

# Racing the Midnight Train

## Leonard Cohen in Performance

**A**t one point in Leonard Cohen's 1963 novel *The Favourite Game*, the protagonist, Lawrence Breavman, is contemplating the possibility of a timeless moment, an eternal fraction of a second captured, like the lovers on Keats's Grecian urn, in the atemporal perfection of a work of art. Only, for Breavman, the work of art is not a Grecian urn, nor an Ode by John Keats—it's a pop song by Pat Boone.

Let it go on as it is right now. Let the speed never diminish. Let the snow remain.  
... Let the compounded electric guitar keep throbbing under the declaration:

*When I lost my baby  
I almost lost my mind.*

... Let Pat Boone stand on the highest rung of the Hit Parade and tell all the factory night shifts:

*I went to see the gypsy  
To have my fortune read.*

... Let me keep my tenth of a second's worth of fantasy and recollection, showing all the layers like a geologist's sample ... Let the tune make the commercial wait forever.

*I can tell you, people,  
The news was not so good.*

The news is great. The news is sad but it's in a song so it's not so bad. Pat is doing all my poems for me. He's got lines to a million people. It's all I wanted to say. He's distilled the sorrow, glorified it in an echo chamber. I don't need my typewriter. ... Pat, you've snatched my job, but you're such a good guy, old-time American success, naive big winner, that it's okay. The PR men have convinced me that you are a humble kid. I can't resent you. My only criticism is: be more desperate, try and sound more agonized or we'll have to get a Negro to replace you:

*She said my baby's left me  
And she's gone for good. (96-7)*

There are two reasons why a pop song by Pat Boone might appear as an unlikely image to stand alongside such classical exemplars as Keats or his urn. One is that Boone's song belongs to "popular" or "low" culture, which traditionally has been separated from "high" culture by a strict hierarchy of socially enforced aesthetic barriers. The second is that Boone's song is a *performance*: its mode is temporal and fleeting, rather than spatial and lasting.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this essay is to situate Leonard Cohen's work of the sixties within these two contexts, suggested by his evocation of Pat Boone in 1963. First, I will briefly discuss some aspects of popular culture in the sixties; then, in the major part of the essay, I will examine in more detail the problematics of performance.

What attitude towards popular culture does Cohen express in this passage from *The Favourite Game*? There are obviously several ways of reading it. The disjunction between the classical model of the timeless moment (Grecian urn, Keats) and the banality of the modern exemplar (Pat Boone) could signal a satirical dismissal of the superficiality of popular music. The passage slyly contains references to the economic pressures which shape pop music (the "commercial," the "PR men"), and which thus prevent it from being the "serious" expression of a "pure" artistic intent. The song that Breavman listens to does not even have the cultural "respectability" (as it might have been seen in 1963) of jazz or the blues: Pat Boone was an archetypally bland, safe, *white* singer, and "we'll have to get a Negro to replace you."

If the intent is satirical, further questions arise about the source and target of the satire. Is Cohen being satirical at Breavman's expense, revealing the immaturity of his protagonist? Or is Breavman himself the satirist, playing a role and, as he so often does, standing back from it in amused self-contempt?

Alternatively, one could read the whole passage "straight": one could see in it a genuine celebration of the power of popular culture. In *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen repeatedly invokes the images of mass-produced ecstasy: pop songs, movies, and the "plastic reproductions of [Catherine Tekakwitha's] little body on the dashboard of every Montreal taxi," of which he writes: "It can't be a bad thing. Love cannot be hoarded. Is there a part of Jesus in every stamped-out crucifix? I think there is. Desire changes the world!" (5). "Do I listen to the Rolling Stones?" asks F. later in the novel, and answers himself: "Ceaselessly" (150).

Thus, for Breavman and/or Cohen, the very fact that Pat Boone has “got lines to a million people” means that “I don’t need my typewriter.” The role of the artist, occupied in the past by the maker of the Grecian urn, or by a canonical poet like John Keats, now belongs to the divinely inspired singer who stands, like Orpheus, “on the highest rung of the Hit Parade.” The only question is why it took Leonard Cohen so long, until 1967, to cut his first record.

