

## Leonard Cohen's blessed summer finale

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Israel's summer season of international concerts came to a finale on Thursday night at a sold-out performance in Ramat Gan's National Stadium.

TV crews were clamoring to interview tour management, activists and civil servants were offering their own spins on pop-inspired peace-making, and a special paparazzi area had been established to enable photographers to record the arrivals of local celebrities.

With the buzz-meter this far off the charts, it was almost as if Madonna hadn't performed nearby just three weeks ago. And who was all this pop circus fuss about? Leonard Cohen: an elderly folk singer who honed his chops in the coffee houses of Greenwich Village and Montreal; an ex-monk of a Californian Zen order; the "grocer of despair" of Seventies singer-songwriters; the man who by the mid-Eighties was considered by Columbia Records' then-honcho Walter Yetnikoff to be too much of a has-been to warrant the distribution of his new recordings in the United States.

Cohen is hardly MTV material. His music is far more suited to candle-lit lonely nights than soccer stadiums, and he is known for referring to his "career" with tongue always in cheek, telling the BBC in 1994 that he was grateful for "the enormous luck I've had in being able to make a living."

But he's been on a world tour now for about a year and a half - a tour that isn't just maintaining momentum, but is instead getting bigger and bigger. He might have played New York's Beacon Theater this past winter, but when he returns to Manhattan next month, he'll pack Madison Square Garden.

Approximately 50,000 tickets were sold for Thursday's Ramat Gan show in less than one day, making for Cohen's largest seated audience so far this year, a fitting finale to the summer European leg of his journey. Cohen's last gig in Israel was over 20 years ago, and before that, when he landed in the fall of 1973 to support IDF troops with a series of impromptu concerts, he told the press that he was also here "to make my atonement."

Thursday's show had a similar agenda. Cohen had collapsed on stage mid-concert last week, on Rosh Hashanah eve, in eastern Spain, but he wowed a Barcelona crowd three days later with a rousing show on his 75th birthday, blessing the audience, "May your life be sweet as apples dipped in honey."

The liturgical, spiritual, introspective and biblical traits of Cohen's repertoire suited the pre-Yom Kippur timing of Thursday's performance well, with far too many poignant and resonant moments to enumerate here.

Descended from members of Judaism's priestly caste, Cohen concluded the concert by raising his hands and reciting the traditional Priestly Blessing, one of the anchors of the High Holy Day services in synagogues around the world.

One concert-goer was overheard smilingly and favorably comparing the experience to having been through Yom Kippur's arduous if elating prayer services, while others brought the liturgical link to more literal levels, taking the opportunity to convene for an Aravit prayer minyan in the intermission between the show's two halves.

During that 1973 visit to Israel and the Sinai battlefield, legend has it that Cohen was plagued with feelings of guilt when he caught himself being relieved to learn that a convoy of bloody bodies that passed him one day were Egyptians and not Israelis. Thursday's concert was given the moniker "Concert for Reconciliation, Tolerance and Peace," and it served as the launch party for a peace-themed fund, which was established to allow Cohen to channel all of the profits from the concert, estimated at \$2 million, towards reconciliation initiatives. Approximately 200 bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families were welcomed to the performance as guests of the fund. Cohen more than once commended them from the stage, championing a "holy, holy, holy response to human suffering" while making it clear that he is not so naïve as to think that his songs or dollars would instantly usher in the age of peace. Instead, he urged us to open our hearts and "ring the bells that still can ring."

THE CONCERT lasted in all for close to three and a half hours, and the crowd, which was comprised of fans with a wide range of dedication levels, transfixed and mesmerized for most of the duration. Favorites going back to Cohen's 1967 studio debut, *Songs of...*, were represented heavily, including a faithfully free-meter "Suzanne" and an appropriately meandering "So Long, Marianne."

The setlist, which has remained relatively static since the spring of 2008, also included several mid-career gems like "Famous Blue Raincoat," "Lover Lover Lover," "Chelsea Hotel #2," "Take This Waltz" and "Hallelujah," the latter inspiring a collective chant of exaltation, tens of thousands strong. The show wasn't devoid of duds ("Ain't No Cure For Love" should never have earned live show staple status, and 2001's "Boogie Street" is much stronger as verses on a page than it is as a stab at crooner-funk), but when backing vocalists Charley and Hattie Webb took over lead duties for a stripped-down version of "If It Be Your Will," the stadium fell into a thick, appreciative silence. Overall, the band was a classy, strong and tight outfit, especially during the exceptionally intense second half. It's true that nowadays Leonard Cohen regularly takes off his fedora and gives his thanks to sizeable crowds for having shared a memorable evening with him, but it's hard, when actually watching him do it, to question his sincerity.

The fact that standout shows have become almost commonplace events for Cohen on this tour does not diminish from their power. As Lou Reed put it last year when inducting Cohen into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, "We're so lucky to be alive at the same time Leonard Cohen is." And with so much reverberating context of atonement, homecoming and post-nationalist opening of the heart, there were many moments when Thursday's concert felt truly outstanding even by Cohen's own recent high standards - an event of genuinely meaningful significance.

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