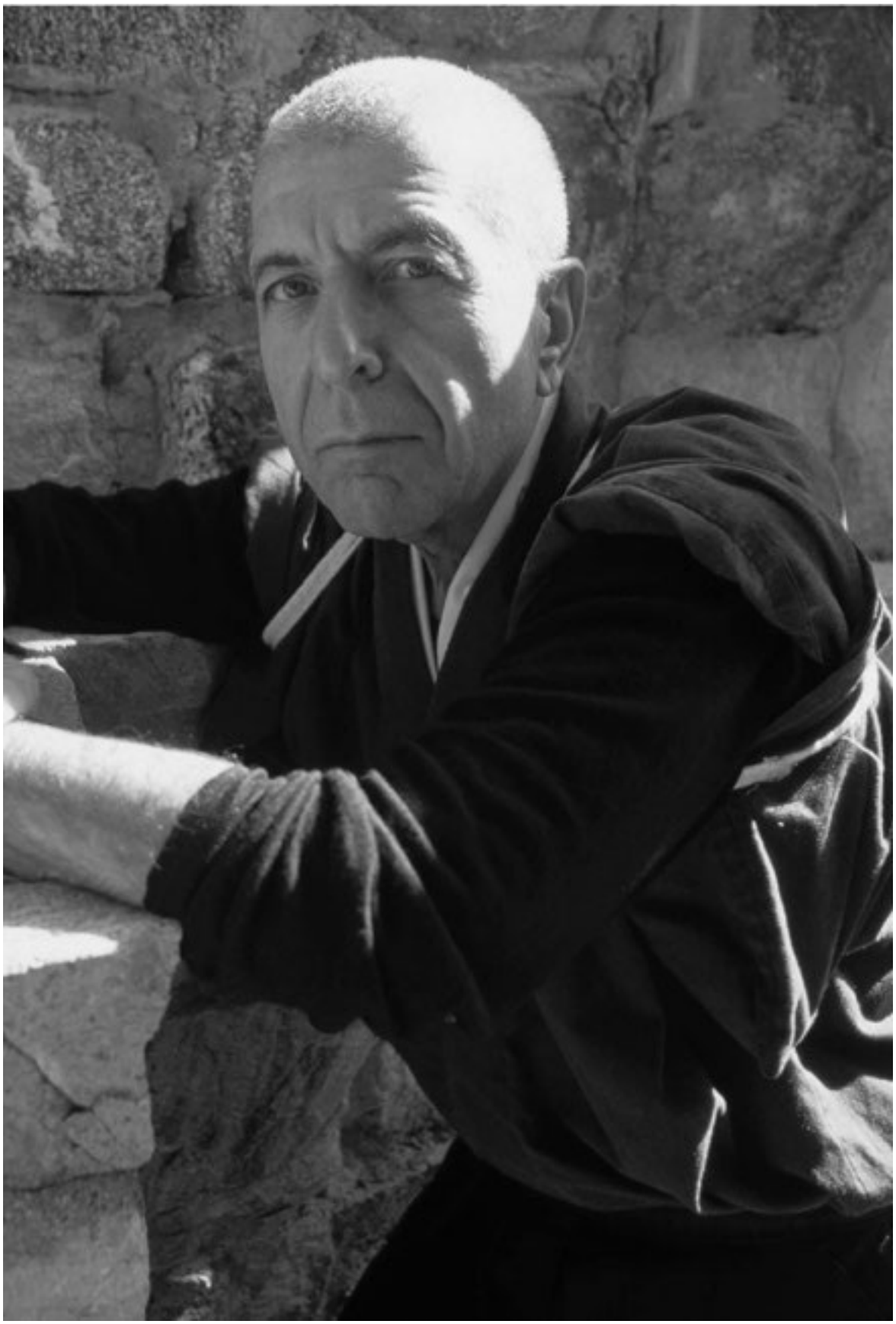
In this song, the title track of The Future (1992), Cohen pulls off a neat trick – making existential despair entertaining. Amid the collapse of civilisation as we know it, he yearns for the terrible old certainties – the Berlin Wall, Stalin, St Paul, Christ, Hiroshima. There is only one plant poking through this desolate landscape, a plant in which Cohen has shown a keen botanical interest throughout his life: “love’s the only engine of survival”.

The Great Event

It’s going to happen very soon. The great event which will end the horror. Which will end the sorrow. Next Tuesday, when the sun goes down, I will play the Moonlight Sonata backwards. This will reverse the effects of the world’s mad plunge into suffering, for the last 200 million years. What a lovely night that would be. What a sigh of relief, as the senile robins become bright red again, and the retired nightingales, pick up their dusty tails, and assert the majesty of creation!

Included on More Best Of Leonard Cohen (1997), this previously unreleased track – it can hardly be called a song – was recited by “Victoria”, clearly not a fluent English-speaker (if indeed she speaks English at all) whose stresses are

wrong and whose emphases are those of someone reading an unfamiliar, foreign text. Though produced towards the end of his career, one can imagine such an experimental piece emerging from the Montreal avant-garde of the Fifties in which Cohen first cut his artistic teeth.





The Guests

One by one, the guests arrive

The guests are coming through

The open-hearted many

The broken-hearted few

And no one knows where the night is going

And no one knows why the wine is flowing

Oh love I need you

I need you

I need you

I need you

Oh . . . I need you now

And those who dance, begin to dance

Those who weep begin

And “Welcome, welcome” cries a voice

“Let all my guests come in.”

And no one knows where the night is going ...

And all go stumbling through that house

in lonely secrecy

Saying “Do reveal yourself”

or “Why has thou forsaken me?”

And no one knows where the night is going ...

All at once the torches flare

The inner door flies open

One by one they enter there

In every style of passion

And no one knows where the night is going ...

And here they take their sweet repast

While house and grounds dissolve

And one by one the guests are cast

Beyond the garden wall

And no one knows where the night is going ...

Those who dance, begin to dance

Those who weep begin

Those who earnestly are lost

Are lost and lost again

And no one knows where the night is going ...

One by one the guests arrive

The guests are coming through

The broken-hearted many

The open-hearted few

And no one knows where the night is going ...

