

Tower of Words

By Josef Woodard, July 27, 2006

Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man

Rufus Wainwright, Martha Wainwright, Nick Cave, and Bono star in a film directed by Lian Lunson.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Here are a few of the many disarming, ennobling aspects of the fine *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, one of the better entries in the dubious "music film" genre: it's a rare concert film in which songs are seen and heard *en toto*; it actually includes the introduction of the backing musicians; and it's a film driven by word-power. Cohen's profound (and playful) lyrics veritably jump and slither off the screen, and we're reminded again of Cohen's special place in the pantheon of poet/songwriters.

Australian director Lian Lunson, who previously made a Willie Nelson documentary, has worked some kind of small, intuitive miracle here. The film began life innocently enough, as a documentary on the Hal Willner-produced Leonard Cohen tribute concerts at the Sydney Opera House in early 2005 (the tribute began in Brooklyn and continues in Dublin this fall). But once Lunson got the mystery man himself in the picture, sparks started to fly, and a unique and tasteful musical portrait is the upshot.

The tribute concert includes stellar performances by the Wainwrights — Rufus ("Everybody Knows," "Chelsea Hotel") and Martha, and the McGarrigle Sisters. Also in the mix are Nick Cave — whose seductive low-end gravel suits "Suzanne" well — the moving singer Antony Hegarty, and Cohen backup singers Julie Christensen and Perla Batalla singing "Anthem" ("there is a crack in everything/that's what lets the light in ...").

U2 also gets in on the act. The Edge and Bono ponder the Man and play as his backup band in a rare video shoot with the modern-day, stage-shy Cohen, who drolly intones "Tower of Song." But Cohen doesn't look nearly as happy playing with Bono as when discussing subjects dear to him, including his early influences (the Bible and Marvel Comics) and his later Buddhist faith.

In the interview portions, Cohen keeps coming up with epigrammatic comments which refract off his lyrics. Regarding his past: "I don't have regrets, nor occasion for self-congratulation." On his painstaking songwriting process: "you go to work every day, but you're not going to get it every day." On escaping the fame game by moving to a Zen monastery in the early '90s and becoming ordained: "the less I was of *who* I was, the better I felt."

Everybody knows this guy is the real deal, with a deep history, and he is ripe for a late-career burst of action and appreciation.