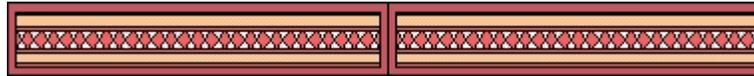




**I stumbled out of bed.
I got ready for the struggle.
I smoked a cigarette,
and I tightened up my gut.
I said, This can't be me,
must be my double.
And I can't forget
I can't forget
I can't forget
but I don't remember what.**

*I Can't Forget
I'm Your Man*



The following article is from *Poetry Commotion*, June 18, 1988.

**As a New Generation Discovers
Leonard Cohen's Dark Humour
Kris Kirk Ruffles the
Great Man's Back Pages**

By Kris Kirk

"The American attitude to Leonard Cohen is that I don't know how to

sing -- 'These are great songs, sure is sad somebody else ain't singing 'em' - and that I'm marginal, totally outside the mainstream. It may finally be changing with this album, who knows? But I'm lucky I've always had a modest audience in Europe, otherwise I'd really be out of luck."

Leonard Cohen chuckles. He chuckles a lot. Like his latest *I'm Your Man* album - with its famed "Lenny eats a banana" cover and its declaration (in "Tower of Song") that "I was born with the gift of a golden voice" - the so-called master of gloom is dead droll, particularly when he's sending himself up. "I agree this album's probably my best so far," he growls, lighting up yet another fag. "I think maybe I'm beginning to get the hang of it now."

After how long?

"Oh, after 20-odd years..."

With a sell-out European tour culminating in a packed-to-the-gills additional third gig at the Royal Albert Hall, the rehabilitation -- resurrection from the dead -- of Cohen proceeds apace. So quintessentially the confessional poet singer/songwriter of the Sixties, he's spent much of his career regarded as an anachronism by all but his most loyal fans, who number among them Matt Johnson, Nick Cave and Coil.

But, like his music, Leonard Cohen has an enduring nature. Almost imperceptibly, the besuited, slightly crumpled 53-year old with the laid back husky Montreal drawl sitting opposite me is being taken very seriously again. As in the Radio 4 critic who dubbed *I'm Your Man* the "best album of '88" back in February. It must seem a strange turn-round to a man who admits that "stocks in Leonard Cohen have been very low indeed". Didn't he get embittered during his lengthy fall from grace?

"I can't honestly say I knew about it, cos you keep on working. Everybody's on the front-line of their own life, there are always events rushing in you have to deal with moment by moment. I've never had a nostalgic bent of mind; I tend not to look back on the Good Old Days. I dunno, I don't seem to have the time. I knew the records weren't selling and I knew people didn't know what I'd been doing even

though I'd been putting out records and books regularly. It occurred to me that they weren't making their way in the market place. But I can't honestly say it hurt me. There is a certain toughness about me you know."

It's been a long time since we've had a novel.

"I'd like to. I'm always blackening pages, but the novel takes a certain regime. You know, you need one room, one table, one chair, one woman. I've always been a pretty hard worker, but I work all the time now. I think as you get older you stop humouring yourself with alternatives -- I know now I'm not going to be a brain surgeon or a forest ranger. There comes a certain point where you think 'I'm a songwriter living in Montreal' and you buy into it. Recently I've gotten very interest in songwriting, hal."

Following in the footsteps of *Various Positions* with its Zorba-esque C&W Viennese waltzes, *I'm Your Man* is a North American dance album suffused with the sounds of the Middle East, central Europe and Jewish gypsy chanson. Maybe the reason he sounds so contemporary is that Leonard Cohen knew all about World Music before many of us were born.

"I feel so many loyalties, so many connections...I played country when I was a kid; my first professional gig was with the Buckskin Boys. I've always liked Middle Eastern music, cantorial music, liturgical music, the blues, flamenco, and what they called folk music before that got to be a nasty put-down."

For someone brought up in a conservative Jewish family in Montreal, Cohen's work is full of Christian imagery -- from Jesus walking on the water in "Suzanne" right through to his latter day stage-raps about the guy on the cross.

"I always liked the founder of Christianity. You know, it took a lot of church councils to decide whether he was divine or not divine, but to me that is not the question for us. The thing is that his moral stance is unequalled -- he's the only guy who's put himself squarely with the outcast, with the leper, with the sinner, with the prostitute, with the criminal. Nobody is excluded from his embrace.

"There have been some startling religious figures, but I don't think there's anybody who said so specifically that nobody is beyond this embrace. It's so subversive and so revolutionary that we haven't even begun to deal with it. It's a miracle those ideas have lasted in the world, because there's no evidence that the meek shall inherit the earth."

Seems like the antithesis at the moment.

"It always was. That's why it's so alarming and so truly beautiful."

Except in his first novel, Cohen's Jewishness doesn't seem paramount in his work.

"I didn't experience anti-Semitism as a child; maybe once or twice in some subtle way that was around. I grew up in a more or less Christian ambiance where there was a kind of gentlemanly respect, and we were treated more or less the same."

And the Catholicism?

"I had an Irish Catholic nanny. And besides, it's impossible to escape Catholic imagery in Montreal, which is a kind of Jerusalem or Qum of the north, a city that's governed subtly by religious principles and moral principles. The organised religions in the city, certainly when I was growing up, were very powerful and many of the loyalties were defined in those communo-religious terms. And growing up somewhere where there's six months of winter, it's kinda natural for Montreallers to have these messianic, demented turns of thought and curious deductions that many of us who come from that town suffer from!"

Do you still fall in love easily?

"Oh, I fall in love all the time. I remember walking with Nico and I said, 'Do you think Joan of Arc fell in love?' and she said, 'All the time Leonard. All the time'. I feel my heart going out 100 times a day."

