

THE PRINCE OF PRURIENCE AND LOSS

JOHN LELAND | November 2001, GQ (US)

John Leland's Cohen profile includes evidence of the singer's penchant for retelling stories: You've already heard the Irving Layton joke that opens this piece, as well as a few of the other anecdotes. But keep reading. Leland offers some fresh insights, and so does his subject. —Ed.

Two O.G.'s were talking about sex, and one of them was Leonard Cohen. It was October of last year, and Cohen had paid a call on his old friend, the writer Irving Layton. Layton, who is now eighty-nine and in poor health, is Canada's most celebrated poet and until recently its alpha rake—earthy, literary, Jewish, horny, a beacon for younger writers and obsessives of the flesh such as Cohen. Leonard, Layton asked, have you noticed a decline in your sexual activity?

In the kitchen of his house in Montreal, Cohen smiles now to recount the conversation. His own amatory legend, which he likes to downplay, includes liaisons with Joni Mitchell, Janis Joplin, and Rebecca De Mornay, among others, and verses that do not flinch at naming body parts or private acts. His eyes are serious, his voice playfully light. This is Leonard Cohen, poet of the sad song, telling a joke. "I said, 'Well, I have, Layton. And I take it that you also have observed some decline in your sexual interest?' Yes, the elder poet had as well. So Cohen asked him when he first noticed the decline. "He said, 'Oh, maybe when I was sixteen or seventeen.'"

Strictly speaking, this is the punch line, but Cohen does not leave it alone. "I think with all human creatures it's downhill," he continues, descending into darker, more familiar territory of bummer and rue. "One is

seized by the rage for a number of years, and then the rest of the world begins to intrude and assert itself.”

For thirty-five years, since Judy Collins recorded his mournful ballad “Suzanne,” Leonard Cohen has cut a worldly, burdened figure through the literary quadrants of pop music, engaging the big questions—sex, salvation, worth—in plainspoken rhyme that has earned him admirers as distant as Nick Cave and Neil Diamond. He is a badass of dark verse. He has come to Montreal, from his main home on the outskirts of South Central Los Angeles, to talk about his new album, titled, with typical austerity, *Ten New Songs*, and about the journey that produced it.

He wears his gray hair short and pushed forward. A striped tie hangs loosely around a gray silk shirt already damp in the unseasonable heat. The album, which came out October 9, is his first since he checked into a mountain Zen monastery in 1994, emerging, with little explanation, five years later. Like his previous twelve recordings, the new one is filled with finely wrought lyrics of obsession and incompleteness. He has also published two novels and nine books of poetry that are even more unflinching than his music. Scattered across forty-five years, these works have brought him pockets of adulation, comparisons to the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, and tribute albums from alternative rockers and Slovakian girl bands—and, above all, a haphazard path that by now qualifies as a long and sustaining career.

Over a breakfast of strong coffee and cigarettes, he shows me a poem he wrote in the monastery, around the time he was thinking about coming down. It begins, “I’ve become thin and beautiful again ...”

We are in for a long talk.

The home in Montreal is a modest row house in the old immigrant quarter, sparsely genteel, next door to a Zen center Cohen helped found, with photographs of his son, Adam, twenty-nine, who is a singer-songwriter, and daughter, Lorca, twenty-six, a painter and sculptor, on display. The house is comfortable but underused. When Cohen first left this city, at twenty-two, he did so as a celebrated Canadian poet, hoping to storm the

Beat poetry and folk music scenes developing in downtown New York. After a couple of fizzled starts, he remembers landing in Max's Kansas City, where a young man named Lou Reed introduced him to the luminaries of the Warhol crowd. Cohen had just published his prodigiously bleak 1966 novel, *Beautiful Losers*, which was a commercial failure at the time, though it has since gone on to sell a million copies. The gamesmanship at Max's got heated; Cohen felt cut. Finally, Reed said to him, "You don't have to take anything from these assholes, you wrote *Beautiful Losers*." Though he never fully abandoned Montreal, he keeps the house mainly so his children will have a connection with the city where they grew up. He has never mentioned Montreal in a song. (In a telling contrast, according to the Web site leonardcohenfiles.com, he has used the word "naked" seventeen times.)