Social attitudes towards popular culture, as it developed in the sixties, displayed the same ambivalence that I have just traced in the different possible readings of Cohen’s novel. The very force which Breavman celebrates in pop music lay in its *lack* of respectability: the fact that it was outside the bounds of “high culture,” of the accepted social institutions of art. Rock and roll was always the music of rebellion: it was, by definition, the music your parents disapproved of. The archetypes of popular culture in the fifties—Elvis Presley gyrating his hips out of sight of Ed Sullivan’s cameras; Marlon Brando in his black leather jacket in *The Wild One*; James Dean caught in terminal adolescent angst—were all “rebels without a cause.” It was the lack of a cause, as much as the rebellion, which prevented them from being assimilated. They were all, in Cohen’s term, “beautiful losers.”

Starting in the sixties, various factors combined to blunt the edge of popular culture, and to curb its potential anarchism. The full effects of this blunting were not to become apparent until the seventies, but the process had begun even at the time (1967-68) when the “counter-culture” seemed to be at the height of its political and social impact. Not the least of these factors was the large-scale commercialism which eventually turned pop music into an industry and its singers into pre-packaged products blander even than Pat Boone had ever been. But perhaps more pervasive was the fact that the rebels acquired a series of causes: civil rights, nuclear disarmament, the Viet Nam war. Even as these causes brought popular artists into conflict with “the establishment,” they also, in a sense, brought them inside it. When Brando, in *The Wild One*, is asked what he’s rebelling against, he answers “What you got?” This is a very different answer and attitude from someone who, ten years later, would seriously reply “Racial discrimination” or “The war in Viet Nam.”

Another factor which acted to assimilate the perceived banality of popular culture, and to render it “respectable” in traditional artistic terms, was the increasing willingness of critics and audiences to see the creators of

popular culture as creative artists: as “authors.” In the movies—or perhaps, in this context, “cinema”—this development was called “the auteur theory,” and it was in the early sixties that this idea flourished in North America.

It had always been recognised that certain film-makers (Eisenstein, for example) had been able to exercise sufficient control over all aspects of their films’ production for these films to be accepted as works of art originating from a singular aesthetic intention: in other words, from an Author, or from the ideal of the Author—independent, original, inspired—constructed by European post-Romantic ideology. But American movies, so evidently the product of the Hollywood system, of studios and mass-production, were generally denied this status. This lack of an “author” was one of the factors which stigmatised Hollywood movies as “low” culture. At the end of the fifties, two developments in European cinema forced a re-evaluation of American movies. One was the great flood of films which convincingly claimed full artistic status for their authors: for Ingmar Bergman from Sweden, Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni from Italy, and above all for the directors of the French “Nouvelle Vague” of 1959: Claude Chabrol, Alain Resnais, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard. The other development was the “politique des auteurs” advocated by, precisely, these French directors, most of whom had begun as film critics, and who ascribed the dignity of the “auteur” not only to the obvious European names but also to the directors of the despised American “movies”: Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Ford, Nicholas Ray.

The “auteur theory” arrived in North America in 1962, in a famous article by Andrew Sarris.<sup>2</sup> Despite some acute criticism of Sarris’s overstatements, it quickly became a kind of orthodoxy, and “the director” became the reference point of all film criticism. The American adaptation of the “politique des auteurs” enabled the critical discourse to reclaim and assimilate the popular movies of the fifties, so that intense debate could be conducted on the merits of, say, Howard Hawks’s *Rio Bravo* (1959) or Nicholas Ray’s *Party Girl* (1958). It also set up the dominance of the director in American cinema of the seventies: Robert Altman, Sam Peckinpah, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood.

The irony of this development is that the Author was being enshrined in American cinema at precisely the time when subsequent movements of French critical thought were moving towards “the death of the Author” (Roland Barthes’s essay of that name was first published in 1968). As film

criticism has progressed through its structuralist and poststructuralist phases, the early statements of the auteur theory have long been left behind; nevertheless, it could still be argued that it was the auteur theory which first established the kind of artistic and academic respectability which has made later film studies possible.

