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The Telegraph

‘He went through women like water’: Leonard Cohen, the unlikely lothario

According to a new book, the singer’s magnetic talent and charm snared Joni Mitchell (among many others) and drove his greatest songs

[By James Hall](#)

The Telegraph (U.K.)

20 November 2020 • 12:43pm

Leonard Cohen was the master of darkly romantic lyrics. The Canadian singer, who died in 2016 aged 82, imbued songs such as Chelsea Hotel #2, Sisters of Mercy and So Long, Marianne with intense passion that was by turns beautiful, elegiac, bleak and explicit. His desires burned deeply, too. “If you want a lover / I’ll do anything you ask me to,” he sang in his famously drawled baritone on 1988’s I’m Your Man.

But a new book about Cohen lays bare just [how tangled, busy and occasionally destructive](#) his love life really was. [Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years](#), by journalist and author Michael Posner, charts his rise from struggling poet and novelist in the late 1950s to the start of his first international tour as a singer in 1970. Written as an oral history, it’s the first of three volumes which are based on over 500 interviews with people who knew Cohen.

What emerges is the picture of an extraordinary talent who was also a compulsive womaniser, a commitment-phobe and a cheat. The book is a dizzying account of [the interplay between ardour and art](#). A succession of women, from on-off partner Marianne Ihlen to dancer Suzanne Verdal to singer Janis Joplin, acted as Cohen’s muses – this much we’ve always known. But the extent to which he played the field may surprise even the most ardent Cohen-ologist.

He was “a master seducer” who “went through women like water”, according to accounts in the book. “Beautiful, wild women... swarmed around Leonard,” recalls Aviva Layton, a friend of the singer’s for fifty years. When Posner writes that the singer was “pursuing every pretty woman he saw”, you feel there’s not much exaggeration involved.

He dated everyone from Joni Mitchell to fellow Montrealer Judy Greenblatt, who moved to London and married Vivian Baron Cohen and became grandmother to comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. “You couldn’t keep track of Cohen’s women,” a TV producer friend called Bernie Rothman told Posner.

Posner paints a picture of a man who was both a product of his time yet also slightly ahead of it. Born to a wealthy Jewish family in the Westmount neighbourhood of Montreal in 1934, Cohen resisted entering the family's textile business and forged an unmapped path as a poet in the slowly emerging bohemia of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Cohen cast a spell on women. His attraction lay in what he represented: he was both outsider and prodigy. His first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, was published in May 1956 and contained 44 poems written between his 15th and his 21st birthday.

But his magnetism also stemmed from immense charisma. His quiet charm, intellect and intensity drew people to him. "It was like moths to a flame," says one former girlfriend, Michele Hendlitz Cohen. His need to be loved may in part have stemmed from insecurities about his physical appearance; he was short and "wasn't that great looking and didn't have a great body", as one person describes him in Posner's book. But such shortcomings may have heightened his compulsion to charm.

Viewed through today's lens, Cohen's busy love life would be interpreted differently. As an author Posner makes no moral judgement (he's helped by the book's format of direct quotations, a distancing device that in the main leaves the reader to decide).

But one instance that occurred two years before 1967's *Summer of Love* seems to encapsulate the prevailing attitude of the time. Anne Coleman, a Canadian writer and college friend, remembers Cohen approaching her at a party in 1965 and intently stroking her stomach before carrying on his prior conversation. "It was one of those 1960s moments – so typical of a party at that time. Nowadays it might be seen as sexual harassment. It certainly wasn't.

"There wasn't anything about Leonard," she added, "that seemed as though he would be doing something that wasn't welcome. It was a sensual appreciation."

Cohen's long on-off relationship with Marianne Ihlen is a major focus of the book. She was the subject of *So Long, Marianne*, one of his best-loved songs, and several others too. Largely played out on the Greek island of Hydra, a beatnik idyll, their relationship was passionate and deeply felt. Cohen first heard about Hydra in London from banker Jacob Rothschild, whose mother was living there at the time. He visited in 1960 and fell in love with the place. It was, he said, "as if everyone was young and beautiful and full of talent – covered in a kind of gold dust". It was also where he met and fell for the Norwegian Ihlen, who had a young son Axel. But Cohen and Ihlen's relationship was at times as toxic as the partner-swapping and backbiting that went on under the shimmering Aegean sun.

Model Madeleine Lerch recalls visiting Hydra in 1961. "I don't know if [Cohen] and Marianne had broken up, but there were tons of other women in his life," she says. "Everyone was sleeping with everyone else. Open marriages. It really was a painful, emotionally dangerous time," says Aviva Layton, a friend of Cohen's.

Posner's book raises two questions that cast a potentially unsavoury light on the relationship. Again, given the book's oral-history format, there is no vouching for the accuracy of people's

recollections. First, some friends suggest that Cohen gave Ihlen's son Axel the drug LSD. The author suggests it's "extremely unlikely" that this happened but it does give an insight into the freewheeling hedonism of the time.

The second question relates to abortions. Five acquaintances of Cohen say in the book that Ihlen, who also died in 2016, underwent numerous abortions because Cohen didn't want children. This chimes with information suggested by filmmaker Nick Broomfield, with whom Ihlen had a relationship, in last year's documentary *Marianne & Leonard: Words of Love*. "She knew Leonard did not want to have kids, and she did not want to burden him," says Layton.

Cohen (2l) and Marianne (2r) in 1960, on the Greek island of Hydra Credit: James Burke

Away from Ihlen, there were affairs aplenty. Cohen had double standards when it came to fidelity: it was fine for him but not for his partners. One of Cohen's girlfriends when he was with Ihlen was Wendy Patten Keys. She says that Cohen was "mad" at her because she was not faithful to him when he was off in Greece. He wrote a poem called *Why I Happen To Be Free* that Patten Keys believes is about her. "Forsaking the lovely girl / Was not my idea / But she fell asleep in somebody's bed," Cohen wrote. Life was emotionally traumatic for his lovers. "I constantly felt I was sharing him," says Patten Keys.

In any case, Cohen and Ihlen's relationship faded as the 1960s drew to a close. "Love seeded on Hydra is, by definition, doomed," explains Cohen's friend Barrie Wexler. In July 1967, Cohen met Joni Mitchell at the Newport Folk Festival where they were both performing. They had a relationship that lasted almost a year.

Mitchell was later dismissive of him. "I briefly liked Leonard Cohen, though once I read Camus and Lorca I started to realise that he had taken a lot of lines from those books, which was disappointing to me," she said. Also in 1967 – although some accounts put it at 1968 – Cohen met Janis Joplin in the lift of New York's Chelsea Hotel. She said she was looking for Kris Kristofferson. Cohen replied: "Little lady, you're in luck, I am Kris Kristofferson."

They spent the night together, with Cohen going on to write *Chelsea Hotel #2* about the encounter. "I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel / You were talking so brave and so sweet / Giving me head on the unmade bed / While the limousines wait in the street," he sang. Again, Joplin was later less than complimentary about their encounter.

There were a few romantic non-starters too. Cohen became obsessed with singer Nico, a disciple of Andy Warhol and occasional member of the Velvet Underground. But she rejected him. Cohen called Nico the "Marlene Dietrich of nihilistic rock", while Warhol called Cohen's first album "Nico with whiskers". She is thought to be the inspiration behind at least two Cohen songs, *Take This Longing* and *Joan of Arc*. And there is a long passage in the book by an artist called Barbara Dodge, who claims that Cohen tried at length to seduce her upstairs in his mother's house when she was 17 or 18 (and still a virgin). The encounter was later mentioned in Cohen's poem, *The Energy of Slaves*.

What we see in Posner's book is Cohen as an almost otherworldly magus who lived, as he himself put it, "on seaweed and amphetamines". His allure was (almost) total. He lived in perpetual motion; a life of constant searching. It was this quest that took his life from Judaism to Scientology and Zen Buddhism; it was this quest that took him from poetry to novels to music; and it was this quest that took him from bed to bed to bed.

Everything about Cohen's aura and era is neatly summed up in one short anecdote in the book. Jacquie Bellon, a friend of the singer and the first wife of American writer Steve Sanfield, tells Posner that Cohen stayed with her and Sanfield in Santa Barbara in 1967 or 1968 when they were boyfriend and girlfriend. Nothing happened between Cohen and Bellon, although she tells the author there was "definitely mutual attraction".

Bellon makes what's almost a passing comment. But the throwaway detail speaks volumes about this unlikely lothario's lasting effect on women. "When [Cohen] left, he left behind a black Italian designer turtleneck. I still have it. It's very small."

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years by Michael Posner is published by Simon & Schuster on November 26

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/went-women-like-water-leonard-cohen-unlikely-lothario/>

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

‘Leonard Cohen’ Review: Everybody Knows Him

Magnetic from the start, it wasn’t at first clear he would make his mark in song.



Leonard Cohen (second left) in Hydra, Greece, with Charles W. Heckstall (left), Charmian Clift (third left), and Marianne Ihlen) (second right), October 1960.