Two portraits in the house could serve as guideposts to Cohen's sojourn from the city's tight Jewish community—which produced the late Mordecai Richler, Layton, and A. M. Klein, among others—to his unlikely status, in late middle age, as a part-time pop star and full-time soul man. The first is of a seventeenth-century Mohawk girl named [Kateri and baptised as] Catherine Tekakwitha, whose oppressive virginity and bid for sainthood figure in *Beautiful Losers*. The other portrait is of an elderly Zen teacher named Joshu Sasaki Roshi, who has been Leonard's spiritual advisor since the 1970s. From different sides, the two pictures address the idea of carnal quiet toward which Cohen's writings have steadfastly groped. Tekakwitha shines with chaste incandescence; Roshi grins in slurry satisfaction beside a half-empty bottle of wine.

A little more than seven years ago, Cohen decided he needed a change of place, not just physical but spiritual. He was ending a tour in support of an album called *The Future*, a corrosive look at decline on a broad scale, and ending a love affair with Rebecca De Mornay. (A rhyme from the album's title track ran, "Destroy another fetus now / We don't like children anyhow.") He removed himself to a Buddhist monastery sixty-five hundred feet up on Mount Baldy, in the San Gabriel Mountains outside Los Angeles, and to the teachings of Roshi. Cohen had been to the monastery before, for short

periods, but this trip was different. Though he makes little of the circumstances, he says that even at the time, he knew he would be there for years. “It sounds dramatic, and I suppose I could put a dramatic spin on it if I were interested in self-dramatization,” he says, “but it was a very natural unfolding. I was close to sixty, my old teacher was close to ninety, and I thought it would be appropriate to spend some time with him.”

Roshi, who came to the United States from Japan in 1962 (“I came to have a good time,” he once said), has been a comfort to and an influence on Cohen in his life and in his music. Some years ago, the two men were in New York, and Cohen felt pelted by criticisms that his music was too gloomy and indulgent. At the time, he was recording his 1984 album, *Various Positions*. The two men had fortified themselves with a very strong Chinese liqueur called Ng-Ka-Fy, and Roshi was nodding off. “I didn’t think he was paying any attention,” Cohen says. “The next morning, I said, ‘What did you think, Roshi?’ He said, ‘Leonard, you should sing more sad.’ That was a very good piece of advice.”

I ask: Leonard, why so many sad songs?

“I never thought of it that way, as morbidity or sadness,” he says. “We never say of a blues singer that he sounds sad. Of course he sounds sad. If the song is authentically an expression of the person’s suffering, then the suffering is transcended and you don’t get the whine, you don’t get the complaint, even though it may be all about a whine and a complaint. It’s experienced as relief, as comfort, as pleasure.”

Nick Cave, who has turned a dark line or two himself, remembers discovering the pleasures of Cohen at the age of fourteen, in a country town in Australia where he used to drink pilfered beer and listen to Cohen’s *Songs of Love and Hate*, an album his friend’s mother considered unhealthily depressing. “It just changed me,” Cave says. “How sexy his whole way of writing was. It’s been decried as depressing, but he’s one of the funniest writers we have. I can’t think of a lyric that doesn’t have a smile hidden in the lines. There are two things going on all the time: warmth and a wicked wit. I wish I had that.”

It should be said that Leonard Cohen does not write his songs from depression but from conflict, from what he calls “the opposing movements in the mind that produce the need for resolving the chaos and observing order.” There was a time when he felt the curtain of depression, and he sought relief in Prozac, Desyrel, MAO inhibitors, and other armaments of the modern medicine cabinet. “They all made me feel a lot worse,” he says. Then around 1998 or 1999, without warning, his depression lifted on its own, and to the betterment of his writing. The despair never provided him with material, he says. “I didn’t feel it was necessarily the engine of the activity. It’s anguish. It’s a pain in the ass. On the contrary, I find my capacity to concentrate enhanced without that background of horror.”

Pilgrims who have trekked up to Mount Baldy, seeking either enlightenment or Cohen, describe the monastery as Spartan, beautiful, and cold. Cohen occupied a wooden cabin with a narrow bed, dirty carpet, and few amenities, apart from his synthesizer and laptop computer. Mornings began at 2:30 or 3 AM, with chores and meditation; on Friday evenings, Cohen, the grandson of a prominent Canadian rabbi, lit candles to observe the Sabbath. He is not a man of simple faith nor eager to foreclose his options. At any rate, his Judaism did not clash with the Zen teachings at the center. In August 1996, he was ordained as a monk and Roshi gave him the name Jikan, which has been roughly translated as “silent one.” “Since his English is very poor, I never really found out what that means,” Cohen says. “It’s got something to do with silence, but normal silence, not special, holy, righteous, renunciated silence. Just ordinary silence. Or the silence out of which everything evolves, the silence at the center of things.” He told one interviewer on the mountain that Roshi had recommended the ordainment for tax purposes.