No “auteur theory” was ever explicitly formulated for pop music, but a very similar phenomenon occurred in the early sixties, involving the enshrinement, at its centre, of a new cultural icon: the “singer-songwriter.” The popular singers of the previous decade had all been *interpreters*: no one expected Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley to write their own songs.<sup>3</sup> But in the early sixties, it suddenly became almost *de rigueur* for pop singers to write their own material. And pop music became respectable in exactly the same way that movies had, since there was now a place for the traditional centre of serious artistic activity: the Author.

This trend was created by the immense success of the song-writing team of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, and even more significantly, by Bob Dylan. Dylan emerged from the New York-Greenwich Village folk movement in 1962. Again, the social criteria of cultural respectability are at work here: folk song was acquiring an aura of seriousness, partly as a result of its scholarly documentation of oral tradition, but more because of its association with liberal protest politics. All it needed was an “original genius,” and Bob Dylan seemed to fit the bill. Dylan himself quickly felt stifled by the demands of folk-protest orthodoxy, and by 1965 he had moved on to rock and roll. (Or, he had moved back: back to the radio music of the fifties he had listened to in the long nights of Hibbing, Minnesota. His first rock album was entitled *Bringing It All Back Home*.)

Almost single-handedly, Bob Dylan created the possibility of fusing popular music—basic, hard-driving rock and roll—with self-consciously “poetic” lyrics. In the great albums of 1965-66 (*Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde on Blonde*), he offered startling surrealistic images, a virtuoso range of intertextual allusion, scathing wit and tender love lyrics, a complete and totally original poetic world. He also redefined the importance of *performance*. Dylan’s singing voice (for which critics over the years have attempted a bizarre range of comparisons, from wounded animals to aging Ayatollahs) not only demonstrated that expressiveness and rhythmic virtuosity are more important in pop music than conventionally pretty musicality; it also fused the songwriter to the singer, since it quickly became apparent that no

one else could sing Dylan's songs as well as Dylan himself. It is in Dylan that the auteur-like figure of the singer-songwriter achieves definition.

Dylan's success spawned a generation of imitators—or, to put it more positively, he created a climate, both cultural and commercial, in which other singer-songwriters could flourish. Among those for whom Dylan opened the door, a surprising number have been Canadian: Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Young, Robbie Robertson, Bruce Cockburn, Joni Mitchell. And Leonard Cohen.<sup>4</sup>

Cohen's impulse towards popular music and public performance predates Dylan's emergence, but it was undoubtedly Dylan's example which made it possible for Cohen to be accepted as a singer. As early as the nineteen-fifties, Cohen had performed in Montreal with a group called The Buckskin Boys. He sang in public during his student days at McGill University. A photograph taken in 1954 of the group of poets associated with the Montreal magazine *CIV/n* (and featured on the cover of the collected reprint of that magazine) shows Cohen at the centre, playing a guitar. His poetry readings of the early sixties, especially those associated with *Flowers for Hitler* in 1964, moved towards various kinds of performance, including stand-up comedy. A spoken introduction to one poem, recorded in the 1965 NFB documentary *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr Leonard Cohen*, displays a highly polished comic routine, in which the pauses are carefully timed to elicit audience laughter:

The other time I was in quarters such as these was  
in the Verdun Mental Hospital, Montreal.

[pause; laughter]

I was visiting —

[pause; laughter]

— visiting a friend. He was on the top floor. It had  
been a hot afternoon, and I had removed my jacket,  
as I am wont to do.

[pause; laughter]

I left it with my friend, who though mentally ill  
was no thief.

[pause; laughter]

I suspect he wasn't even mentally ill.

[pause; laughter]

He was doing this instead of college.

[pause; laughter; Leonard doesn't quite manage to keep a straight face].

From here it is a short step to the legends of Leonard Cohen riding onto a concert stage on a white stallion.

For Cohen, that is, popular culture right from the start was a question of performance: of, that is, the performing self. This phrase is the title of one of the most influential books of cultural criticism dealing with the sixties: Richard Poirier's *The Performing Self*. Published in 1971, it already looked back at the sixties in an almost elegiac way. For Poirier, the self is always a social construct, a fiction: "[a]ny self is invented," he writes, "as soon as any purpose is conceived" (122). That invention takes place primarily in performance, which Poirier describes as a "self-discovering, self-watching, finally self-pleasuring response" to the problems of identity (xiii). The value of performance lies in its "release of energy into measured explorations of human potentialities" (xiii).