Yet when you're in love, you still always feel trapped?

"I think it's true that nobody can stand the distress of isolation and

loneliness, yet very few can support the vertigo of surrender, of losing yourself, that's why the new single's called 'There Ain't No Cure For Love', because nobody can sustain surrender for a very long time and nobody can stand the distance either.

"This human predicament we're all in doesn't submit to solutions, and when anybody oversimplifies the scene and comes up with a solution, you can be sure you're going to feel it like oppression. Because you're trying to order something that can't be ordered, trying to establish rules for something that has its own rules."

So it was Janis Joplin "giving me head on an unmade bed" was it?

"Yeah, I've just started disclosing that recently because I reckon it's late enough."

Another lover was the goddess Joni Mitchell.

"I'm still very friendly with Joni - I had dinner with her before the tour, and I have the same admiration for her as you do. But I think it was Noel Harrison who came up to me in the LA Troubadour and said 'How d'you like living with Beethoven?'"

Once noted for his many love affairs, Cohen -- who has a 15-year old son, and a 13-year old daughter called Lorca -- has been committed to the same woman for many years now. Does he carry the full-blown romanticism of his lyrics into real life? If he uses lines like in the album's title track ("If you want a boxer / I will step into the ring for you") he could presumably seduce anyone in the world?

"I try, ha!"

But are you like that in real life?

"I think I never was until recently. It took a particular kind of experience in my own life to turn a corner and be able to say to a woman 'This is it'. There's still a lot of the old goat in me, but I can say that to a particular woman."

Some people would find the sentiment "And if you want to work the street alone / I'll disappear for you" very shocking.

"But you've got to be able to say that to someone you love. A man has to let another man bring gifts to his wife. That goes for us all. And the notion that a thing is fixed and doesn't admit of any need for change or modification, that's the sure formula for suffering. People have to decide between themselves whether they're going to be true to one another, and what 'being true' means, they have to define for themselves. You may decide to share that thing exclusively with each other. But there's a whole range of friendships that are available to people, and perhaps you suffer a great deal if you refuse them. Maybe I have a more radical view of the thing, which is private and even inarticulate to myself. But I know in myself there are times when that line is true. At times you have to disappear for your lover, and you have to let them cook by themselves and in whatever way they want. Otherwise you can't hold it."

One of the new songs says, "Everybody knows the plague is coming... / everybody knows the scene is dead".

"I feel the whole thing's dead, yeah. The plague in the most physical sense is AIDS. But there's another kind of plague going on too, of which AIDS is one of the symptoms. If indeed disease does have ultimately a psychic origin, then there's a plague of alienation and separation and lassitude and panic; a sense of not being in control.

"I don't think there's a solution in human terms. Things like this arise and we're continually called upon to cope. Period. Occasionally men rise up and want to order the thing in a very strict and fixed way and that usually ends up in a political nightmare. Or a religious nightmare, which is the same thing. I can't buy into the conventional revolutionary position because I think the achievement of the West is very subtle and very high, and I wouldn't want to throw out the baby with the bath-water. I know how fragile society is, and everybody's goodwill is needed to make the thing work."

You were the first man in popular music to evince a genuinely feminised or perhaps androgynous mentality. Have you ever had a gay relationship?

[The last column in this article suffered from overcopying and each line was blurred towards the end. The best was done to try to fill in these gaps. Words in brackets are

the result of those efforts.]

"No, not personally. I mean, I think [everybody] appreciates the sense of attraction between [the] sexes and I suppose I've been open to my [feelings for] both men and women, so it's completely [natural for] me to have deep relationships with men. It [doesn't] take much of a leap of the imagination to [project] deepness into physical terms. But I've never [been] deeply sexually attracted to a man. There [have been] moments, but not deeply. I think my deepest [sexual] emotions were towards women."

One thing that never rang true about [Cohen's] self-deprecation, with regard to his looks; [even] nowadays he tells the story on-stage of how [Janis] Joplin once told him "Never mind Leonard - [we've] got the music". Surely he knew he was - [and is] ravishing?

"You go through periods... Aaah, you [know what] happens as you get older...one is never [comfortable] about that sort of thing. At that period when [I was] living at the [Chelsea] Hotel, I [weighed] 116 lbs. and was [pale] and didn't look [very] good. I was [very] unhealthy, and [there] were a lot of the [tanned] Californian [surfer types] around to rub it [in.]"

Did you ever [do drugs]? "I tried it, but I [didn't like it] in the sense that [I like] cigarettes, I don't seem to be able to get into [drugs] deeply. My constitution doesn't tolerate it. [The first] time I shot up heroin, I threw up immediately. [Take] too much my stomach goes sour. So I've [probably] been saved from a lot of dead-ends that way."

Does Cohen have periods of manic [depression]?

"I have been wiped out a few times and I [have] experienced acute forms of mental distress. [I'm not] unique in this respect. Every so often I do tend [to get] down. I stop being careful and it blackens [quickly and] thoroughly.

"This thing seems to have got into the [computer. I] don't mind answering the question 'Are you [really] depressed?' if it comes from someone who understands what depression is, or that [everybody] experiences it. But to be set up as the [gloomiest guy in] town - it's just very boring as an approach. [You talk] about my being funny, and I

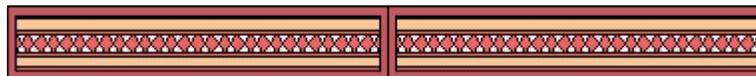
think I've always [had that] take on it - but it seems to have escaped 90 [per cent] of the people I talk to."

How do you feel about getting older, Lenny?