An important milestone in Cohen's artistic development, and reflective of the rejuvenating effect of a series of personal difficulties Cohen experienced in 1978, this song was the opening track on Recent Songs (1979). The imagery of the song is influenced by the Persian poets Attar and Rumi, but the song is not easy to interpret. One possible reading is that the party that the guests attend is life itself, and that what is required to mitigate life's "lonely secrecy" is – not for the first or the last time in Cohen's work – love. A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



The Gypsy's Wife

And where, where, where is my Gypsy wife tonight

I've heard all the wild reports, they can't be right

But whose head is this she's dancing with on the threshing floor

whose darkness deepens in her arms a little more

And where, where is my Gypsy wife tonight?

Where, where is my Gypsy wife tonight?

Ah the silver knives are flashing in the tired old cafe

A ghost climbs on the table in a bridal negligee

She says, "My body is the light, my body is the way"

I raise my arm against it all and I catch the bride’s bouquet

And where, where is my Gypsy wife tonight?...

Too early for the rainbow, too early for the dove

These are the final days, this is the darkness, this is the flood

And there is no man or woman who can’t be touched

But you who come between them will be judged

And where, where is my Gypsy wife tonight?...

Included on Recent Songs (1979) and Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001), this song was written while “my own marriage was breaking up and in a sense it was written for my gypsy wife … but in another way it’s just a song about the way men and women have lost each other … and become gypsies to each other”.



The Law

How many times did you call me

And I knew it was late

I left everybody

But I never went straight

I don’t claim to be guilty

But I do understand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

Now my heart’s like a blister

From doing what I do

If the moon has a sister

It’s got to be you

I’m going to miss you forever

Tho’ it’s not what I planned

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

Now the deal has been dirty

Since dirty began

I’m not asking for mercy

Not from the man

You just don’t ask for mercy

While you’re still on the stand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

I don’t claim to be guilty

Guilty’s too grand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

That’s all I can say, baby

That’s all I can say

It wasn’t for nothing

That they put me away

I fell with my angel

Down the chain of command

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

There’s a Law, there’s an Arm, there’s a Hand

This song from Various Positions (1984) may have a title that is a direct translation of the Hebrew word Torah (used to describe the first five books of the Bible), but it is not a religious song. Indeed, some of its ideas are heretical – “I fell with my angel” contradicts the Jewish principle that angels can neither improve nor deteriorate while the suggestion that “you just don’t ask for mercy / while you’re still on the stand” is at odds with Catholic theology and practice. Given that Cohen has said that this song has “got something to do with the fact that there are consequences to our activities”, we may conclude that inso far as the song contains spiritual wisdom it is humanistic wisdom not religious.



The Letters

You never liked to get

The letters that I sent.

But now you've got the gist

Of what my letters meant.

You're reading them again,

The ones you didn't burn.

You press them to your lips,

My pages of concern.

I said there'd been a flood.

I said there’s nothing left.

I hoped that you would come.

I gave you my address.

Your story was so long,

The plot was so intense,

It took you years to cross

The lines of self-defense.

The wounded forms appear:

The loss, the full extent;

And simple kindness here,

The solitude of strength.

You walk into my room.

You stand there at my desk,

Begin your letter to

The one who’s coming next.

Co-written by Sharon Robinson, this song was included on Dear Heather (2004). The phrase “I said there’d been a flood / I said there’s nothing left” may be an oblique reference to the apocalyptic vision Cohen expressed in ‘The Future’, though it is of course a worldview that he has implicitly or explicitly expressed throughout his career.



The Old Revolution

I finally broke into the prison,

I found my place in the chain.

Even damnation is poisoned with rainbows,

all the brave young men

they’re waiting now to see a signal

which some killer will be lighting for pay.

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture,

you whom I cannot betray.

I fought in the old revolution

on the side of the ghost and the King.

Of course I was very young

and I thought that we were winning;

I can’t pretend I still feel very much like singing

as they carry the bodies away.

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture...

Lately you’ve started to stutter

as though you had nothing to say.

To all of my architects let me be traitor.

Now let me say I myself gave the order

to sleep and to search and to destroy.

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture...

Yes, you who are broken by power,

you who are absent all day,

you who are kings for the sake of your children’s story,

the hand of your beggar is burdened down with money,

the hand of your lover is clay.

Into this furnace I ask you now to venture...

This song, included on Songs From A Room (1969), uses political language but does not address social themes. But, although the song feels chock full of meaning, it is not clear what exactly it does address. That Cohen has not played the song live since its release suggests that its ambiguity has strayed over the boundary into imprecision, that the poet has indeed “started to stutter …”.



The Smokey Life

I’ve never seen your eyes so wide

I’ve never seen your appetite quite this occupied

Elsewhere is your feast of love

I know ... where long ago we agreed to keep it light

So lets be married one more night

It’s light, light enough

To let it go

It’s light enough to let it go

Remember when the scenery started fading

I held you till you learned to walk on air

So don’t look down the ground is gone,

there’s no one waiting anyway

The Smoky Life is practiced

Everywhere

So set your restless heart at ease

Take a lesson from these Autumn leaves

They waste no time waiting for the snow

Don’t argue now you’ll be late

There is nothing to investigate

It’s light enough, light enough

To let it go

Light enough to let it go

Remember when the scenery started fading

I held you til you learned to walk on air

So don’t look down the ground is gone,

there’s no one waiting anyway

The Smoky Life is practiced everywhere

Come on back if the moment lends

You can look up all my very closest friends

Light, light enough

To let it go

It’s light enough to let it go

Played on Cohen’s 1975 tour under the title ‘I Guess It’s Time’ and co-credited to John Lissauer, the version included on Recent Songs (1979) is credited solely to Cohen. The notion that “the smokey life” refers to drug use is not only simplistic but unevidenced. Clearly, from the song, “the smokey life” is one where all tangible reference points have evaporated. The thrust of the song is that when this happens (as it does “everywhere”), one must not panic: one must continue, one must survive. A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).





The Stranger Song

It’s true that all the men you knew were dealers

who said they were through with dealing

Every time you gave them shelter

I know that kind of man

It’s hard to hold the hand of anyone

who is reaching for the sky just to surrender,

who is reaching for the sky just to surrender.

And then sweeping up the jokers that he left behind

you find he did not leave you very much

not even laughter

Like any dealer he was watching for the card

that is so high and wild

he’ll never need to deal another

He was just some Joseph looking for a manger

He was just some Joseph looking for a manger

And then leaning on your window sill

he’ll say one day you caused his will

to weaken with your love and warmth and shelter

And then taking from his wallet

an old schedule of trains, he’ll say

I told you when I came I was a stranger

I told you when I came I was a stranger.

