Sex, spirituality and dark thoughts: a serious look at Leonard Cohen's lyrics



Canadian singer Leonard Cohen performs at Madison Square Garden in New York in 2012

Rory Kiberd

November 13 2021 02:30 AM

Leonard Cohen was an outlier on the rock circuit. As red-blooded and prone to drug use as any of his contemporaries, his soft-spoken humility meant he didn't repel the older generations. You could take him home to your mother and grandmother, and they might even attempt to steal him from you. Having undergone a childhood steeped in Jewish studies, religion was a constant influence on his poetry and his lyrics.

Harry Freedman, an author on Jewish culture, has timed this book to be released on the fifth anniversary of Cohen's death. Fluidly written, it might seem a little dry and fusty at first. However, the breadth of Freedman's erudition is impressive. And ultimately he is an insightful guide to the many religious references in Cohen's back catalogue.

This is by no means a warts-and-all exploration of Cohen's life via his lyrics. Freedman mostly stays within the remit of the religious origins of the songs apart, from some glancing references to juicy happenings in Cohen's

Privacy

enraging an audience in Hamburg. These incidents are merely for context.

Freedman does a commendable job of tracing the myriad allusions to religious texts in Cohen's lyrics. He was someone who wanted to draw on tradition but not be stultified by it. Embracing the old and the new, he also didn't want to be hamstrung by only one faith. Both a buddhist monk in a monastery for a decade and a writer of psalms, Cohen was restless and ever-searching when it came to his religious education. He tussled with his faith and, on such songs as *The Butcher*, even levelled accusations of cruelty against God for allowing atrocities such as the Holocaust.

Read More

- **Ask Adrian: Headphones that will keep out office noise and alternatives while waiting for broadband rollout**

Even though he embraced many religions, he bridled at those rabbis teaching in a formulaic fashion, resigned to dissipation. Where was their passion?

To Cohen, this passion is reached through eroticism. Sex is a sacrament. He treats the erotic with a reverential awe. For the most part, there's nothing sordid about his depictions of sex. As he put it: "If you leave God out of sex, it becomes pornographic; if you leave sex out of God, it becomes self-righteous." Freedman says "there is no blasphemy in intimacy... Procreation, as the Kabbalah asserts, is a holy act."

Freedman is not absolutist. He refrains from getting into the weeds of Cohen's personal life. By not tying down the meaning of the songs, he leaves them open to interpretation, like all great poetry.

As well as some lesser-known songs, many classics are explored. *Who By Fire* is based on synagogue liturgy, imaging how death might come. Drawing from the Kabbalah, *Anthem* depicts the necessary brokenness in the world — "There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in". And of course, there's a close inspection of the punishingly ubiquitous *Hallelujah*, which was a great song before *The X Factor* decimated our enthusiasm for it. This song dwells on the insufficiency of faith, and the spiritual qualities of the erotic.

Tortured imagery

Video of the Day

Members of Irish Down syndrome community intimidate All Blacks with haka performance



00:00 00:45

Promoted Links by

Make social your superpower with Hootsuite.
Schedule, manage and analyze the
Hootsuite

How Much Does It Cost To Hire A 24-Hour Live-In Carer in Ottery St Mary? The Price
Caregiver | Search Ads

Ottery St Mary: Unsold Cruise Cabins Are Almost Being Given Away
Senior Cruise Packages | Spo...

Pensions versus ISAs: a beginner's guide
Interactive Investor

Most Watched



Inmates video themselve having cel party in Mountjoy prison



Video reveals bystander confronti bike thief Connolly Station, Dublin



Cartel hitman Trevor Byrne compares weapons with Limerick gangster behind bars



'Is this Christmas gone? Doe

Privacy

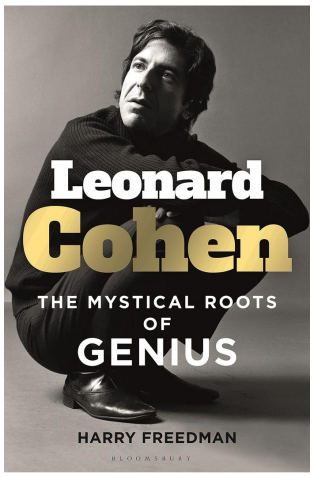
hot take. That said, this opacity might reflect Cohen's malaise when writing. Some of his imagery during his depressive phases can be tortured and knotted, and never more so than on *Songs of Love and Hate* — "If any of his albums justified the epithet 'music to commit suicide by', this was the one", writes Freedman. Cohen said "depression isn't just the blues... It's a kind of mental violence which stops you from functioning properly."