Photo: James Burke/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

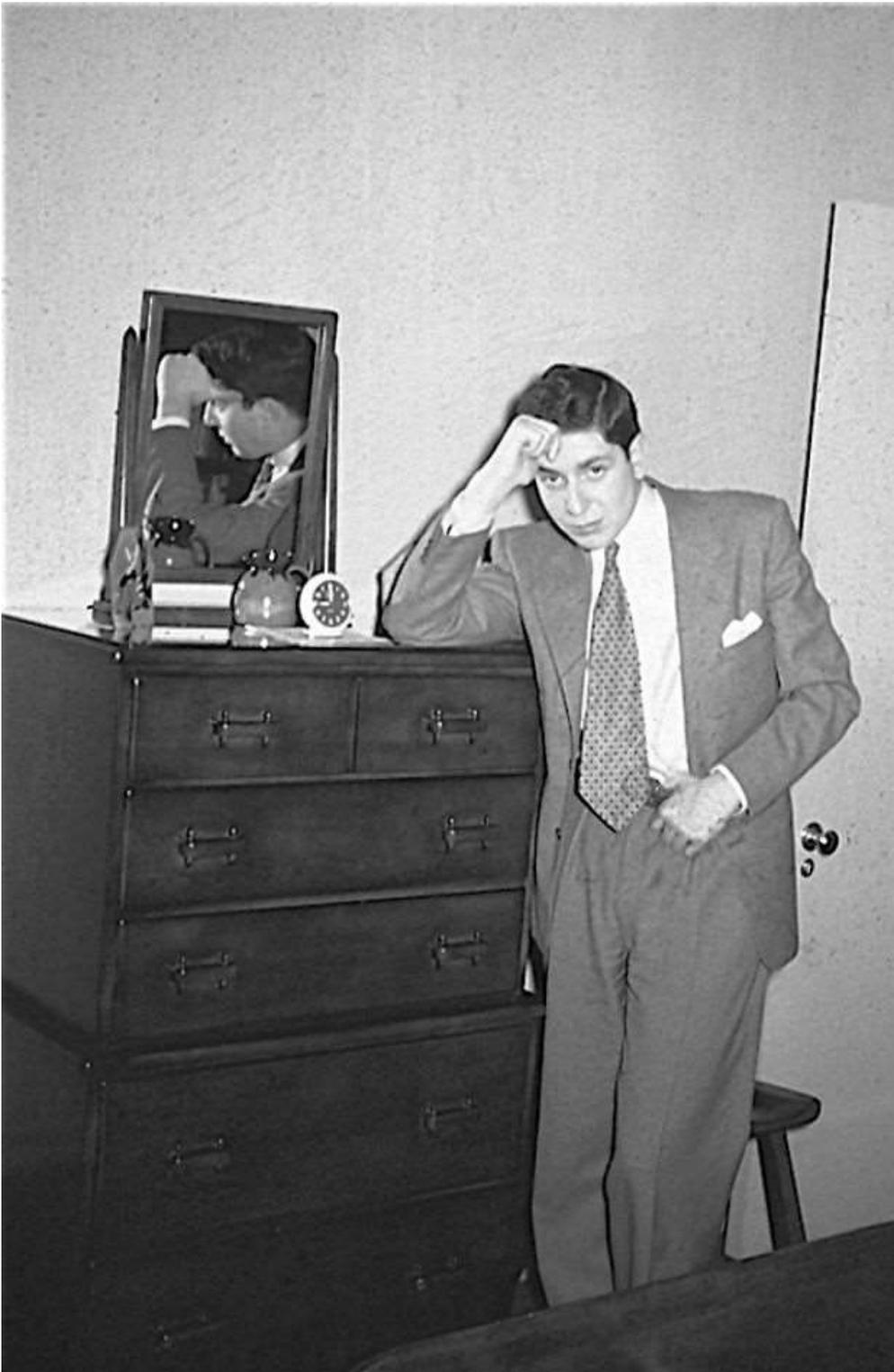
By James Campbell
The Wall Street Journal
Nov. 20, 2020 12:09 pm ET

Leonard Cohen: Untold Stories: The Early Years

By Michael Posner
Simon & Schuster, 482 pages, \$30

In the introduction to “Leonard Cohen: Untold Stories: The Early Years,” Michael Posner explains that he first proposed the idea of an oral biography to the singer and poet in 2007. It would be “a book based on interviews with his friends, family, bandmates, backup singers, record producers, monks, rabbis, and lovers.” Cohen responded genially, but at the time was entangled in litigation with his former business manager, who was accused of swindling him on a mighty scale. After Cohen’s death in 2016, Mr. Posner revived the project. “Perhaps he really did intend, one day, to confer his priestly blessing on my little enterprise. And now, from whatever empyrean realm he inhabits, he has.”

From the first of these sentences to the second is quite a leap. If Cohen was anticipating a lively, talking-heads-style portrait, full of titillating gossip and maddening contradictions but bulging with testimony to his charisma and gnostic manner, then he will not be displeased. "Leonard was probably the most seductive man I've ever met," says Aviva Layton, wife of Cohen's early mentor, the poet Irving Layton. "Seductive not just to women but to men. What is it that he had? It was magic." Ms. Layton is among the most spirited of the 350 or so associates interviewed by Mr. Posner. "Untold Stories" also draws on previously published recollections, from Cohen himself (usually modest and self-aware), Joni Mitchell ("I briefly liked Leonard Cohen") and Marianne Ihlen, the muse and romantic partner who inspired one of his most famous songs and who, like him, seemed to crave a usable form of domesticity while forever striving to evade its restrictions.



Leonard Cohen in Montreal, 1948.

Photo: Simon & Schuster Canada

It is easy to forget that Cohen was a poet and writer of fiction before breaking into song. Raised in Westmount, an affluent suburb of Montreal, he was expected to enter the family clothing business but instead fell in with a company of writers and artists, presided over by Irving Layton. By the time the album “Songs of Leonard Cohen” was released in 1967, he had published four collections of verse and two novels. He took his guitar to parties and sang “mainly union songs,” but his vocal and instrumental abilities were on the whole unpromising. One ex-girlfriend recalls, “The first time I heard him sing, I said, ‘Leonard, I don’t think this is going to fly.’ Boy, was I wrong.”

Some early public readings were caught on film (as well as a decent stand-up comedy routine) and may be found on the internet, but poetry was not enough for Cohen and the readings increasingly turned into concerts. Under “Ambition” in the 1951 graduation yearbook of Westmount High, he wrote “World famous orator,” which, in his way, he became. Cohen always had a liking for martial emblems. His backing group was known as the Army. He called his third book of poems “Flowers for Hitler” (1964). In France and Germany he risked starting riots by throwing out his right hand onstage and clicking his heels. The plea to the audience was, “here tonight, for just one moment in time, let it stand for peace and love,” which is apt to get lost in translation. One of his backing singers recalls that, in Munich, “we were met with police and German police dogs, and things got pretty strange. He gave the Nazi salute, and a hiss went up from the crowd. But he wooed them and won them with his hypnotic charm.”

That charm is amply exposed in “Untold Stories,” allied to Cohen’s sexual allure. “He’d look at a girl and she’d go to bed with him, right away,” Robert Cohen, a cousin, says. “All he had to do was look at her.” Perhaps. Less charming is the recurring talk about “sharing” women. Arnie Gelbart knew Suzanne Verdal, the inspiration for another famous song, “and her former partner, Armand Vaillancourt, and he generously passed his woman on to Leonard.” (Ms. Verdal is not to be confused with Suzanne Elrod, the mother of Cohen’s two children.) Cohen’s longtime friend Barrie Wexler describes leaving the Greek island of Hydra with Marianne, while Leonard stood on the port, waving them off. Says Mr. Posner: “Cohen, of course, had frequently handed off other women to male friends, but this was of a different order of magnitude.”

Hydra features largely in the book. When Cohen met Marianne Ihlen in 1960, she was living on the Aegean island with her husband, Axel Jensen, a prolific Norwegian writer with mystic tendencies, and their son, known as little Axel. The story is recounted here that when the boy was 15, (in the words of Ruth Seymour) “Marianne allowed Leonard to take Axel to Mexico. That’s where he gave Axel psilocybin. Marianne believed that when Axel came back, he wasn’t the same anymore.”

There appears to be no dispute that Little Axel was damaged after taking a drug that other sources refer to as LSD—he has spent much of his life in institutions—but four other witnesses, including Marianne herself, are quickly cited to refute the suggestion that Cohen was responsible for giving him the drug in his early teens. In Aviva Layton’s words, “Leonard would never do that, not in a million years.” All claim that Jensen was responsible. Mr. Posner himself says of the allegation against Cohen that it is “extremely unlikely” to be true. So why print it? At this point, I had a vision of Cohen, in his empyrean realm, withdrawing that doubtful priestly blessing.

Other tales focus on Cohen’s laid-back approach to daily life—one of several strategies deployed to ward off his ever-threatening depression—and his generous nature. This aspect of Cohen is well illustrated in “The Last Great Event,” a 2016 memoir by Ray Foulk, the organizer of the 1970 Isle of Wight Festival, where Cohen performed in the company of Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, Miles Davis and others. When the destruction of perimeter fencing meant that a paying event had become a free one in the space of a few minutes, Mr. Foulk was obliged to tell the star that only half his \$15,000 fee—a considerable sum at the time—would be honored. Cohen replied: “That’s cool. Don’t fret. I’ll be playing. It’s only money.” According to Mr. Foulk he added,

“with grace and sympathy, ‘it’s not your fault. I can see that.’ ” There are related tales here, including several of Cohen performing, unpublicized, in mental institutions. In one such instance, in England, he noticed that he was being recorded. Cohen asked nurse Ian Milne what it was for. “I said, ‘Just for myself.’ He asked that I didn’t sell it. I have respected that to this day.”

“Untold Stories” comes to a close as Cohen’s rock ‘n’ roll life begins in earnest. Future installments will likely bring more about cheating and being cheated, in love and finance, about the related despondency and its temporary cures: Scientology, the I Ching, Zen Buddhism and lots of drugs. The books will doubtless be as enjoyable as this one. Some deeper reflections on the transformation of the callow poet into the mournful bearer of intimate messages, with exquisite phrasing, will also be welcome.

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https://www.wsj.com/articles/leonard-cohen-review-everybody-knows-him-11605892144?mod=searchresults_pos1&page=1

'Westmount was kind of a beacon for him': Leonard Cohen's early years told through hundreds of voices in new book

'For a guy as complex as Leonard Cohen was, and as smart as he was, I think he would enjoy the ambiguity that ensues from this kind of approach'

Author of the article:

Jacob Dubé

The National Post

Publishing date:

Oct 22, 2020



Leonard Cohen, circa 1963

Back in the mid-2000s, Michael Posner, then a staff reporter for The Globe and Mail, received a much awaited email from a coveted address, baldymonk@aol.com. The address belonged to none other than the superstar Canadian singer, songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen.

Posner had contacted Cohen to ask for his participation in an oral history biography of the famous musician, featuring quotes and recollections from hundreds of people involved throughout his life. But Cohen's reply was less than favourable.

“He sent back a nice note, but basically said no,” Posner told the National Post.

Cohen was understandably busy. At the time, he was pursuing legal action against his former manager [Kelley Lynch](#), who was accused of stealing millions from Cohen's personal accounts. She was later ordered to pay the musician around US\$9 million.

Posner shelved the idea for years, but revived the project shortly after Cohen's death on November 7, 2016, at 82. Now, three years and hundreds of interviews later, Posner has just released the first of three volumes detailing the life of Leonard Cohen, through the voices of his family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and, yes, lovers.

For a guy as complex as Leonard Cohen was, and as smart as he was, I think he would enjoy the ambiguity that ensues from this kind of approach

Published on Oct. 20, Leonard Cohen, *Untold Stories: The Early Years* is an oral biography, which means that while the author might sprinkle in a few paragraphs for context, the majority of the book is told through the voices of other people — and a few quotes from old Cohen interviews that Posner received permission to use.

