

Leonard Cohen
Haute Dog
by Mr. Bonzai

©1988 by David Goggin, all rights reserved
no reproduction without written permission from mrbonzai@mrbonzai.com

Let's set the record straight, once and for all, about this Leonard Cohen. Seems to me that most folks think of him as a dark, brooding, melancholic, depressing fella. Actually, he's a very funny guy. True, it ain't the light humor of Sam Kineson or Don Rickles, but if you're willing to follow him deeply down Dante's staircase you'll find the chuckles that echo through the nuthouses and whorehouses of antiquity.

How many characters like Leonard Cohen exist? He's a songwriter, a poet, a novelist, a painter, and a sharp dresser, too. Onstage, backed by superb musicians both modern and ethnic, with sultry sirens accompanying him like loving ex-lovers, Leonard hangs loose in film noir duds and sings his hard-boiled narratives, sketching underworld scenes with shady undertones and witty asides.

Leonard's photographer and scheduler, Sharon Weisz, told me that he liked cheap hangouts and junk food. On our way to his home, Mrs. Bonzai and I stopped to pick up some greasy weiners (Pink's famous chili dogs) and a jug of chianti. Leonard greeted us at the door barefoot, with a five o'clock shadow and led us to his sunny kitchen nook where he set out fine china and silver for our haute dog cuisine.

He first published his poetry in 1956 while an undergrad. Each of his two novels, "Beautiful Losers" and "The Favorite Game" have sold more than 800,000 copies worldwide. His songs have been sung by the diverse likes of Judy Collins, Neil Diamond, Diana Ross, Joan Baez, Rita Coolidge, Jennifer Warnes and Joe Cocker. He was signed to Columbia in '67 by John Hammond and has recorded ten albums, capped last year with the brilliant "I'm Your Man." He appeared as the head of Interpol on Miami Vice. There is an annual Leonard Cohen Festival in Krakow, Poland.

After steeping ourselves in his music for many days and nights, can I tell you what a pleasure it was to lunch with this maestro of murky mirth?

BONZAI: How long is this current tour?

COHEN: Not very long — about 20 concerts, starting in Vancouver and working our way down the coast. We just finished 70 in Europe.

BONZAI: We've been immersing ourselves in two records, your greatest hits and the new one, *I'm Your Man*. Quite a difference between the two. The instrumentation on this new album is so vivid — fits the songs and really opens them up for pictorial imaging.

COHEN: Yes, its curious. I had no strategy — never have — about those things. But it is very different.

BONZAI: Did you personally choose all the musicians?

COHEN: Yes. I played a lot of the stuff, except the very accomplished synthesizer work, drums, sax, and guitar on some cuts.

BONZAI: Who is the backup vocalist Anjani?

COHEN: She's a wonderful Hawaiian-American singer who lives just down the street. She is very beautiful and a very talented writer herself. John Lissauer, an old musical colleague of mine, introduced me to Anjani when we were putting together the group in 1984, for the tour that went with *Various Positions*. She sings with me on "First We Take Manhattan", "Ain't No Cure For Love", "Jazz Police" and "I'm Your Man". Jennifer Warnes is the backup singer on "Everybody Knows", "Take This Waltz", "I Can't Forget" and "Tower of Song". Three French women are also on "Take This Waltz", which I tracked in Paris, and Jennifer did the overdubs here in Los Angeles.

BONZAI: Your voice on the new record is dramatically different in pitch from your previous records. Why is your voice so much deeper?

COHEN: My life changed. Everything changed in it. I don't remember much of the past. I had some kind of amnesia and I don't remember too much.

I am now going through my books of verse to compile an anthology for my Canadian publishers. I can hardly recognize the work, the positions — everything has changed radically, including my voice and my approach. I don't have a clear idea of what happened — actually, I don't have a great interest.

BONZAI: I understand you went through a difficult period. I'm familiar with this from my mother. She withdrew so much, that everyone gave up on her and thought she would never make it back. I just gave her a break and thought that something could happen. She pulled out of it. Is this the kind of change you're talking about?

COHEN: Something like that. It's hard to even develop a position on it. In fact, you don't really feel like looking back from any perspective. There's something peaceful about it, though.

BONZAI: Do you find that you like working with certain engineers, certain equipment?

COHEN: I've never minded who the engineer was, but I especially like working with Leann Unger.

