

Essay Contest 2014/15. Zentrum für Kanadastudien

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Leonard Cohen

"I don't consider myself a pessimist. I think of a pessimist as someone who is waiting for it to rain. And I feel soaked to the skin." ¹

These melancholic words were written by Leonard Cohen, who immediately came to my mind when thinking of Canadian personalities. I have loved Canada as a country since I was there two years ago, though I have only seen a small part of it, coincidentally Montreal and its surroundings, where Leonard Cohen was born. Next to many well-known singers like Céline Dion, Bryan Adams and Justin Bieber or actors, actresses and directors, for example Pamela Anderson or James Cameron, Canada also has also given us some amazing writers, or as the case at hand, also musicians. One of them is the Canadian personality I have chosen, Leonard Cohen.

Leonard Cohen, the famous Canadian musician, singer-songwriter, novelist and poet, was born into a Jewish family living in Westmount, a suburb of Montreal on the 21st of September, 1934. His father, who earned his living as an engineer, died when Cohen was nine years old. Cohen's musical mother Marsha was the daughter of a Russian immigrant. When Cohen was 13, he learned how to play the guitar to impress a girl, and sometime later, he had his first appearances in small cafés. But at that time, his priority was not becoming a musician; he aimed at being a successful author. His first book, a collection of poems named *Let us compare Mythologies*, was published in 1956, even before he had graduated from university. This book contains many of the topics he deals with later. After his next publication in 1961, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, he became well known in Canada, but also gained recognition in the rest of the world. He then started to travel through Europe and finally settled down on the Greek island of Hydra. Living there, he released two more novels and one volume of poems: *The Favourite Game* (1963), *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and *Flowers for Hitler* (1964).

In 1967 he returned to the USA to start a career as a singer-songwriter. His first performance took place at the *Newport Folk Festival* in 1967, where the producer John Hammond spotted his talent and saw a second Bob Dylan in him. Cohen's first album *Songs of Leonard Cohen* came out and was a big success among folk fans and songwriters. Famous songs are *Suzanne*, *Sisters of Mercy* and *So Long*, *Marianne*.

For Cohen, music was just a good source of income to restart his career as a writer, but with increasing success, he soon got rid of this attitude. *Songs of Love and Hate*, probably the saddest and most criticized of Cohen's albums was released in 1971, caused by personal crises. Then, in 1979, *Recent Songs* came out, which was more like his first albums and full of humour and religious themes, not like earlier songs that were overwhelming with self-doubt and melancholy. This album also contained the song *Hallelujah* that was covered countless times.

Inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall and of communism, he also made songs that are political and critical of society, mostly to be found on the album *The Future*. He then retired into a Buddhist monastery and became a monk named *Jikan*, which means "the silent". Nobody thought that he would ever make music again, until in 2001, *Ten New Songs* turned up. There is also a film about him, *I'm Your Man* by Lian Lunson. Altogether, Cohen has sold over 6 million of his albums and has become popular all over the world. The last ones he released were *Old Ideas* in 2012 and *Popular Problems* two years later. He has a wife, Suzanne Elrod, and two kids named Adam and Lorca.

I have chosen Leonard Cohen for this essay, because I think that he is an outstanding singer-songwriter, and although I listen to different kinds of music too, I really like his songs. What I find amazing is that he is not only a great musician, but also a talented writer, as the following poem shows.

You tell me that silence
is nearer to peace than poems
but if for my gift I brought you silence
(for I know silence)

you would say
This is not silence
this is another poem
and you would hand it back to me.²

This poem may be a song lyric, or at least it seems like one to me because of its form. The main content is a small disagreement between the speaker/lyrical I and the person he writes to. He would make the one he writes this poem for every gift he could think of, but the recipient would still be unhappy. Silence is at most a short moment, granted that it does exist at all. In my opinion he captures a strong emotion of being unfulfilled in this poem. I like the way he writes, because it is extraordinary in dynamic and inspiration and I think that he could have been also very successful as a writer, because he encourages the readers to think about his poems. But he does not only do this in his written works, also the lyrics of his songs are touching and deep, and sometimes music can awake emotions that would not be there if you only had something written.

Looking at his music, I like the folk-style, but also the sad songs. Although *Hallelujah* has been covered so often, I think that the original version by Leonard Cohen is the best. He has a pleasant voice that fits perfectly to every instrument used in his songs and he has the ability to deeply affect the listener. For me, Leonard Cohen really deserves more attention than some other “musicians” today and I am glad that he was born in Canada, so I could write this essay about him.³

¹ www.brainyquote.com

² www.pinterest.com

³ Sources: www.rollingstone.com www.wikipedia.org