"I like it. On the other hand, a friend of mine, [Layton,] who's probably the best poet alive - wrote a [piece,] 'The Inescapable Lousiness Of Growing Old'. [I] don't want to make a case for it. But my own experience is that you just start to get a handle [on] things, you get to see how [things] work. You observe a couple of generations - Dylan says, 'Those phoney false alarms' - [and you] begin to penetrate those things. It's the most [interesting] thing around, to see yourself and your friends [and your] children getting older. It really is the most fascinating activity."

Lenny C, I love you.

Over the last year, I've let float to her feet so many words of thanks, they hardly seem adequate anymore. But that won't stop me from extending once again my appreciation to her for sharing AND typing this great article. So thank you to Ann Holmes for all she's done to make sure we never go hungry for our Cohen fix. And thank you also to her supplier, the great snowstorm from Norway, Geoffrey Wren. Finally, thanks to Dick Straub for his assistance in filling in the blanks.

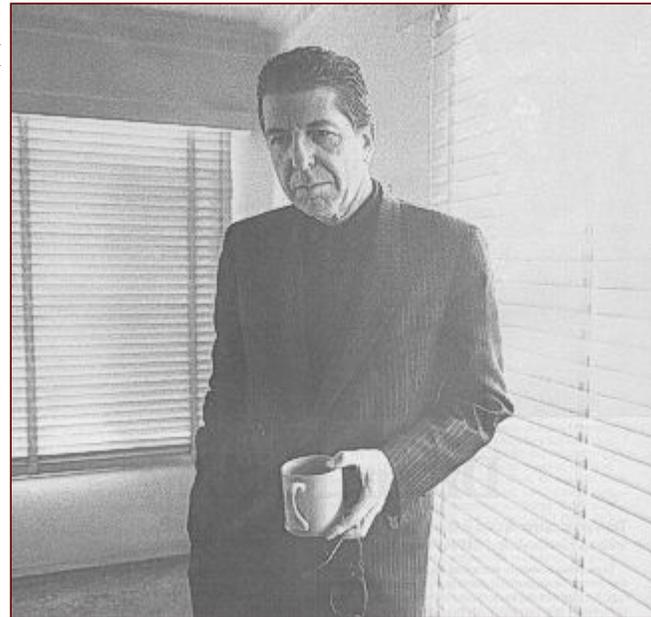


The following interview, photographs, and handwritten lyrics are from *Musician*, July 1988. The photographs are by James Cassimus and the handwritten lyrics are from Leonard Cohen's notebook, © by Stranger Music, Inc.

Leonard Cohen's Nervous Breakthrough

By Mark Rowland

"I think if I had one of those good voices, I would have done it completely differently," Leonard Cohen ruminates. "I probably would have sung the songs I really like rather than be a writer. When I was a kid I always had this fantasy of singing with a band. We'd have get-togethers and I'd sing 'Racing with the Moon,' stuff like that. I just don't



think one would have bothered to write if one could have really lifted one's voice in song. But that wasn't my voice. This is my voice."

Leonard Cohen has written two novels, eight volumes of poetry and

nine albums, the latest of which, *I'm Your Man*, is as sophisticated and drolly incisive as pop songwriting gets. Ask any fan about Cohen, though, and invariably the first point of reference is the man's way with a song. The pitch is deep if not particularly resonant, dynamic shifts are seemingly verboten, his phrasing deceptively flat. On "Tower of Song," a tune from the new album, Leonard even makes a crack about it: "I was born like this, I had no choice," he explains in that distinctive warble. "I was born with the gift of a golden voice."

But he's not entirely kidding, either, or at any rate he shouldn't be. For Cohen's voice is very much the witting instrument of his songs -- dark, knowing, romantic, bummed. He's the reigning auteur of folk noir, the godfather of doom 'n' gloom. Over in England, where pop ennui has become something of a cottage industry, Cohen is treated with near-regal respect. Popsters from Nick Cave to Echo & the Bunnymen's Ian McCulloch credit his inspiration; the Sisters of Mercy even took their name from one of his early songs. Cohen's last record *Various Positions*, sold 300,000 copies in Europe. In the U.S., it was not even released.

Of course existential despair has never been a hot ticket in America, to an audience that admires R.E.M., Cohen's elegant lyrical turns probably don't count for much. But dismissing him as a terminal groaner (and unless you're a member of his substantial cult following, chances are good you've thought along those lines) only underscores Cohen's consistency. At 53, Leonard still dresses in black, his shoes are shined and his pin-striped jacket well-tailored. He has style in other words. Not the sort that cops Grammy awards or Top 40 airplay, as Cohen has survived 20 years in pop music without either. But it's an honest style, singular and uncompromised - which may be why he's managed to survive at all.

He grew up in Montreal; his father was an engineer and sometime clothier who died when Leonard was nine. At McGill University he began writing poetry and played in a country and western trio, the Buckskin Boys. He also became part of a literary "underground" that, as Cohen recalls, "Didn't have any subversive intentions because even that would be beneath it." With the help of a grant, Cohen began traveling through Europe, eventually settling on the Greek island of Hydra. He stayed seven years, wrote two highly regarded novels, *The Favorite Game* (1963) and, *Beautiful Losers* (1965) - the latter itself the

subject of a book by the Canadian critic Dennis Lee - and lived with Marianne Jenson, later celebrated in one of Cohen's more popular songs ("So Long, Marianne"), and the mother of Norwegian novelist Axel Jensen.

"It was a very intense group of people who were passing through the island at that time," Cohen remembers. "People who were going to make their mark on the culture - Axel, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, the Swedish poet Goran Tonstrom. A very curious meeting of people, and that was very much a part of why I stayed."

