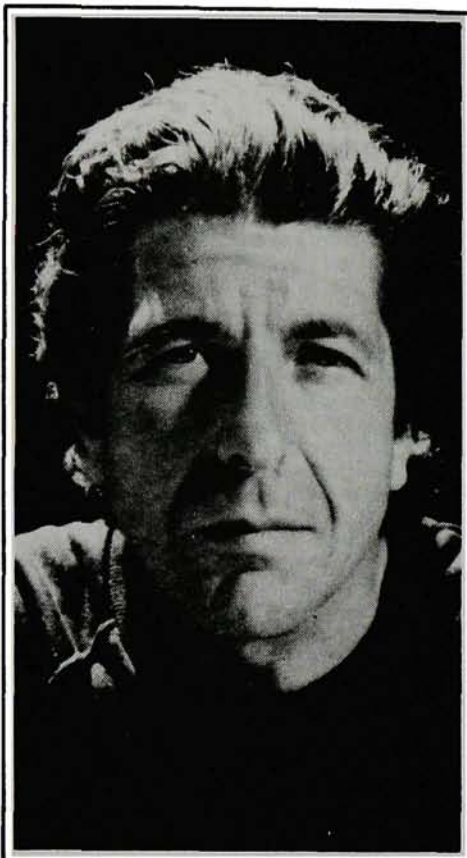


FILM REVIEWS

Harry Rasky's The Song of Leonard Cohen

Leonard Cohen sits with his guitar on the balcony railing of his Montreal apartment, picking the opening notes of *Bird on a Wire*, his classic elegy to his own freedom. The image dissolves into soft spotlights as the composition changes to Cohen singing on stage, a troubadour bathed in crimson. Then suddenly we see the golden torso of a statue; the shot widens to reveal it as an angel figure among several others adorning a building. The camera pans to include the Eiffel tower, and zooms in on a pigeon in the foreground. Cut to a rear view of a bus labouring up a rainy highway incline...

This is the initial sequence of Harry Rasky's feature-length documentary *The Song of Leonard Cohen*. Like Rasky's masterful *Homage to Chagall, Song* is a highly personal, remarkable act of sympathetic imagination. The director's interpretive hand is always there, but Cohen somehow speaks for himself, because the filmmaker is so closely attuned to the man's vision, his inflation, and his ironic wit. Sumptuous visuals of women, art, architecture, or children complement the longing and potency of Cohen's lyrics. The film follows Cohen, with his friends and his band, through the changing environments of his world — Montreal, and five European cities on a recent concert tour — and through the many frozen



Cohen's face reflecting our own in Harry Rasky's sensitive film, *The Song of Leonard Cohen*.

moments of his past — haunting still photographs of Cohen's many faces, his family, and his women. The finely mixed soundtrack consists of Cohen's music, conversations, poems, and commentary, full of ambiguous wisdom, melancholy, humour, and light self-parody.

Much of the film dwells on the minstrel's face, exposing on it the roughening effects of time and women, often in very long takes. (Later Cohen says, "I like to see the marks on people".) Rasky seems to be saying that if we look at Cohen long and closely enough, we will recognize him for the archetypal 'shapeshifter' that he is, and we'll see our face in his. The effectiveness of this approach depends upon the extent to which we can identify with Cohen as the artist, the Lazarus-like lady's man, the deeply wounded insecure Canadian, the wandering Jew, the city, the alien in strange lands...

In one sequence, Rasky examines the contents and ambiance of Cohen's apartment, while Cohen comments on the camera's curious, hand-held investigation. As we see the kitchen sink, the cramped bathtub, and the deliberately austere furnishings, Cohen insists that it's "voluptuously" comfortable because "it's got everything you need." Cohen's careful enactment of luxury in simplicity ("I've always liked white rooms") takes on new dimensions of irony and poignancy as the film progresses.

The film is about the Canadian condition, as is some of Cohen's poetry. He translates a song on his tape recorder from the French; in it, a wanderer speaks of his "most unfortunate country". When asked, Cohen admits that he identifies with that voice "a little bit." He takes a very long ride through the streets of Montreal in a calèche, wearing a yellow T-shirt which says Hollywood YMCA. In his favourite greasy spoon, Solomon's, he gropes with a very intense look in his eyes for something to say about French Canada, and then recalls that the motto of Quebec is "Je me souviens" — "I Remember" (which is a very good point). The juxtaposition of the poet at home and on the road repeatedly implies the truth

The Song of Leonard Cohen

p./d./sc. Harry Rasky mus. "Passenger" with Steve Meador (drums), Charles Beck (guitar), Paul Ostermayer (saxophone, flute & clarinet), Bill Ginn (piano & synthesizer), Mitch Watkins (guitar) and Jonn Bilezikjian (mandolin & oud), Rafik Akopian (violin). Accompanying vocalists: Sharon Robinson, Jennifer Warnes ed. Paul Nikolich p. man. Len D'Agostino p.a. Aili Suurallik d.o.p. Kenneth W. Gregg, c.s.c. Additional photography: Jean Reitberger film quality control Jim Lo ed. rec. Erik Hoppe re rec Terry Cooke lght Erik Kristensen asst. cam. John Maxwell graphic design Geoff Cheesbrough graphic photog. Robert Mistynyn stills Hazel Field l.p. Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton, Mort Rosengarten p.c. CBC running time 90 min. colour 16 mm.