“I prefer oral biography because it allows these individual voices who actually knew him to offer their own judgements about the man,” Posner said. “So you get this chorus of voices, some of whom whose memories might be faulty, but it almost doesn't matter. Because the reader gets to decide which point of view that they think is closer to the truth. I like that aspect of it.

“For a guy as complex as Leonard Cohen was, and as smart as he was, I think he would enjoy the ambiguity that ensues from this kind of approach.”

Cohen was born on September 21, 1934, in Westmount, a rich suburb near Montreal. Wealth permeated the enclosed city, which had its own police department and traffic rules; and where most children were enrolled in private schools.

“Westmount was kind of a beacon for him,” Posner said. “Although he eventually moved to another part of Montreal, those early years really shaped him in profound ways.”

The Cohens were pillars of the Jewish community in Westmount and were considered by some to be Jewish royalty, Posner said. Cohen's relatives were respected community organizers, rabbis and savvy businessmen — so it was often expected of the Cohens to join the family's clothing

business. It's not hard to see how the public persona of Cohen emerged from such a proper family, especially considering his tendency to be the best dressed man in the room.

But as his love for poetry and writing began to grow, he faced increasing pressure from his relatives to join the family business.

He had this core conviction that he didn't want to be in the family business," Posner said. "I think he was grateful for the efforts his uncles made to help his family particularly after his father died in 1944. But he wanted no part of a commercial life, and he wanted no part of an academic life. He wanted to be a writer."

Closer to home, Cohen reportedly fought often with his mother, Masha, especially after his father's death in 1944. Emotional with a strong Russian accent, she would focus many of her expectations and anxieties on her only son.

"Leonard learned to deal with the world, which is essentially rough and philistine, by dealing with his mother," one source says in the book. "When it comes steamrolling over you, all you can do is utter a prayer."

After a stint attending McGill University, where he was acquainted with fellow poets Louis Dudek and Irving Layton, Cohen decided to leave Montreal.

"It gives you a broader perspective on everything, but particularly on your roots and your upbringing," Posner said. "So he did have to escape, and so he does. He goes to Greece, and that's the start of it."

He left for London, and eventually reached the Greek island of Hydra, where he met one of his muses, Marianne Ihlen, the inspiration of one of his most famous songs, "So Long, Marianne".



Photo of Leonard Cohen and Marianne Ihlen. Photo by Elevation Pictures

But despite the pressures of his relatives and especially his mother, Cohen found himself returning to his hometown throughout his life, not quite able to escape its attraction — he continued to own a home in the city until his death. As he wrote in his second published book of poetry, *The Spice Box of Earth*, “I belong beside the Mediterranean. My ancestors made a terrible mistake. But I have to keep coming back to Montreal to renew my neurotic affiliations.”

Posner’s book follows characters throughout Cohen’s life until the beginning of his lucrative career as a musician and his first international tour in 1970. Two more oral history volumes are set to be subsequently released, in which Posner says, “there will be even more revelations.”

As he spoke to more and more people about Cohen’s life and work, Posner said he was able to begin tracking down the origin and inspiration for Cohen’s poetry and songs. The origin of “The Cuckold’s Song” — a poem published in *The Spice Box of Earth* about a man whose girlfriend sleeps with another man — was previously unknown, but Posner discovered that it was very likely inspired by a 1956 affair between his first cousin Robert Cohen and Leonard Cohen’s then-girlfriend Freda Guttman.

“I don’t think he was too put out about it,” Robert Cohen tells Posner, “especially as the event was great fodder.”

Even though the book contains hundreds of interviews, Posner said, there were still a few people who don’t feature in the biography. Cohen’s two children, Adam and Lorca, turned down the

offer to share stories about their father. Some wanted to keep their stories about Leonard to themselves and Posner says there are a few people he wished he could speak to, but who have died before he could get to them.

“If I had begun the project a decade earlier,” Posner said, “maybe I would have had more voices.”

But ultimately, Posner hopes that the oral biography gives readers a fuller depiction of Cohen, as seen through the eyes of the people that were most affected by his presence.

“There’s something really special about this guy, which I hope comes through in the book.”

<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/westmount-was-kind-of-a-beacon-for-him-leonard-cohens-early-years-told-through-hundreds-of-voices-in-new-book>

MUSIC CONNECTION

KUBERNIK: INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR OF "LEONARD COHEN, UNTOLD STORIES"

[LATEST, MUSIC NEWS](#)

SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

[HARVEY KUBERNIK](#)

Poet, novelist, singer-songwriter, artist, prophet, icon—there has never been a figure like Leonard Cohen. He was a true giant in contemporary western culture, entertaining and inspiring people everywhere with his work.

From his groundbreaking and bestselling novels, *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, to timeless songs such as "Suzanne," "Dance Me to the End of Love," and "Hallelujah," Cohen is a cherished artist.

His death in 2016 was felt around the world by the many fans and followers who would miss his warmth, humor, intellect, and piercing insights.

I was an acquaintance of Leonard Cohen for over 45 years.

In the mid and late seventies I conducted a series of interviews with him for *Melody Maker* at his two different Southern California residences, was present on a few of his Phil Spector-produced recording sessions and noshed with Leonard a handful of times this century.

In 2015 I wrote and assembled a hardcover coffee table size volume *Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows* for Palazzo Editions, currently published in six foreign languages. In 2016, the title was also published in Chinese and Russian.

If you're interested in reading about my documentation of Leonard Cohen visit these well-respected Cohen-driven websites.

[The Leonard Cohen Files](#)

www.leonardcohenfiles.com

Our **Leonard Cohen Forum** at www.leonardcohenforum.com is the meeting ... Multi-voice narrative memoir tribute to LC - by **Harvey Kubernik** (pdf) (Sept 23)

[Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows by Harvey Kubernik - A ...](#)

[allanshowalter.com > 2019/10/29 > leonard-cohen-everybody-knows-...](#)

In the March 1, 1975 issue of *Melody Maker*, the now defunct English music weekly, I discussed touring, music and his literary influences with Leonard one afternoon at the Continental Hyatt House in Hollywood, which followed his Troubadour Club engagement.

"I used to be petrified with the idea of going on the road and presenting my work," he told me in our first interview. "I often felt that the risks of humiliation were too wide. But with the help of my last producer, Bob Johnston, I gained the self-confidence I felt was necessary. My music now is much more highly refined.

"When you are again in touch with yourself and you feel a certain sense of health, you feel somehow that the prison bars are lifted, and you start hearing new possibilities in your work.

"I don't have any reservations about anything I do. I always played music. When I was 17, I was in a country music group called the Buckskin Boys. Writing came later, after music. I put my guitar away for a few years, but I always made up songs. I never wanted my work to get too far away from music," stressed Cohen.

"In the early days I was trained as a poet by reading English poets like Lorca and Brecht, and by the invigorating exchange between other writers in Montreal at the time.

"My tunes often deal with a moral crisis. I often feel myself a part of such a crisis and try to relate it in song. As far as the use of Biblical characters in such tunes as 'Story Of Isaac', and 'Joan Of Arc', it was not a matter of choice. These are the books that were placed in my hand when I was developing my literary tastes."

In November 2017, a year after Leonard's passing, people gathered in Montreal to celebrate his life. The MAC [the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal] launched *Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything*, an exhibition that overwhelmed in its expanse and emotional depth.

Later, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal debuted *Dance Me* a homage to Leonard's artistry. The main attraction was *The Tower of Song: A Memorial Tribute to Leonard Cohen* concert.

These events are being acknowledged in this Collector's Edition *Montreal Leonard Cohen Memorial Commemorative* Box Set. This product recreates the Montreal celebration of Leonard's life and work with a collection of high-quality Blu-Rays, recordings, fine art lithographs, posters and other rare items issued in a limited edition of 5,000.

It's being released by the Unified Heart Productions Foundation (UHPF), a Canadian charity founded to fulfill Leonard's commitment to assisting young Canadian artists. All proceeds from the sale will go to the pursuit of the UHPF's charitable purpose.

Visit www.cohenboxset.com to learn more about the *Montreal Leonard Cohen Memorial Commemorative* retail item.

I'm very excited about the October publication from Simon & Schuster Canada of *Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories* by bestselling author and biographer Michael Posner which chronicles the full breadth of his extraordinary life.

The first of three volumes—*The Early Years*—follows him from his boyhood in Montreal to university, and his burgeoning literary career to the world of music, culminating with his first international tour in 1970.

Through the voices of those who knew him best—family and friends, colleagues and contemporaries, rivals, business partners, and his many lovers—the book probes deeply into both Cohen's public and private life. It also paints a portrait of an era, the social, cultural, and political revolutions that shook the 1960s.

In this revealing and entertaining first volume, Michael Posner draws on hundreds of interviews to reach beyond the Cohen of myth and reveal the unique, complex, and compelling figure of the real man.

Posner is an award-winning Toronto writer, playwright, and journalist, and the author of seven books. These include biographies of novelist Mordecai Richler (*The Last Honest Man*, 2004), selected as one of the *Globe and Mail's* top 100 books of that year); singer Anne Murray (*All of Me*, 2010, as ghostwriter); as well as books on medicine, film, public opinion, and money.

He was Washington Bureau Chief for *Maclean's Magazine*, and later served as its National, Foreign, and Assistant Managing Editor. He was managing editor of the *Financial Times of Canada* for three years.

Posner later spent sixteen years as a senior writer with the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper. Two of his critically acclaimed plays were mounted at the Toronto Fringe Festival.

He began work on *Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories* in December 2016.

Michael Posner first saw Leonard Cohen read in January 1967 in Winnipeg, Canada at the University of Manitoba and later witnessed his 2013 Toronto concert.

Posner has done his homework. I was honored when Michael and his editor at Simon & Schuster asked me to pen testimonial praise for the book back jacket along with several notable authors and poets.

"Posner is our Cohen-centric tour guide. He has delivered an enthralling oral history, carefully weaving the multi-voice narratives to us in a revealing, deep-dive exploration. I eagerly await the next volume."

— **HARVEY KUBERNIK**, music historian and author of *Leonard Cohen: Everybody Knows*

"With this book, Michael Posner has pushed the horizons of biographical possibility. The voices gathered here are indispensable to complete the splendid mosaic that is Leonard Cohen."

"Through these stories, a unique portrait of a young Leonard Cohen is revealed, with insights into not only his extraordinary life but also his timeless poetry and music."