It was a scene Cohen finally abandoned, however, along with his romance and his career as a novelist. He returned to the United States with the idea of becoming a country singer, eventually settling near Nashville. Before that happened, though, "Suzanne" was covered by Judy Collins, and he was signed to Columbia by that label's great talent scout John Hammond. *Songs of Leonard Cohen* was an immediate success, several of its selections later comprising the soundtrack to Robert Altman's classic film *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*.

With his minimalist melodies, chiaroscuro croak and a poetic sensibility that suggested *fin-de-siècle* fatigue, Cohen seemed to have as much in common with the late-'60s counterculture as an undertaker at a carnival. But they clicked. Partly it was Cohen's stance, so determinedly unfashionable ("to change my name or go for an image would have felt sneaky, underhanded - that was Hollywood") as to be irresistible for a culture hooked on novelty. Part was the power of truths, however unpleasant, to insinuate and endure. With *Songs From a Room* (1969) and *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971), he became a mordant prototype for a new breed of confessional and increasingly popular singer/songwriters. But as the '60s waned, so, ironically, did Cohen's appeal. Another lengthy romantic liaison (Cohen has never married) produced two children, Adam and Lorca, and for a time a measure of personal stability. But Cohen's music foundered. Always fascinated by religion, some of his theories grew mystical to the point of becoming opaque. "I thought I was one of those men that sang about his predicament, and that somehow everybody would connect with it," Cohen admits. "But I lost my way and began involving myself with speculations that I knew deep down were not really public concerns. The world was no longer attracting me. It wasn't very entertaining."

The record industry seemed to feel the same way about Cohen. Despite continued success in Europe, his albums went out of print here, and he didn't tour the U.S. for 10 years. A few months ago, Columbia Records tried to airbrush its past policy of benign neglect by presenting Cohen with its Crystal Globe award, representing over five-million sales by an artist outside their native country. Accepting the award at a sparsely attended ceremony, Cohen remarked that he had "always been deeply touched by the modesty of [Columbia's] interest in my work." Even when surrounded by corporate hype, Cohen is a very reliable witness.

"I don't care whether they like me or not, or whether they think I'm a great poet or not. I shiver every time they use the word 'poet,'" he notes dryly. "It means I've never been shut down. [But] I consider it a friendly gesture that they remembered that I had sold these records. And if they think I've produced a record that can sell, I don't want to say anything that's going to change their minds."

The surprise success last year of Jennifer Warnes' album of Cohen songs, *Famous Blue Raincoat*, hasn't hurt his commercial prospects, and with the release of *I'm Your Man*, Cohen's songwriting career may be finally coming full circle. Meticulously crafted, and for once not so's you'd notice, the songs mesh the direct lyricism of his earliest work along with the toughened emotional fiber of a guy who's been around the block a few times since. It's a black comedy, and an entertaining one; "Ain't No Cure for Love," "Everybody Knows" and "I Can't Forget" even have what you might call hooks. Were it not for the polished production values, occasional oud lick, or those angelic female harmonies - by now a Cohen trademark - you'd think he was finally making his country-western debut.

Cohen likes the record too, but mostly he's glad it's finished; as the following interview indicates, its three-year gestation was unusually tortured, even for him. Tortured enough at least to lead Cohen to re-examine his life, his worth as an artist and his place in the world. Now he's a happier man. "But I think that's because I just heard that the record went to number one in Norway," he admits. "Then I heard it was going toward number one in Spain, and I began to reach higher states of ecstasy and bliss."

We conversed one evening in Cohen's Los Angeles apartment, a few days before his octet departed on a 65-concert tour of Europe. It was a clean, well-lighted place, though virtually devoid of furniture. Whether rummaging through his refrigerator or his own fertile mind, Cohen graciously shared the discoveries - an ear of corn, a forgotten poem, grape leaves, funny stories. For all his reputation as a bard of despair, his manner seemed elfin, his bleakest observations peppered with self deprecating humor. Leonard Cohen is an artist, all right, and something else at least as valuable: He's a character.

MUSICIAN: Do you think your music is coming back in vogue?



COHEN: People like the stuff again; I guess that means it's a good time. Other musicians are treating me like Beethoven. Younger groups are recording my songs, some of them in subterranean caves in Iceland. I'm always gratified when extremist groups are attracted by my work. I look at it more or less like it's the Middle Ages, or the Dark Ages. There's a flame here or there. Someone lifts a torch. Sometimes it's in Warsaw, sometimes Reykjavik. It takes a certain amount of perseverance.

MUSICIAN: Is that a problem for you?

COHEN: I did not go into this for the short haul. I understood that about myself a long time ago. And then you're not even aware as the years go by. It's not that one wakes up every morning and says, "I must reconsecrate myself in this great mission..." Also, I've had examples in my life of men who've grown older in the harness and kept producing remarkable work. My friend Irving Layton, who is probably the best Canadian poet alive today, is on maybe his fiftieth book. That's inspiring. There's no concession to old age.

MUSICIAN: You're referring to writers and poets. In terms of pop singers/songwriters, though, you haven't had many role models.

COHEN: That's true. But I've been sustained by people responding to my work though the marketplace does not celebrate it. So I never got the sense that "it's over." Maybe I should have - there was ample

evidence from certain points of view.

MUSICIAN: Most of your following is in Europe. Do you think your songs, your world view, attracts or plays to what's considered a more European sensibility?

COHEN: I think the public world in Europe is not as powerful as the public world here, so there's still an inner space that's not so much under assault. There's still some remnant of nineteenth-century culture. In America there is no vacuum. Everything is public and the commercial institutions are now the landscaping of this public world. There's nowhere else for you to exist. There's a few libraries, a few second-hand record stores - the archives. But unless you are in the system here, you don't exist. I'm not on the side of the cultivation of inner space, though. I don't have anything vested in the position my life has given me. I'm happy to make a living. I don't consider myself scorned, and I never design my songs to be outside the mainstream.

