

"I'M STILL TRYING TO FIND MY SONG"

Francis Mus interviews Roscoe Beck

The following interview with Roscoe Beck, the musical director of Leonard Cohen's band since 1979, took place in Ghent on August 16, 2012.

FROM RECENT SONGS (1979) TO OLD IDEAS (2012)

FM : Can this *Old Ideas* tour (2012) be compared with the tour of 1979 or with the album *Recent Songs*? For instance, the choice of the instrumentalists is very similar: the violinist Alexander Bublitchi could be seen as the new Raffi Hakopian and Javier Mas reminds me of the oud-sound of John Bilezikjian.

RB: It certainly can, for the reasons you just said. The violin is now in the band and Javier could be certainly compared to John Bilezikjian on the oud. The '79-band was a kind of a model for this band and even for the 2008 and 2010 band.

FM: Why was it a model? In what sense could it serve as an example?

RB: I believe that Leonard really liked that band, as he said before. During rehearsals just a few months ago he even said to some of the band members "maybe you should listen to *Field Commander Cohen*". That band was in some ways the model for what we are doing now. I have always felt that the '79 band really was maybe, *in a way* – and I don't mean to sound pompous or arrogant – world music before the term existed (it came into vogue in the eighties or nineties). It was an international band. You have Americans, Canadians, a Russian violinist, an Armenian oud player... It really was a mixing of different worlds.

FM: The term "world music" reminds me of the two French translations of *Book of Longing* (one version for France and one for Québec). In the Quebec-version, the translators described Leonard Cohen as a *Montrealer*, whereas in the French version, it is the *universal* dimension of Cohen's work that is put to the fore. Is there a link between the music (choice of instruments, type of music that you make) and the lyrics (locally anchored, typically Canadian, or more international or even universal...)?

RB: Well, only in that the music has to support the lyrics or the text. Mood-wise, the mood of the music has to suit the lyrics.

FM: Leonard Cohen declared that the lyric and the music should form a whole and that they cannot be separated once the song is finished. As a writer, he often evokes the "invisible guitar" behind his poetry. How do you as a "musical director" conceive this relation between the lyric and the music? Is the lyric more important than the music? Is the music's function (only) to strengthen, to accentuate, to underline... the words?

RB: I think that's exactly so. The lyrics, the words are really more important than the music. But one never knows, because you're performing for an audience and you don't really know what's going to touch the heart of the person in the audience. Mostly the lyrics are in English and maybe the person in the audience doesn't even speak English. They may have heard some translations of some of the lyrics, but many of the lyrics may not be understood. It may then be the music that speaks to them. So one never knows. Both are important, but Leonard was a writer first before he ever made a record. His first book was published maybe ten years before he ever made a recording, so one can say he's a writer first and the music supports that. But... you never know what's going to reach someone. A certain harmony of voices might appeal to someone. It may be the way Leonard or Sharon sing, it may be the harmonies of the Webb sisters or it may just be the chord progression or even a violin solo that makes somebody weep. People experience at different levels, I guess this is what I want to say.

LYRICS, MUSIC AND THE AUDIENCE

FM: Critics, for instance, have often praised the *poetical qualities* of LC's work. However, when I heard the album *Famous Blue Raincoat* [RB produced this album] for the first time, I saw it as an evidence that the *music* (and the melody in particular) has also a crucial role to play in the work of Leonard Cohen. Could one say that the enterprise of *Famous Blue Raincoat* was precisely to highlight and even to reinforce this melodic dimension of Cohen's work?

RB: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I co-produced that record with Jennifer. That was a certain vision that was born in 1979 when we were touring together. Besides Jennifer, Sharon, Rafi Hakopian and John Belazikjian, Leonard had hired my entire band *Passenger*. Because we were a self-contained band we started hearing his music in a little different way and certainly Jennifer and I did. We would perform these songs every night (like *Joan of Arc* and some others) and we could hear other possibilities as well as Leonard's own interpretation – which I think is always the most important. Jennifer and I began talking about it on the tour bus in 1979. She had a recording contract at the time and we said "Wouldn't it be great to do a whole record of Leonard's music and present it in a different way?"

FM: How would you describe that "different way" or the artistic view that was at the basis of the enterprise?

RB: Just that, just to take Leonard's music and to present it in a different way so that maybe it would bring another audience in. Over the years Leonard has had its critics. Many people love him, but certainly in earlier years he also took a critical beating from time to time: for instance that he doesn't sing well, that he doesn't have a good voice, etc. But we heard the beauty of the songs. Jennifer has one of the most beautiful voices I've ever heard. When we were performing *Joan of Arc* in 1979 and she would sing this duet with Leonard I would really be just transported: so nice! I was playing my bass and watching them and I could hear something else. Jennifer presented this idea to record companies many times, but they were much more interested in her being a pop singer and making pop records. Jennifer is also a true artist and she had this other vision of Leonard's music and finally we were able to convince somebody to invest in that idea but it took seven years of asking and her being laughed at by record company offices.

