

A session with

There's safety in numbers, so Leonard Cohen found himself descended upon early Monday morning by a shivering group of four: Patricia Hughes, Terry Donnelly, John Thompson and Jon Whyte.

Cohen is probably the best and certainly the most spectacular Canadian poet of his generation. Since the recent re-issue of his first book, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, all his volumes of poetry are in print. (The others are *The Spice-Box of Earth*, *Flowers for Hitler*, and, just new, *Parasites of Heaven*.)

As well, he has written two fine novels, *The Favorite Game* and the recent notorious *Beautiful Losers*.

When we arrived at his hotel suite, Mr. Cohen was in the shower. The door was opened by Eli Mandel, of the U of A English Department, a poet and a friend of poets. "I'm Leonard Cohen," he said.

We weren't fooled. We set up the tape-recorder, which kept making rude chirps; Cohen sang softly in the shower. In time he emerged, and the following conversation took place.

WHYTE: I was just looking through your most recent book, *Parasites of Heaven*, and noticed that in some of the poems you've been writing over the past year there seems to be more of an awareness of the ballad styles. Does this stem from your playing of the guitar or just from your interest in the ballad?

COHEN: I think that book is closer to the first one, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. I've always played the guitar; I used to play in a barn dance group called the Buckskin Boys.

THOMPSON: Do you think that the breakthrough into popular music of people like Bob Dylan is going to have any importance either to popular music or to the general culture?

COHEN: Well, I don't know. I feel that I created Dylan.

THOMPSON: How so?

COHEN: For me the whole thing was the incantation of words to a string accompaniment. That was my whole idea of what I wanted to do. Then I got sidetracked into writing for five or six years and put away my guitar for another kind of trip. But I feel that I'm doing now what I was doing at fifteen.

WHYTE: There's also some stuff in your poems—things like the rabbinical or the cantor's chants in some of the poems in *Flowers for Hitler* . . .

COHEN: I feel it's all the same; I think for me it's all been one poem. I just found myself in a different place, in a different sort of crisis. Each book represents for me a different kind of crisis. I never felt that I changed from one thing to another, but that things around me changed—I mean, I just responded in a different way.

I never felt anything really move. I saw that the page looked different

—sometimes it was prose, sometimes it was poetry—but I never really felt very far from that incantatory voice beside a stringed instrument.

When I wrote *Beautiful Losers* I wrote it to the sound of the armed forces radio station in Athens—that's what was going all the time, country and western music. And after I finished *Beautiful Losers* I thought that what I really wanted to do was to become a country and western singer. So when I came back to America I started down to Nashville, but I got waylaid in New York and got into that world. But the same things are happening. It's music.

WHYTE: Has anyone ever approached you about doing a record?

COHEN: They're making a record in New York, and a couple of my things have been recorded already by Judy Collins on her newest record—they're really nice. It's

circumstances. The worst thing that can happen to you is that you can die. Nothing can happen to the universe, and nothing can happen to us; it's just how attached you are to your own soft shell . . . and after a while you get to be very unattached to it, I believe.

WHYTE: You consider *Beautiful Losers* part of the big poem, then.

COHEN: I consider it a poem, first of all: sort of a long epic poem. It was certainly written that way. It was written in the way that I've always written poetry.

WHYTE: How's that? . . .
COHEN: Just music . . . music. I just had a very big song, exactly the same as if I were writing a very small song.

When you're writing a big song you know that the song is going to take about a year instead of, say, a morning. You just train yourself that way—you just keep in a certain

sounds like a song to me.

Anything that highly organized—and I don't mean the organization of the mind, but the organization of necessity, like the instructions on shoe polish tins—I've always liked because it has that life and death sound to it. Anything that has a life and death sound to it is a song.

WHYTE: This is very nice . . . a while ago I was talking with someone who said, "Look, Jon, you're interested in poetry, and you probably want all of the three hundred thousand people in this city to talk poetry. What's your Dale Carnegie program for getting people into the poetic sing or swing of things?" You seem to have done this more successfully than most of the other poets in the country, although Layton has done a fairly good job too. Do you have this Dale Carnegie program riding in the background?

you want to hear is haiku.

(Haiku is a Japanese three-line verse form of five, seven and five syllables a line, respectively.)

It really is just where you are; the world is endlessly diverse, and you can find poetry wherever you are, or else it finds you wherever you are. That's really what it is—poetry finds you.

WHYTE: Would you rather make love or make poems? Or are they the same thing?

COHEN: That really depends on the girl. (laughter)

DONNELLY: Do you write painfully and carefully, or do you find it largely a spontaneous thing?

COHEN: I find the whole person's engaged. Those lyrics that are really a gift you have nothing to say about, and I don't think that you can organize yourself to produce it, whether you're going

never got any of it down, but in those moments I felt the best I've ever felt about writing because it really was happening in the midst of the music. It's really great.

