



First We Take the Main

Leonard Cohen's Montreal—through the eyes of his lifelong friend

BY CHRISTINE LANGLOIS

“Leonard Cohen was born in Montreal in 1934.” For the past 50 years, every album liner note and book-jacket cover from the famous artist has included some version of this phrase. Despite decades lived far away (Los Angeles, Greece, a Buddhist monastery in California), Cohen has returned regularly to the city of his birth, to a small three-storey row house he bought for \$7,000 in the 1970s.

Cohen's home is sparsely decorated with antiques from his childhood home. White curtains hang across the doorways. Living lightly has always been his mantra—“voluptuous simplicity,” as he calls it. Even the bath-

room off the kitchen still holds the place's original claw-foot tub.

Cap in place, wool scarf wrapped around his neck to protect against winter chills, he talks about how he uses the space; how he liked having the bathroom close to the kitchen so he could keep an eye on bathing children when his two, Adam and Lorca, were young; how many songs he has written sitting at the kitchen table.

Back in March 2006, when I visited, Cohen was preparing for a concert tour that was about to take him around the globe once more. His one regret? He wished he didn't have to leave his beloved Montreal for so long.

PHOTO: JEAN-FRANCOIS BÉRUBÉ

When I asked him to explain his lifelong connection to *la belle ville*, he told me, without a hint of his trademark irony, “I just love it. How do you describe ‘love’?”

A funny answer coming from a man who has been writing and singing about the mysteries of love for more than 50 years. But if Cohen can’t describe his love for Montreal, who can?

Mort Rosengarten can.

That winter day in 2006, Rosengarten was also there, paying Cohen a visit. The two, it turns out, have been close friends since they were schoolboys together in the well-to-do neighbourhood of Westmount. Watching the two old men laugh and kibitz over cherry Danishes and strong coffee at Cohen’s battered pine table—while Cohen’s partner, Anjani Thomas, looked on with a smile—one couldn’t

miss the affection and shared sense of humour.

What better way to gain perspective on Cohen’s love affair with Montreal, I wondered, than to see the city through the eyes of a childhood friend?

Rosengarten has been there with Cohen through it all: Together they moved out of their parents’ houses and went to local universities; they ex-

changed the traditional world

of their childhood for the free-spirited world of artists; Rosengarten became a sculptor and was at the jazz parlour Dunn’s Birdland when Cohen first began reading his poetry.

The character Kranz in Cohen’s first novel, *The Favourite Game*, was loosely modelled on Rosengarten. The two co-owned an art gallery, until it was destroyed in a fire, and still live around the corner from

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Cohen has called the Plateau area near Parc du Portugal “home” for over 30 years.



Some of Cohen’s old haunts (from left): Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours and The Main deli on Blvd. St-Laurent.

each other in the trendy Plateau neighbourhood. And in spite of their different career paths, they maintain a deep friendship.

I rap on Rosengarten’s row-house

door. Like Cohen, he owns a tiny place near picturesque Parc du Portugal, built in the 1850s in what was originally the village of St-Jean Baptiste. The narrow, historic street is a jumble of old and new, gentrified homes pressed up against originals like Rosengarten’s. Inside, his place is quirky and charming—one large room with original pine floors, a single bed, a bathtub out in the open along one wall (plumbing was a late addition). He and Cohen bought the place in the early ’70s, with Cohen taking the upstairs apartment and Rosengarten the downstairs. (A year later, Cohen bought his current home.)

The two Westmount boys moved to this working-class area for its inexpensive housing, but soon a wave of writ-

ers, musicians and artists followed, drawn by the cheap accommodations and an increasingly lively club scene. Over the decades, the music has changed but the vibe of the Plateau neighbourhood—with its rich streetscape of sidewalk cafés, clubs and boutiques interspersed with aging factories—has stayed the same.