For all his stress on performance (and despite illuminating essays on both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones), Poirier does not have much to say about how performance is valued by critics, and by audiences. He seems to assume it as a virtue, something to do with energy, and leave it at that. I am not so sure. I want to argue that performance, like pop culture, has elicited deeply ambivalent reactions, and that both sides of that ambivalence can be read in Leonard Cohen's work—often enough, in the same song. On the one hand, performance is seen positively, as a source of spontaneous contact and intimacy between artist and audience, as a guarantee of personal presence, and as a healing force. On the other hand, performance is also artificial, an exercise in lying, and its ideal of "presence" depends upon a structure of absence, even of death.

However, before I begin to develop my discussion of that ambivalence, I must acknowledge that "performance," in the field of pop music, encompasses several overlapping but subtly different modes. The "purest" mode of performance is the concert situation, with the singer live on stage before an audience. But the word may also be applied to *recordings*—indeed, it is as a recording (Pat Boone on the juke box) that I first evoked performance in relation to Leonard Cohen. Listening to a recording, in the privacy of one's own home, is obviously a very different situation (from the point of view of the audience) than attending a concert.<sup>5</sup>

Yet I would argue that most of what I have to say about performance, and about the ambivalence of performance, applies, to a great extent, in both situations. The recording of a singer's voice can still produce what I will refer to as the illusion of intimacy: indeed, the illusion may be all the stronger in a private setting than in a public one. But recording also underlines what I will

refer to as the structure of absence; recording always carries with it the implication that the singer's voice (or "presence") can be repeated even after the singer's death.

Live performance is valued because it is seen as bringing the artist into direct personal contact with his or her audience. This phenomenon has become especially prevalent in Canada in the format of the poetry reading. There is a long tradition of Canadian writers performing their own work—from Bliss Carman and Wilson MacDonald through to Cohen's own readings in 1964—but it was in the late sixties and early seventies, under the auspices of such organisations as the Canada Council and the League of Canadian Poets, that poetry readings really flourished. The ideology of such occasions is made explicit by Constance Rooke:

I observe an ordinary reader approaching a flesh-and-blood writer and can see on that reader's face a look (either bold or shy) that will soon blossom into speech: You don't know me, but I know you. (257)

As I have argued elsewhere (*Signature Event Context* 16-17), Rooke accepts too easily the kind of "intimacy" which this encounter produces; the notion of "personal" contact in the reading situation is a very tenuous one. (In Derridean terms, it depends upon the metaphysics of presence in its most traditional form: the priority of voice over writing.) The structures of writing and performance are more complex: every "reading" is a further act of (re-)writing, on the part of both the author and the listener. "Immediacy" is always already mediated. The performing self is always a text; indeed, what is at stake in performance is, as Poirier argued, the very nature of the self. "Intimacy" proposes that there is a self there to be encountered; "performance" implies that that self is necessarily a constructed one, a textual one. Nevertheless, the appeal of the occasion, the mystique of the personal encounter, is undeniable. Literature, especially poetry, should be read aloud, and (with a few notable exceptions) poets themselves are the best performers of their own work. The illusion of intimacy in performance may be just that—an illusion—but it is one that our culture holds dear. Like any widely held belief, it continues to exert its force, no matter how shaky it may prove under analysis.

The same illusion holds in popular music, where the live concert takes the place of the poetry reading. The chances of any "personal encounter" are of course much less in a 50,000 seat stadium than they are in the more cloistered confines of poetry readings, and often enough the "live" performers



are reduced to gigantic figures on overhead TV screens; but the ideology of live performance remains. The outrage which greeted the revelation, in late 1990, that the “singers” of Milli Vanilli had been lip-synched by other performers, both on record and on stage, testifies to the continuing importance attributed to the *presence* of the live performer. Performance in this sense is the seal of authenticity, of sincere self-expression, of assured personal communication.