When I changed my tuning on guitar, years ago, I changed to different kinds of strings for my Spanish guitar, which is made of cedar. Everybody said, "Look, the thing is very dead now. The guitar is not built to accomodate these kinds of strings." I said, it's true. It does sound dead now, but I think that the

molecular structure of the wood is going to change if I keep playing it and the strings sit there for a long period of time. Something is going to change. Eventually, it sounded OK.

I feel that microphones and engineers are very important, and the presence of Leann in the studio is something that I'd try to arrange even if she weren't an engineer. There's something hospitable about her presence that makes you want to sing. First of all, you fall in love with her and it makes you want to sing to her. I don't like to have anybody in the studio but Leann, because everybody else falls in love with her, too. If I can get my tracks down, then I can sing to her. I know her husband will understand this.

There are microphones that are more or less sensitive to the kinds of sounds that I can produce. Engineers know about those things. But there is also some other kind of process at work. They speak about certain actors being friendly to the camera. Once you start to hear the playbacks, you can accommodate yourself to the microphone that's available, and also, the microphone begins to accommodate itself to you. Things are continually changing.

BONZAI: Do you have a magical relationship with your musical tools?

COHEN: I think it is the opposite of magical. Magical is the word we give to relationships that we can't understand. I'm not very interested in the occult, especially the sensibility that goes with it and the kinds of things that people who are interested in the occult ask to be forgiven for. I'm not interested in that pursuit, but I do know that inanimate objects, especially when they have working parts, and depend on things like sound and light, are susceptible to the influence of the people who are working with them.

BONZAI: Do you have a personal studio where you feel most comfortable?

COHEN: Every studio can work, in the same way that we are speaking of these instruments. There are some places, of course, that will be forbidding, but I think we can work in almost any studio, under almost any conditions. Those become part of the agenda, things that you merely take into consideration when you're doing it. There are probably far more sensitive people that need a very special kind of environment to work in. But I find I can work almost anywhere, with almost any kind of instruments.

I especially love the tracks I used on "I'm You're Man" — I took them off toy keyboards. They're supposed to be sounds that are unavailable to our deep appreciation, but I don't think it's true. You can pass those sounds through conventional recording equipment and they can come out quite solemn and quite deep. I love technology, but in a very indiscriminating way. Almost everything can be used to make records.

BONZAI: Where do you live?

COHEN: I live between a number of places. I spend some time here. I spend a lot of time in Montreal, and I spend time in Paris.

BONZAI: Why is Montreal special to you?

COHEN: I think it's just that I was born there. I don't know if I ever would have gone to Montreal otherwise — maybe I would have heard about it, but I haven't heard about it anywhere else — that it is beautiful, and good. I love Montreal because I know it so well, and probably because of its particular religious/political disposition — which makes it a very intense and holy city.

BONZAI: Who is the most amazing artist that you've worked with?

COHEN: The greatest musician that I ever worked with was Raffi Hakopian, an Armenian-Russian violinist who came here in the Seventies. I met him in 1979 and he toured with me in 79-80. He plays on an album of mine called *Recent Songs* and on "Take This Waltz" from the new album. He just went back to the Soviet Union.

BONZAI: For good?

COHEN: Yes. I think he lied to get out of the Soviet Union. He was married to a Jewish woman and he said he was Jewish. They let him out and then I think they found out that he lied and they wouldn't let his wife join him, and they wouldn't let him back. He lived his life in America as an immigrant. He never learned to speak English. He lived with the Russians in Los Angeles, and later in New York. He was very homesick, and finally he was permitted to return.

I am continually impressed with the capacity of people to survive, and go on. I am touched by people in all walks of life — how they manage to accommodate themselves to extremely antagonistic circumstances.

BONZAI: If we could invite one person to join us here today, from anyplace in the world, any place in history, is there anybody you would like to meet and talk to?

COHEN: I don't like to disturb people, or stir the dust of graves, or summon people from their ordinary days.

BONZAI: If you could choose the music for your own funeral, what would you like played?

COHEN: Well, you know, I don't like music very much, like most musicians. So, maybe they could pass on that. By that time — which could be any time from now on — the musical saturation has become so thorough, that this might be one of the few spots where there is no music. I would appreciate that.

BONZAI: Can you think of your all time most complete performance? Where it was, when it was, why the situation was perfect and why it worked...

COHEN: One of the happiest and most heartfelt moments was in my last tour, at a concert in Seville. The audience began waving white handkerchiefs and chanting, "Torero". I don't know if we were any good that night, but somehow the hospitality of the audience was such that they awarded me the highest designation of the heart. So, that remains the most touching moment.