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that most of us have no sense of national identity until we leave home.

Rasky gradually reveals Cohen's private and public relationships with women: asked at one point if he is obsessed with women, Cohen replies that it's the Divine Scheme, and everyone is preoccupied with the opposite sex. The sequence in which he sings "Won't you let me see your naked body" is superb concert footage, capturing the self-conscious smiles on girls' faces as they watch the brilliant, twisted veteran with the blue guitar. It is also about as close as Rasky gets, within the boundaries of CBC decorum, to including the visceral, Dionysian side of Cohen in *Song*. Where is the possessed, vindictive persona of a poem like *O Wife Unmasked*, "with his mind on cunt/ on cunt only/ heart money attention talent art/ tuned entirely to cunt", who recalls that "her buttocks relax in my hands/ like meat freshly killed"? Wisely restrained for family viewing.

When Irving Layton visits Cohen with his wife, he offers many extravagant words of praise for Cohen's genius, and remarks on the appeal of their poetry: "When you don't feel secure, when you don't feel happy — that's being Jewish!" According to Layton, the modern-Western-urban neurosis for which they are the voice is basically a Jewish world view. (Would Woody Allen agree?)

When the soundtrack takes up *So Long Marianne*, there is a nice series of stills of her and Cohen in the sunwashed simplicity of Greece, and Rasky creates a powerful dissolving and expanding image of her as the Ideal Woman, the blond Muse. She is contrasted later with Suzanne (not the one in the song), Cohen's dusky, exquisite Gypsy Wife. She appears in colour, with their two beautiful children, primarily as another incarnation of Cohen's desire, and his loss. We begin to see that *Song* is also about nostalgia.

As a concert film, *Song* does for Cohen what *The Last Waltz* did for The Band. It's a rich evocation of his lifestyle on the road, the compromises, the "forms of boredom disguised as poetry", the idolatry and rewards. The knowledge that "the singer must die for the life in his voice" is never far from the surface.

In the final sequence of the film, a series of flashbacks to the multiple stances and costumes in which Cohen has appeared acknowledges the iconoclastic emphasis of the film's visuals; the way they meld with the song *That's No Way to Say Goodbye* is another example of Paul Nikolich's sensitive, seamless editing. *Song* is a complex portrait of Cohen with

the landscape of his precarious, perhaps broken marriage of Heaven and Hell; in the process it becomes a poetic investigation of our preoccupations and anxieties. For my tastes, the ending would have benefited from something like Cohen's commentary on his wry prose-poem, *How to Speak Poetry*, in the collection *Death of a Lady's Man*: "I hate him for this. He will pay for this religious adver-

tisement...I hate his fucking face, all serious with concern. Don't let him go to the good movie, and don't let him hear the merry tunes in the Music Hall. Never let him sing again. And let him sit outside with his stinking educational corpse while the stripper on the little gilded stage turns us all on."

Chris Lowry

Martin Lavut's War Brides

It is a truism, in fact almost a platitude, that Canadian movies tend to be about losers. At times, they certainly seem to have been made by losers; so that the audience ends up losing as well. What a pleasure then to see *War Brides*, a CBC feature-length film for television in which everybody wins, on both sides of the screen.

War Brides was written by Grahame Woods, produced by Bill Gough, and directed by Martin Lavut — all men with established credentials, recently from the CBC's *For The Record* series. However, the four women who star as the brides (Elizabeth Richardson, Sonja Smits,

Sharry Flett, and Wendy Crewson) are none of them household names — at least, not yet. Geoffrey Bowes, Layne Coleman, Kenneth Pogue and Timothy Webber, as the husbands, come off just as well.

The four couples are presented in a believable and winning way. At the outset, we see a trainload of frazzled women winding its way across the winter landscape. We care about the women immediately, in a warm, old-fashioned way, as we follow them to their destinations.

Producer Bill Gough says of the film, "We've tried for the best in '40's movies, both in style and in entertainment value, in addition to revealing many aspects of what Canada was like at that time." Certainly the film does have the feel of the '40s, from the hairstyles, to the sounds of the radio, even to the embossed sheet-metal wall of a telephone booth in a hotel hallway. The new compositions and recordings of period music, by Tommy Ambrose and musical arranger Rick Wilkins, seem aptly sentimental but never cloyingly nostalgic.

Some moments stand out. Sharry Flett, as the deserted wife, has one of those spunky roles that are uncommon in these days of the woman-in-jeopardy television film: she brings to it so much character, determination, and humour that almost all her scenes are a delight. Layne Coleman plays the soldier who brings back a German wife. He is neither your stereotyped stolid Maritimer, nor the embittered young man back from the war, but a finely-drawn composite. Writer Woods has given him a telling scene that he handles particularly neatly. He is teaching his wife to drive, and while she is behind the wheel, tensely manipulating the big truck, he takes advantage of her preoccupation to tell her how beautiful she is and how much he loves her. He knows that she is too busy trying to drive to react effusively and perhaps embarrass him.

Doris Petrie plays his mother, a beaten-down farm wife. Although she has little to say until later in the film, she still manages to convince us of just how hard life has



Forsaking their homes for love in a strange land are the *War Brides* (left to right) Sharry Flett, Wendy Crewson, Elizabeth Richardson and (front) Sonja Smits.