But now another stranger seems

to want you to ignore his dreams

as though they were the burden of some other

O you’ve seen that man before

his golden arm dispatching cards

but now it’s rusted from the elbows to the finger

And he wants to trade the game he plays for shelter

Yes he wants to trade the game he knows for shelter.

Ah you hate to see another tired man

lay down his hand

like he was giving up the holy game of poker

And while he talks his dreams to sleep

you notice there’s a highway

that is curling up like smoke above his shoulder.

It is curling just like smoke above his shoulder.

You tell him to come in sit down

but something makes you turn around

The door is open you can’t close your shelter

You try the handle of the road

It opens do not be afraid

It’s you my love, you who are the stranger

It’s you my love, you who are the stranger.

Well, I’ve been waiting, I was sure

we’d meet between the trains we’re waiting for

I think it’s time to board another

Please understand, I never had a secret chart

to get me to the heart of this

or any other matter

When he talks like this

you don’t know what he’s after

When he speaks like this,

you don’t know what he’s after.

Let’s meet tomorrow if you choose

upon the shore, beneath the bridge

that they are building on some endless river

Then he leaves the platform

for the sleeping car that’s warm

You realize, he’s only advertising one more shelter

And it comes to you, he never was a stranger

And you say ok the bridge or someplace later.

And then sweeping up the jokers that he left behind ...

And leaning on your window sill ...

I told you when I came I was a stranger.

One of Cohen's earliest songs, it was included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967) and on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001). A number of phrases ("he wants to trade the game he plays for shelter" and "you hate to watch another tired man / lay down his hand / like he was giving up the holy game of poker") can be read as metaphors for Cohen's abandonment of his literary ambitions for the "shelter" of a musical career. The song is also a good early example of a Cohen trademark – the use of religious images and vocabulary for non-religious purposes.



The Traitor

Now the Swan it floated on the English river

Ah the Rose of High Romance it opened wide

A sun tanned woman yearned me through the summer

and the judges watched us from the other side

I told my mother “Mother I must leave you

preserve my room but do not shed a tear

Should rumour of a shabby ending reach you

it was half my fault and half the atmosphere”

But the Rose I sickened with a scarlet fever

and the Swan I tempted with a sense of shame

She said at last I was her finest lover

and if she withered I would be to blame

The judges said you missed it by a fraction

rise up and brace your troops for the attack

Ah the dreamers ride against the men of action

Oh see the men of action falling back

But I lingered on her thighs a fatal moment

I kissed her lips as though I thirsted still

My falsity had stung me like a hornet

The poison sank and it paralysed my will

I could not move to warn all the younger soldiers

that they had been deserted from above

So on battlefields from here to Barcelona

I’m listed with the enemies of love

And long ago she said “I must be leaving,

Ah but keep my body here to lie upon

You can move it up and down and when I’m sleeping

Run some wire through that Rose and wind the Swan”

So daily I renew my idle duty

I touch her here and there -- I know my place

I kiss her open mouth and I praise her beauty

and people call me traitor to my face

Included on Recent Songs (1984), this song includes fine examples of Cohen's literary skills. The phrase "a suntanned woman yawned me through the summer" is wonderfully evocative. An earlier version of the song, then called 'The Traitor Song', was played on Cohen's 1975 tour. At that time, it was co-credited to John Lissauer, but he did not play on and is not credited for the album version.



The Window

Why do you stand by the window

Abandoned to beauty and pride

The thorn of the night in your bosom

The spear of the age in your side

Lost in the rages of fragrance

Lost in the rags of remorse

Lost in the waves of a sickness

That loosens the high silver nerves

Oh chosen love, Oh frozen love

Oh tangle of matter and ghost

Oh darling of angels, demons and saints

And the whole broken-hearted host

Gentle this soul

And come forth from the cloud of unknowing

And kiss the cheek of the moon

The New Jerusalem glowing

Why tarry all night in the ruin

And leave no word of discomfort

And leave no observer to mourn

But climb on your tears and be silent

Like a rose on its ladder of thorns

Oh chosen love, Oh frozen love...

Then lay your rose on the fire

The fire give up to the sun

The sun give over to splendour

In the arms of the high holy one

For the holy one dreams of a letter

Dreams of a letter’s death

Oh bless thee continuous stutter

Of the word being made into flesh

Oh chosen love, Oh frozen love...

Gentle this soul

Included on Recent Songs (1984), and also on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001), this song contains some of Cohen's finest writing – the phrases "oh tangle of matter and ghost" and " climb on your tears and be silent / like the rose on its ladder of thorns" rank alongside his best lyrical constructions. Unusually, Cohen uses explicitly religious language in a song with a recognisably religious theme, for he is attempting to seduce his woman not into bed but into a state of grace. The last stanza ends with a prayer that would not have disgraced the psalmist and which any poet would be proud to have penned: "oh bless the continuous stutter / of the word being made into flesh".



There For You

When it all went down

And the pain came through

I get it now

I was there for you

Don’t ask me how

I know it’s true

I get it now

I was there for you

I make my plans

Like I always do

But when I look back

I was there for you

I walk the streets

Like I used to do

And I freeze with fear

But I’m there for you

I see my life

In full review

It was never me

It was always you

You sent me here

You sent me there

Breaking things

I can’t repair

Making objects

Out of thoughts

Making more

By thinking not

Eating food

And drinking wine

A body that

I thought was mine

Dressed as Arab

Dressed as Jew

O mask of iron

I was there for you

Moods of glory

Moods so foul

The world comes through

A bloody towel

And death is old

But it’s always new

I freeze with fear

And I’m there for you

I see it clear

I always knew

It was never me

I was there for you

I was there for you

My darling one

And by your law

It all was done

This song, included on Dear Heather (2004), was co-written by Sharon Robinson. Addressed to an individual woman, this song simply would be flattering and romantic. Given what we know of the complexities of his work and the richness of his love-life, it is surely a better reading to see it as addressed to womankind in general, or to the abstract Love, whose servant Cohen has ever been.



There Is A War

There is a war between the rich and poor,

a war between the man and the woman.

There is a war between the ones who say there is a war

and the ones who say there isn’t.

Why don’t you come on back to the war, that’s right, get in it,

why don’t you come on back to the war, it’s just beginning.