FM: In his early work Cohen stated explicitly that the effect on the reader or listener was one of the most important functions of his art. For instance about his first novel *The Favourite Game* (1963) he said to a journalist: "I want to challenge the reader's honesty, I want him to say: *I was that man, I was there.*" Even in his music this very same idea is coming back, e.g. in the song *Please don't pass me by*. Do you/LC still consider this as the mandate of the artist? It is an ambiguous issue: on the one hand, the work of Leonard Cohen shows a determination to detach from the audience because art forces to do so (the romantic image of the artist: "*You must leave everything that you cannot control*"). On the other hand, then, the audience seems to be *essential* to this artistic practice as well for the reasons I just mentioned. How can these visions be combined? How important is the audience for the artistic project itself?

RB: I'm always thinking about the audience, because without the audience what would we be doing? We would be playing for ourselves and that's a good point too – that we could go off on attention about playing for ourselves instead of playing for the audience. But we really play for the audience. I think we offer the audience the opportunity to be transported to another place. We not necessarily demand of them that they do anything in particular. If someone in the audience simply wants to come and be entertained by the music and nothing more, well certainly they can do that. They can watch the show, watch the musicians play, look at the beautiful lighting... One could enjoy it on – I don't really want to say superficial but... one could enjoy it on *one* level but I think we offer an opportunity for people in the audience to go deeper, if they wish.

FM: Even in lyrics that are much less explicit than "Please don't pass me by" one can notice that the listener or the reader is *already* involved: Cohen is addressing the audience in a *direct* way. For instance: in the line "She stands before *you* naked" (*Light as the breeze*) – he's talking to the audience. Or: "Suzanne takes *you* down" (and not: "Suzanne took *me* down"). Or: "Everybody knows that *you're* in trouble ... what *you've* been through" Do you try to translate this appeal to the reader in the music?

RB: No, I can't recall ever having talked about the lyric in that way. More often we just start playing music and Leonard is like the director of the film. If he feels something is working and it supports, he will probably

say: "That's really lovely". If he doesn't feel it's appropriate, he will suggest something else. E.g. he'll ask the background singers to wait and come in later. I don't think we have ever actually had an "intellectual" discussion about "the lyrics are saying this, so we have to do this..." I think he just expects the musicians to understand what he's after and certainly we all pay attention to the lyrics. The music that we create is going to be as a result of those lyrics and hopefully it is appropriate. There is always some "massaging" of the music that has to go on until it feels right.

FM: Jim Devlin wrote that "*The Debussy mood he had so earnestly sought from Phil Spector on 'Death of a Ladies' Man' album – an intimate, lush, almost impressionistic rapture – was successfully captured here [in Recent Songs]*". Would you agree with this? What would be the difference with the new album *Old Ideas*? In another interview you said that *Old Ideas* is "a little different of things Cohen has done before".

RB: In *Old Ideas*, just to skip to that record, the mood is set right away with *Going home*. I think certainly because of Leonard's age: he's thinking a lot about this particular stage of his life and a lot of the songs... even 'old' ideas, I don't know how old they are but certainly... maybe old ideas but new songs! Thematically I think certainly thoughts of death or dying have always been in his lyrics.

FM: I agree. When I read the tracklist, these thoughts of death struck me: 'Going home', 'Amen', 'Show me the place'...

RB: It has a bit of a retrospective perspective on life. A perspective of a 77 year old man is just going to be very different of a perspective of a 25 or a 35 year old man. *Recent songs* is certainly one of my favorite recordings of his because that's where we met. That is a fabulous recording that was underrated at the time, I think even still underrated. 1979 was the disco era, so certainly Leonard was not on a lot of people's radar at that time. I do remember that critically it was received well. The reviews of the record I saw at the time were positive but...

FM: ...It was released after the very criticized *Death of a ladies' man* album...

RB: Yes, it was uphill from there ☺ I thought at the time and still think that it is a wonderful album. Songs like *The Guests*, *The Window* are just beautiful. Of course that's where the violin and the oud came in very strongly and Jennifer Warnes' presence is very strong on the record.

FM: There are several explanations on the choice of music in *Recent Songs*. Cohen himself declared that his mother remembered him of the music that she liked: a Russian, oriental kind of music. But he also said that he was searching for a "romantic mood", in particular in the lyrics, in which he introduced romantic symbols such as the swan, the rose... Maybe this type of music was chosen to fit that romantic mood?

RB: Yes and I think it does. It was somewhat of a new beginning for Leonard, although he has had many new beginnings ☺

THE SONG OF LEONARD COHEN. THE SONG OF ROSCOE BECK

FM: Would you agree with the idea that the work of Leonard Cohen is less characterized by "fractures" and "periods", but could better be described as "variations", "extensions", "explorations" of the same themes (religion, loss, longing, etc.) that were involved already in his first writings?

RB: These themes are the most important ones, aren't they? ☺ What else is there really? Love, death, religion, sex,... these are the driving forces of our lives. Leonard said to me one time that he felt that basically everyone has *one* song and that they write the same song over and over and over again. I think that's kind of what you're saying.

FM: Indeed. Harry Rasky has made a documentary with a title that reflects this idea as well: *The song* [singular!] *of Leonard Cohen*.