There is in performance an element of spontaneity, of the unpredictable, which was at the centre of the sixties performance pieces known as “Happenings.” The major rock concerts and festivals of the late sixties—Monterey, Woodstock, Altamont—evolved as Happenings, and were imbued with dramatic structure. Woodstock was widely mythologised as the triumph of the counter-culture, even the founding act of a new “nation.” Altamont, which is remembered less for the Rolling Stones’ music than for the murder of a member of the audience by the Hell’s Angels supposedly guarding the stage, was then equally widely seen as the betrayal of that nation. Specifically, Altamont was seen as a *failure of performance*: the Rolling Stones, on stage, were unable to control the violence in the audience. (One of Poirier’s essays in *The Performing Self* gives a very acute analysis of this response.) If Woodstock was, as Joni Mitchell’s song proclaimed, the way to “get back to the Garden,” then Altamont provided its mythological counterpart: the Fall from Grace, Paradise Lost.

Leonard Cohen certainly believed in the intimacy of performance. In 1991, in a speech he gave on the occasion of his induction into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, he spoke of “this sudden and strange and mysterious intimacy” which existed between himself and his audience; and he thanked

those of you who have welcomed my tunes into your lives, into your kitchens when you’re doing the dishes, into your bedrooms when you are courting and conceiving, into those nights of loss and bewilderment, into those aimless places of the heart which only a song seems to be able to enter.

This is an eloquent and moving tribute to the power of song, and to the intensity of the relationship which may develop between singers and their audience. In this case, since Cohen is referring specifically to people listening to his records in their own homes, it is clear that the “intimacy” of live performance extends into the recorded medium. Indeed, recording enables an even greater intimacy (kitchens, bedrooms) than the concert stage could ever produce.

In his early concert tours, Cohen gave himself generously on stage. (I remember a concert I saw at the Olympia Theatre in Paris in 1976, when he dragged his weary band back out for encore after encore after encore.) By the tours of the late 1980s he had become much more guarded—much more conventionally “professional”—and even the conversational asides between songs were carefully rehearsed. The earlier Cohen is preserved on film, in Tony Palmer’s documentary *Bird on the Wire*, filmed during the 1972 tour of Europe.<sup>6</sup> Here one can see Cohen reaching out to his audience, trying (sometimes with disastrous naiveté) to answer their concerns, to reconcile their divisions, to *heal* them. His performances on the 1972 tour are remarkable for their extended improvisations, and for his painfully sincere addresses to the audience. He was continually courting what he himself called “disgrace”: attempting to maintain his own state of grace, and to bring his audience into it with him, by running on the edges of its collapse.

This mood is also preserved in the “Minute Prologue” to the *Live Songs* album recorded on this tour:

I’ve been listening to all of the dissension  
I’ve been listening to all of the pain  
And I feel that no matter what I do for you  
It’s going to come back again  
But I think that I can heal it  
But I think that I can heal it  
I’m a fool, but I think that I can heal it  
With this song

This is the same belief that Lawrence Breavman clung to in *The Favourite Game*. “The news was not so good,” Pat Boone sang, and Breavman responded: “The news is great. The news is sad but it’s in a song so it’s not so bad” (*Favourite Game* 97). This is the ethos of Woodstock, unshadowed by the Altamont murder. Of the “Sisters of Mercy,” Cohen sings that “They brought me their comfort and later they brought me this song.” The comfort and the song go together. Music is redemptive. Performance heals.

Yet at the same time, and without necessarily denying any of these positive values attributed to it, I would also argue that “performance” is viewed with great suspicion. “It’s a clever performance,” we say, implying that somehow it is not *real*. To perform is to pretend that you are something that you are not; to perform is to lie. Poirier’s phrase, the performing self, is uncomfortably close to “performing seal.”

“A singer must die,” Leonard Cohen wrote (and sang) in 1974, “for the lie

in his voice." I do not think that this line means that only those singers who lie must die, as opposed to those singers who do not lie, and thus can live; I think it means that all singers lie, that performance is a lie, and that all such lying performances have death built into them, as part of their structure. If in "Sisters of Mercy" he associates "comfort" with "song," in "Leaving Green-sleeves" he proclaims a different equivalence: "I sang my song, I told my lies."