MUSICIAN: But you have often positioned yourself as an outsider, particularly when you arrived on the pop scene in the late '60s.

COHEN: I always find it interesting when people designate me as a figure of the '60s, because I certainly never bought the ['60s] point of view, and I'm on record in book after book. I think there's one called *The Energy of Slaves* which came out in '73 and ends with this line: "Welcome to this book of slaves which I wrote during your exile, you lucky son-of-a-bitch, while I had to contend with all the flabby liars of the Aquarian Age."

MUSICIAN: But in the late '60s you were in a community of folk singers who played together, sang each other's songs -

COHEN: And everybody went for the money. Everybody. The thing died very, very quickly; the merchants took over. Nobody resisted. My purity is based on the fact that nobody offered me much money. I suppose that had I moved into more popular realms, I might have surrendered some of the characteristics of my nature that are now described as virtues.

MUSICIAN: That must have made you feel a little odd.

COHEN: It made me feel a little poor. *[laughter]*

MUSICIAN: Do you feel limited by your voice?

COHEN: There's no question; there are lots of things I wouldn't try. But I don't think that has anything to do with delivering a song. A song, a message, a laundry list, a salutation - there's a way to deliver the thing so that it touches the person you're speaking to. Now there are lots of good singers who couldn't do my stuff - couldn't penetrate it, would have no interest in it. I can do my songs better than most people. Very rarely someone like Jennifer Warnes comes along, who has all the emotional equipment and can bring musical qualities to the song that I can't even approach. This superb sound that issues from her throat. Now maybe that can get in the way of a song too. Most music criticism is in the nineteenth century. It's so far behind, say, the criticism of painting. It's still based on nineteenth-century art - cows beside a stream and trees and "I know what I like." There's no concession to the fact that Dylan might be a more sophisticated singer than Whitney Houston, that he's probably the most sophisticated singer we've had in a generation. Or that Tom Waits' whole personage is incredibly classy and chic, much more so than anybody around, mostly.

MUSICIAN: Is that something you take to heart?

COHEN: Well, I'm actually talking about myself. People talk about me being a primitive, they use "folk singer" as a way to put people down, things like that. I'm a folk singer, okay, but I mean, some folk singer wrote the melody to "Greensleeves." How primitive was that? Nobody is identifying our popular singers like a Matisse or Picasso. Dylan's a Picasso - that exuberance, range, an assimilation of the whole history of music.

MUSICIAN: What's great about the best folk and country music is the clarity, the removal of anything extraneous from the point. And listening to *I'm Your Man*, I hear that in your own writing again, those succinct narrative and musical qualities.

COHEN: That's what I've been working on for the last few years. I think "The Book of Mercy" (from *Various Positions*) was the final statement of the mystical, religious being. I don't have to talk about

religion anymore - it's gone underground. I don't think popular music is a good place to explore a lot of those ideas. The song that is going to survive in this landscape today has got to have a certain kind of power, of strength. You don't put your philosopher at the head of the army. This is a time for a very strategic position - to the marketplace, and to the whole psychic landscape. Muscle is indicated, a kind of phalanx. A lot of other things have to be put behind the front line. If your heart has really been threatened with cynicism - one's own, I'm talking about, not CBS'. *[laughter]* With the greed, the skepticism, the general devaluation of all spiritual currency that faces us today, a position has to be taken that is appropriate in the face of this real assault.

MUSICIAN: You found yourself having a change of heart?

COHEN: I found myself getting wiped out, over and over again. I found myself breaking down, in not very pleasant ways. I wasn't making [songs] as strong, I wasn't paying enough attention to the foundation, the casting. I had good ideas, and sometimes I made a frail thing whose frailty was so alarming that it could endure, like the song "If It Be Your Will." It has its own disarming life and can survive in this landscape. But mostly, no, they can't.

MUSICIAN: Are you speaking in terms of music, or the craft of writing those songs?

COHEN: I'm speaking in terms of a position that embraces those things but also embraces the mode that we order our food in a restaurant and approach our friends and our lovers, just the style of operation today.

MUSICIAN: This may be something of a stretch, but do you think that your attitude in the '60s, which was then something of a corrective to the excesses of the era, ultimately became corrupting and disfiguring for yourself?

COHEN: Well, my retrospective chops are pretty rusty; I don't have that kind of mind. I remember that I was enflamed in the '60s, as so many of us were. My appetites were enflamed: to love, to create, my greed, one really wanted the whole thing. And I remember feeling at a certain point that this was not working. You'd wander around the

East Village in New York, there'd be a paper called the *East Village Other* which seemed to indicate there was some kind of community. Only you'd walk the street and there'd be no evidence of any such thing. The evidence started to accumulate that nothing was happening. Someone observed that whoever marries the spirit of their generation will be a widow in the next. I never married the spirit of my generation because it wasn't that attractive to me. And I've since moved further and further from any possible matrimonial commitment. As you get older, I think you get less willing to buy the latest version of reality. Mostly, I'm on the front line of my own tiny life.

MUSICIAN: It's remarkable that you'd written two well-received novels before becoming a professional songwriter. After that much struggle, why did you abandon a career as a novelist?

COHEN: Many times in the last few years I've thought I should have stayed with writing. Then maybe life would have been a little easier. I would have shipwrecked less dramatically. From my point of view.

MUSICIAN: You think it's a less difficult life emotionally?

COHEN: As I remember it, for the writing of books you have to be in one place. The regime is just completely different. It usually involves a certain type of stability. You tend to gather things around you when you write a novel. You need a woman in your life. It's good to have some kids around, 'cause there's always food. It's nice to have a place that is clean and orderly, where this light comes in.