BONZAI: You speak Spanish, don't you?

COHEN: No, I speak a little French and I can read some of my favorite Spanish poets in bilingual translation.

BONZAI: Lorca was an inspiration for one of your songs...

COHEN: I like Federico Garcia Lorca very much. I like the man, and I like his work.

BONZAI: Are there other poets that you admire or have influenced you?

COHEN: There's so much excellent work. Every time I turn on the radio, I hear something good. Everytime I pick up a magazine, I read some writing that is distinguished. My pace and viewpoint is being influenced continually by things I come across.

You recapitulate the whole movement of your own culture. Occasionally we are touched by certain elaborate language, like the language we associate with the Elizabethan period, with the King James translation of The Bible, or Shakespeare. In certain moments you are influenced by very simple things. The instructions on a cereal package have a magnificent clarity. You're touched by the writing in National Geographic — it represents a certain kind of accomplishment.

Occasionally you move into another phase where you are touched by the writing of demented people or mental patients. I get a lot of letters from those kinds of writers. You begin to see it as the most accurate kind of reflection of your own reality, the landscape you're operating on. There are many kinds of expression that I'm sensitive to.

BONZAI: Have you ever been to Japan?

COHEN: Yes, I went with my old teacher, who is a Japanese gentleman.

BONZAI: What was he teaching?

COHEN: He was teaching — it's hard to say what he was teaching. He's a Zen master. I'm not quite sure what I was studying with him.

BONZAI: Is there any old proverb, any old saying that you dislike?

COHEN: Dislike? There's one I *like* very much. I believe it's Chinese, and it goes like this: "Why do you hate me? I never helped you." I like that saying because it evokes the complexity of a relationship, a friendship. Whether it's accurate or not is really not important. It evokes the complexity that is the background of any relationship.

BONZAI: Do you think you've made any enemies through the years?

COHEN: (pauses thoughtfully) Probably not enough.

BONZAI: On the music industry side of things, do you know any useful business advice that people entering the business might benefit from?

COHEN: Well, I remember when I went down to New York with the intention of establishing myself in the music business. I was not a boy. I was in my early 30s and my mother said to me, "Leonard, be careful — those people aren't like

us." I was very resentful of my mother suggesting that she could tell me anything about things. But you know, she was right. They aren't like us. So, that's a good thing to remember.

Whatever you think it's going to be, it's not going to be like that. However how crooked you might have heard it is, it's going to be a lot more crooked than that.

BONZAI: Don't you think it's always been true in the arts?

COHEN: Yes, there has always been a business element that has to be dealt with. It's good. That's why movies are the most interesting art form today. They involve the most money, and anybody that can master the form knows a lot about human life. That's why poetry is the least interesting art form today, because you don't have to enter the world to write it. There is no demand, so poetry is no longer a significant expression for most people. It's very important that people understand business.

BONZAI: When you were in your early formative years, were there any musicians that influenced you?

COHEN: I was more affected by the places connected with the music than the actual musicians. The whole night when the music was played was generally more important than the music.

BONZAI: Do you believe in reincarnation?

COHEN: I have no interest in my opinions. I have opinions from time to time, but I hate to be in this position of defending an opinion.

BONZAI: How about imagining yourself in another time as a musician, an artist?

COHEN: You're a rich man. You have questions that involve a great sense of psychic abundance. You're very lucky. I never think of things like that. That's very luxurious, and I don't say this in any pejorative sense. Quite seriously, that type of speculation I connect with a scope and abundance that I don't have.

BONZAI: Any animals that you identify with, that you feel a kinship with?

COHEN: I like dogs very much. Sometimes I miss my dog. I like animal movies on television — I love the closeups of animals on those documentaries. I think it's such a privilege to be able to see this — the flicker of consciousness in a bird's eye.

BONZAI: Have you ever witnessed a miracle?

COHEN: I've witnessed many miracles, some very conventional. I was a counselor at a camp in the Laurentians in the early 50s. In the town of St. Margaret, Quebec, there was a nun by the name of Sister Anne, who began curing people, locally. Within two or three weeks there were private ambulances from as far away as Texas in the streets of St. Margaret, which had maybe 5,000 people. People were sleeping on the streets and in the public squares. There were cripples, crutches, wheelchairs. There were hundreds of

people in the public square singing all day and the chief of police walking up and down with his baton singing along.