The metaphysics of presence postulates a "personal encounter" as something which takes place between two independent, fully self-present individuals. It has no place for the invented self, for the doubled or divided self. But the activity of writing is always a doubled and divided one: the structure of writing, even at the instant of creation, inscribes a split between the I who writes and the I who is written. There is no pure, unmediated moment of "original" creation. And even if there were, *performance* is necessarily distanced from it. Performance evokes the nostalgia for such a moment of pure self-presence, but it can only do so by repeating, and emphasizing, the original division.

The activity of performance is doubled also in the sense that it is a structure of repetition. This structure is most evident in the form of recording, where the same performance may be played over and over again. But, just as intimacy (the characteristic of live performance) extends into recording, so also repetition (the characteristic of recording) is already implicit in live performance. Performance is doubled as citation and *re*-citation, the repetition of a text that already exists prior to the moment of performance. The singer is always divided (in Bob Dylan's words) into I and I: the person who performs this song for you now, and the person who previously wrote it. Improvisation compresses but does not eliminate this split. Any given performance of, say, "Suzanne" is haunted by the echoes of all past performances, and by the ghost of the man who wrote it, and who is *no longer there* (even if, in another incarnation, he is now on stage singing it). The value of presence in performance is always shadowed by this absence: a "live" performance is also a performance of death.

This structure is evident in a remarkable moment recorded in the film *Bird on the Wire*. Cohen starts singing "Suzanne," his best-known and most-often-performed song, the song that for many people has always defined his identity as a song-writer: in a word (a loaded word), his *signature* tune. But on this occasion he mixes up the first few lines, breaks off, and says "No, wait a second, I forgot the words." It is as if he has forgotten

himself. The crowd laughs, and a few of them yell out the opening words: in concert, a singer can always be doubled by the audience. His own self-presence is already inscribed, in advance, in their response. But Cohen refuses that reassurance, that re-inscription of his identity from the outside. Instead, he proceeds to rewrite his song, to reinscribe his signature, in the form of an improvisation:

Come on Suzanne, don't leave me now  
Been waiting for you for a long long time  
You know, a lot has happened since I wrote  
    that song for you, dear  
Oh yes, I'm the man who wrote "Suzanne"  
A thousand years ago  
Yes, I'm the man who wrote "Suzanne"  
A hundred years ago  
Yes, I'm the man who wrote "Suzanne"  
A hundred years ago  
And I don't want anyone to lose it  
And I don't want anyone to use it  
But I'm the man who wrote "Suzanne"  
A hundred years ago

This improvisation makes simultaneously the two assertions about performance. On the one hand, it echoes Cohen's belief in the healing powers of song ("I don't want anyone to lose it / And I don't want anyone to use it"). In very strong terms (that is, in the rhythms of the singing itself), it proclaims the unity between author and performer: I *am* the man who wrote "Suzanne," I am one, my work and I are one, I stand before you now as a presence. On the other hand, it also testifies to the division within the singer, to his lack of coincidence with himself. It inserts the split of "a thousand years ago": the man who wrote "Suzanne" is *no longer* me, he exists only in the past, he is absent, he is dead. The song becomes a self-composed, self-performed epitaph. And this is the structure of all performance, which must always refer back to the absent origin, to the unrecoverable source of the song. A singer *must* die, for the lie in his voice.

This constant shadow of death in "live" performance is realised, of course, in recording; we still can hear the "live" performances of dead singers. We still can hear, for example, Janis Joplin; and we still can hear (live, or recorded, or as a recording of a live performance) Leonard Cohen's tribute to Janis Joplin. He met her, so he tells us, at the Chelsea Hotel in New York "in the winter of 1967"<sup>7</sup>; the story of this meeting evolved through

years of in-concert introductions, and by 1988 it had reached a state as finely honed as the 1964 story of the friend in the mental hospital. (This transcription is from the Vancouver concert on October 26th, 1988, the night after the first Mulroney-Turner debate on Free Trade.)

When I left Montreal to go down to New York City to try to break into this infernal racket called show business, even though I was a grown man my mother said to me, "Leonard, be careful, those people aren't like we are." That's all I've got to say about the Free Trade issue.

[prolonged applause]

I did find a very nice hotel down in New York City, a very sophisticated hotel. You could go up there, up to the desk at 2 o'clock in the morning accompanied by a pygmy and a polar bear, and ask for your key, and they'd say, "Good night, Mr Cohen."