— **ANNE MURRAY**, Grammy Award-winning singer

"Posner masterfully weaves an abundance of interviews with Cohen's family, friends, and myriad lovers to create an intricate tapestry and, ultimately, produces the most revealing portrait of the legendary songwriter and wordsmith to date."

— **NICHOLAS JENNINGS**, journalist and bestselling author of *Lightfoot*

"Out of a welter of stories—from those who encountered Leonard Cohen as associate, friend, or lover—Michael Posner has shaped a fascinating multi-faceted portrait. Posner is indeed Cohen's Boswell, no doubt about it."

— **SEYMOUR MAYNE**, poet, editor, and translator

In August 2020 I conducted an email interview with Michael Posner.

Q: What is the genesis of your Leonard Cohen book?

A: The genesis was actually the Mordecai Richler book. It had done pretty well critically, but not commercially. It struck me that Cohen was a much bigger name and was a book that could sell internationally. When I wrote him, about 2007, the only biography of any consequence was Ira Nadel's *Various Positions*...but as you know, nothing happened then. He said no. I dropped the idea.

When he passed, Sylvie Simmons' book was out—for four years— but I knew as a journalist that there had to be other stories around. She had followed and fleshed out the familiar story line very well, but I knew there had to be hundreds of people who had stories or something new to say about him that had never been spoken to. The trick would be finding and persuading them to talk — hard, but less hard because he had passed

Q: What always drew you to Leonard's work? Your previous books are in other arenas.

A: I loved the music and the early poetry... but truthfully, I think my ambitions were journalistic. This was a guy of masks. He was very careful and skillful about his public presentation...Could some of those masks be stripped away? And what would be revealed? And would what might be revealed be connected to his work? So yes a fan, but that wasn't the key. At the beginning it was just instinct—there had to be more. Had to be. But almost as soon as I started, I realized there was a, infinitely more and b, I had taken on a huge challenge, not only because I was seeking new voices on Cohen, but because I also had to cover the known narrative as well — it is after all a biography. So I'd need to find, if I could, new wrinkles even in the old stories. Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't. But with virtually every interview, I was coming away with new material. Not always home runs, usually singles, even bunts...but as it accumulated, I was confident that Cohen fans particularly, who can be obsessive, would want these stories—if I could find a publisher.

Q: And you embarked on this literary journey without a book deal, even schlepping to Los Angeles and other destinations.

A: Yes... Los Angeles, New York City, Hydra in Greece, Austin, Texas, London, England, Ithaca, New York a few times, San Francisco and Montreal several times.

Q: I happily turned over some leads to you that I didn't utilize in my own book. I'm a record geek more interested in sound engineers, producers, studios and musicians and not the women, sex trips and drugs in my books. However I am curious if the Israeli woman I recommended from the bagel shop in the San Fernando Valley in California was for real?

A: Yes. Totally legit, but there's a more interesting one in the second book.

Q: How did this actual book deal happen? Did you solicit a manuscript? A literary agent? I'm sure there were nibbles but there seemed to be a sense of destiny for the endeavor, let alone a multiple book deal for three volumes.

A: My initial proposal was initially rejected but then they changed their minds. And though they first said the full manuscript—then 600,000 words— would have to be cut dramatically, they changed their mind again and said let's do three separate books so the cutting was minimized. I was hugely fortunate

Q: Even before doing additional research, further writing and editing the first book, tell me about some of your feelings and appreciation of Cohen's work before you really got going in the journey.

A: To be honest, I was not a student of his work before I began. I liked much of it, even most, but just as a fan, not any in-depth analysis... I did think that the first novel was largely autobiography, and that many of the songs were also, as he said of the song "Suzanne," essentially reportage... the trick would be to decipher who is who in the lyrics.. Because like most writers, he wrote what he knew...The three books, then just a single volume, were largely done when I got the contract. I did develop a deeper appreciation for his work, his craftsmanship...his dedication, his genius...his ability to deploy the very specific to address the universal...the contemporary to reach the eternal., and with humour..I do think many of the songs will last a very long time

Q: During the writing process, once the deal happened, and as you turned in volume 1, what changed or was really obvious now to you about Cohen as person and artist as a biographer?

A: Well, part of the answer is my appreciation for his gifts and his commitment to those gifts. On the human side, I saw a guy who really struggled...struggled with the consequences of fame on his life and art, struggled to keep pushing himself not to repeat himself... struggled, that is, to move the creative goalposts on himself... struggled hugely with relationships...his 'marriage,' his children, his many lovers. None of this was easy...add to that his bipolar condition, which led to severe down periods...and you begin to see how complicated a life he led... he had trouble staying in one place...emotionally and physically... as soon as a sense of comfort or complacency or predictability was manifest, he checked out... and yet, for good friends, he was always there with time or money... and 95 per cent of the women he met, bedded and left, only speak in glowing terms about him and the positive impact he had on their lives. I think ultimately I came away with a sense that he's impossible to reduce to one thing or another...he inhabited and expressed multitudes.

Q: What truly makes this book way different and essential for Cohenheads and the newly initiated? Why would Leonard appreciate your work?

A: The difference is two things. New stories told by people who we have never heard from before ...including some 20 women he had serious relationships with...most in the later books... but also close friends like Barrie Wexler and Henry Zemel.

I think and hope that, were he still with us, Leonard would savor the ambiguity, and the conflicting accounts.

Q: You employed the oral history multiple voice narrative method in this book, which I do as well. I like bringing the witnesses to the forefront and let them recall specifics. What are the pros and cons of this methodology? Did you utilize this concept in previous books?

A: The oral biography format gives you Leonard as Rashomon...this complicated multifaceted personality who presents himself in different ways to different people. As though he could read the kind of character he needed to be and manifest himself as that. The oral biography approach forces readers to make their own judgment about where the balance of truth might lie in any particular story or observation. The Richler book is oral biography as well. Its strengths are that it gives more weight and voice to people who actually knew him. There is no top-down, imposed interpretation of who Leonard was...that's the good news ...the bad news is that the same virtue is a liability ...that readers might be confused by the myriad voices and the absence of a firm point of view.

Q: Can you give us some tips about the interview process for this book and your literary career? Is the secret to be a good listener? How do you get such good results? Also, is one reason because these yentas want to spiel on Leonard and really bring good stuff to the table?

A: Interview technique? Shut up. Don't talk. Avoid the temptation. Listen. The more listening you do, the better the results. Also polite persistence—not everyone wants to talk, but with time and diplomatic overtures, some can be persuaded. The investment is often worthwhile

Q: What about the editing process?

A: Very complicated. First I had to transcribe the tapes... thousands of hours... so part of the editing occurred then...don't transcribe what I won't need. Some people appear once and some appear 30 times... so I had to locate where the quotes would go and then try to connect them to surrounding quotes as much as possible, being as faithful as

possible to chronology. As to later edits, some ruthlessness was required. In Studs Terkel's oral biographies, there's more fidelity to the particular nuances of individual voice. Here, for editing sake, I had to lose that individuality, mostly. Having three books obviously made the cutting much easier than it would have been with one....though it was still painful at times...

Q: Since his physical passing, and the Cohen tribute concerts in Montreal and celebrations, what has emerged or changed in the Cohen universe? We know death of an artist brings new products and a slew of documentaries as well as reissues and unreleased recordings.

A: Since his death: A posthumous book of poetry, *The Flame*. a museum retrospective of his life that has toured internationally. A posthumous album of his music—words by Leonard, music by his son Adam and others, *Thanks For the Dance*. There are plans for release of a book of early Cohen fiction/short stories. Lots of Cohen tribute shows mounted internationally. He won a posthumous Grammy for *You Want It Darker*. There was Nick Broomfield's documentary *Words of Love, Leonard and Marianne* which has played worldwide. There's now a documentary in post-production on the song "Hallelujah."

Q: What about Cohen's impact?

A: There are two impacts to measure. The current one, on other artists, is huge - - Nick Cave, Bono, Rufus Wainwright...all kinds of people have been profoundly influenced by his work.

I don't think the late tours per se are meaningful, except to prove how big a star he actually was... in effect, it was a five-year farewell tour and a celebration of everything Cohen. So, yes he was a kind of father figure, but not just in a reflexive, honorary way...artists will try to duplicate what he was able to do. The other impact to measure is the future and it's just too soon to say...but I do believe they'll still be playing a lot of his music in 100 years...if the planet is still viable.

HARVEY KUBERNIK is the author of 19 books, including Canyon Of Dreams: The Magic And The Music Of Laurel Canyon and Turn Up The Radio! Rock, Pop and Roll In Los Angeles 1956-1972. Sterling/Barnes and Noble in 2018 published Harvey and Kenneth Kubernik's The Story Of The Band: From Big Pink To The Last Waltz. For 2021 they are writing a multi-narrative book on Jimi Hendrix for the same publisher.

Otherworld Cottage Industries in July 2020 has just published Harvey's 508-page book, *Docs That Rock, Music That Matters*, featuring Kubernik interviews with D.A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, Murray Lerner, Morgan Neville, Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Andrew Loog Oldham, John Ridley, Curtis Hanson, Dick Clark, Travis Pike, Allan Arkush, and David Leaf, among others.

Kubernik's 1995 interview, *Berry Gordy: A Conversation With Mr. Motown* appears in *The Pop, Rock & Soul Reader* edited by David Brackett published in 2019 by Oxford University Press. Brackett is a Professor of Musicology in the Schulich School of Music at McGill University in Canada. Harvey joined a distinguished lineup which includes LeRoi Jones, Johnny Otis, Ellen Willis, Nat Hentoff, Jerry Wexler, Jim Delehant, Ralph J. Gleason, Greil Marcus, and Cameron Crowe.

This century Harvey wrote the liner note booklets to the CD re-releases of Carole King's *Tapestry*, Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, Elvis Presley *The '68 Comeback Special* and *The Ramones' End of the Century*.

Kubernik's writings are in several book anthologies, most notably *The Rolling Stone Book Of The Beats* and *Drinking With Bukowski*. He was the project coordinator of the recording set *The Jack Kerouac Collection*.

Harvey Kubernik's 1996 interview with poet/author Allen Ginsberg was published in *Conversations With Allen Ginsberg*, edited by David Stephen Calonne for the University Press of Mississippi in their 2019 *Literary Conversations Series*.

In 2020 Harvey served as Consultant on *Laurel Canyon: A Place In Time* documentary directed by Alison Ellwood, which debuted on May 2020 on the EPIX/MGM television channel. It was just nominated for three Emmys.

