

BOOKS

How the light gets in

TIM DE LISLE

Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius

HARRY FREEDMAN

(BLOOMSBURY, 288 PP, £18.99)

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THERE ARE thousands of pop stars these days, ranging from Elvis Presley, who made his name 65 years ago, to teenagers who went viral last week on TikTok. But in this crowded firmament are only a handful of figures who have generated many books. It's an exclusive club, founded by The Beatles in 1968, and containing just four other members: Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, David Bowie – and Leonard Cohen.

On my shelves, Cohen (1934–2016) looms even larger than Dylan. He's not as famous, but he lends himself to literature. It's partly because he was a man of letters himself, respected as a poet before he began (aged 33) to sing. It's partly that he was able to articulate his art in a way many singers can't, or won't. I've interviewed a few of them, including Bowie, and while a brush with stardom is never dull, none was as interesting to talk to as Cohen. He would listen closely to the question, pause for a moment, and come out with something lucid, analytical and often very funny.

Above all, Cohen attracts writers because his work has depth. "Tower of Song" starts out as a moan about middle age and ends up as a monograph on songwriting. "Dance Me to the End of Love" is a fiercely romantic ballad that also encompasses the Holocaust.

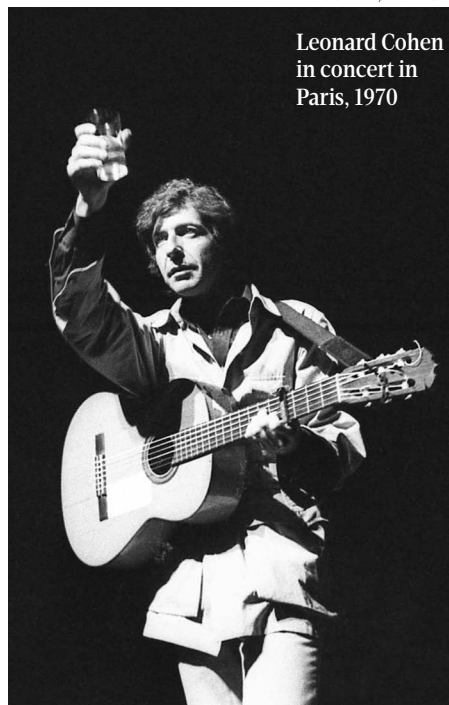


PHOTO: ALAMY, PHILIPPE GRAS

Leonard Cohen
in concert in
Paris, 1970

"Democracy" is a study of 1980s America – "the cradle of the best and of the worst" – that anticipates the age of Donald Trump. (Cohen, who knew how to make an exit, managed to die the day before Trump won the presidency.)

He looked as hard at love as any singer-songwriter, while roaming wider than most. There was one well of inspiration that he kept going back to: the Bible, which he called "the most important book in my life". It's what *Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius* is all about.

The film director Paul Greengrass, when speaking to students, has one piece of advice: "find the song that only you can sing". This book passes that test with flying colours. It could only have been written about Cohen,

and it could only have been written by Harry Freedman, biographer of *The Talmud* and author of *The Murderous History of Bible Translations*.

Described on the flyleaf as "Britain's leading author of popular works of Jewish culture", Freedman lives up to his billing by expressing sharp scholarship in crisp sentences. Homing in on Cohen's best-known song, he notes that the word Hallelujah makes only 15 appearances in the Bible, all in Psalms. "It is, biblically speaking, quite an unusual word. It's one of very few words in Hebrew made up of two words run together ... we should translate it as 'praiseGod.'" Hallelujah, of course, sounds better; and Freedman's textual criticism breathes new life into its well-worn lines.

HE SHOWS how Cohen, who labelled himself a Buddhist Jew, learnt from his grandfather Solomon Klonitzky-Kline, a Lithuanian-Canadian rabbi and the author of *A Treasury of Rabbinic Interpretations*. He shows how often Cohen's biblical imagery comes via the liturgy. He shows what a fan Cohen was of Jesus ("the staggering account of the Sermon on the Mount, which I don't pretend to understand at all"). Over 16 patient, piercing pages, he shows how "Anthem", with its classic refrain "there is a crack, a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in", is indebted to Ecclesiastes. He keeps shedding light on songs you thought you knew.

Freedman does have one blind spot: he's not very interested in the sound of music – the tune, the tone, the mood, the feel. Cohen, if he was still with us, might be murmuring "You don't really care for music, do you?" But then we can always play the songs as we read. And Freedman gets away with it because his handling of the words is masterly. He leaves you feeling wiser about Leonard Cohen, and Judaism, and life.