MUSICIAN: You had gathered these things?

COHEN: I had those things and then I decided to be a songwriter. I don't know what it was, something to do with money. Although I was being affirmed in certain circles, I couldn't pay the rent. I'd always written songs, so it was more like an emphasis changed rather than a venue. But I still don't know how I got so deeply into it. It started to engross me - and also, I had enormous success at the beginning. That's always a trap; you think, "I can repeat that." This seems like a wonderful way to live. Everywhere you go people seem delighted to have you around. It seems to be more lively.

But ...it wasn't. I found myself mostly alone and that all the flaws of my nature were aggravated and written large. And I found myself mostly alone in cities that I didn't know very well, trying to find a date for dinner.

That's really what I found. What I left, which was an intimate relationship and a beautiful house on a Greek island, was obviously something I couldn't stand either. So I don't know, but it certainly didn't work out very happily over the years. It's taken me a long time to come out of the shipwreck of 10 or 15 years of broken families and hotel rooms. And some kind of shining idea that my voice was important, that I had a meaning in the cosmos. Well, after enough lonely nights you don't care whether you have a meaning in the cosmos or not.

But you don't know what to change *to*. When we're young and we're standing in front of this buffet table, you can pick and choose from the vast range of generality. The older you get the more specific your life becomes, and you can't say, "I could be a forest ranger" or "I could be a brain surgeon." When all the while you're this songwriter living in L.A. It takes a long time to know it, and to say, "Well, okay, that's what I'm gonna be." Or even, "That's who I am. Now I'm going to be a good one."

Now I know what I am. I'm not a novelist. I'm not the light of my generation. I'm not the spokesman for new sensibility. I'm a songwriter living in L.A., and this is my new record.

MUSICIAN: It sounds like there were times you felt pretty close to going under.

COHEN: It's just a matter of how prone you are to real mental disorder. It's true that certain suffering is educational. It's true that experience is important. That artists have an unstable psychic nature and sometimes it's valuable. All these things that you've heard about writing, about the artist, are true. But a lot of people spend most of their life in acute pain. And it breaks some people. I was no stranger to depression and many distressed kinds of states, but at a certain point it really wasn't funny. And at that point you have to start being what the Christians call "born again." You've got to recreate your personality so that you can live a life appropriate to your station and

predicament. And having illusions makes it very difficult to create an appropriate self.

MUSICIAN: I'd imagine it's also a catch-22, since so much of your best music seemed to spring from that sense of despair.

COHEN: I can't tell you how many letters and phone calls I've gotten over the years from people in mental hospitals who say, "You know where we are, and the fact that you're on the outside and we're inside gives us great hope." It's tricky, because I have been in real dangerous places, and I don't like them.

MUSICIAN: Where you worry that you can't trust yourself?

COHEN: Where you worry about jumping out of the window. You worry whether you're gonna get from one moment to the other. I don't want to spend much time there. I know my voice can speak from time to time to people who have been there. Whether I've helped somebody or bound them to their predicament, I don't know. Affliction and suffering are mysterious.

MUSICIAN: But you speak as if you've had a more recent change of heart, or will.



COHEN: For the moment I seem to have. I think it may be because my record is number one in Norway. *[laughter]* I'm not sure; it might be that. I listen to the radio, and I like all kinds of music, you know. But I do like to hear from people who have been there, that's just my personal taste. Now, Hank Williams has been there.

MUSICIAN. Yeah, he died there.

COHEN: You want to hear a guy's story, and if the guy's really seen a few things, the story is quite interesting. Or even if he comes to the point where he wants to sing about the moon in June, there's something in his voice ... when you hear Fats Domino singing, "I found my thrill on Blueberry Hill," *whatever* that's about, I mean, it's

deep.

MUSICIAN: Do you always know what your songs are about?

COHEN. There's a lot of songs that lose their meaning, you forget. I'm finding that out now, rehearsing the band. There are some songs I just can't get behind. Some are surprising me, songs I really thought I could sing, like "Bird On a Wire." I'm not sure it's necessary to say, "I swear by this song and by all I've done wrong that I will make it all up to thee." Either I've done that, or there's no point in making that promise again if I haven't. It's very hard to get behind certain lines. The new songs I'm not having any trouble with.

MUSICIAN: It's been three years since your last album. How did this one come about?

COHEN: Well, I hope I don't have to write a record like this again. I've always been slow, but this was very slow and tricky and it broke down a lot. And I had to leave it many times and I spent a lot of money and my judgments were all wrong. In the middle of the recording I realized that the lyrics were all wrong and they'd already taken a year or two to write.

For instance, "I Can't Forget" has that limpid kind of language that doesn't twist your arm at all. It's a dead, flat language that I like. But that song started off as a song about the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. As a metaphor for the journey of the soul from bondage into freedom. It started out, *I was born in chains but I was taken out of Egypt / I was bound to a burden but the burden it was raised / Lord I can no longer keep this secret / Blessed is the name, the name be praised.* It went on like that for a long, long time, and I went into the studio and tried to sing this song about how "I was born in chains and I was taken..." But I *wasn't* born in chains and I wasn't taken out of Egypt, and not only that, but I was on the edge of what was going to become a very serious nervous breakdown. So I hadn't had the burden lifted and the whole thing was a lie! It was wishful thinking.

