

Leonard Cohen reminds us why he still matters

By Joshua Klein
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

NEW YORK—Montreal bard Leonard Cohen has written and recorded many great songs, and influenced many times that number of peers and followers with his spiritual, morose and occasionally carnal poetry and music.

But lately one song towers over the rest of Cohen's considerable oeuvre, and that's "Hallelujah." It has been covered countless times by the likes of Bob Dylan, Bono, John Cale, Rufus Wainwright and, perhaps most famously, Jeff Buckley. It has been heard in TV shows and movies as diverse as "The West Wing" and "Shrek." It has even been interpreted on "American Idol" and England's "The X Factor," the latter leading to a record-breaking U.K. chart hit by fifth season winner Alexandra Burke.

Yet "Hallelujah," it should be noted, isn't some gem from Cohen's late '60s and '70s heyday. It's a track from his relatively unsung later years—1984, to be exact—and is found on an album initially deemed so uncommercial it didn't even warrant an American release.

In keeping with that uncommercial spirit, Cohen retreated from public performances and recording for many years. But after financial setbacks, he began recording again and announced his first U.S. concert tour in 15 years. He performed Thursday at New York City's Beacon Theatre, and is scheduled to perform May 5 at the Chicago Theatre.

Fifteen years may seem like a long time, but Cohen is a patient man. "Hallelujah" reportedly took two years to write and once allegedly spanned 80 verses before he found a way to whittle them down (Cale's influential 1991 version was supposedly crafted from a mere 15 pages of lyrics faxed to him by Cohen). But for the thrilled audience at the Beacon Theatre, Cohen's appearance came not a moment too soon.

Yes, Cohen has written several classics—"Suzanne," "So Long, Marianne," "Chelsea Hotel No. 2" and "Bird on the Wire" among them—but as of late, it's "Hallelujah" that increasingly pulls more people into the fold. It's a cryptic but compelling masterpiece of hopeful melancholy (and oft overlooked sensuality) by a man many may not even know wrote it.

Not that Cohen seemed to mind. Though he was no recluse, the singer/songwriter grew increasingly sanguine on the sidelines in the '80s, and by the '90s he had vanished peacefully to a Buddhist retreat outside Los Angeles, where he was ordained a monk and kept to himself, apparently content to let his legacy speak for itself.

But after five years in seclusion he reportedly emerged only to learn that his legacy had been exploited by a former manager, who left him with just a fraction of his fortune. That's what led him back to work, with new albums (2001's "Ten New Songs" and 2004's "Dear Heather") and the tour.

An icon as influential as Bob Dylan, as cool as Lou Reed and as hip as Tom Waits, Cohen nonetheless got a late start in his career. He was 33 when he released his first album, 1967's "Songs of Leonard Cohen." Now that he's 74, it's unclear how many tours he has left in him.

Ironically, royalties from all those renditions of "Hallelujah," as well as licensing deals to use the song in movies and on TV, probably mean that refilling the coffers is less of a priority for Cohen than it once was. Yet the rare opportunity to see Cohen perform the song himself is not to be passed up, and on the day of the New York show, tickets were going for hundreds of dollars to desperate fans.

Perhaps news that a live CD and DVD of Cohen's 2008 London performance are on their way offered some solace to those shut out, as did the formal announcement of

the spring U.S. tour.)

Yet that was likely no substitute for the sight of the man himself, dapper and fleet of foot as he trotted into position to front his ace band through more than two hours of instantly recognizable material.

Like Dylan, Reed and Waits, Cohen is not a conventionally talented vocalist, but he still used his impressive baritone like a master, frequently delivering, on bended knee, each perfectly phrased line with a mix of menace and knowing mirth.

In the end, it's no surprise that an artist of Cohen's caliber should return; each year more acts reunite, most nowhere near his level. What's remarkable is how Cohen has managed to do this minus the stigma of nostalgia. From "Famous Blue Raincoat" to "The Future," his music felt wholly in tune with the here and now. "Dance me to the end of love," he intoned at the show's start, and the crowd followed him at every step.

That the ubiquitous and much-beloved "Hallelujah," which came midway through the show, was (standing ovation or not) far from the evening's highlight said less about the quality of that composition and more about the quality of all those that surrounded it.

One after the other, songs such as "Sisters of Mercy," "Tower of Song," "The Partisan" and "Everybody Knows" reduced the audience to rapt silence, attentive to every nuance of Cohen's voice and the subtle accompaniment of his band and backing singers. Unlike the work of many of his contemporaries, these songs have weathered the passage of time not as relics but as something special, something living and breathing, something almost otherworldly in their austerity and grace.

From the looks on the faces of the people pouring onto the street after the show, to be part of it was a rare privilege.

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