There was a line waiting and Sister Anne would come down the stairs of the little parish church and people would be brought to her. She had a silver crucifix and she would cross them and tell them to stand up or walk towards her. And sometimes they would drop their crutches and walk towards her and the crowd would surge in and pick up the crutches and break them and throw them into the air. Sometimes a person would collapse. She didn't seem to be attached to the outcome of blessings. She merely gave the blessing.

Afternoon after afternoon I witnessed miracles. Some would say there are certain kinds of hysteria that this particular kind of treatment addresses well. That's OK. Whatever the thing is, I saw these cures. She was eventually called away and encouraged to stop performing this kind of practice. Those were miracles that I saw very clearly.

BONZAI: I remember in Montreal there was a place we called the crutch museum — hundreds of crutches on the walls.

COHEN: Oh, yes, the Oratory of St. Joseph. Frere Andre was the founder.

BONZAI: Didn't they have his heart in a jar, and it was stolen and held for ransom. They had trouble raising the money. Then they found that the actual heart wasn't there because a film team had brought lights in once and it cooked his heart and they had to replace it. So, a counterfeit heart was stolen.

COHEN: I didn't hear about the grisly ending to your story, but I remember it was kidnapped and returned. I was just at the Oratory about three weeks ago. The heart is there. I don't know what state of cooking, of cuisine it's in. But it's there, it's secure now.

BONZAI: Colorful place, Montreal. Are you Jewish?

COHEN: Yes.

BONZAI: There are a lot of Jesus references in your work, though. Why is that?

COHEN: Jesus — why would anybody want to avoid Jesus?

BONZAI: There's a line in one of your more famous songs. "Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water." I find that to be very humorous. Does anybody ever laugh when you're performing it?

COHEN: (laughs) Uh, I don't — maybe, maybe everybody's laughing. Maybe that's why they like me to perform it.

BONZAI: How does it feel to be a hero?

COHEN: That's one of those "have you stopped beating your wife?" questions. (chuckles) The presumption that one is a hero. Those designations don't really speak to me.

BONZAI: I leave it up to you whether you are, or to imagine what it's like to be one.

COHEN: I've met some real heroes of war, seen them in action. And I've met some heroes of the path, who have conquered, have overthrown themselves.

BONZAI: Freedom from public aspirations, or statements of accomplishment, or biographies. How does that relate to the urge to create, to be an artist, to perform? How do you continue to work with the knowledge that perhaps it's meaningless, or that there is no real value in recognition? What is the motivation, with that consciousness in mind?

COHEN: I think the motivation is to be free from those questions. If we didn't have work, we would be thinking about those questions. Why are we working? What is the meaning of our work? What is the significance of our lives? Then you would be in hell. Doubt is hell. We have work so that we can move from hell into something that is not hell. It doesn't really matter what one's work is. Nobody has to award work significance from an exterior position. You don't have to make an object of work. As soon as you make an object of work, then of course, you can look at it like something outside of yourself and something which has a value. Which work is better, which work is worse, which work is significant and which is not significant. But when you're one with your work, you're free.

BONZAI: I was in a studio the other day and heard a new Waylon Jennings cut. I thought, boy, Waylon could really do a number on one of your songs.

COHEN: I like him. Please tell him to sing some of my songs.

BONZAI: Some of your fame has come from your songs being done by other people. Are there any other artists that you would enjoy hearing interpret your work?

COHEN: My critical faculty goes into immediate suspension when anybody sings my songs. I'm prepared to love it all, and I do. I've never heard a cover version of any of my songs that I didn't like.

BONZAI: Your vocal delivery is close to *speaking* the song. The French call it *diseur*. Do you feel a part of that tradition?

COHEN: I don't resist it, but I think the tradition is a lot wider than that. In the wider sense it's called folk music. I know that has a bad sound these days, although it's coming back and is a little more respectable now. There was a time when to be described as a folk musician was the last thing you'd want.

BONZAI: Sort of like the stink of poetry.

COHEN: Yeah. I've used that phrase, incidentally. The stink of poetry. I like it.

But urban folk music, country western — somehow the musical values are very sophisticated, not primitive as it's usually taken to be. Very sophisticated and very, very minimal, but the emphasis is on the voice and the *experience* in the voice.

BONZAI: How long does love last?

COHEN: Well, it lasts just like all the songs say. It lasts forever.

#