And this song, "Taken Out of Egypt," took months and months to write. Nobody believes me when I say these things but I have the notebooks and I don't fill them in an evening. And there were many of them. So it wasn't as if I had an endless supply of songs: I had to start

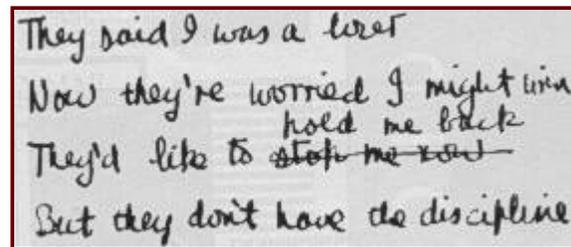
over. And I was saying to myself, "What is my life?" and that's when I started writing that lyric: *I stumble out of bed / I got ready for the struggle / I smoked a cigarette / And I tightened up my gut / I said this can't be me / Must be my double / And I can't forget / I can't forget / But I don't remember what.* That was really true.

MUSICIAN: That's quite a switch. The first version is such a big screen Technicolor production.

COHEN: Yeah: *I was led to the edge of a mighty sea of sorrow / Pursued by the armies of a dark and cruel regime / But the waters parted and my soul crossed over / Out of Egypt, out of Pharaoh's dream.* Pretty good - it's DeMille! [laughs]

MUSICIAN: It must have been hard to let go of all that imagery.

COHEN: This happened with almost every one of the songs. "First We Take Manhattan" began as a song called "In Old Berlin," which was an inquiry into the nature of



They said I was a loser
Now they're worried I might win
They'd like to ^{hold me back} stop me now
But they don't have the discipline

evil. "I'm Your Man," that started off as a song about "waiting for the miracle." It had some funny lines in it like *waiting for the miracle, there's nothing left to do / I haven't been this happy since the end of World War II.* But I couldn't sing it. I *wasn't* waiting for the miracle, or maybe I was and I didn't like the victimized position. Then it became a song called "I've Cried Enough for You," where I was talking to myself, you know, *I've never seen the sky so blue the grass so green the day so new / I can't believe it but it must be true / I've cried enough for you.* And *that* didn't work.

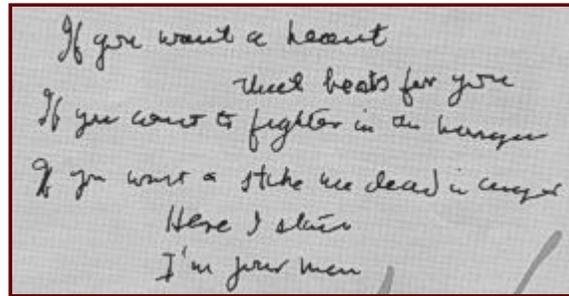
'Cause what I was really trying to say was, "I'll do anything for you." But it took two or three more writings and recordings of the song to get to "I'm Your Man," which is just a perfect little song. It was hard to get to those truths.

MUSICIAN: It sounds like this album was like your personal psychologist, where you go in and say, "This is what I'm feeling," and the therapist says okay but keep talking, and ultimately, you discover

that your real feelings are completely the opposite.

COHEN: Right, right. The true position is not a Sunday School position. It is not the platform you thought you had developed to present yourself as the

guy you want people to know about. But the thing is, it is the way a guy feels when he's trying to get a girl back. [laughter]



MUSICIAN: All these songs started out as grand themes, and ended up as something very basic.

COHEN: Yes, as I myself was a grand theme when I started the record a few years ago, and that grand theme evaporated.

MUSICIAN: Are you sad to lose that?

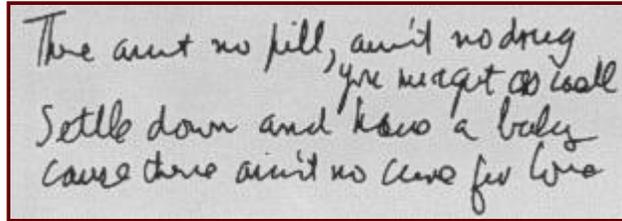
COHEN: I'm happy I lost it! The whole idea of a grand theme made my life very unhappy.

This mad period started with *Various Positions*. I remember writing this song "Hallelujah"; I filled two notebooks with the song, and I remember being on the floor of the Royalton Hotel, on the carpet in my underwear, banging my head on the floor and saying, "I can't finish this song." After I wrote the one version [for *Various Positions*], I wrote another lyric which I'm doing now, which goes like this:
Maybe I've been here before / I know this room I've walked this floor / I used to live alone before I knew you. / I see a flag on the marble arch / But love is not a victory march / It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah. / There was a time when you let me know / What's really going on below / But now you never show it to me do you? / I remember when I moved in you / And the holy dove was moving too / And every breath we drew was hallelujah. / Maybe there's a God above / But all I ever learned of love / Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you. / It's not a cry you hear tonight / It's not a mystic who's seen the light / It's a cold and a broken hallelujah. That was the prototype of the defeat.

I won't tell you how many times I did "Ain't No Cure for Love." That

started out as a song -

MUSICIAN: About the SALT Treaty?



The ain't no pill, ain't no drug
you might as well
Settle down and have a baby
Cause there ain't no cure for love

COHEN: Actually, one of the things on my mind was that I was very pissed off at Band-Aid, this moment in musical history where everyone took care of

"we gave at the office." It was very nice, but first of all, I hadn't been asked by anybody to sing. [smiles] So the song started off *from the heart of man to the heart of God the ladder's been removed / And there ain't no band-aid big enough to cover up this wound.* That idea.

I've always had this very scroogie point of view. When people demonstrate against nuclear weapons, I think, "These people think that if they eliminate nuclear weapons, they eliminate death." It promotes something like "eternal peace." But we're not going to live forever; maybe I think, basically, that nothing really changes. I'm not attached to that opinion, though. I don't even care if it's true. When you're banging your head against the dirty carpet of the Royalton Hotel trying to find the rhyme for "orange", you don't care about these things.