HUGHES: When you describe writing and poetry as being a kind of singing, the whole thing seems to be very apocalyptic. Are you a prophet?

COHEN: I think that in the same way we know the past, we know the future. We're somewhere between those two things. Every man is a prophet, there's no question about it.

We tend to get into the question of poetry as if it were an end in itself, whereas poetry really is a verdict. I've said that and felt that many times. It's really the name we give to a certain kind of experience, either one that raises the hair on the back of our necks, or one that places our heads above ourselves.

We tend to lose ourselves because we can't talk about fire, or we can't really show each other what we mean about life. We tend to talk about the way poems are organized, but I think that every poem is life and death.

That's really the only realm you want to live in. The really great things about a poem are what is happening to the man, how that bit of language happens to get something across to him. Talk about the language is like the pointing finger and not the moon.

HUGHES: I know what you mean, because to me *Losers* was a prophetic book. Really I see you as a prophet.

DONNELLY: When Irving Layton was here last year he said something to the effect that he was one of the great forces holding Canada together. I wonder if you'd claim that for yourself.

COHEN: I think it's Layton and the railways. (laughter) And I feel I'm one of the great disintegrating forces.

THOMPSON: Do you have an affection for Canada's forces of disorder, like its politicians and so forth?

COHEN: Anyone who has no affection for Canada has a dead heart. It's an adorable country.

HUGHES: What do you think of French-Canadian culture?

COHEN: It's like asking somebody what he thinks of his stepbrother. You know, I grew up in that family . . . Cinderella . . . I don't know who I was. One of the ugly sisters maybe. I was in the house and so I feel it was part of me. I feel much closer to the French chansonnier than I do to any English poet.

THOMPSON: What English poets do you feel closest to?

COHEN: Whenever I hear that a guy writes poetry I feel close to him. You know, I understand the folly.



SINGIN' A SONG
... at Tuesday concert



COHEN LOOKING
... it's all the same



THE HAPPY POET
... but not always

called "In My Life"; there are two of my tunes on it.

THOMPSON: What do you think is the value of this sort of incantation in a world in which everything seems to become very prosy?

COHEN: I've never seen the world that way. I don't think the world is becoming prosy—on the contrary, I think it's becoming more and more ritualistic. I think we're probably entering a great Egyptian period, where there are going to be very well-defined castes—priests, warriors, scribes.

THOMPSON: Was this what you were getting at in *Beautiful Losers* in the talk about magic?

COHEN: Well, I think that people understand now that there is such a thing.

THOMPSON: In *Beautiful Losers* you had F. say, "All my life I've tried to be a magician; my advice to you is not to be a magician but to be Magic." Don't you think that this is a tremendously dangerous way to encounter life?

COHEN: I don't think life is dangerous under any

kind of training. If you want a certain kind of poem that sounds as if a man were starving and had the visions of a man who is malnourished, then you stop eating and you just live that way.

And if you have the feeling of wanting to write a good-bye song, like that certain kind of folk ballad, then you put yourself in that frame of mind—it's just a matter of time, and a matter of being able to master that kind of discipline for a year or for a morning. It's just a matter of how extensive the training is going to be.

THOMPSON: Do you think that all valid poetry is song, or do you think there are other elements?

COHEN: I think it's song and . . . I think it's all song. Even the books that don't present themselves as songs, like *The Guide to the Perplexed*, all have that feeling.

Whenever people are talking about that thing on how to live or the style with which you move through the world, whenever it gets down to that central thing, it always

COHEN: Well, whenever a poet starts talking about bringing the people into poetry, he really means just letting his poetry get out to the people. I've always felt that it was in the public realm. It's never been a program on my part—I've always felt that that's where it belongs. I don't feel that you have to bring the public into any poetry, because the public is in it already.

Most of the tunes on the charts are pretty good. I think we're probably in one of the greatest periods for lyrics since Elizabethan times. Take that ballad that Bobby Darin sings, *If I Were a Carpenter*—that's as good a ballad as any Scottish border ballad. It really is right up there.

THOMPSON: Do you think that popular song is more interesting now than what the "poets" are doing in the academies?

COHEN: Interesting is just where your head is. There's a time when all you really want to read are saintly confessions—and that's poetry—and there's a time when all

to do it from the heart, the stomach, the mind, or any other of the Yogic centers. You can't organize it.

But for a novel, something like *Beautiful Losers*, my whole idea was to let each center have its play, so that sometimes I was writing from the spine, sometimes from the stomach, sometimes from the head, sometimes from the heart; and I know that if I lasted long enough then each of those centers would have its song.

WHYTE: Have you done any playing around with strictly oral poems as opposed to the rhythmic poem at all? I was thinking of the Anglo-Saxon bard sort of thing, who knows just the story and some of the elements that he's going to put in, but not all of the elements.

COHEN: Lots of times when I was working with a small group where there's a guitar, drums, a singer, a bass—we'd fool around together and something would start and it would just go on for a long time. An impromptu ballad—we