Walking through pouring rain, Rosengarten and I stop for lunch at The Main, his and Cohen’s favourite deli. (Mostly vegetarian, Cohen indulges on occasion.) Located on Boulevard St. Laurent—the street known as the Main—the place has purple fake-leather booths and a friendly waitress who greets customers with equal ease in English and French. She’s well acquainted with Rosengarten’s usual order: “a cold, medium-fat sandwich.” The staff is a microcosm of the street itself. The original wave of immigration that brought Jewish newcomers to the area, starting around the turn of

(ABOVE LEFT) P. NARAYAN/MAXX IMAGES; (OPPOSITE) PHILIPPTCHENKO/IMEGAPRESS.CA

the previous century, was eventually followed by influxes of Portuguese and, more recently, Latin Americans and Southeast Asians. And so, while owner Peter Vavaro isn't Jewish, he's been making the quintessential Jewish dish for 30 years using a secret recipe.

A wall of cartoons of famous Montrealers who have visited the establishment includes a drawing of Cohen. Earlier, Cohen had told me something he appreciates about Montreal: When he ventures out for an espresso or a sandwich on the Main, he's free to make his way without fanfare. Many of the young people rushing past don't recognize him, but those who do, don't intrude. "I can see it in their eyes," he explained. "They're recalling an experience they've had with my work." Little would they guess that many versions of the songs that mean so much to them were first scribbled in a small home nearby.

Rosengarten and I drive up Mount Royal—the treed mountain at Montreal's heart—and across the summit to Westmount. With large, stately homes set back off tree-lined streets, the area is a sharp contrast to the frowzy mélange that is the Plateau. Rosengarten cruises past his old home—a large greystone—and then past Cohen's, a slightly more modest brick house with a white veranda that backs onto a park.

With a mischievous grin, Rosengarten tells me the only place in the neighbourhood that holds fond memories from his Jewish boyhood is St. Joseph's Oratory, the massive Catholic basilica

built to honour Brother André, the priest credited with the ability to perform miraculous healings. It's where he and Cohen hung out in their late teens. A small restaurant attached to the oratory was the only place within walking distance of their homes that they could duck away to for a coffee and a smoke.

Coincidentally, just weeks after my guided tour, Cohen's anthem, "Hallelujah"—with its potent lyrics about sexual awakening, religious searching and romance gone wrong—hit No. 1 on the U.K. charts. I couldn't help thinking about the Montreal of Cohen's early years, the Montreal that threw off the strictures of the Catholic Church and embraced the sweeping changes—sexual and otherwise—of the '60s.

As we drive east to Old Montreal, Rosengarten speaks of his and Cohen's young-artist days spent exploring the historic port, and of their eagerness to leave Westmount behind. He parks, and we walk along cobblestones to Rue St-Paul, near the waterfront.

With the low-slung stone buildings and boutique hotels, the area is now a well-preserved tourist destination. But on this wet mid-week afternoon, few tourists are around. Rosengarten describes the scene as it would have been in the early '50s, when he was a young man. The bars were raucous end-of-the-line watering holes for longshoremen and sailors from around the world, and for young artists escaping the confines of prim upbringings. Closing time was officially 3 a.m., but, he remem-

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bers, the last shows in bars and cabarets began at four. As Cohen sang in "Closing Time" on his album *The Future*:

And it's partner found, it's partner lost.

And it's hell to pay when the fiddler stops: It's closing time.

We arrive at the last stop of the day, Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours (Our Lady of Good Hope), near which Suzanne Verdal, who inspired the song "Suzanne," once had an apartment. The venerable chapel, built in 1675, features a well-preserved wooden tower topped with the Virgin Mary, her arms outstretched, but still has a view of the wide St. Lawrence. Peeking inside to see gleaming brass and stained glass windows depicting dying saints, snippets of Cohen's song play in my head:

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river...

And she feeds you tea and oranges That come all the way from China...

And Jesus was a sailor

When he walked upon the water.

And he spent a long time watching From his lonely wooden tower.

Cohen wrote the song in Montreal in the '60s, and Judy Collins's rendition catapulted him from a struggling novelist into a songwriter in the big leagues with Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell.

On his current concert tour, Cohen sings "Suzanne" most nights, as the second number in the second set. And, as if in celebration of the city that inspired the song, and of the man who's forever inspired by his city, the crowd responds with rapturous applause. ■

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