<https://www.musicconnection.com/kubernik-interview-with-author-of-leonard-cohen-untold-stories/>

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Author interview

'The Jewish identity is the essence of the man'

Not everybody knows: Fresh Leonard Cohen stories illuminate a complex troubadour

Canadian journalist Michael Posner's quest to interview anyone who knew the mysterious celeb bears fruit with the first installment of oral biography trilogy, dropping October 20

By [Robert Sarner](#)

The Times of Israel

20 October 2020, 4:14 pm



Leonard Cohen performing during the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival 2009 at the Empire Polo Club in Indio, California, April 17, 2009. (Paul Butterfield/Getty Images via JTA)



A 22-story tall portrait of Leonard Cohen on the side of a building on Montreal's Crescent Street. (Robert Sarner/Times of Israel)



Michael Posner, author of 'Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories,' poses on the rooftop terrace of his apartment building in midtown Toronto, August 21, 2020. (Etye Sarner)

TORONTO — Canadian writer Michael Posner is on a mission to track down and speak with anyone who knew iconic troubadour Leonard Cohen. The first installment in the resultant trilogy of oral biographies was published October 20.

During this ongoing, mammoth project to shed new light on the Jewish songster through the recollections of others, Posner has interviewed 520 people from around the world, who together span all stages of Cohen's life and career. The first interview was in 2016, with Canadian poet and essayist David Solway who befriended Cohen in the 1960s, and the most recent one was with Regine Cimber-Lorincz, who now lives in Antwerp and met Cohen in Israel in 1972. In the process, Posner has gained great insight into the man famously labeled "the poet laureate of pessimism," and whose repertoire was termed "music to slit your wrists to."

Additional interviews are in the cards as Posner continues his quest for more material for his collective portrait of the peripatetic performer who wrote and sang such classic songs as "Suzanne," "Hallelujah," "Bird on the Wire," and "First, We Take Manhattan."

When complete, Posner's sleuthing will have generated a three-volume, chronological oral biography. The first just-published installment titled "Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years" begins with Cohen's childhood and adolescence in Montreal, and concludes with his first major concert tour when he was 36.

The project has proven far more time-consuming than Posner expected when he embarked on it shortly after Cohen died in Los Angeles in November 2016, at the age of 82.

"The challenge and fun of the work has been trying to find people who are still alive, had some involvement with Leonard, knew about events or certain moments in his life and could comment on them knowledgeably," Posner told *The Times of Israel* during a recent interview on the rooftop terrace of the seven-story apartment building where he lives in midtown Toronto. "Part of the challenge has been locating specific people who I knew were out there but I didn't know where, or whether they would talk to me if I found them."

Posner, who has long been fascinated by Cohen and his oeuvre, first saw him in concert in early 1967 at the University of Manitoba in Posner's hometown of Winnipeg. It was one of Cohen's early public performances at a time when he was known mostly as a poet and novelist, well before the release of his first album later that year.

In 1968, Posner moved to Toronto to pursue a master's degree in English literature before starting his journalistic career, during which he has held senior editorial positions at Canada's national weekly news magazine and two leading newspapers. He's also a playwright and the author or co-author of seven books.

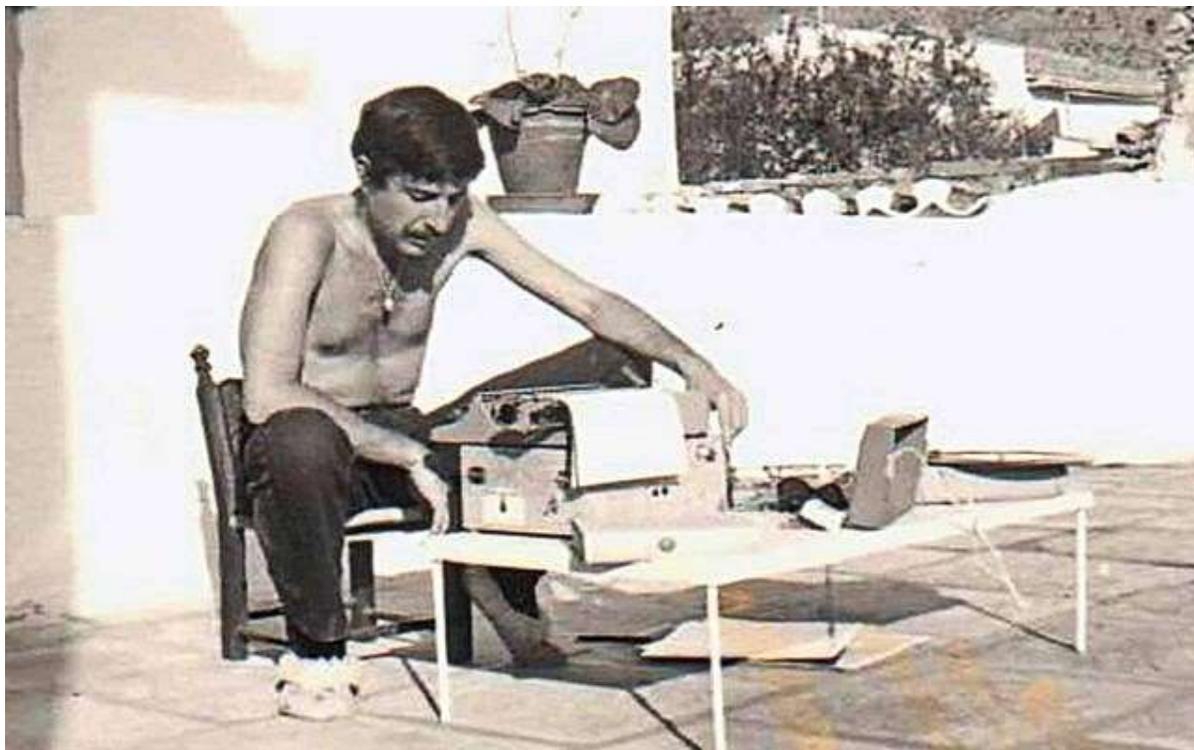
As he did in a previous oral biography of another Montreal Jewish cultural icon, the late Mordechai Richler, Posner interviews figures from his subject's life — including friends, relatives, ex-lovers, writers, musicians, back-up singers, summer camp directors and rabbis — to reveal what was behind the public persona. To keep the book flowing, Posner inserts a narrative with informative tidbits that provides a better context and historical record. Though largely

sympathetic to its subject, the book shows Cohen, warts and all, including his copious drug use and chronic philandering.

I don't want to say he was a saint. I certainly don't want to say he was a devil, but I think he was capable of encompassing aspects of both

Having interviewed so many people from Cohen's world, Posner has himself become an authority on the writer and musician.

"What I've learned is that I don't want to reduce Cohen to a simple, kind of binary character," says 73-year-old Posner, who has been told by many people that he bears a resemblance to the gentlemanly songster. "I don't want to say he was a saint. I certainly don't want to say he was a devil, but I think he was capable of encompassing aspects of both."



Leonard Cohen seen in the documentary 'Marianne & Leonard: Words of Love' (Courtesy Roadside Attractions)

Cohen's complexity was apparent in what people told Posner.

"He was a hugely complicated man, almost infallibly gracious, polite, civil, humorous and intelligent, but also had a dark side," he adds. "He was depressive. He had this kind of — I don't know if it was manic depression or bipolarism, I don't know the proper psychiatric label, but he definitely could go into a very dark place. And you wouldn't want to spend much time in his company when he was there."

It clearly was no obstacle to the many women who spent time in Cohen's company. A staggering number appear in the book, some merely cited, others speaking nostalgically of their trysts decades earlier with the man described as a "serial seducer" whose infidelity was well known to those around him.

"Although Leonard is justifiably regarded as one of the great lovers of modernity, a kind of Casanova of the late 20th century, I think his great love affair was his work," says Posner, who has three children and eight grandchildren. "At some level, as soon as he became comfortable in a relationship with a woman, it became uncomfortable, and he had to get out."

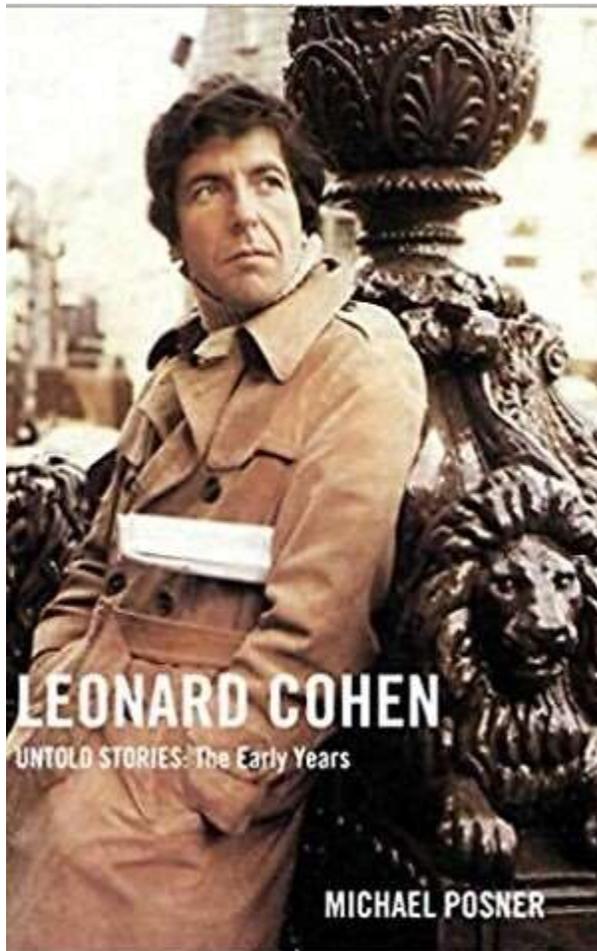


Marianne Ihlen and Leonard Cohen seen in the documentary 'Marianne & Leonard: Words of Love' (YouTube screenshot)

Another aspect that quickly emerged in interviews was the highly restless, nomadic side of Cohen, whose wanderlust was dizzying to others.

"One of the things that's been forced upon me in seeking to reconstruct his life chronologically is to try to figure out where he was at any given time, whether it be a month or a year," Posner explains. "The pace at which this guy moved around from place to place, I don't think anybody could've collected more Air Miles than him. Two, three days here, gone, two, three days there, gone. A week here, a week there, he was constantly on the move, until quite late in his life when he became more sedentary. It's true there was often a business reason, but also a psychic reason. He needed to change locations almost as if he felt trapped wherever he was, trapped emotionally, psychologically, romantically."