It was in the elevator of that hotel that I began to notice that there was a young woman often in that narrow cubicle. After several nights, I gathered my courage and I said to her, "Are you looking for someone?" She said, "Yes, I'm looking for Kris Kristofferson." I said, "Lucky lady, I'm Kris Kristofferson." Such was the generosity of those times that she never let on.

Some time after she passed from this vale of tears I found myself in a bar in a Polynesian restaurant in Miami Beach, drinking some concoction from a ceramic coconut shell. This was a mystery that I never could penetrate, because there were real coconut shells on every tree on the boulevard. Nevertheless, the words to this song came, and I finished it in due course. It was for Janis Joplin at the Chelsea Hotel. . . .

This whole story is set, then, within the context of "this infernal racket called show business"; it is a story about performance. In a much earlier version of this introduction (Paris, Olympia Theatre, June 5th, 1976), Cohen said of Joplin, "She was a very great singer and completely undivided in her attitude towards her audience." But if Joplin, both in the song and in the story, is *undivided*, Leonard Cohen exists in a milieu of multiple divisions. Although he is an adult, his mother treats him as a child, and warns him that "those people aren't like we are." He attempts to seduce the young woman in the narrow cubicle by pretending to be Kris Kristofferson: that is, a performer himself, he pretends to be another performer. Joplin, through the "generosity of those times" (the mythical golden age, the sixties), redeems the falseness of this performance through a performance of her own: "she never let on," she pretends to believe his pretence. After her death, Cohen again finds himself surrounded by the artifice of "this infernal racket": the ceramic coconut shells *perform* the "real coconut shells on every tree," just as Cohen's song must now perform his real grief for Janis Joplin. The words

may originally have come to him in a spontaneous moment, but now they are the same words every night, repeated in performance. Even this spoken introduction has not changed, essentially, night after night since 1976. In order to praise the undivided singer, Cohen must continually divide himself.

“I finished it in due course,” said Cohen in 1988. In fact, the song went through at least two major versions. The text performed in the concerts of 1972 is substantially different from the song released in 1974 on *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, where it bears the title “Chelsea Hotel #2.” The “finished” song is much tighter and more laconic; its understated ending (“I don’t even think of you that often”) seems like a defence against too unguarded a statement of emotion. “Chelsea Hotel #1” is much more open, looser in structure, more demonstrative of the singer’s feelings. The performance recorded in *Bird on the Wire* is built around three repetitions of the chorus, which allow for extended improvisation. The first two lament Joplin the pop star, “making your sweet little sound on the jukebox / making your sweet little sound on transistor radio.” Then the third chorus takes off on a new verbal riff:

You got away, didn’t you baby  
You just turned your back on the pain  
You got away in your wildest dreams  
Racing the midnight train  
I can see you now  
Racing the midnight train  
with no clothes on  
See all your tickets  
torn on the gravel  
All of your clothes and  
no case to cover you  
Shining your eyes in  
my deepest corner  
Shining your eyes in  
my darkest corner  
Racing the midnight train  
I can’t catch you baby  
Racing the midnight train

Again Cohen refers to the redemptive power of song: “Shining your eyes in / my darkest corner.” But for Janis Joplin, as for Leonard Cohen, performance is also a desperate affair. The “midnight train” is surely death. Janis Joplin, for the few brief glorious years of her career, raced with it, against it, ahead of it; but finally, this is a race which a singer must lose. You catch the train, or the train catches you.

As for Cohen, the singer of *this* song, he has to admit that “I can’t catch you, baby.” In the verses, both Joplin and Cohen are described as “workers in song,” who are “oppressed by the figures of beauty”: not individual artists in control of their work but the servants of their medium and their vocation. In the moment of performance, as he repeats this song on stage, Cohen is still one of the “workers in song,” one of “those of us left.” His own presence implies Joplin’s absence: an absence inscribed most simply, most tellingly, by the fact that her name is never mentioned in the lyrics of the song.

