

Leonard Cohen

CHANGES/JUNE 1st, 1969/PAGE 29

It is a strange, uncertain world. There are many dangers and the night is long, as this green and blue planet spins through space. Ages ago, ancient men huddled close together around a comforting fire while beasts of prey howled deep in the forest or circled the darkness growling - held back by the spell of the fire. The men told each other stories of the gods, myths of the magic sun and mystic rain, trying to make some order of their difficult existence.

Leonard Cohen sits before a fire in a one-room stone cottage, strumming guitar and reciting songs in his rich one-toned voice. He makes up myths and tells himself stories while a jew's harp boings in the background like a chorus of crickets. This is *Songs From a Room* (Columbia):

I found a silver needle and put it in
my arm
It did some good
Did some harm
But the nights were cold
and it almost kept me warm
How come the night is long?

Later in another song, *Lady Midnight* answers:

Don't try to use me
Just win me or lose me
That is what the darkness is for

Cohen is not a musician as this second album further demonstrates - he is a poet and storyteller. While he has only three or four tunes (you will recognize them from his first lp), he has infinite stories and images. He rhymes his poetry with music, almost speaking the words with the slow

inevitability of a tango. He gives us glimpses into other people's lives. And says perfectly the half-formed thought or desire you've wanted to give to your lovers and friends.

There are two types of songs that Cohen writes: the long rambling social narrative and the true poems like "Suzanne." On *Songs From a Room* there are fewer of the true poems than on *Leonard Cohen* (his first record), so that this one is less exciting as song than as thought-provoking stories.

They are stories about life's dangers and sadnesses; how to make it through the night in a world where the God who had hurt and angered you says:

Do not leave me now
Do not leave me now
I'm broken down from a recent

fall
Blood on my body
Ice on my soul
Lead on my son
It's your world

Remember how Dylan told the Biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac on *Highway 61*:

God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe said, "Man, you must be puttin' me on" . . .

There is a strong thread of anti-war, anti-stolid stupidity on this album beginning with Cohen's version of that myth, "The Story of Isaac." Probably the best cut on the record (with "Bird on the Wire"), it is Isaac speaking a chillingly lovely narrative of going up the mountain with his stern

holy father. At the point of the raised hatchet, Cohen steps in and says to today's fathers:

You who build these altars now
to sacrifice these children
You must not do it anymore
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been
tempted by a demon or a god

Judy Collins did a more musical version of this song on her last album, *Who Knows Where the Time Goes*. I'd played it many times, but it wasn't until I listened to Cohen sing/say it that I heard all the words and knew what it was about. Maybe that's why although people like Judy Collins make better songs of his work, Cohen's versions are important: He is his best interpreter.

Johanna Schier

