

COHEN'S DEMOCRACY

WORDS **Tim Footman**

“I love the country but I can’t stand the scene,” he laments. It is not what America stands for that turns him off, but the persistent inability of its inhabitants – himself included, we assume – to live up to those ideals.

Photo **Edward Gajdel**



Since rock music came into being in the mid-1950s, it has expressed, to a greater or lesser degree, support for freedom, rebellion, youth, democracy. The success of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and the other pioneers of the genre coincided with the appearance of the teenager as a socio-economic force, and also the first rumblings of what would become known as the permissive society. When the battle lines of the 1960s were drawn, musicians knew to which side they belonged, for civil rights, against the Vietnam war; a mindset that continued into subsequent decades, as the causes celebres shifted to apartheid and later, the Iraq conflict.

Of course, there were many musicians who refrained from explicit political commitment, and a few, very few who bucked the trend by appearing to question the benefits of freedom and democracy; one thinks of David Bowie’s mid-70s ramblings about the wonders of fascism.

Leonard Cohen’s place in this continuum is hard to identify. In the 1960s, he became identified with the folk-protest movement that had coalesced around Bob Dylan, but this is misleading. Having achieved critical acclaim as a poet and novelist for the first decade of his career, his motivation to begin a musical career was entirely pragmatic; it was the only way he could make a decent living from his writing.

Indeed, while American youth was falling under the spell of Dylan and his acolytes, Cohen had been beyond his influence, spending several years on the Greek island of Hydra, with his only musical accompaniment being a few Ray Charles records and the tightly controlled playlists of US forces radio. He only really discovered Dylan in 1966, when he first heard (and enjoyed) the *Bringing It All Back Home* album, which had been released the previous year. By this stage, Dylan’s songs of protest and righteousness were already being edged out by more allusive, almost surreal compositions, and while Cohen’s performing style did owe something to Dylan’s, he never wrote political anthems along the lines of ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ or ‘With God On Our Side’. Cohen’s lyrics were mostly about love and

lust, with a healthy side order of religion. He made superficial political nods in the right direction: one of his earliest musical appearances, in 1967, was at an anti-nuclear benefit concert; and at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970, he made the egalitarian noises about public ownership of the land. But he was generally averse to what he saw as political gestures; he politely wafted away requests from his more ideologically committed friends that he should give up his house in Greece as a protest against the US-backed junta that had ruled the country since 1967. Instead, he preferred to get his education in a more hands-on manner. As early as 1961, he had visited Cuba, narrowly avoiding the Bay of Pigs invasion; and he went to Israel during the Yom Kippur war of 1973.

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It was not until 1987 that Cohen really brought together his songwriting craft and his political instincts, on ‘First We Take Manhattan’, written for Jennifer Warnes’ *Famous Blue Raincoat* album, and subsequently recorded by Cohen himself on *I’m Your Man* (1988). It was partly inspired by the German terrorist group the Red Army Faction (aka the Baader-Meinhof Gang), and Cohen’s observation that political violence can be as much a product of personal character flaws as of ideological commitment.

Cohen’s next album, *The Future* (1992) carried on the political themes of its predecessor. Events had overtaken him; his new songs needed to take into account the crushing of political protests in Tiananmen Square in June 1989; the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of that year; and the LA riots of April 1992, which Cohen

watched from his balcony while the album was being recorded. All these events and more came together to influence the song 'Democracy'.

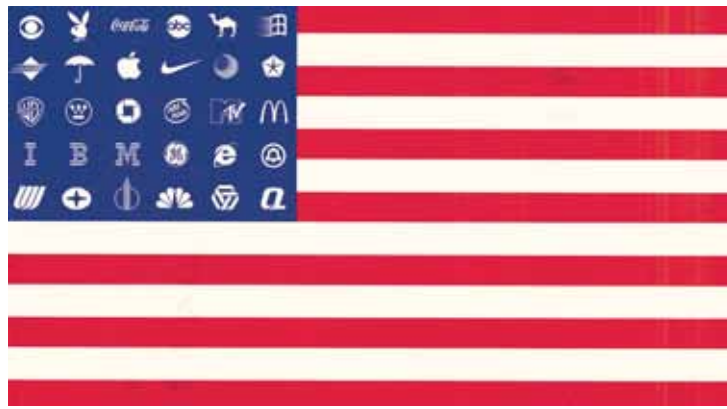
“Give me back the Berlin Wall,” he beseeched, “Give me Stalin and Saint Paul.”

