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LEONARD COHEN "Ten New Songs" *****
 cd - 2001 - Columbia / Sony (COL5012022) - 52'49"

2001 the year of downtempo? Even rock's wisest grand old man (together with Robert Wyatt) has now made a languidly slow record. But his motivation is totally different, of course, and so is the music. These ten new songs are a music we're no longer accustomed to. They are the very essence of what music - and poetry - can do. Pavlov's dog runs freely in these pastures, at long last. There is no manipulation, not in this music, just mere honesty. The timeless beauty of someone communicating. Someone who's been living a harsh and rigid life as a monk for years on end (since 1993), hardly having time to write down the words for a tune yet eventually filling a scrapbook with lines and ideas for songs, and who has then taken some time off to make another record. (Nine years after the previous one, 1992's "The Future", a work which did indeed invite a conclusion.) Someone who has during that period worked very intense on his lyrics, striking out redundant observations, killing many a darling thought or word. But then again Mr. Cohen was already a full-blown novelist and a poet before he started recording in the second half of the sixties.

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"I smile when I'm angry. / I cheat and I lie. / I do what I have to do / To get by. / But I know what is wrong. / And I know what is right. / And I'd die for the truth / In My Secret Life." (from "In my secret life", the opening track)

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To paraphrase Cohen (cf. Ira B. Nadel's biography "Various Positions" - London: Bloomsbury 1996, ISBN 0747531676 - p.272+268): "With him, there's no sense of poetry divorced from the human predicament". "I don't feel that I am a singer, or a writer. I'm just the voice, a living diary." Having taken "the major advice [in the Bardo Thodol or Tibetan Book Of The Dead] to view all things that happen to you as projects of your self", and what with the lifes, loves and revelations he's had, Mr. Cohen has succeeded in making "Ten New Songs" one of the high points of his career as a recording artist. More so than ever before, his songs voice the human predicament - mortality and whatever may surround it.

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"The ponies run, the girls are young, / The odds are there to beat. / You win a while, and then it's done - / Your little winning streak. / And summoned now to deal / With your invincible defeat, / You live your life as if it's real, / A Thousand Kisses Deep. // [...] I guess they won't exchange the gifts / That you were meant to keep. / And quiet is the thought of you / The file on you complete, / Except what we forgot to do, / A Thousand Kisses Deep." (from "A thousand kisses deep", the second track)

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So... Are you down enough to get with it? Hope not! As with every new album, most media gave us the usual porbetrayals of Leonard Cohen. Yet essentially, he is not that Grandmaster of Depression poète maudit Nick Cave made of him by covering "Avalanche", and he's hardly that intellectual's Barry White baritone who delivers a few clever lines to make women swoon and men remember their casanova calling... though he might have been all that if he'd put on more weight in that zen monastery of his, of course.

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"And so inside my little room / There plunged the rays of Love. // [...] All busy in the sunlight / The flecks did float and dance, / And I was tumbled up with them / In formless circumstance" (from "Love itself", the fifth track)

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Leonard Cohen is also among the rock business's funniest men - in that laconical Jewish tradition (cf. Brooks, Mel: "Jesus Christ? I knew him, I knew him. He was thin, he was nervous, wore sandals, came into the store, never bought anything"). Take for instance that graffiti which he put on a Montreal café wall "MARITA / PLEASE FIND ME / I AM ALMOST 30" after a woman there had told him to come back and try to pick her up when he was thirty (rather than slap him in the face). Or consider his poem "A PERSON WHO EATS MEAT // A person who eats meat / wants to get his teeth into something / A person who does not eat meat / wants to get his teeth into something else / If these thoughts interest you

even for a moment / you are lost". Or check Ira Nadel's aforementioned biography for proof, e.g. the story of how "he greeted an unruly crowd at the Berlin Sportpalast with Goebbels' own fateful words, spoken on the very same spot: 'Wollt Ihr den totalen Krieg?'" (p.185). Really, Mister Cohen! Utterly "someone long prepared for the occasion / In full command of every plan you wrecked", were you not, that very instant? (the quote is from "Alexandra leaving", the seventh track)

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"I fought against the bottle, / But I had to do it drunk [...] // I know that I'm forgiven, / But I don't know how I know / I don't trust my inner feelings - / Inner feelings come and go." (from "That don't make it junk", the third track)

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But indeed, yes, Leonard Cohen is also the original greatest romantic - incurably: a Jewish scholar who ended up with a severe case of Tibetan desire (cf. Nadel p.202). Check his first novel "The Favorite Game" (1963) or his poems for proof, e.g. "FOR ANNE // With Annie gone, / Whose eyes to compare / With the morning sun? // Not that I did compare, / But I do compare / Now that she's gone" (1961). Or this quote from - most likely - 1956 (already!): "I have loved because she was beautiful and we were two humans lying in the forest at the edge of a dark lake or because she was not beautiful and we were two humans walking between buildings who understood something about suffering. I have loved because so many loved her or because so many were indifferent to her (...) I have never thought of women as a medicine for loneliness and I do not think that humans are so unique, one from the other, that there exists among the living only one special, perfect lover for each special, perfect beloved, to be pressed and fit together by Fate like jigsaw pieces. Each person we want to love takes us on a different path to love, and they change us and we change them as we all move together, and love offers as many alternate paths as any landscape" (Nadel p.28-29).

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"Though I take my song / From a withered limb, / Both song and tree, / They sing for him." (from "By the rivers dark", the sixth track)

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Apart from religious or mortal themes, this new album is also about love and loneliness, obviously. The lyrics are up to the highest standard, and That Voice is indeed humming them. At first listen, the music and the melodies may seem a bit too simplistic (- anyone who's seen those documentary images of Cohen as a zen monk practising on the electronic organ in his cell will understand what I mean -), e.g. in "A thousand kisses deep", "That don't make it junk" or "Love itself". But after a while, that simplicity becomes a major attraction and even force. I'm not talking harsh austerity here, but bare essence - the rich timbre of Cohen's voice is too luxurious. And 'nature!'. Sometimes, the rich simplicity of "Ten New Songs" reminded me of Aaron Neville's doo wop tribute "Orchid In The Storm" albumette. Most tracks were sparsely arranged, but in a sophisticated and original manner, not barren at all, e.g. the vocal interplay in "Here it is" or the gospel feel of "Boogie Street". Producer Sharon Robinson, who also provided second vocals, did a most wonderful job. That gospel feel, for instance, was innate in Cohen's work so far, but Ms. Robinson brought it out, finally. (Phil Spector eat your heart out. Again.)

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"It is in love that we are made; / In love we disappear. / Though all the maps of blood and flesh / Are posted on the door, / There's no one who has told us yet / What Boogie Street is for." (from "Boogie Street", the ninth track)

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With these "Ten New Songs" Mr. Cohen has added another masterpiece, and another dimension, to his oeuvre. If you are already familiar with his work, this record comes highly recommended. (And so do the sites listed below! For instance the 'files' site boasts unpublished poetry and the official site has exclusive interview footage.) If you're not already familiar with Leonard Cohen, I can't really tell if this is the best way to start exploring this great songwriter's own particular tower of song. Personally, I'd start with one of his first four studio albums, e.g. 1971's "Songs Of Love And Hate" (lp #3), but this is just as valid an access. Much more so than with any of his records from 1975 onwards, there is a gentle intensity, almost an aura, which envelops this record and which becomes more radiant with each listen. And after all, since you are already in that 'predicament', why not find beauty in it, and wisdom? (pv)