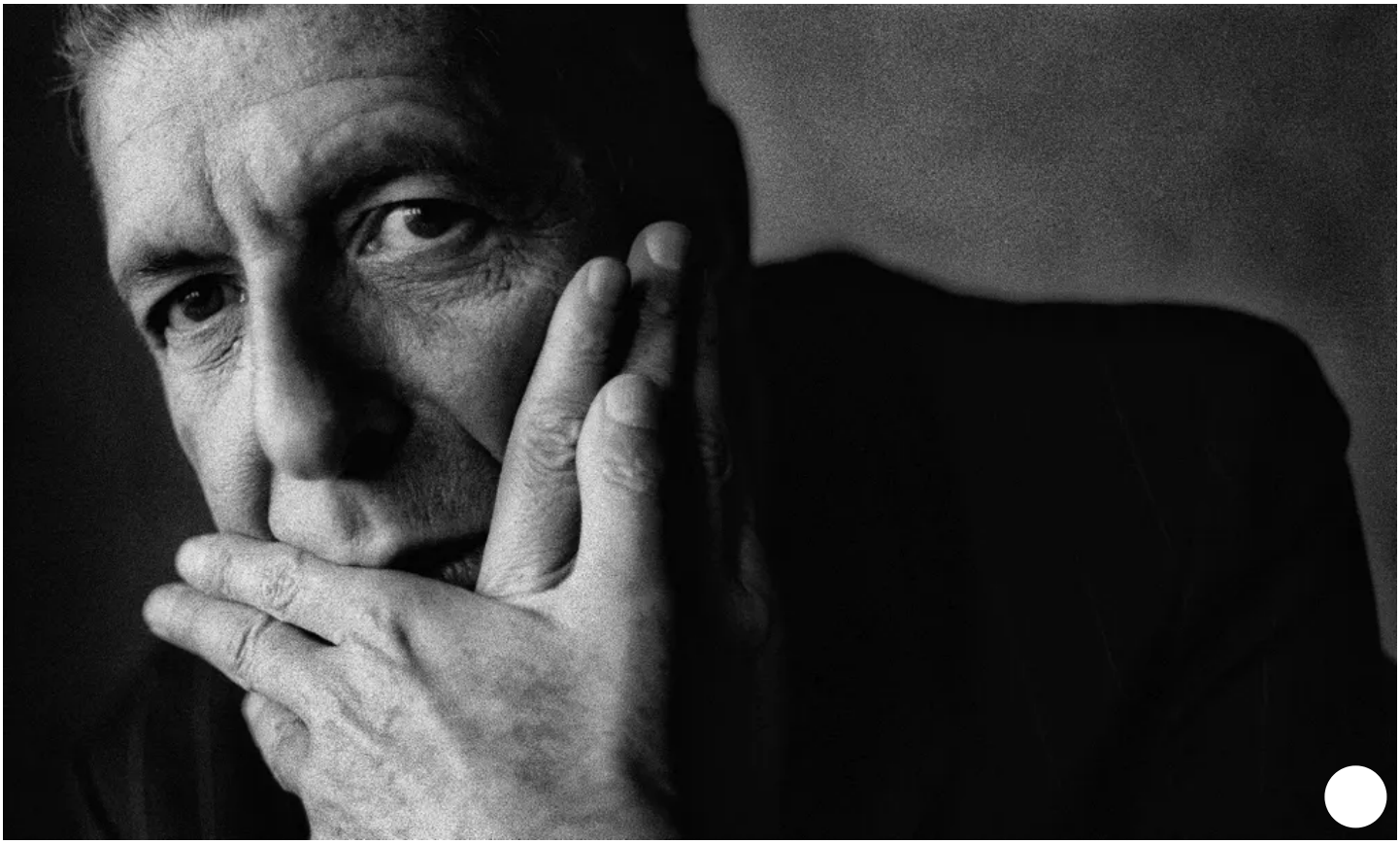

Observer book of the week

# Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius review – the God behind the guy

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In 1963, when he was 29, Leonard Cohen gave a speech in Montreal's Jewish Public Library: "I believe that the God worshipped in our synagogues is a hideous distortion of a supreme idea - and deserves to be attacked and destroyed," he said. "I consider it one of my duties to expose the platitude which we have created." Cohen had come to imagine himself as part of an underground "catacomb religion" of poets, a new kind of "cantor", "one of the creators of the liturgy that will create the church".

At that time, Cohen had never sung on a record or a stage. He had published two narrowly acclaimed volumes of poetry and a experimental novel. His speech, part of

a symposium on the future of Judaism, carried weight in part because he was a son of one of the most notable Jewish families in Canada - his paternal grandfather was the founder of the *Canadian Jewish Times*, whose uncle had been unofficial chief rabbi. His maternal grandfather had written *A Treasury of Rabbinic Interpretations*. Cohen himself resolved to go "into exile" from his faith, to think up other possibilities for spiritual life like "love and sex and drugs and song", for which there was little room in the synagogue.