The most cursory glance at the lyrics tells us that Cohen is dealing in paradox, in irony, in sarcasm. “Democracy is coming to the USA”, is his growly refrain. But surely the USA is a democracy? What, after all, was the American Revolution about, if it didn't involve pushing aside a distant, exploitative monarchy, in favour of elected representatives and the freedoms defined in the Constitution? The USA has democracy to spare – which is why they're so keen to export it.

But Cohen is not only suggesting that democracy is arriving in the USA more than two centuries late; in his view, it's little more than an illusion anyway. “It's coming from the feel that this ain't exactly real,” he says, “or it's real, but it ain't exactly there.” The American electoral process has been reduced to sound bites and ad breaks, like sneakers or burgers or haemorrhoid lotion; we are in the realm of Buadrillard's simulacrum, of Debord's Society of the Spectacle. The choice between Bush and Clinton (1992 was an election year) is no more substantial or significant than a choice between Nike and Adidas. In a torrent of similes that juxtapose religion and commerce and disillusionment, Cohen depicts a land that has lost its way, and is descending into self-created chaos. The democracy he describes is not the polite model of fair elections and free speech; he takes the word back to its Greek roots, rule by the mob, rule by the people he could see setting fire to Korean grocery stores, the form of government that so profoundly troubled Plato.

There is added piquancy, of course, in the fact that Cohen, notwithstanding his residency in California, has never actually been an American citizen. Swivel-eyed rednecks might tell him to love it or leave it and go back north where he came from, but he's got the perfect response: “I love the country but I can't stand the scene,” he laments. It is not what America stands for that turns him off, but the persistent inability of its inhabitants – himself included, we assume – to live up to those ideals.

That contrast between what is and what should be is encapsulated by Cohen's appropriation of lines from one of America's beloved poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The original poem 'O Ship of State' was an exhortation to the relatively young nation to carry on despite its internal differences, and that any apparent obstacle can be overcome: “Fear not each sudden sound and shock, / 'Tis of the wave and not the rock...” Cohen would have been aware of the irony; Longfellow's poem was written in 1850, and within little more than a decade, the nascent democracy would come close to tearing itself apart. They were right first time; those shocks really were rocks after all. The assumption at the time was that, however many layers of irony Cohen was slathering onto his song, deep down he wanted democracy to triumph in the USA, and everywhere else. The truth



Corporate American Flag, Shi-Zhe Yun

was slightly more complex. The title track of *The Future* appears to be a repudiation of democracy, of freedom, of all the things that earnest young people with acoustic guitars were demanding in the 1960s. Most of Cohen's contemporaries would have agreed that the collapse of the Soviet bloc was essentially a good thing, but he foresaw the troubles that untrammelled freedom might bring, and he understood the need for authority, whether it came from Marx or the Bible. “Give me back the Berlin Wall,” he beseeched, “Give me Stalin and Saint Paul.” Again, he's being ironic, but he could see that the collapse of the Wall in 1989 simply replaced one set of problems with another.

Back in the Land of the Free, the difficulty was not that the USA didn't have democracy, but that its inhabitants seemed unable to cope with it, responding to the challenge either with mob violence or TV-addled apathy. A few months after the album's release, Cohen seemed content to identify himself as a prophet of despondency, contemplating with sorrow the decadence into which his adopted home had fallen. “A catastrophe has taken place, but now we're waiting for the flood,” he said. “And if the butcher shop isn't exactly in our backyards or living rooms, then it's certainly down the street. That whiff of homicide and destruction is in one's psyche now... I say this now and nobody raises an eyebrow. But I've been saying it for a long time. They're just not raising their eyebrows so high anymore.”

By 1994, he was surveying contemporary America with the jaundiced eye of an authoritarian moralist, expressing views that seemed to chime more with right-wing Republicans than with the sax-playing, draft-avoiding, non-inhaling incumbent of the White House; indeed, his proposed solutions sailed uncomfortably close to the sort of fascism that David Bowie had proposed two decades earlier. “They should put boys and girls into uniform,” Cohen declared in a British magazine interview. “There should be universal North American conscription again. It's us against drugs. If you don't understand that, you're gonna lose.” At this stage, he was spending most of his time in a Zen Buddhist retreat on Mount Baldy, California, a state of affairs that necessitated the subjugation of the self to obedience, ritual and three o'clock wake-up calls. Whether or not democracy was coming, and what form it might take, Leonard Cohen was having none of it.

Tim Footman is the author of 'Leonard Cohen: Hallelujah', Chrome Dreams, 2009.



"DEMOCRACY"

**It's coming to America first,
the cradle of the best and of the worst.
It's here they got the range
and the machinery for change
and it's here they got the spiritual thirst.
It's here the family's broken
and it's here the lonely say
that the heart has got to open
in a fundamental way:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.**