Well I live here with a woman and a child,

the situation makes me kind of nervous.

Yes, I rise up from her arms, she says “I guess you call this love”;

I call it service.

Why don’t you come on back to the war, don’t be a tourist,

why don’t you come on back to the war, before it hurts us,

why don’t you come on back to the war, let’s all get nervous.

You cannot stand what I’ve become,

you much prefer the gentleman I was before.

I was so easy to defeat, I was so easy to control,

I didn’t even know there was a war.

Why don’t you come on back to the war, don’t be embarrassed,

why don’t you come on back to the war, you can still get married.

There is a war between the rich and poor,

a war between the man and the woman.

There is a war between the left and right,

a war between the black and white,

a war between the odd and the even.

Why don’t you come on back to the war, pick up your tiny burden,

why don’t you come on back to the war, let’s all get even,

why don’t you come on back to the war, can’t you hear me speaking?

Though this song, included on New Skin From The Old Ceremony (1974), lists a number of sociopolitical conflicts, it is clear that Cohen is only really concerned with the war between himself and Suzanne Elrod. Unfortunately, Cohen does not generalise from the particular and the song fails to rise above its partisan and somewhat bilious context.



To A Teacher

Dedicated to A. M. Klein (1909-1972)

Hurt once and for all into silence.

A long pain ending without a song to prove it.

Who could stand beside you so close to Eden,

When you glinted in every eye the held-high

razor, shivering every ram and son?

And now the silent loony bin, where

The shadows live in the rafters like

Day-weary bats,

Until the turning mind, a radar signal,

lures them to exaggerate

Mountain-size on the white stone wall

Your tiny limp.

How can I leave you in such a house?

Are there no more saints and wizards

to praise their ways with pupils,

No more evil to stun with the slap

of a wet red tongue?

Did you confuse the Messiah in a mirror

and rest because he had finally come?

Let me cry Help beside you, Teacher.

I have entered under this dark roof

As fearlessly as an honoured son

Enters his father’s house.

Included on Dear Heather (2004), the words of this song were originally included in Cohen’s anthology The Spice-Box Of The Earth. Abraham Moses Klein was a Canadian writer, best known as a poet and cited by Cohen as an influence. He was a significant figure on the Montreal literary scene from the Thirties onwards, and an important member of the Montreal Jewish community. After 1956, he gave up writing and became a recluse, the “silence” referred to in the song’s opening words.



Tonight Will Be Fine

Sometimes I find I get to thinking of the past.

We swore to each other then that our love would surely last.

You kept right on loving, I went on a fast,

now I am too thin and your love is too vast.

But I know from your eyes

and I know from your smile

that tonight will be fine,

will be fine, will be fine, will be fine

for a while.

I choose the rooms that I live in with care,

the windows are small and the walls almost bare,

there’s only one bed and there’s only one prayer;

I listen all night for your step on the stair.

But I know from your eyes

and I know from your smile

that tonight will be fine,

will be fine, will be fine, will be fine

for a while.

Oh sometimes I see her undressing for me,

she’s the soft naked lady love meant her to be

and she’s moving her body so brave and so free.

If I’ve got to remember that’s a fine memory.

And I know from her eyes

and I know from her smile

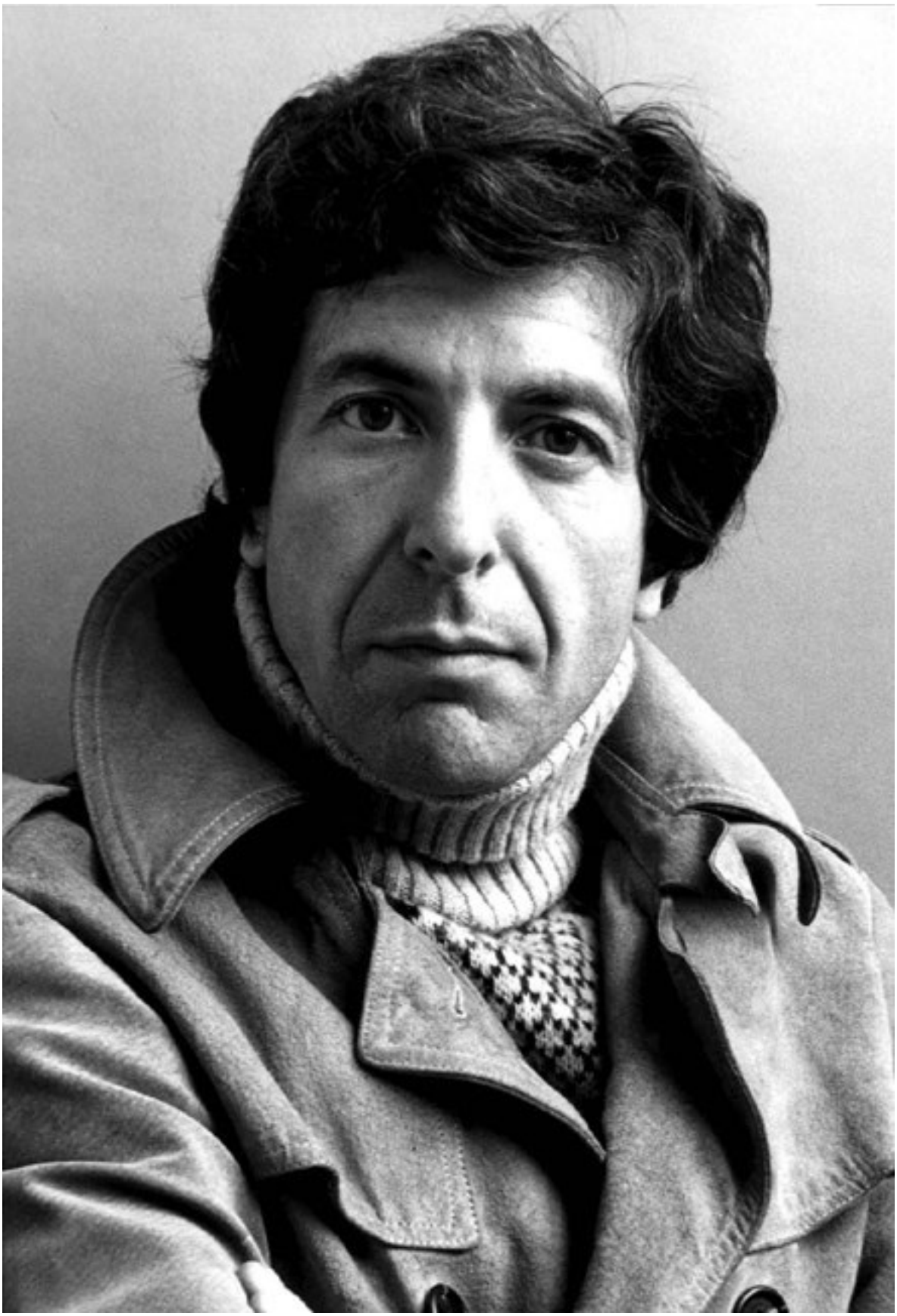
that tonight will be fine,

will be fine, will be fine, will be fine

for a while.