He was not, Cohen insists, trying to retire or retreat from the world. “It’s the wrong place to go to if you want to retire, because it’s a very busy kind of place, as monasteries or Zen centers are,” he says. The center had phones and also a steady onus of snow to shovel, dishes to wash. He served as a cook for Roshi and gave occasional interviews. The Rinzai Zen discipline of the

center sought rigorous, sweaty engagement with the world, not pious withdrawal.

In his work, Cohen has been scrupulously direct in engaging the world. For all the gloom in his writing, fans are as likely to be drawn to the humor and bite of his boudoir reportage. In other words, the dirty stuff: the bawdy swash of a song like “Don’t Go Home with Your Hard-On,” which featured Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg singing sloppy backup, or the well-mannered vitriol of “Everybody Knows”: “Everybody knows that you’ve been discreet / But there were so many people you just had to meet / Without your clothes / And everybody knows.”

Leonard Cohen is less willing to speak so directly in conversation. After three decades of interviews, he knows how to give a little taste and then eloquently retreat, covering his tracks by professing a lack of eloquence. For years he has expressed regret at revealing that his song “Chelsea Hotel,” with its line “Giving me head on the unmade bed,” referred to an affair with Janis Joplin. The lyric, which borders on cruelty, was fine, he says, but he should have let it remain anonymous. Relationships with God, with women, with the world, “are appropriately addressed in one’s work,” he says. “Otherwise it’s just gossip, which is not a particularly exalted activity. A great deal of time and attention has gone into producing the language. To speak casually about the matter is taking the name in vain. There’s a commandment against it.”

That said, he offers me some unpublished writings, which he hopes will answer some of my questions. The descriptive poems from Mount Baldy add meat to the dry bones of the pilgrims’ accounts of the monastery. Besides the meditating and the chores, the robes and the shaved pate, the poems recount three-hundred-dollar bottles of Ballantine’s scotch and the pleasures of lower altitudes. Cohen writes:

*I’m loose in the belt and tight in the jowl / Crazy young beauties still covered with
the grime / Of shrines and ashrams / Want to examine their imagination / In an old*

He did not go up the mountain to discover the scalding virtues of self-denial.

In the house in Montreal, he taps at his laptop like an archaeologist reconstructing an elusive event. The directories in the computer are labyrinthine inventories of Cohen's consciousness. Entries for a single song lyric pile up: "Final version #1," which innocently offers itself as conclusive, is really just a speed bump along the way to "Final version #20" and beyond. "That's good," he says, pulling up a poem called "Lovesick Monk" and offering a window on his life on Mount Baldy. It begins, not burying the lead, "It's dismal here." Later, a line of verse stretches across a drawing of a woman's bare backside, offering up a typical mix of portent and self-mockery. Across her ass it reads, "This is the perfection of the great way."

There is something alluringly incomplete about Leonard Cohen, and I think this is one of the traits that make him so seductive to women. His songs pick repeatedly at the same themes of unfulfillment, circling back over a few gnawing aches. He is not afraid to seek company in his ruin. His best lyrics are reductive, distilling a single yearning to metallic purity, often in language hewed down to monosyllables. He shows me a passage from a song in progress, an embryonic draft that has been through just sixteen revisions but is pure brutal Cohen: "You came to me this morning / And you handled me like meat / You've got to be a man to know / How good that feels, how sweet."

His filmic biographer, Harry Rasky, who directed a documentary called *The Song of Leonard Cohen*, once described him as "the first great vaginal poet," a line that means nothing to me or Cohen, except maybe this: His verses, like his conversation, create hollow spaces rather than eager projections. There is room to come inside; there are bruises to handle roughly.