In this book, Harry Freedman examines that spiritual journey, which took Cohen not only through a storied succession of lovers and more than his fair share of narcotics but also deep into Bible study, and, over several decades, into the rigours of Zen Buddhism, in which tradition he became an ordained monk. Pop music has always explored the shifting borders of sacred and profane devotion, from Elvis's spirituals, through the gospel roots of Motown to Madonna's raunchy confessionals, but Cohen found his own way to reconcile what he called his "lifelong obsession" with earthly love with his more mystical urges: "I decided to worship beauty the way some people go back to the religion of their fathers."

Cohen in 1967, 'when he had trouble finding a record deal'. Photograph: Jack Robinson/Getty Images

The first vivid expression of that impulse came a few months after he made that library speech when he met the young avant-garde dancer Suzanne Verdal. The pair never became lovers, but Cohen was among the friends that Verdal would invite to her cheap apartment in one of the abandoned warehouses on the St Lawrence waterfront. She served him jasmine tea and little mandarin oranges from nearby Chinatown, and the pair of them would walk along the river past Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours where sailors went to be blessed before heading out to sea. Cohen used the elements of these encounters almost verbatim in his first hit song, Suzanne, which became a blueprint for lyrics that shifted between conversation with a lover or with a God or with both, and allowed him to find his unique voice.

Freedman, whose previous books include *The Talmud: A Biography* and *Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul*, suggests that Cohen became a reincarnation of a fifth-century Israeli tradition of the "paytan": poets who were also prayer leaders, who wrote allusive verses to be recited alongside traditional liturgy. In workmanlike fashion he deconstructs the Talmudic and New Testament references in a series of Cohen's most familiar songs to show how the poet's songwriting circled back to the scriptural study he had undertaken with his grandfather in his teens.

**" He told Jarvis Cocker that most of the reference points in Old Ideas were 'about 2,614 years old'**

The exercise works best with those songs that have almost become modern incantations to rival the Lord's Prayer or the Kaddish. Notably, Anthem, the centrepiece of Cohen's 1992 album, *The Future*, which provides the seminal line "there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in" ("the closest thing I have to a credo," Cohen said) and, of course, Hallelujah, the song that launched a thousand *X Factor* auditions.

Cohen spent five years writing Hallelujah, famously filling notebooks with 80 potential verses before he found those six that might best please the Lord, and his concert audiences. Freedman is lucid on the ways in which the songwriter identified himself directly with King David (who Cohen called the Bible's "sweet singer", "the embodiment of our higher possibility") and on the consummate expression of Cohen's synthesis of the sensual and the divine ("I remember when I moved in you and the holy dove she was moving too...") but in chasing down every biblical reference, he risks losing that balancing irreverence in Cohen's lyrics, which rhymes God-fearing Hebrew with breathy pillow talk. "I wanted to push the hallelujah deep into the secular world," Cohen once said. "I wanted to indicate that hallelujah can come out of things that have nothing to do with religion."

Freedman mentions a favourite quote, which Cohen attributed to Ben Jonson, a couple of times - "I've studied all the philosophies and all the theologies but cheerfulness keeps breaking through" - but that wisdom is not always at the

forefront of his own quest for the roots of the poet's genius. You rather hear it in passing in some of the book's better anecdotes. For example, when Cohen's son Adam was critically ill, in a coma following a car crash, Cohen sat by his hospital bed for months. Sometimes, he read to his son favourite passages from the Bible. When Adam eventually came round the first thing he said was: "Dad, can you read something else?"

Cohen performing in London in 2013. Photograph: Brian Rasic/Getty Images

In part because of his longevity as an artist, Cohen's own life became a gift to parable. He had trouble finding a record deal in 1967 because everyone thought he was too old, at 33, to ever be a hit. He enjoyed the irony that the album he released 45 years later, *Old Ideas*, came closest to topping the charts. He told Jarvis Cocker that most of its reference points were "about 2,614 years old". That final hallelujah was itself a kind of dark joke on the part of his Gods. In 2005, he brought a lawsuit against his manager Kelley Lynch for cleaning out $5m from his bank account, partly while he was studying to be a monk. In 2008, at the age of 74, he was therefore obliged to resume his touring career, playing 387 concerts in five years, and securing his legend.

Cohen died on 7 November 2016, the day before the election of Donald Trump as US president. His final album came out a few weeks earlier, pointedly titled *You Want it Darker*, with no question mark. Having forged his own spiritual path, Cohen inevitably returned, in a voice now lower than Johnny Cash's, to where it had begun. As Freedman points out, the title track of this album was accompanied by Gideon Zelermyer, cantor of the synagogue in Montreal that Cohen had attended as

a child. Zelermyer utters the song's last word, "hineni", which Cohen translates as "I'm ready, my Lord". Listening to it again, you also hear something unspoken: a powerful sense of mission accomplished.

*Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius* by Harry Freedman is published by Bloomsbury (£18.99). To support the *Guardian* and *Observer* order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply



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