

The Soundtrack of Your Life

A writer's love of Leonard Cohen can be traced to her father's decision in 1970 to choose the album *Songs from a Room* over a pair of pantyhose.

by Malwina Gudowska

It all began at a bingo game. A high-school student at the time, my father was taking part in an English-language camp organized by the British Council just outside of Krakow, Poland in the summer of 1970. As one of the camp's extracurricular activities, the Polish students played bingo in the evenings, and as a victor one night, my father could choose one of two prizes brought in from the UK: a pair of pantyhose or a Leonard Cohen album.

Pantyhose, a wardrobe staple at the time, were hot commodities in Poland and hard to come by in Communist times. My father had a mother, two sisters and a girlfriend to think about. Leonard Cohen, although a well-known author and poet, was relatively new to the music world, having released only his second studio album. My father had never heard of him. So, you can see the dilemma.

In what would seem like a serendipitous sequence of events, but was in fact attributable to the simple fact that any 15-year-old boy would, given the choice, choose music over pantyhose—even during hard Communist times—my father chose *Songs from a Room*, Cohen's 1969 release. As we now know, pantyhose are overrated but you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who would say the same about Cohen, and for my father, the decision cemented a lifelong affair with the Canadian legend.

For years afterwards, "Tonight will be Fine" played on my dad's Bambino record player, over and over again until, finally, he could get his hands on Cohen's later albums from across the Polish border. With the addition of bootleg cassettes, his Cohen collection began to grow, and it now includes all of Cohen's albums, (legit) tapes, CDs, DVDs and books.

According to my father, at a party some years later when a guest put on Cohen's music, one of his British friends chimed in: "It's too early for Cohen," insinuating that it had to be well into the night and you had to be sufficiently tipsy to listen to the "godfather of gloom" rhapsodize about sex, religion and death—the dominant themes in Cohen's music.

But growing up, it was never too early for Leonard Cohen in our house. I woke up on weekends to a blaring "Suzanne"; I danced in my parents' living room to "Take this Waltz," pretending the bookshelves were my audience; I knew all the words to "Closing Time"; and I "took Manhattan" long before I could even imagine strolling its streets, which I did, eventually, in my late 20s visiting, the Hotel Chelsea in New York City, where Cohen lived in the early 1970s.

I lip-synched songs about crack and anal sex ("The Future") and "giv-



ing head on an unmade bed" ("Chelsea Hotel No. 2") before I knew what any of it meant. And for me, actress Rebecca De Mornay wasn't just the crazy nanny in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*; she was Leonard Cohen's girlfriend back then.

In his 2006 book, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin writes that musical taste starts to form in the womb. A 20-week-old fetus can already process musical and environmental sounds. After birth, the culture we grow up in also plays a part in our preferences and it's only when we reach the teen years of self-discovery that we begin to form our own musical preferences separate from what we've known as kids. But mostly, we end up liking music that sounds like other music we already like, writes Levitin. That would explain why I didn't stray far when attempting to assert my own musical taste.

As a teen, I loved "Famous Blue Raincoat"—the Tori Amos cover; I listened on VHS repeat (rewinding the video over and over again when the song would begin to play) to Concrete Blonde's version of "Everybody Knows" from the best Christian Slater movie ever, *Pump Up the Volume*; and when my high school friends obsessed over "Where is My Mind" by the Pixies, I one-upped them with the band's cover of Cohen's "I Can't Forget." This was, but it wasn't, my parents' music.



“I was struck by how much passion that suave septuagenarian can still convey and elicit.”

It wasn't until my early 20s that I decided to take a break from listening to Cohen, covers and all. It wasn't so much a conscious decision as one that happened because I was listening to other stuff: Brit pop and, for a very short time, death metal to impress an old boyfriend. And perhaps, subconsciously, I needed to branch out and break free of what symbolized my childhood and ties to home, and my parents.

But as thousands of women and men can tell you, whether they are referring to his music or his philandering ways, Cohen has an alluring way of drawing you back to him.

“Marry me!” a woman from the crowd yelled out at his Toronto concert in 2008, the first time I saw him live. To which Cohen responded from the stage: “It wouldn't work; many have tried.”

In her February 2012 article about Cohen's newest album, *Old Ideas*, released in January, *New Yorker* writer Ariel Levy discusses how the musician, now 77 years old, still has the power to educe an all-consuming sensuality.

“A few years ago, I went...to see Cohen perform at Radio City Music Hall, and I was struck by how much passion that suave septuagenarian can still convey and elicit. He was understated, but irresistible,” Levy writes.

Everyone has a Leonard Cohen story, from the Polish students who identified with his subversive lyrics and organized a Cohen festival in 1983 when the civil liberties of Polish citizens were non-existent, to Roger Ebert, who says that if it weren't for pausing to listen to “I'm Your Man” before being discharged from the hospital, an artery in his neck would have burst in the car as opposed to in the hospital where he received immediate attention. And then there's the hauntingly

beautiful story of Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari, who says the lyrics to “Sisters of Mercy” helped him survive 118 days in an Iranian prison.

For me, there was no life-changing event that made me return to Cohen's music again about seven years ago; I simply felt comforted when I heard his music play, despite the often sad and self-deprecating lyrics. Studies have shown that adults are drawn to music that moved them when they were younger, so perhaps it was inevitable. There was also a sense of ownership I could never shake, like that felt by many super-fans, who can't imagine anyone loving, or knowing their favourite musician the way they do. It was also a tie to my past, and to my dad. Now, my father and I often correspond with each other through Cohen: he sends me new cover-song CDs from Saskatoon, where he now resides, and I tell him about the latest biography or article I've come across.

While at Cohen's concert in Calgary in 2009, I accidentally pocket-dialled my home landline from my cell during his performance of “Closing Time,” and since then, the muffled version has been saved on my voicemail. I can't bear to press “delete” each time the stern Telus lady reminds me that I have one saved message, even though it's from three years ago. That must be the sign of a true No. 1 fan. Or, in my case, No. 2, after my father. 📞

Catch a glimpse of Leonard Cohen at Axis Contemporary Art, where 40 years' worth of Cohen's sketches and paintings are on display until May 14th.



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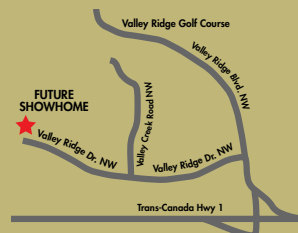
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