Cohen has described this song, included on his second album Songs From A Room (1969) as the first proper song he wrote, and it contains many elements that he would return to in his later work – the sensual and elegiac tone, the failing relationship, the rainbow moments seized in the face of damnation. The second stanza contains a very good example of the experienced poet at work at the beginning of his songwriting career. Following an by all accounts accurate description of his domestic arrangements, he writes “there’s only one bed and there’s only one …” – the listener expects “chair” – “prayer”, not only hitting the rhyme and achieving surprise but leading neatly into and enhancing the succeeding line “I listen all night for your step on the stair”. The live version included on Live Songs (1973) contains two additional stanzas which, coupled

with its harsher arrangement, infuse it with a bitter sarcasm absent from the original.





Tower Of Song

Well my friends are gone and my hair is grey

I ache in the places where I used to play

And I’m crazy for love but I’m not coming on

I’m just paying my rent every day

Oh in the Tower of Song

I said to Hank Williams: how lonely does it get?

Hank Williams hasn’t answered yet

But I hear him coughing all night long

A hundred floors above me

In the Tower of Song

I was born like this, I had no choice

I was born with the gift of a golden voice

And twenty-seven angels from the Great Beyond

They tied me to this table right here

In the Tower of Song

So you can stick your little pins in that voodoo doll

I’m very sorry, baby, doesn’t look like me at all

I’m standing by the window where the light is strong

Ah they don’t let a woman kill you

Not in the Tower of Song

Now you can say that I’ve grown bitter but of this you may be sure

The rich have got their channels in the bedrooms of the poor

And there’s a mighty judgement coming, but I may be wrong

You see, you hear these funny voices

In the Tower of Song

I see you standing on the other side

I don’t know how the river got so wide

I loved you baby, way back when

And all the bridges are burning that we might have crossed

But I feel so close to everything that we lost

We’ll never have to lose it again

Yeah my friends are gone and my hair is grey

I ache in the places where I used to play

And I’m crazy for love but I’m not coming on

I’m just paying my rent every day

Oh in the Tower of Song

A brilliantly achieved essay on the art of songwriting, this song was included on I’m Your Man (1988). Cohen has called it “one of the three or four real songs that I’ve ever written”. It surely entitles him to the rent-free lease of room in the Tower. Hank Williams (1923-1953) was a country music titan and one of the most influential songwriters of the twentieth century. A notable cover version by Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds was included on the tribute album I’m Your Fan (1991).





True Love Leaves No Traces

As the mist leaves no scar

On the dark green hill

So my body leaves no scar

On you and never will

Through windows in the dark

The children come, the children go

Like arrows with no targets

Like shackles made of snow

True love leaves no traces

If you and I are one

It’s lost in our embraces

Like stars against the sun

As a falling leaf may rest

A moment on the air

So your head upon my breast

So my hand upon your hair

And many nights endure

Without a moon or star

So we will endure

When one is gone and far

True love leaves no traces

If you and I are one

It’s lost in our embraces

Like stars against the sun

Reusing two stanzas from a 1961 poem ‘As Mist Leaves No Scar’, this song from Death Of A Ladies’ Man (1977) reads on the page like a typical Cohen lyric of his early period. The musical treatment given it by Phil Spector, in one of his more manic phases, shows the distance Cohen had travelled musically at that time, but also suggests that he had travelled involuntarily. As such, historically if not lyrically, it represents a nadir in Cohen’s career.



Undertow

I set out one night

When the tide was low

There were signs in the sky

But I did not know

I’d be caught in the grip

Of the undertow

Ditched on a beach

Where the sea hates to go

With a child in my arms

And a chill in my soul

And my heart the shape

Of a begging bowl

A short but effective song, economically exhibiting Cohen's poetic skill, it was included on Dear Heather (2004).



Waiting For The Miracle

Baby, I’ve been waiting,

I’ve been waiting night and day.

I didn’t see the time,

I waited half my life away.

There were lots of invitations

and I know you sent me some,

but I was waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

I know you really loved me.

but, you see, my hands were tied.

I know it must have hurt you,

it must have hurt your pride

to have to stand beneath my window

with your bugle and your drum,

and me I’m up there waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

Ah I don’t believe you’d like it,

You wouldn’t like it here.

There ain’t no entertainment

and the judgements are severe.

The Maestro says it’s Mozart

but it sounds like bubble gum

when you’re waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

Waiting for the miracle

There’s nothing left to do.

I haven’t been this happy

since the end of World War II.

Nothing left to do

when you know that you’ve been taken.

Nothing left to do

when you’re begging for a crumb

Nothing left to do

when you’ve got to go on waiting

waiting for the miracle to come.

I dreamed about you, baby.

It was just the other night.

Most of you was naked

Ah but some of you was light.

The sands of time were falling

from your fingers and your thumb,

and you were waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come

Ah baby, let’s get married,

we’ve been alone too long.

Let’s be alone together.

Let’s see if we’re that strong.

Yeah let’s do something crazy,

something absolutely wrong

while we’re waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

Nothing left to do ...

When you’ve fallen on the highway

and you’re lying in the rain,

and they ask you how you’re doing

of course you’ll say you can’t complain --

If you’re squeezed for information,

that’s when you’ve got to play it dumb:

You just say you’re out there waiting

for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

Although included on The Future (1992), work on this song, co-written by Sharon Robinson (with whom Cohen had collaborated on ‘Everybody Knows’), had begun in the early Eighties. Versions of the song were apparently ready for inclusion on both Various Positions (1985) and I’m Your Man (1988), but in mood and for its contrast yet continuity with the themes explored in the other

songs on The Future it is surely in its rightful place on that album.