Thankfully, late in life, that seemingly insoluble depression lifted. Cohen's lyrics became more clear-eyed and generous in their straightforwardness — this is not to say that their meanings were any less multifaceted, but rather that the execution was cleaner.

Freedman comes into his own in the last chapter of the book, entitled 'Prayer', particularly when dealing with the beautiful hymn-like lyrics of the optimistic *Come Healing* and the shudderingly acquiescent *You Want It Darker*, in which Cohen intuits and accepts his close-at-hand death.

With mortality bearing down upon him, he had no choice but to reduce everything to its essence. Freedman's clarity in analysis mirrors Cohen's own here.

Freedman has shone a light on the inspiration behind these songs. Much could have remained in darkness without him.



Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius by Harry Freeman

Music: Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius by Harry Freedman
Bloomsbury, 288 pages, hardcover, €26.59; e-book £9.59

Read More

- **Ask Adrian: Headphones that will keep out office noise and alternatives while waiting for broadband rollout**

Promoted Links by

because people have gone home?' - nightclub promoter on new restrictio



At a glanc Covid cas county by county an hospitalis figures

Latest Book Reviews

More ›

- **A State of Emergency: Richard Chambers turns Ireland's Covid story into a pacey page-turner**
- **Rosaleen McDonagh's essays rage against the machine with admirable grit and guile**
- Tanya Sweeney
  ❝ How Sally Rooney's rare talent will ensure novel cuts through the hype
- **Beautiful World, Where Are You review: Rooney lowers the temperature in novel of big ideas**
- **The Women of Troy review: Barker falters with Trojan offering**

Most Read

1. **Stanley Tucci's memoir is a mouth-watering read that doesn't dish the dirt**
2. **The Dublin Railway Murder: the locked-room mystery that - electrified Victorian society**
3. **Still Life review: Sarah Winman's exquisite testament to life, love and art is a masterpiece**
4. **The Pawnbroker's Reward: Searing testament to the cruelties of the Famine**
5. **The Opposite of Butterfly Hunting: Dark and uncomfortabl**

Privacy

Grow your social following the right way
Hootsuite

Celeb Couples with Major Age Differences
FamilyMinded

It's Official: These Are the Best Guitarists of All Time
Work + Money

Travel Selfies That Weren't Worth the Risk
Far & Wide

Why should you stop drinking £5 wine?
Naked Wines

150+ Photos of 2021's Met Gala
POPSUGAR

Ottery St Mary: Unsold Cruise Cabins Are Almost Being Given...
All Inclusive Cruises | Sponsored

Here Are 23 of the Coolest Gifts for This 2021
Best Trending Gifts

I Have £500,000—When Can I Retire?
Fisher Investments UK

Latest

More ›

- 2 hours ago
  'I'm in trouble, I'm in trouble' – frantic phonecall as two brothers killed in farmyard axe attack
- 2 hours ago
  Large number of older renters paying third or more of income for accommodation
- 2 hours ago
  Ireland's Jamison Gibson-Park ruled out against Argentina as Luke McGrath gets call-up
- 2 hours ago
  Pat Stacey
  ❝ Success of hit show Succession and its razor sharp dialogue proves it is good to talk
- 3 hours ago
  Clondalkin GAA community unite for fundraising event for dad battling cancer

Independent.ie

Search entire site

News
Irish News
World News
Local News
Local ePapers
Environment
Weather
Latest News
Video
Topics

Opinion
Letters
Editorial
Comment
Journalists

Business
Budget
Brexit
Irish
World
Technology
Personal Finance
Small Business
Farming
Jobs
Commercial Property
In The Workplace

Sport
Rugby
GAA
Soccer
Paralympics
The Left Wing
The Throw In
Women's Sport
Golf
Horse Racing
Other Sports
Dublin GAA
Tee to Green

Life
Health & Wellbeing
Home & Garden
Family
Parenting
Food & Drink
Motoring

Style
Celebrity
Fashion

Entertainment
Movies
Television

Travel
Reader Travel Awards
Travel News

Podcasts
The Indo Daily
The Left Wing

About Us
Video
Newsletter

Privacy

;