Posner first conceived of the book in 2007. He sent Cohen an email, seeking his cooperation but the latter politely declined. After he died, Posner resurrected the project. For the first three years, he had no publisher and spent \$35,000 from his own pocket covering travel costs to conduct in-person interviews with subjects. It was only last November that he finally secured a publisher, Simon and Schuster Canada.



The first volume consists of approximately 1,300 quotes of varying length, including many by Cohen that Posner extracted from previously published interviews or writings. Most of the people featured — some well-known, others not — are quoted multiple times throughout the book.

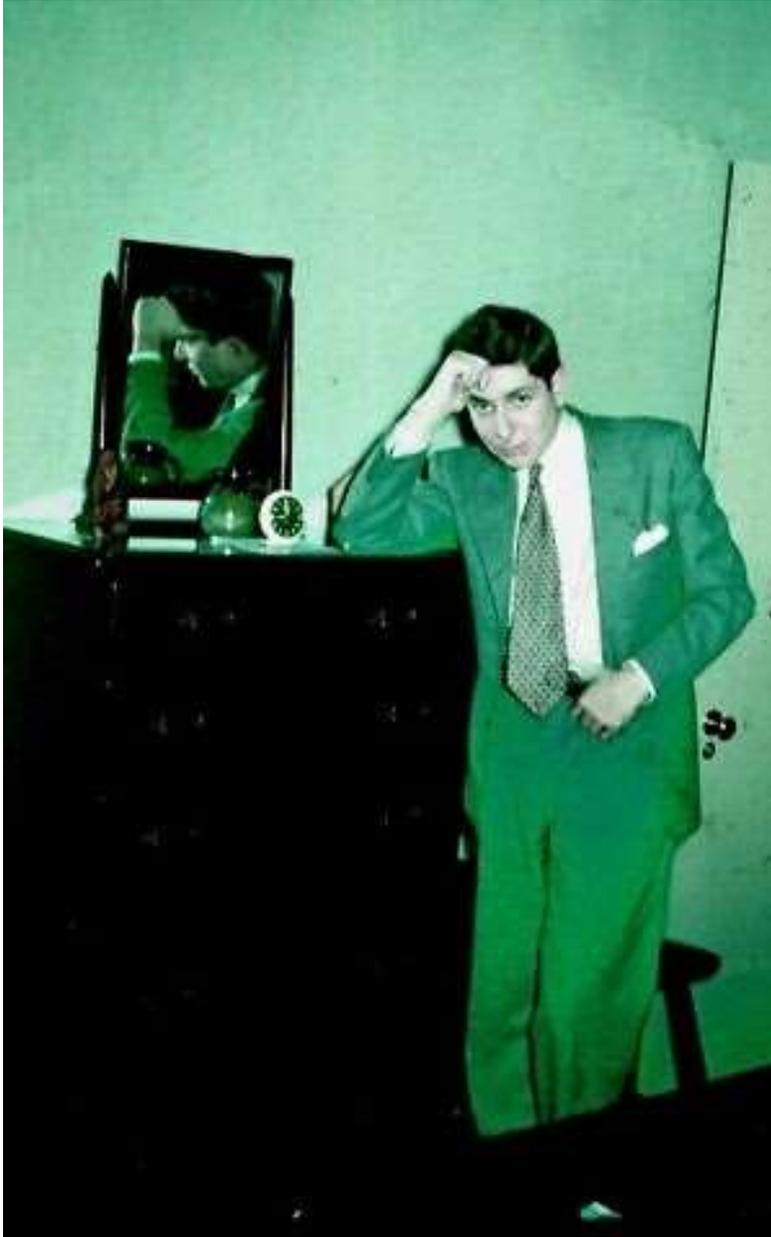
Among them are singer Judy Collins, who in late 1966, shortly after meeting Cohen in New York, was the first to record one of his songs and encouraged him to perform live; folksinger Eric Andersen to whom Cohen said that it was Andersen's song "Violets of Dawn" that inspired him to write songs himself; and Kelly Lynch, Cohen's former business manager who allegedly stole \$5 million of his money.

In 1958, at age 23, Cohen worked as a counselor at a summer camp 90 minutes north of Montreal, where one of his friends was Moishe Pripstein.

"Leonard was very quiet, clever and had a great smile," Pripstein told Posner six decades later

for the book. "Somewhat reticent, he wasn't one of the leaders, not forceful in his interactions, but very present. He didn't distinguish himself in athletics. At that time, he was noted more for his poetry, though he had his guitar and played around with it."

A few years earlier, Mark Bercovitz spent time with Cohen in Montreal while both attended McGill University and were fraternity brothers.



Leonard Cohen on a visit to his sick cousin Robert Cohen in Montreal, 1948. (Courtesy Robert Cohen)

“Leonard had his guitar and we’d sing,” Bercuvitz recalls in the book. “I remember singing ‘Tom Dooley’ with him. He was dating Freda Guttman then but was already searching, going off on different tangents. I always had the impression he wasn’t really a happy guy. He was always searching for something else. His quest for women was part of that searching. Many of us coming from less well-off families were driven to find financial success. Others, like Leonard, were free spirits.”

One late afternoon 15 years ago in Toronto, the only time their paths crossed, Posner chose not to speak to Cohen, a decision he regrets today. Although it was only a fleeting encounter, it made a lasting impact.

“I must’ve been going to do an interview at the Soho Metropolitan Hotel and he was outside in a raincoat waiting, pacing up and down,” Posner recalls. “Our eyes made contact and it was clear he knew I had recognized him as Leonard Cohen. He had this aura about him. He wasn’t a big guy, maybe 5’7”, 5’8”, yet he was larger than life. He just had that kind of presence. He was a magnetic, charismatic figure, even in those 20 seconds.”

Little did Posner know then that Cohen would become the central focus of his professional life many years later.

“Working on the book caused me to examine his work very closely, but less for pure analytical reasons than to seek connections between art and his life and who he might have been writing about,” says Posner. “Knowing better his songs and writing also allowed me to pose better questions to interviewees. As with other great writing, poetry, novels and song lyrics, when you spend time with them, you get a better sense of the enormous craft involved.”



Still of Leonard Cohen from ‘Bird on a Wire.’ (Courtesy Isolde Films)

Cohen’s spiritual longing emerged repeatedly in interviews.

“The Jewish identity is the essence of the man,” says Posner definitively. “It’s there from an early age and never really goes away. He dabbled in Scientology briefly in the 1960s and I think he basically thought there was some value in it but largely it was a scam.”

In 1973, Cohen met charismatic Zen master Joshu Sasaki Roshi, who ran an almost militaristic, disciplinarian form of Zen Buddhism in California. It led to a decades-long involvement with Roshi and Buddhism.

“There was a Buddhist dimension to the second half of Cohen’s life,” says Posner. “It was part of him but Buddhism is not really a religion and more a practice.”



Portraits of Leonard Cohen’s grandfather, Lyon Cohen, left, and great-grandfather, Lazarus Cohen, at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim. (Ben Harris/JTA)

His religious exploration took him to new places.

“Leonard also had a genuine interest in Christianity,” adds Posner. “The Christianity he was interested in though isn’t Pauline Christianity. It’s the original Jesus Christianity, Jesus the Jew Christianity, the sermon on the mount, that kind of stuff.”

He was definitely a Jew but, like many of us, he had a problematic relationship with the deity

“Those early Christians were all Jews, and they articulated a way of living and way of thinking that Leonard related to. But none of that takes anything away from his Judaism. He went through phases, like we all do. He studied kabbalah and put on tefillin [phylacteries]. He was definitely a Jew but, like many of us, he had a problematic relationship with the deity,” says Posner.

Cohen had a positive relationship with Israel which he visited many times, usually to give concerts. Posner interviewed several Israelis who knew Cohen, including singer Oshik Levi, who he spoke with in Tel Aviv in 2018 about his experience 45 years earlier.



Leonard Cohen, center, performing with Israeli singer Matti Caspi, on guitar, for Ariel Sharon, with arms crossed, and other Israeli troops in the Sinai in 1973. (Courtesy of Maariv via JTA)

When the Yom Kippur War erupted in 1973, Cohen flew to Israel in solidarity with the beleaguered Jewish state. A chance meeting with Cohen in a Tel Aviv café led Levi to convince him to join him and other musicians to perform for Israeli troops in the Sinai. After his initial trepidation, Cohen agreed and famously gave several performances for soldiers during the war. Posner is still pursuing several people in Israel who knew Cohen.



A nine-story mural of Leonard Cohen in Montreal. (Robert Sarner/Times of Israel)

Posner readily acknowledges that several key people in Cohen's life refused to be interviewed for the book, including his son, Adam, his daughter, Lorca, his manager, Robert Kory, his lifelong close friend Morton Rosengarten, and Suzanne Elrod, the mother of his children. Likewise two of his other significant romantic partners – American actress Rebecca de Mornay and French photographer Dominique Issermann. Among fellow singer-songwriters who either declined or ignored Posner's request was Bob Dylan, with whom Cohen was friendly and often compared.

The comparison came up in Posner's interview with Malka Marom, an Israeli who moved to Toronto, where she found fame in the 1960s as half of a folksinging duo.

"She and Leonard were an item," says Posner, who quotes Marom in the book on the work of Dylan and Cohen. "Dylan was the voice of his generation. You can't take that away from him. But Leonard is the voice for all time."

In 2003, Posner published his oral biography of Mordechai Richler, following the novelist's death in 2001 and after interviewing 150 people who knew him. While Richler and Cohen both

figured prominently in their native city, the former had a much more contentious relationship with Montreal's Jewish community.

“Cohen was a much less abrasive figure than Richler,” says Posner. “He was really well bred with these Edwardian manners that were reflexive and infallible. He was always, as far as I know, courteous. Whereas Richler, either because he was half-drunk or fully-drunk, would just as soon insult you to your face. He didn't stand on any kind of ceremony whereas for Leonard, ceremony was really important.”

As things stand now, the second book in Posner's Cohen series will appear next fall, followed by the final installment a year later.

When asked what his next major project will be after he's finished with Cohen, Posner [answers laconically](#), “May I live so long.”