Way Down Deep

way down, way way down

way way down deep

you’re got me way down, way way down,

way way down deep

you’re got me way down, way down deep

I wander with you in my sleep

I’m way down, way way down,

way way down deep

it came to me this morning

I was walking down the street

was like my soul could taste you

and God, you tasted sweet

finally I can breathe again

finally I can speak

I’ve got you in the glory place

I’ve got you way down deep

I’ve got you way down, way way down,

way way down deep

you’re got me way down, way way down,

way way down deep

you’re got me way down, way way down,

I wander with you in my sleep

I’m way down, way way down,

way way down deep

it’s a funny feeling

but I cannot say I mind

I know that I’m dealing with

a love that’s far from blind

I see every single angle

I look before I leap

how else can I put it

when you’re got me way down deep

you’ve got me way down, way way down,

way way down deep

you’ve got me way down, way way down,

way way down deep

you’ve got me way down, way down deep

I wander with you in my sleep

I’m way down, way way down,

way way down deep

don’t matter what we gave away

was nothing we could keep

don’t matter what we gave away

you know that talk is cheap

forgive me if I hate you

you’re a liar and a thief

but I’ve got you in the glory place

I got you way down deep

you’ve got me way down, way way down ...

don’t matter if the road is long

don’t matter if it’s steep

don’t matter if the moon goes out

and darkness is complete

don’t matter if we lose our way

I know we;re gonna meet

I’ve got you in the glory place

I’ve got you way down deep

you’ve got me way down, way way down ..

Written by Cohen and Jennifer Warnes, who recorded it on Hunter (1992), though Cohen himself never has.



Who By Fire?

And who by fire, who by water,

who in the sunshine, who in the night time,

who by high ordeal, who by common trial,

who in your merry merry month of may,

who by very slow decay,

and who shall I say is calling?

And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate,

who in these realms of love, who by something blunt,

and who by avalanche, who by powder,

who for his greed, who for his hunger,

and who shall I say is calling?

And who by brave assent, who by accident,

who in solitude, who in this mirror,

who by his lady’s command, who by his own hand,

who in mortal chains, who in power,

and who shall I say is calling?

Included on both New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974) and Live In Concert (1994), this song is based on the Jewish prayer ‘Mi Bamayin, Mi Ba Esh’ sung at Yom Kippur. “And who shall I say is calling?” – you do not need me to tell you it is Death.



Why Don’t You Try

Why don’t you try to do without him?

Why don’t you try to live alone?

Do you really need his hands for your passion?

Do you really need his heart for your throne?

Do you need his labour for your baby?

Do you need his beast for the bone?

Do you need to hold a leash to be a lady?

I know you’re going to make, make it on your own.

Why don’t your try to forget him?

Just open up your dainty little hand.

You know this life is filled with many sweet companions,

many satisfying one-night stands.

Do you want to be the ditch around a tower?

Do you want to be the moonlight in his cave?

Do you want to give your blessing to his power

as he goes whistling past his daddy, past his daddy’s grave.

I’d like to take you take you to the ceremony,

well, that is if I remember the way.

You see Jack and Jill they’re going to join their misery,

I’m afraid it’s time for everyone to pray.

You can see they've finally taken cover,

they're willing, yeah they're willing to obey.

Their vows are difficult, they're for each other,

so let nobody put a loophole, a loophole in their way.

Though this song from New Skin For The Old Ceremony (1974) must be classified as a love song, it is a curious one. He begs his lover to leave him, praises the single life, and rather ungallantly asks "do you need to hold a leash to be a lady?". When he asks "do you need his labour for your baby?" – and an overwhelming majority of mothers surely do want some assistance from the father of their baby during its infancy – one suspects that Cohen has lost his usually acute touch in discussing male-female relationships. A live version was included on Field Commander Cohen – Tour Of 1979 (2001).



Winter Lady

Trav’ling lady, stay awhile

until the night is over.

I’m just a station on your way,

I know I’m not your lover.

Well I lived with a child of snow

when I was a soldier,

and I fought every man for her

until the nights grew colder.

She used to wear her hair like you

except when she was sleeping,

and then she’d weave it on a loom

of smoke and gold and breathing.

And why are you so quiet now

standing there in the doorway?

You chose your journey long before

you came upon this highway.

Trav’ling lady stay awhile

until the night is over.

I’m just a station on your way,

I know I’m not your lover.

Included on Songs Of Leonard Cohen (1967), this song, although addressed to one woman (the "trav'ling lady") is clearly about another who really is his lover and who occupies his thoughts even when he is away from her. There are autobiographical echoes of Cohen's then fading relationship with Marianne Ihlen, and his sense of male-female relationships as a battleground and his own war-weariness are eloquently and poignantly expressed.



You Have Loved Enough

I said I’d be your lover.

You laughed at what I said.

I lost my job forever.

I was counted with the dead.

I swept the marble chambers,

But you sent me down below.

You kept me from believing

Until you let me know:

That I am not the one who loves –

It’s love that seizes me.

When hatred with his package comes,

You forbid delivery.

And when the hunger for your touch

Rises from the hunger,

You whisper, “You have loved enough,

Now let me be the Lover.”

I swept the marble chambers,

But you sent me down below.

You kept me from believing

Until you let me know:

That I am not the one who loves –

It’s love that chooses me.

When hatred with his package comes,

You forbid delivery.

And when the hunger for your touch

Rises from the hunger …

This song from Ten New Songs (2001), co-written by Sharon Robinson, seems a simple love song, with an elegant twist on Cohen’s sense of victimhood – “it’s love that seizes me”. But we know enough of Cohen to suspect apparent simplicity. Given that at the time of writing this song Cohen was living in Roshi’s monastery in California, and taking into account that the beloved to whom he addresses the song forbids the delivery of hatred, we can read the song as the portrayal of a spiritual journey and an expression of Cohen’s Buddhist beliefs.



You Know Who I Am

I cannot follow you, my love,

you cannot follow me.

I am the distance you put between

all of the moments that we will be.

You know who I am,

you've stared at the sun,

well I am the one who loves

changing from nothing to one.

Sometimes I need you naked,

sometimes I need you wild,

I need you to carry my children in

and I need you to kill a child.

You know who I am...

If you should ever track me down

I will surrender there

and I will leave with you one broken man

whom I will teach you to repair.

You know who I am...

I cannot follow you, my love,

you cannot follow me.

