

Another Take on Leonard Cohen

[Review of *Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows* by Harvey Kubernik (London: Omnibus, 2015)]

The book *Everybody Knows* is a tribute to Leonard Cohen's life and career compiled by Harvey Kubernik, a writer, editor, music producer and music historian who has been contributing to various magazines and music journals such as *Melody Maker*, *Crawdaddy!*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Record Collector News* and *MOJO*. He is the author of seminal books on music among which are: *This Is Rebel Music* (2002), *Canyon of Dreams: The Magic and the Music of Laurel Canyon* (2012) and *Neil Young: Heart of Gold* (2015).

The present book on Leonard Cohen was published by Omnibus Press in cooperation with Palazzo Editions. The outcome is an ingenious compilation of memorabilia and recollection of Cohen's colleagues and friends packed with photographs from Cohen's life and peppered by Kubernik's own commentaries.

Omnibus has previously published other books on Leonard Cohen, *Leonard Cohen: In Every Style of Passion* (1996) and *Leonard Cohen: In His Own Words* (1998) by Jim Devlin, which was also a compilation of excerpts and quips. In 2010, they published *Remarkable Life* by Anthony Reynolds which contained so many factual errors and typos that it had to be reissued. In 2012 they published *Leonard Cohen: The Music and the Mystique*, a botchy commentary and explanation to all of Cohen's songs. With their last volume on the singer, they seem to be trying to compensate for their failure to release something substantial after the success of the first book by Devlin.¹

Everybody Knows is introduced by two great photos of Leonard Cohen and Federico García Lorca which Kubernik chose for contrast and to suggest that Cohen's life has been always interrelated with Spanish poetry and song. The book consists of ten chapters. Each of them presents a structured timeline which describes the major events of Cohen's life. The number of music producers, musicians, historians and Cohen's friends who were interviewed (most often in 2013) give an impressive perspective on the work of Leonard Cohen. Among the names, there appear John Lissauer, the producer of the *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (1974) and *Various Positions* (1984), who helped Cohen to arrange and record the original version of "Hallelujah," Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell, who speak about the influence of Cohen's music upon them, Bob Johnston, the legendary music producer, Sharon Robinson and Jennifer Warnes, singers accompanying Leonard Cohen, Jarkko Arjatsalo, the founder of *LeonardCohenFiles.com*, Allan Showalter, the founder of the website *Cohentric.com* and many others.

Kubernik's painstaking work on various interviews out of which he selects the excerpts brings into focus often forgotten pieces of information. Such as a note that in 1971 Cohen was travelling to Switzerland to listen to lectures by Immanuel Velikovsky.² This fact brings up an interesting conjecture about Cohen's approach to writing since Velikovsky was known for his

1 Devlin, Jim. *In Every Style of Passion: The Works of Leonard Cohen*. London: Omnibus, 1996. Devlin, Jim. *Leonard Cohen: In His Own Words*. London: Omnibus, 1998. Ratcliffe, Maurice. *Leonard Cohen: The Music and the Mystique*. London: Omnibus, 2012. Reynolds, Anthony. *Leonard Cohen: A Remarkable Life*. London: Omnibus, 2010.

2 See Harvey Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows* (London: Omnibus, 2015), 86.

work on comparative mythology and biblical texts and analysed them from a psychoanalyst's perspective and cosmology.

All the critics and fans know how hilarious the theme of psychoanalysis and hypnotism in Cohen's work might be. The author mentions how he found the book *25 Lessons in Hypnotism* on Cohen's bookshelf and how it is related to the family maid whom Cohen hypnotised and made to undress when he was young.³

Furthermore, Cohen's toying with psychoanalysis and various religious systems is being revealed, perhaps inadvertently, when Kubernik mentions Cohen's meeting with Suzanne Elrod, the mother of his two children at the Scientology Centre in New York.⁴

Another peculiar information is provided thanks to the producer John Lissauer, who comments on the album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* and using broadcasting microphones from World War II during its recording,⁵ which adds to the theme of Holocaust in Cohen's work.

Apart from these curiosities, the book provides several extra sections. The first one, named "Contributors", present short bios of all the people whom Kubernik interviewed or who commented on Cohen's work in earlier interviews. Another section of the book, "Discography", presents detailed information on Studio Albums, Live Albums, Compilation Albums, Boxed Sets, 7" and 12" vinyl singles, EPs and CD-singles, Various Artists and Guest Appearances; and Selected Tribute Albums. Each album entry is fitted with notes on the name of the studio, personnel and their instruments involved, cover art, release date, label, the catalogue number, highest chart position on release, the lyrics, cover art, remasters and reissues and music videos. Kubernik then suggests further reading and gives references to Cohen's books of poetry and prose as well as makes a selection of other biographies written on the singer.

Composing biography of excerpts and quips is an interesting method. However, some of them do not follow the timeline. Chapter two, for instance, speaks about Cohen's escapade to Cuba during the Bay of Pig invasion (1961) and suddenly there appears an excerpt by Dr. Steven Max about Leonard Cohen spending the summer of 1948 at Camp Wabikon on Lake Temagami in northern Ontario.⁶ Sometimes the book has problems with coherence for it combines excerpts that do not follow the narration.

Kubernik does not attempt to say much about the themes appearing in Cohen's work nor does he offer a critical approach. Moreover, he does not venture into a more detailed description of the newest works, at least of the two last studio albums, which are described only briefly. This resignation to delve more into the recording process may come from the lack of information provided on paper or from his inability to access musicians recording and touring with Leonard Cohen most recently.

The book ends with a Sanskrit mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum",⁷ which asks us for compassion. It has enchanted us with its quality paper and its typefaces and some unpublished words and wonderful photographs, however, in the end, it is mostly a beautifully done variation on

3 See Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen*, 18.

4 See Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen*, 61.

5 See Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen*, 100.

6 See Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen*, 33.

7 See Kubernik, *Leonard Cohen*, 223.

the previous biographies of Leonard Cohen containing all that we already knew and adding some peculiarities that we did not. Nevertheless, Omnibus Press makes up for the last two volumes on Leonard Cohen and gives us, finally, something of quality.

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