Like the improvisation on “Suzanne,” “Chelsea Hotel” is an epitaph—an epitaph not only for Janis Joplin, not only for the winter of 1967, but for Leonard Cohen also, for the singer who must die for the lie in his voice, for the absent presence which always haunts the structures of performance. As such, it’s a sad song, a sad story. But remember Pat Boone:

*I can tell you, people,  
The news was not so good.*

The news is great. The news is sad but it’s in a song  
so it’s not so bad. (Favourite Game 97)

It never is—which is why we too return, again and again, to songs and to singers, to those “aimless places of the heart which only a song seems to be able to enter.” As audience, we are also caught up in the paradoxes of performance. The act of listening, of attending, of *being* there *for* the singer, is itself a kind of performance. Our presence too is shadowed by absence; for us too, the moment of performance must pass into memory, or into the traces of recordings. This remains true, whether we are sitting in the Olympia Theatre in Paris, in the singer’s “presence,” or whether we are sitting at home, listening to a record, in the singer’s “absence.” The paradoxes of performance produce the timeless moment, as Breavman found with Pat Boone, by inscribing the timeless within time, and by including death in the intimacy of presence. Each of us, singer and audience alike, is caught up in this structure of performance, listening to the song as it lives and dies, letting it go on as it is right now, racing the midnight train.

#### NOTES

- 1 This distinction is of course complicated by the fact that Boone’s performance is *recorded*, and therefore repeatable. For a fuller discussion of this point, see 60 above.
- 2 Most of the key articles on auteurism, including Sarris’ “Notes on the Auteur Theory in

- 1962” and Pauline Kael’s incisive rebuttal “Circles and Squares,” are conveniently reprinted in Mast.
- 3 And certainly not Pat Boone! The song that Breavman is listening to in *The Favourite Game* is “I Almost Lost My Mind,” written by Ivory Joe Hunter. (Incidentally, one of the lines Cohen quotes—“I went to see the gypsy”—forms the basis of a song written by Bob Dylan, in 1970, in tribute to Elvis Presley.)
  - 4 There have been sporadic contacts between Dylan and Cohen, enough to indicate a deep and continuing mutual respect. They shared the same recording company (CBS), and have both worked with the same producer (Bob Johnston). When Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue visited Montreal in 1975, Dylan dedicated one song to Cohen, introducing “Isis” (an interesting choice, considering the importance of Isis in *Beautiful Losers*) with the words “This is for Leonard, if he’s still here!” (For a full account of Cohen and Rolling Thunder, see Larry Sloman, *On the Road with Bob Dylan: Rolling with the Thunder* [New York: Bantam, 1978] 316-324.) This performance of “Isis” is available on Dylan’s album *Biograph*.) In 1977, Dylan sang back-up vocals for one track of the curious album Cohen made with Phil Spector, *Death of a Ladies’ Man*. In 1985, asked by an Australian radio programme to nominate his five favourite recordings, Cohen began with Dylan’s “Tangled Up In Blue.” And in 1988, again in Montreal, Dylan performed a rousing but unattributed version of Cohen’s “Hallelujah.”
  - 5 In between these two modes, there are such mixed modes as the recording of a live concert. A fuller reading of all modes of performance would have to account for a wide range of listener-response. How does one’s response to a recording change from the first listening to subsequent listenings? How does one’s response to a recording of a live concert change depending on whether or not one was present at the original concert? Not to mention the whole phenomenon of karaoke!
  - 6 This collection of essays deals with the sixties—but the limits of decades are flexible, and Cohen’s 1972 tour, from which most of my examples are taken, may well be seen as participating in the mood and ambience of the sixties.
  - 7 This phrase is taken from the lyrics of “Chelsea Hotel #1.” See below for the provenance of this song.

#### WORKS CITED

Quotations from Leonard Cohen’s songs are transcribed directly from his records, and from *Bird on the Wire*, the film of his 1972 tour. Quotations from his spoken introductions are taken from the NFB documentary, *Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Leonard Cohen*; from his 1988 concert in Vancouver; and from the 1991 Juno Awards Ceremony. Every possible effort has been made to obtain permission to quote from albums, readings, speeches and songs.

The discussion of performance in this paper repeats and develops certain passages in my book *Alias Bob Dylan* (Red Deer College Press, 1991), and also owes much to questions and discussion points raised by various audiences (in Canada, England, Germany, France, and India) to whom earlier versions of this paper have been presented.

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