I am the distance you put between

all of the moments that we will be.

You know who I am...

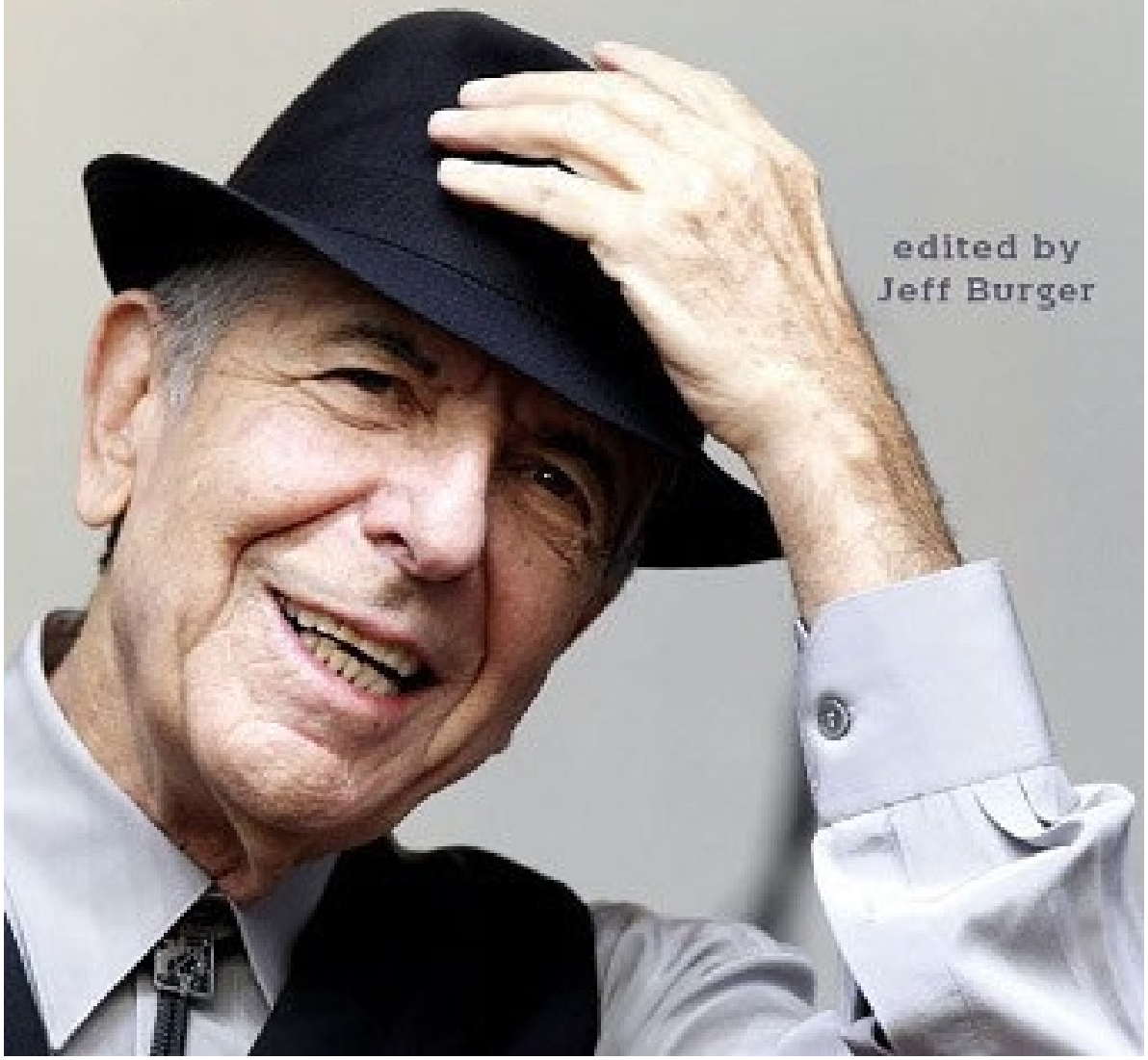
Included on Songs From a Room (1967), and also on Live Songs (1973), this song fails to avoid the danger inherent in using the "I" voice – the danger of becoming ego-bound and failing to generalise an individual experience so as to make it relevant and interesting to others. His need for his lover "to kill a child" is selfish if it refers to abortion, and frankly obscene if it doesn't. Perhaps appropriately for his first album, it is an immature song.

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Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen

LEONARD COHEN

on Leonard Cohen



edited by
Jeff Burger

Leonard Cohen has probably had millions of words written about him during his long career. Few of them can have conjured such a riveting picture of the dark, droll and mystical poet/singer-songwriter as his own thoughtful responses in the course half a century of interviews. Here, in his own words taken from countless interviews between 1966 and 2012, is Leonard Cohen On Leonard Cohen.