Cohen's revelation on Mount Baldy, when it came, was the opposite of an epiphany. Instead it was a recognition that there would be no epiphany. It came upon him like medicine, harsh but healing. "One has a sense of a gift," he explains. "I have a gift for rhyme. I found with a sense of relief that I had no gift for the spiritual life." What this meant, he says, was that he was free to abandon the quest, without the aroma of disappointment or failure, nor a rejection of the cause. "I didn't have to seek for anything. And with the search, the anxieties attendant on that search ended. I don't know if 'happiness' is the word to describe the feeling; maybe 'applied indifference.'"

When he came down from the mountain in 1999, a few months before his sixty-fifth birthday, he brought a laptop full of songs, ten of which he deemed worthy of use. For a typical song, Cohen might write thirty or forty verses before arriving at five or six he can live with: "Unfortunately, I have to write a whole verse before I can discard it. I'm not sure that it's not any good until I finish it. Some people write great songs in the backs of taxicabs. I'm not like that." He ran across a sometime collaborator named Sharon Robinson, who helped him set the songs to music and record them in a backyard studio outside his Los Angeles home. They recorded their vocals late at night and in the early mornings, so as not to pick up the chirping of birds. In the spirit of incompleteness, they used Robinson's demo tracks as the final accompaniment.

The songs are among the gentlest of his career, melancholy but not broken. The images are tautly visual, creating big vistas from a few little words: "The ponies run, the girls are young / The odds are there to beat."

Lust, which has been a lacerating force in Cohen's life and consequently in his work, is for the moment diminished. Instead the songs all refer, however obliquely, to the resolution of the time on Mount Baldy. His was not a break with faith; he continues to pursue meaning through Buddhism and Judaism. But this compulsive inquiry, as ever, will require labor-intensive immersion in his work, not deliverance. The new album reflects this acceptance. "As my

old teacher says, 'You can't live in paradise: there are no toilets or restaurants.' Regardless of whatever descriptions you have of yourself, you have to keep coming back," Cohen says, to what he calls, somewhat infelicitously, Boogie Street, "the ordinary landscape of work and desire."

On a street outside the house in Montreal, the conversation circles inevitably around to work and sex. For a brief period of time, before his musical career took off, Cohen worked as a reporter. He got an assignment to interview the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould and was so impressed with the clarity of Gould's ideas that he did not bother to take notes; the words, he was sure, were burned into his mind. It was the last assignment he ever took. But the experience stayed with him, and even now, he says, "I think of myself as a journalist and my songs as reportage. I draw something as accurately as I can with the evidence available."

At his courtly insistence, we are on a mission to find Montreal bagels, the slender, heavy ones of which the city is justly proud. Sex and seduction have been recurring causes in his work and life, and so in interviews. I ask if he ever instigated the romantic turmoil in his life to have something to write about. This is not the first time he has considered the question. He says, "Layton once suggested that the poet does it for the poem, screws things up to have something to write about. I don't know if that's so. All that speculation suggests that we're in control, that we're doing things according to a plan. That runs counter to my understanding of how things work."

What Cohen will say for his career is that it has largely left him free to work. At an awards ceremony, he once thanked the executives of his record company for not paying too much attention to his work. His brief tastes of celebrity—he was once, for example, mobbed in Norway, where he fleetingly enjoyed a profile to rival that of Britney Spears—relieved any envy of greater stardom. At the same time, the fidelity of his fans has allowed him a working life more literary than pop, neither enslaved by his fans' needs nor oppressing them with his.

He protests amusement at his rep as a swordsman. "It's amazingly inaccurate, but it's interesting to read about," he says. And it has allowed him

into the fraternity, access to the players' lore. "Because of this fictitious reputation, I have the credentials that permit me to enter into conversation with the Great Ones," he says. "From what I gather, when it comes to the objects of love that they desire—not the ones that come easily, but the women they want—then the background is anxiety. It has a physical resonance. Nobody masters it."

So he will continue to plumb the contours of this anxiety, unquenched by either Prozac or Zen, by the examples of Catherine or Roshi. Perhaps because Cohen was always older than the rock crowd, his work has sought deeper purchase in life's conflict, rather than the rock-and-roll joys of release. This is a key both to his longevity and to his next move. The conflict still beckons. As he sang a decade and a half ago, in bittersweet acknowledgment, there ain't no cure for love. But for Cohen, at least, there are the annealing self-examinations of the laptop. And for the rest of us, there is the work of Leonard Cohen.