RB: That was made during the '79-tour. That speaks to that too. I thought many times about that statement Leonard made to me: everyone has *one* song, you continue to write *one* song. I questioned it first: *one* song,

really? Don't we have different perspectives at different times of our lives? Don't we have different experiences? But if you look at the whole, like you were saying, the themes that one chooses often end up being the same themes. One could look at one-self: now I'm 58 years old but in many ways I still feel like the same person as I was when I was 25. I still think about the same things, which is love, death, religion, sex... ☺

FM: If everybody has one song, then how does *your* song differ from the song of Leonard Cohen, that we hear five nights in Ghent this week? How would you describe *your* song that you are trying to perform in a lifetime?

RB: I'm still trying to find my song. ☺

What would be your favorite LC album? I guess it must be *Recent Songs* or am I wrong?

RB: *Recent Songs* certainly makes the list. I think it is *Famous Blue Raincoat* because Jennifer and I really put our hearts into that record. We worked very hard under less than ideal conditions with really not enough money to do it.

FM: Why isn't she in the band now (Jennifer Warnes sung some parts on the album *Old Ideas*)? Is there an opportunity that she would come back?

RB: I would love it! She was offered the opportunity in 2008 and she just wasn't sure that she was up to that much travel.

FM: What is your favorite Leonard Cohen-song?

RB: Off the top of my head comes *Joan of Arc*, just because of how that moved me emotionally in concerts in 1979. That is just a personal choice, just because of my personal experience of watching Leonard and Jennifer sing this song a few hundred times in concert. But there are many... and many of them are on that record [*Famous Blue Raincoat*]. To this day when I listen to *Song of Bernadette* I still cry. When Jennifer hits that last note, holds it and the vibrato comes at the end it just... it tears me apart, which... it's odd but that is an experience that I relish. I like to have my heart torn out of the... It tells me that I am alive. But many things do that. In rehearsal a few months ago, the first time that we rehearsed *Come healing* with the Webb sisters I couldn't... tears immediately came to my eyes, I couldn't stop it. Picking a favorite is really hard.

1979 was a really wonderful period of LC to listen to. I wish there were more professionally recorded performances from that period. Personally I feel that was Leonard's high water mark as a vocalist. He was really singing his best at that time. From the *I'm your man* album on, when his voice lowered in pitch, his vocal approach became more narrative.

FM: Is this the reason why a song like *The Window* is not included in this tour? It is a song that should be *sung*, isn't it?

RB: It is, he can still sing it but now in a lower register. We haven't worked up *The Window* yet. I have received messages from people requesting it, but we have worked up *The Guests*. I guess you are right, *The Window* is a little more melodic. I think the '79-tour was Leonard at his best. He was really singing, he was in fine form and I know that he enjoyed that band. It was magical on good nights.

FM: Could one say that the sound of Dino Soldo fits difficultly in that mood of the '79-band (that still serves as an example)?

RB: Well, Dino was in a way a substitute for the violinist we couldn't find in 2008. We were trying to recapture that sound and we heard several different violinists that we tried in the group. They were all fine musicians but no one quite captured that spirit that we had heard before with Raffi. I think that comes back to what you were saying about the music that Leonard's mother loved. The music that *she* loved is the music that *he* loves and the music that *I* love through him, through my working with him in 1979 and in 1980 with Raffi. I came to love that sound also and know that sound very intimately and experience that sound even more than that. It's more the experiential thing. We were searching for that again when we put the band together in 2008 and we never found it. Dino brought something else, especially with his harmonica playing, and the saxophone and the ewi (the electronic wind instrument) he played. As I look on it back now,

I realize that Dino filled the void that was there because we couldn't find the violinist until now. Now we have it again with Alex. One just knows when one hears the right thing. When he finally heard Alex playing live Leonard sent me an e-mail: "I've hired Alex. We have found what we were looking for".

FM: Will there be another album after *Old Ideas*? During the press conference in London LC referred to that: he said he has the material, and he was even dreaming about a new tour.

RB: Yeah, I'd be very surprised if there wasn't another album. G-d willing, his work goes on...

FM: How would you describe your biggest contribution to the work of LC (not in terms of albums but throughout the whole career)?

RB: I really don't think about what my contribution has been. I feel fortunate to be able to support the work of somebody I think is a great artist and the greatest writer that I have ever had the pleasure to be around. I am just happy to be here, and I am happy that I met him 33 years ago. It was a moment that changed the course of my life and I think the collaboration has hopefully been beneficial for both of us, but I love the man, I love his work and I'm just so happy to be involved to whatever degree.

I want to thank Roscoe Beck for his gracious participation in this interview.

Francis Mus is a teacher and researcher at the University of Leuven, Belgium with a doctorate in French literature. His current focus, however, is on writing a book examining recurrent themes in the work of Leonard Cohen. Research for this project has included trips to London, Montreal and Toronto and, when the 2012 Leonard Cohen Tour came to Ghent, an interview with Roscoe Beck, which is presented below. His review of *Old Ideas* was recently published on the music website *Consequence of Sound* (see <http://consequenceofsound.net/2012/11/thoughts-on-sylvie-simmons-im-your-man-the-life-of-leonard-cohen>)