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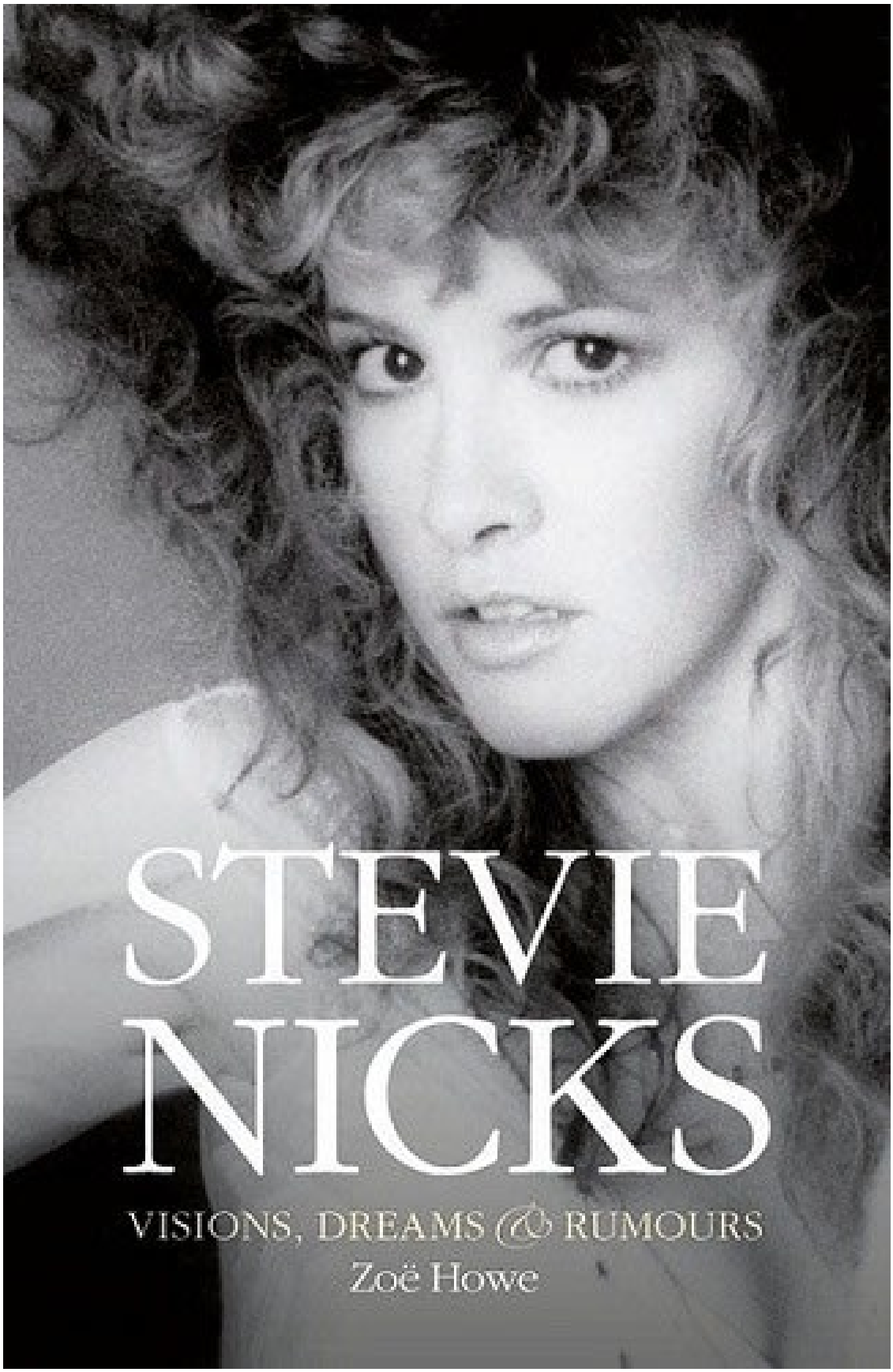


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Stevie Nicks: Visions, Dreams & Rumours


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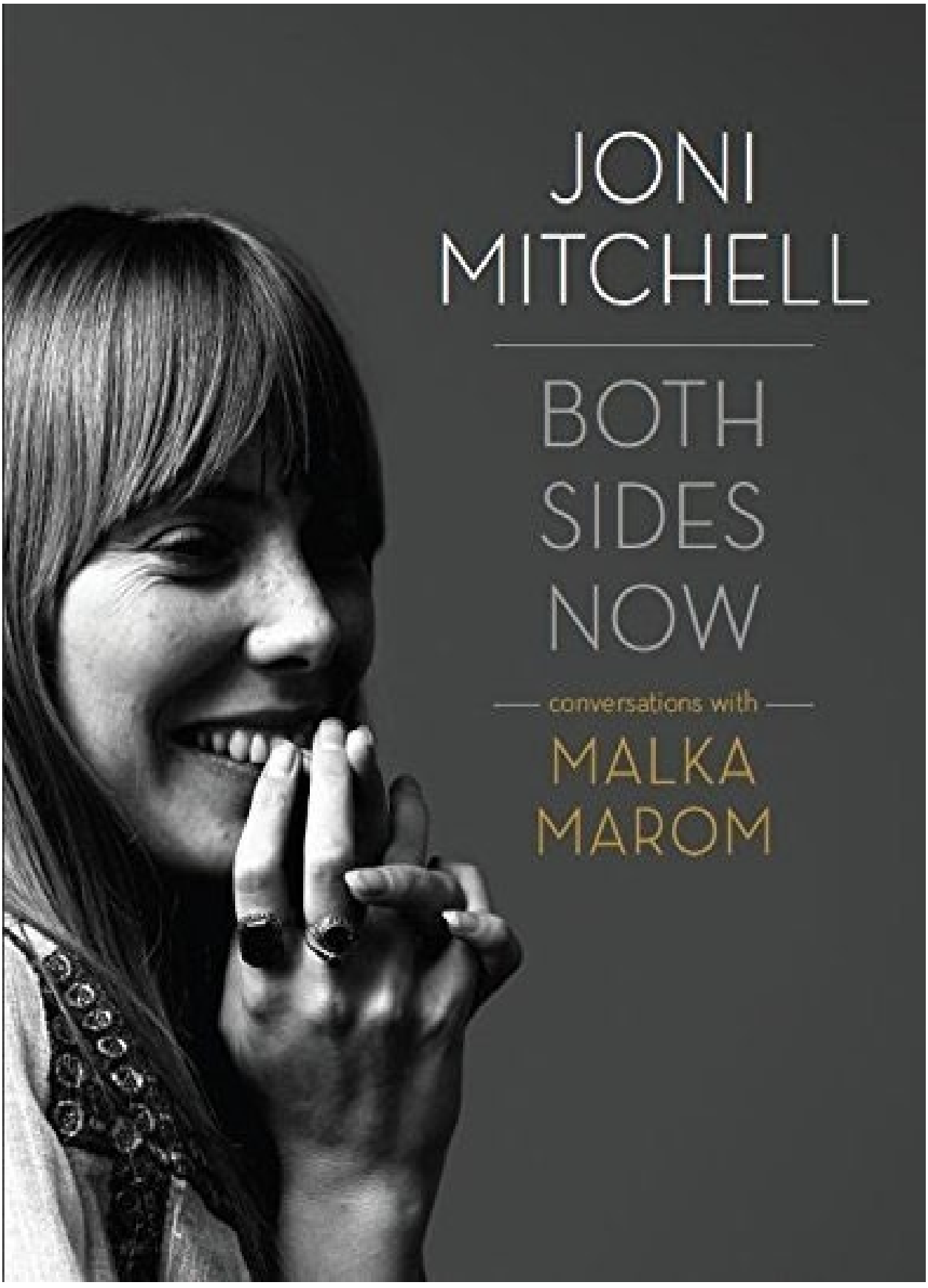
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MITCHELL
BOTH
SIDES
NOW
conversations with
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