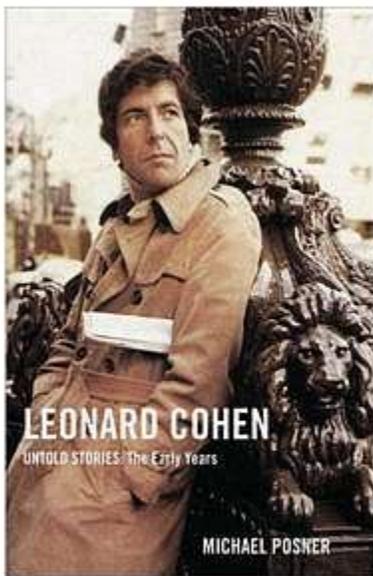
The 20 books you need to read this winter

An eclectic selection of just-published new fiction and non-fiction to get us through the nights of winter ahead

By Brian Bethune, Mike Doherty, Emily Donaldson November 27, 2020



MEMOIR/ BIOGRAPHY



Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years by Michael Posner

Early on in his oral history of Leonard Cohen, veteran Canadian journalist Michael Posner writes about Jewish scholars who were said to know the Talmud so well they could stick a pin in it and, without looking, tell you what word it had hit. Posner's book, the first of a planned trilogy, emerges from similarly obsessive study: covering the time between Cohen's childhood and his first European tour in 1970, it draws on more than 500 interviews with people who were close to him—whether for decades or just a few hours.

While there's no shortage of Cohen biographies and documentaries, Posner's book offers an impressively thorough excavation of stories, including some gems and, well, dirt. Together, his sources' various positions and perspectives create a cubist portrait of the Montreal-born icon as a young man—and simultaneously an artist, intellectual, prankster, bon vivant, workaholic and dabbler in everything from macrobiotics to Scientology to the Buddhism he would later practise. The wife of one friend recalls “gazing in awe at his profound eyes. I felt I was in the company of one of our universe's most incredible beings . . . My mind flew into the beauty of his poet's voice.” The less enthralled wife of another friend says, “I was dealing with a seducer, of men and women . . . I lost track of him after he became a star, and I'm glad I did.”

Cohen's unslakable thirst for experience—aided by charm and family money—made of his early life a pampered picaresque, and the candid tales Posner elicits and deftly assembles range from the fascinating to the exhaustively predictable. The men in Cohen's earlier life tended to be competitors, drinking buddies, hangers-on, or all three. The women were objects of lust, muses or simply unfathomable—like the refreshingly blunt Carol Zemel (who was married to yet another friend). She describes being left alone with Cohen at his apartment: “He sat there and hid from me, under a blanket, for 20 minutes, a half-hour.” We also glimpse the unsavoury, the sordid and the sad—as the friends of his on-again, off-again love, Marianne Ihlen, speak about the abortions she had at his behest.

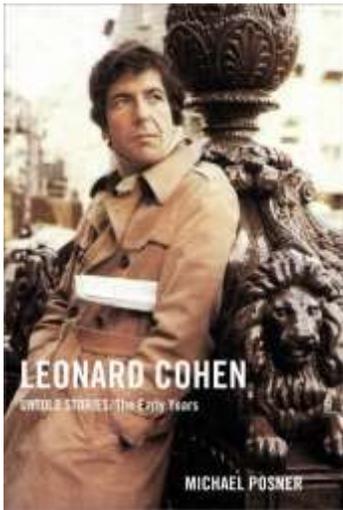
In later life, Cohen would become reflective and gracious. Here, in his long formative period, he remains elusive. His own quotes are drawn from other (mostly unattributed) sources, and his work is explored in terms of its connections with people he knew. Nonetheless, if Cohen's your man and you're his fan, you'll want this book. —**Mike Doherty**

<https://www.macleans.ca/culture/books/the-20-books-you-need-to-read-this-winter/>

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years

Michael Posner

[CBC Books](#) · Posted: Nov 26, 2020 5:16 PM ET | Last Updated: November 26



Poet, novelist, singer-songwriter, artist, prophet, icon—there has never been a figure like Leonard Cohen. He was a true giant in contemporary western culture, entertaining and inspiring people everywhere with his work. From his groundbreaking and bestselling novels, *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, to timeless songs such as "Suzanne," "Dance Me to the End of Love," and "Hallelujah," Cohen is a cherished artist. His death in 2016 was felt around the world by the many fans and followers who would miss his warmth, humour, intellect, and piercing insights.

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories chronicles the full breadth of his extraordinary life. The first of three volumes—The Early Years — follows him from his boyhood in Montreal to university, and his burgeoning literary career to the world of music, culminating with his first international tour in 1970.

Through the voices of those who knew him best—family and friends, colleagues and contemporaries, rivals, business partners, and his many lovers — the book probes deeply into both Cohen's public and private life. It also paints a portrait of an era, the social, cultural, and political revolutions that shook the 1960s.

In this revealing and entertaining first volume, bestselling author and biographer Michael Posner draws on hundreds of interviews to reach beyond the Cohen of myth and reveal the unique, complex, and compelling figure of the real man. (*From Simon & Schuster*)

Pop culture gets its due

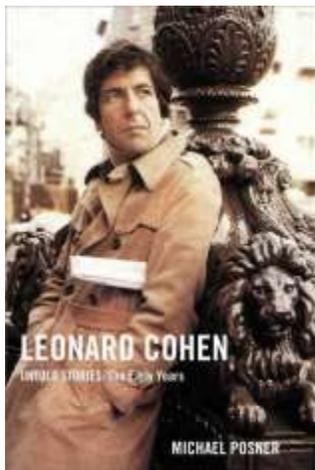
By [Deborah Dundas](#)

Books Editor

The Toronto Star

Fri., Oct. 23, 2020

Leonard Cohen, *Untold Stories: The Early Years*, by Michael Posner, Simon and Schuster



“Untold Stories” marks the first of three volumes on Cohen anticipated from this prodigious journalist. The format is interesting: Posner undertook dozens and dozens of interviews with Cohen’s relations, friends, sometimes even Cohen himself, and quotes them directly — creating a unique oral history, as if they’re in a room together, sharing memories and stories, going right back to his early life in Montreal, and even earlier, to understand the context in which he grew up. They’re linked together with a light narrative voice that gives this biography a very intimate and personal feel.



Leonard Cohen

Untold Stories: The Early Years

By: [Michael Posner](#)

Available: 2nd December 2020

ISBN: 9781982152628

Number Of Pages: 496

The extraordinary life of one of the world's greatest music and literary icons, in the words of those who knew him best.

Poet, novelist, singer-songwriter, artist, prophet, icon--there has never been a figure like Leonard Cohen. He was a true giant in contemporary western culture, entertaining and inspiring people everywhere with his work. From his groundbreaking and bestselling novels, *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*, to timeless songs such as "Suzanne," "Dance Me to the End of Love," and "Hallelujah," Cohen is a cherished artist. His death in 2016 was felt around the world by the many fans and followers who would miss his warmth, humour, intellect, and piercing insights.

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories chronicles the full breadth of his extraordinary life. The first of three volumes - The Early Years - follows him from his boyhood in Montreal to university, and his burgeoning literary career to the world of music, culminating with his first international tour in 1970.

Through the voices of those who knew him best--family and friends, colleagues and contemporaries, rivals, business partners, and his many lovers the book probes deeply into both Cohen's public and private life. It also paints a portrait of an era, the social, cultural, and political revolutions that shook the 1960s.

In this revealing and entertaining first volume, bestselling author and biographer Michael Posner draws on dozens of interviews to reach beyond the Cohen of myth and reveal the unique, complex, and compelling figure of the real man.

About the Author

Michael Posner is an award-winning writer, playwright, journalist, and the author of seven books. These include the *Mordecai Richler* biography, *The Last Honest Man*, and the *Anne Murray* biography, *All of Me*, both of which were national bestsellers. He was Washington Bureau Chief for *Maclean's* magazine, and later served as its national, foreign, and assistant managing editor. He was also managing editor of the *Financial Times of Canada* for three years. He later spent sixteen years as a senior writer with *The Globe and Mail*.

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/leonard-cohen-michael-posner/book/9781982152628.html>

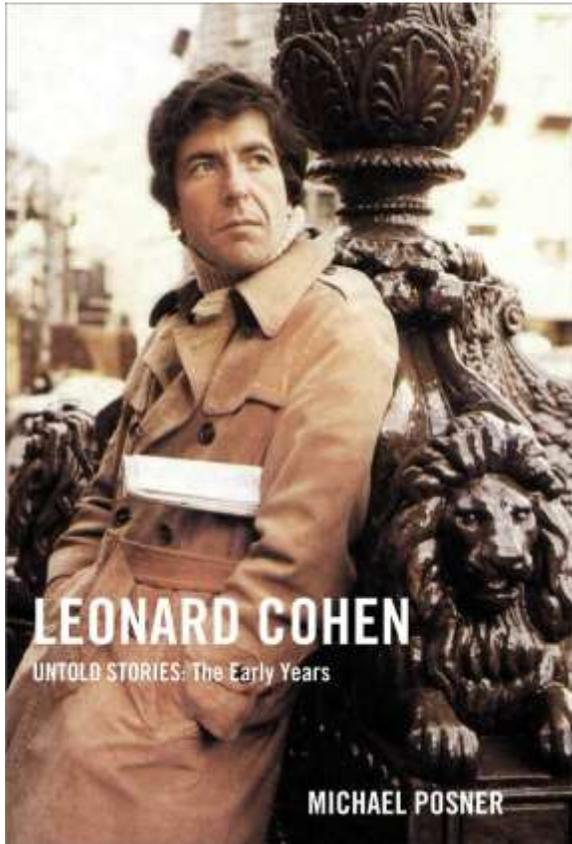
Best music books of 2020 review: From the Beatles and Leonard Cohen to the Kanneh-Masons and Skin

Not sure what to give music-obsessives this Christmas? *Jochan Embley* is on hand to help fine tune your selection



By Jochan Embley

**Leonard Cohen — Untold Stories: The Early Years by Michael Posner
(Simon and Schuster, £25)**



(Simon&Schuster)

Leonard Cohen’s posthumous album in 2019 proved he still had something profound to say, even in death. This book likewise confirms that hundreds of others have their own tales to tell about the master songwriter. The first of three volumes, it covers his early life via a myriad of fascinating interviewees, from rabbis to lovers.

Best for: candid storytelling.

Give it to: anyone who misses Cohen.

Leonard Cohen (drinking) with Marianne Ihlen (left, with pram) and friends on Hydra.



WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

- Cohen temporarily went blind in the middle of a Montreal street after taking too much opium with on-the-lam Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi.
- In 1966, he was considered as the presenter of a TV public affairs show; he turned down the chance to become Canada's Melvyn Bragg.
- Asked how he was so thin by his poet friend Henry Moscovitch in 1965, Cohen replied: "Henry, you'd be thin too if you lived on seaweed and amphetamines."

Various positions

Eyewitness accounts of the man and his myth make up a sprawling oral history. By **Victoria Segal**.

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years

★★★★★

Michael Posner

SIMON & SCHUSTER. £25

IN 1965, Leonard Cohen introduced fellow Canadian poet Phyllis Webb to pot before taking her out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Montreal. "He was chattering away," recalls Webb, "and said 'aren't I being brilliant?' And I said, 'No.'"

As the first instalment of Michael Posner's monumental three-volume oral history makes clear, "no" wasn't a word that Cohen was accustomed to hearing. The ladies' man who inhabits these pages is very much alive, whether "hypnotising" his family's maid to take off her clothes or instructing young student Madeleine Poulin to appear at midnight on the balcony of her room at Marianapolis College, an institution run by the Sisters Of The Congregation Of Notre-Dame. ("Boy, that's really stepping inside his own myth, isn't it?" remarks his friend Dennis Lee). Constructed from over 500 interviews with both inner-circle intimates and passing ships, the book is equally promiscuous, unable

to turn down the promise of a quick recollection, no matter how shallow and meaningless.

Yet this writhing mass of eyewitness testimony isn't without its gratifications, vividly exposing just how much life Cohen lived before he decided to make the move from poet and novelist to singer-songwriter. Not every memory is capable of offering up his psyche on a silver platter, but as the anecdotes accumulate up until 1970, they build a compelling picture of the worlds around him — affluent Montreal suburbia, Canadian Jewish summer camps, beatnik coffeehouses, jetset bohemia — grounding his myth in solid context, enriching it with casual detail. Cohen partly turned to music after realising he would struggle to make a living as a poet; a friend's ostensibly mundane observation that Cohen would shun the cheaper, more distant airport parking for the closer option suddenly offers a sharp sliver of insight into his motives.

After a careful account of his childhood, from his background in "Jewish aristocracy" to his volatile relationship with his Russian mother, Masha, friends and acquaintances trace Cohen's steep trajectory away from potential futures as a solicitor (he lasted half a term at law school) or grandee of the family clothing firm. His poetry, says friend and artist Vera Frenkel, "awoke empathy. Poor man. The women lined up to comfort. He did that very well." In 1959, he headed to London, then on to the

proto-hippy idyll of Hydra, the Greek island where he started his turbulent eight-year relationship with Marianne Ihlen. Cohen might be the central character — scrawling "I change I am the same" in gold on the whitewashed walls of his house during an acid trip, coming close to collapse as he writes his 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers* under blazing sun, nursed back to health by a housekeeper with nettle soup — but the milieu around him is equally febrile, the living easy, the morals equally so. "The '60s were dangerous times for relationships," says writer and long-time friend Aviva Layton, "and Greek Islands were quadruply dangerous." Even back in Montreal, recalls another girlfriend, it was "like a pyjama party. Everybody was doing everyone else."

There is an element of boho soap opera to Leonard Cohen, *Untold Stories*, the format allowing for wildly unfounded speculation — gossip over whether he ever spent time in a

mental institution, for example. Some recount casual cruelties and romantic recklessness; others saw Cohen as a hero even before he'd written a word. Yet as with any good oral history, the stories and opinions slowly coalesce like pointillist dots, shifting into a complex portrait of a man stepping into his myth, becoming brilliant.

"The '60s were dangerous times for relationships."

AVIVA LAYTON

ZED

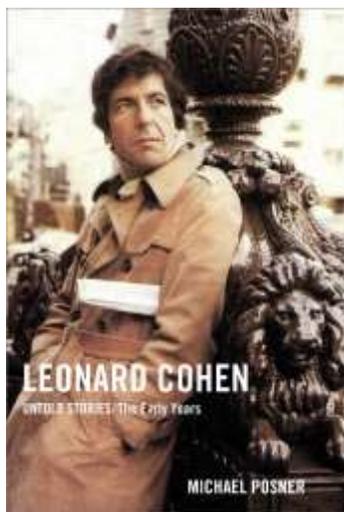
THE ZOOMER > BOOK CLUB

The Gift of Books: Cultural Studies

From Enya to the Beatles, Leonard Cohen and Richard Avedon, these culture tomes check all the gift boxes. /

BY NATHALIE ATKINSON / DECEMBER 16TH, 2020

For the culture vultures who are plugged in to the zeitgeist and have already devoured every think piece on *The Queen's Gambit*, here are some books about the usual pop-culture suspects plus a few that zig



LEONARD COHEN, UNTOLD STORIES: THE EARLY YEARS by Michael Posner

This is the first installment of a three-book chronicle by Posner, the Canadian entertainment journalist who has authored award-winning bios on both Mordecai Richler and Anne Murray. It covers the Canadian troubadour's privileged Montreal childhood and rejection of law and the family business up to his first major tour in 1970.

<https://www.everythingzoomer.com/zed-book-club/2020/12/16/the-gift-of-books-cultural-studies/>

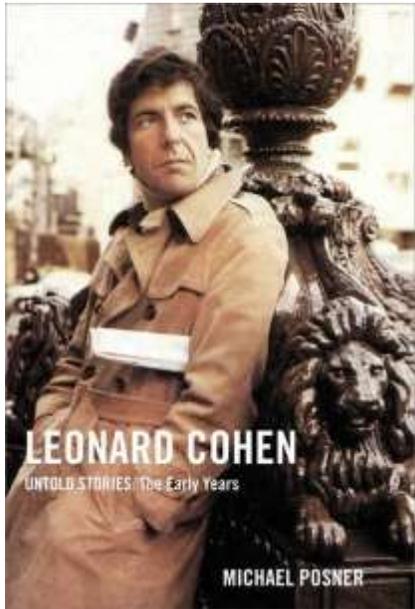
Fifteen music books that struck a chord in 2020

Brad Wheeler

Published December 21, 2020

One part of the music industry that didn't shut down this year was the publishing of books on music and musicians, including everything from a Mariah Carey tell-some (but not all) to an erudite exploration of German composer Richard Wagner's impact on the modern world. What follows is a list of memorable music books that hit the right note in 2020.

Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years, Michael Posner (Simon & Schuster)



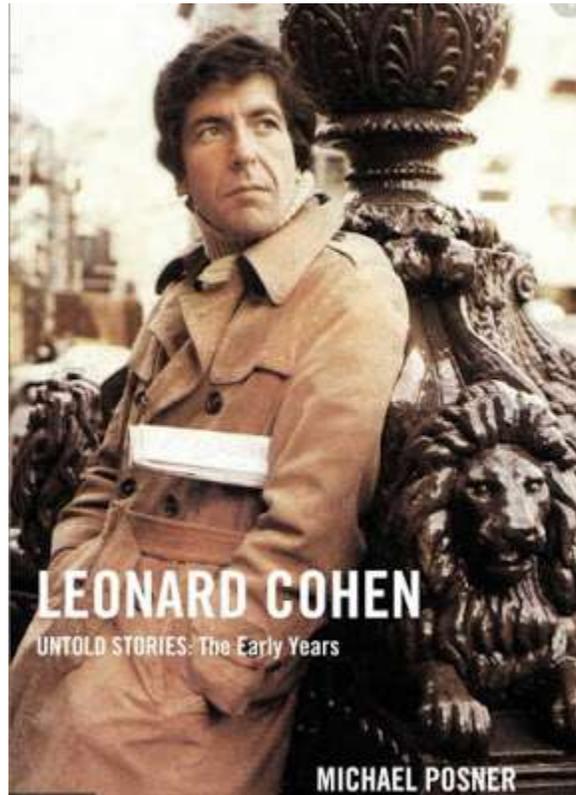
A more poetic title for this doggedly researched oral history of Leonard Cohen's early years would be *The Birth of a Ladies Man*. The first entry in a three-volume series follows the poet-songwriter from his boyhood in Montreal to his first international tour in 1970. Anecdotes abound – when asked why he was so skinny, a young Cohen replied: “You’d be thin too if you lived on seaweed and amphetamines.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/article-fifteen-music-books-that-struck-a-chord-in-2020/>

KEN MCGOOGAN
Canada, Scotland, Arctic

**Now they're coming for
Leonard Cohen**

November 30, 2020



A Facebook friend who teaches at university recently received a cancel-culture email after he included Leonard Cohen in a syllabus. Yup. He spared us several "marvelous rhetorical peaks" but quoted the conclusion, which urged him to

"please re-evaluate your life choices before spreading these opinions in the name of education." When I read this, I chanced to be relishing *LEONARD COHEN: Untold Stories/ The Early Years*, a remarkable oral biography by Michael Posner. Once you get used to the approach, all these short fragments, different voices, diverse opinions, the book is a can't-put-it-down page-turner. As an ex-Montrealer, I've been reading and listening to Cohen and his chroniclers since *The Favorite Game*. Even so, I learned a lot from this new book. I didn't realize, for example, how close Cohen came to abandoning his incipient music career to become a television host. And, ridiculous as it sounds, I thrilled to discover that on February 20, 1966, when I caught Bob Dylan in concert at Montreal's Place des Arts, Leonard and Irving Layton were somewhere in the audience. Sure, Cohen came from a privileged background -- but he recognized that and was remarkably generous. OK, he lived an extreme life -- lots of women, lots of drugs. But he came of age in the 1960s. The Sixties, people! You can't rightly separate any individual from his or her times -- not to moralize and judge. *Beautiful Losers*? As Dennis Lee observes, "A non-Indigenous who wrote (Kateri Tekakwitha) as Leonard did would get torched today." Right. And fair enough. But today is not the yesterday of fifty-five years ago. No *Beautiful Losers*, no Buffy Ste. Marie doing *Magic is Alive*. And Ste. Marie herself notes that in 1966, "Nobody knew who who Kateri was. Indigenous people didn't know who she was So Leonard shone a light on her for a huge audience." With this first of three volumes, Posner has done Cohen aficionados a terrific service. While thinking about volume two, I find myself harking back to [the night Leonard Cohen taught me that Magic Is Alive.](https://kenmcgoogan.blogspot.com/2020/11/now-theyre-coming-for-leonard-cohen.html?m=1)

<https://kenmcgoogan.blogspot.com/2020/11/now-theyre-coming-for-leonard-cohen.html?m=1>