



A new book details a little-known moment when the musician journeyed, unsanctioned, to a war zone to play for Israel's troops. He's been a beloved figure there ever since *By Kim Hughes*

LEONARD LOVE & WAR

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG POET Cohen, in 1967

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PHOTOGRAPHY, JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES (COHEN); WILLIAM KAREL/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND)

PHOTOGRAPHY, YAAKOVI DORON (SOLDIERS); YAGIL HENKIN/IMAGES OF ISRAEL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (CONCERT)

IT SEEMS unlikely that a life chronicled as exhaustively as Leonard Cohen's could yield a riveting untold chapter almost six years after the singer-poet's death at 82.

In *Who By Fire: War, Atonement, and the Resurrection of Leonard Cohen*, Canadian-

Israeli journalist and author Matti Friedman provides a richly detailed account of the late musician's momentous and very risky concert tour for soldiers serving on the front lines of the 1973 Yom Kippur War as they fought Soviet-backed Egyptian and Syrian forces over the Israeli-occupied Sinai peninsula, which the Israelis had wrested from Egypt during the Six Day War of 1967.

Hastily organized and not sanctioned by the Israeli army, Cohen's desert tour didn't get much coverage from local or international media. Friedman says it was relegated to a "footnote" in Cohen's career, although it was, in fact, "a crucial moment both for Cohen and for people in Israel.

"[Its impact] was awful, incredible, unforgettable and immortal," Friedman says in an interview from Jerusalem. "I am lucky no one noticed it until now."

Its significance registered on Friedman's radar in 2009, when 50,000 people showed up for a Cohen concert in Tel Aviv. "It was his last reunion with Israel. He'd turned his back on the crowd, retreating to the monastery on [California's] Mt. Baldy [in the '90s], and then, upon discovering that his manager had stolen his savings, came out to tour for the first time in fifteen years," Friedman writes. "Just like Cohen's 1972 tour [when he played Europe and Israel in April, after 1971's *Songs of Love and Hate*], this one ended in Israel."

Unlike 1972, Cohen – born into an Orthodox Jewish family in Montreal in 1934 – was in his 70s. He was also a globally revered, bona fide pop icon.



In concert in Ramat Gan, Israel, 2009; (above) Cohen serenades Israeli troops, 1973.

"The [Tel Aviv] concert went down as one of the best ever held here, and people speak of it in almost religious terms," says Friedman, 44, who was raised in Toronto. "I didn't appreciate the extent to which Cohen remains a music god in Israel, like Canada. But people remembered that during one of the darkest moments in Israel's history, Cohen showed up."

EVEN IF the backstory was begging to be told, it wasn't easy. For one thing, Cohen didn't detail it in his notebooks, which Friedman flew to Los Angeles to read. He had to piece together the narrative through interviews with those who saw Cohen play or who had performed in his local pick-up bands; through photographs snapped by soldiers at the shows (many included in *Who By Fire*);

and through a deep dive into the archives of his publisher, McClelland & Stewart, at the McMaster University library in Hamilton, Ont. At McMaster, Friedman uncovered a 45-page manuscript, housed in a box, that Cohen typed on the Greek island of Hydra (where he lived with his partner, Suzanne Elrod, and their son, Adam), shortly after he got back from Israel.

"The entire document is too long to print in full," Friedman writes, "so I've taken the liberty – with great trepidation – of abridging the text to distill the narrative of his journey to Sinai."

Even so, the manuscript is cryptic and impressionistic. It is also, as Friedman writes, "often vivid and obscene. The way he writes about women, and the way he related to them, was part of the style of ▶



MAN ON A WIRE
Cohen in London, 1992;
(below) troops in Sinai, October, 1973



“... during one of the darkest moments in Israel’s history, Cohen showed up”

those days, but it is out of step with our own times.”

In the book, Friedman notes that the 39-year-old poet, “the one who travelled to Sinai and who typed this manuscript, is in the grip of anger and urges. He’s trying to lose himself with women and drugs. He’s a harder character to love.”

Friedman speculates Cohen’s reticence about documenting the tour might stem from the complex reasons for undertaking it. Facing 40, Cohen was apparently unhappy at home and feeling washed up, career-wise. The stakes were high.

“I think the tour was very significant, but also disturbing, upsetting,

exhilarating, and he didn’t really know how to talk about it,” Friedman says. “He never offered a journalistic account of what happened. Maybe he thought that would reduce his work; he wanted to channel the essence of the experience into art. And I think he didn’t want to be seen as being on one side of a fraught political issue.”

Friedman also suspects performing for soldiers might have been an afterthought. Cohen, he writes, arrived in Israel without a guitar, and told some people he wanted to work on a kibbutz like other foreigners had done in 1967, picking oranges, for example, so men on the communal farms could join the war. “There are hints in the manu-

script that he wanted a place to start again, and he thought that might happen here,” Friedman says. “But I don’t think he had a concrete plan of how he was going to go about it. It just kind of came together as if by magic.”

INDEED, COHEN’S grandest artistic achievements were yet to come, which makes the dangers he faced during the Yom Kippur War even more heart-stopping. “This wasn’t like Bob Hope playing to troops on bases,” Friedman says, alluding to the famed American USO tours.

It’s unclear exactly how many shows Cohen performed in 1973; Friedman speculates it was dozens. But their impact on the soldiers who saw them, many quoted in Friedman’s book, was incalculable.

He speaks to a grizzled former field commander, Amatzia Chen – known as Patzi to his soldiers – who saw Cohen play.

“What touched me very deeply was this Jew hunched over a guitar, sitting quietly and playing for us,” Patzi, now in his 80s, tells Friedman. “I asked who he was and someone said he was from Canada or God knows where, a Jew who came to raise the spirit of the fighters. It was Leonard Cohen. Since then, he has a corner of my heart.”

“Officially, the tour never happened,” Friedman says. “Everything was so chaotic and there was such disarray in the army that no one thought to write down who came and where they went. I tried to track down a list, but none seems to exist.”

And what would Cohen have made of *Who By Fire*? “I constantly ask myself that question,” Friedman laughs, adding that Cohen’s last manager, Robert Kory, who runs the Cohen estate and knew the musician well, “thought I got it right. So, I hope, somewhere, Cohen is smiling.

“Even if he wouldn’t have signed off on every word, I hope he would respect my attempt to understand the soul of a great artist at a crucial moment in his life.”

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