But I had this idea that "there ain't no cure for love" in every sense of the matter. If you do have [love] it's a kind of wound, and if you don't have it it's worse. And this is what Christ is about: Christ *had* to die because there ain't no cure for love. You can't change this world. And Christ, especially, understood this. So I wrote the whole song on those terms.

MUSICIAN: What terms?

COHEN: Theological terms. And then I thought, "I'm never gonna get behind this, either." But Jenny heard part of the song and she liked it. So I started writing a lyric that would have these ideas somewhere way, way back and no one would have to bother about them but me. It'd just be this love song about a guy who'd lost a girl.

"Take This Waltz" was written deep into the nervous breakdown. It took me 150 hours to do the translation of the poem [by Federico Garcia Lorca]. It was hard to adapt so you could sing it in 3/4. The official translation - well you couldn't sing that. So I had to get permission from the [Lorca] estate to do my own translation. And I was sorry that they gave it to me because when I started the thing, I didn't realize I had taken my first step on a walk to China.

MUSICIAN: You must read Spanish pretty well.

COHEN: No, I don't. I met a Costa Rican girl who helped me with it, and I had other translations that people had done, but they weren't rhymed. His poem is rhymed. Then I went to Paris to record it, then I broke down and went to a monastery in New Mexico for two months. I thought, "I don't have to do a record anymore, I'll be a monk!" It's good to have these places to go. When I came out I started the record again.

MUSICIAN: I think I'm beginning to understand the meaning of "Tower of Song."

COHEN: I was sitting at this table when I began that song, in 1985. I've got lots of verses. I wanted to make a definitive statement about this heroic enterprise of the craft.

MUSICIAN: And at the end you're just kind of locked in a room.
[laughter]

COHEN: Right. That's when it became clear to me that I was in the "Tower of Song."

MUSICIAN: You've mentioned every song on the album except "Jazz Police," which, musically at least, is really an anomaly.

COHEN: I met a young musician in Montreal, Jeff Fisher. He arranged "First We Take Manhattan," which had that Sergio Leone quality that I wanted - otherwise the song would have been laughed out of the world. I said to him, "Why don't you write something? Let's do a rap song." I had this song, "Jazz Police." From going around with the fusion group Passenger. There was this standing joke that if I caught them playing augmented fifths, or even sevenths, I'd

call them on it, because I've always gone for a certain kind of sound. So I was the "jazz police." The lyric, I'm not sure what it was about. The idea was to take a premise and let it collapse into a joke, or an absurdity. But - I hated it. I hated the whole thing and I think I still do. I was going to let it go, but then all these other songs started breaking down, and it moved back on the menu.

It caught the mood of this whole period I'm describing, though - this kind of fragmented absurdity. I was living that, so I let it stay, and also, I didn't have much to choose from.

MUSICIAN: The vault was empty?

COHEN: The vault was empty. To put together another couple of songs for this record - it would have been another year! And I realized things were hospitable for me in Europe. If I waited, I'd be starting from scratch again.

This is as tough as it's ever been for me, just in terms of working. I had a pretty rough time with *Beautiful Losers*, but I didn't know it. I broke down after it was over.

MUSICIAN: When you say "broke down," what do you mean?

COHEN: Well, when I finished *Beautiful Losers* I was living on Hydra. I went to another island and when I wanted to come back I hired a boatman to get me to another, bigger boat that was headed that way. It was about 110 degrees, very hot sun. The fisherman said to me, "You'd better come in under the tarp." I said no. He said, "Sea Wolf, 'huh?" When I got back to Hydra I couldn't get up the stairs to my house. They got a donkey and took me up. I went to bed and I couldn't eat for 10 or 15 days. They finally called a doctor and I was hallucinating and going crazy and went down to 116 pounds and, you know, a breakdown of some kind. But that seemed right: I'd been working pretty hard and taking speed. I'd had a sunstroke, obviously. And I'd just finished this book.

The day the storks came to the island was the day I recovered. They stop over and land on their way to Africa, or maybe coming back from Africa; they nest on the highest buildings, which are usually churches. So there's a curious feeling; they come in and sit on the

churches and leave the next morning. They just spend one night. And the morning they left I recovered, I stood up and I addressed the people of my family and it was a miracle. The miracle of the storks.
[laughter]

So that wasn't like *this*: This took two years of disintegration and then putting it back together in some way. But I think i recovered because my song went to number one in Norway...

MUSICIAN: That wasn't too long ago.

COHEN: No, I'm newly recovered.

MUSICIAN: For someone who's Jewish, your music often seems obsessed with Catholicism. Why?

COHEN: I grew up in a Catholic city, and all through Quebec the church is very strong. And I had an Irish-Catholic nanny; because my father was sick and my mother was usually at the hospital taking care of him, I was brought up part Catholic in a certain way. The figure of Christ touched me very early in my life. My radical Catholic friends were very angry at me for this Christological infatuation. Because they had really been oppressed by the church. To me it was romance. And there were many georeligious ideas I could speculate on. For one thing, I could see Christianity as the great missionary arm of Judaism. So I felt a certain patronizing interest in this version of the thing. I didn't have to believe it.

But I was talking today to a friend of mine, and it came to me that Christ's image is just the perfect symbol for our civilization. It's a perfect event for us - you have to die to survive. Because the personality is crucified in our society. That's why so many people collapse, why the mental hospitals are full. Nobody can survive with the personality that they want, which is the hero of their own drama. That hero dies, it's massacred, and the self that is reborn remembers that crucifixion. And we're doing that every day. This Christian myth at the center of our society is very good. It's workable.

MUSICIAN: It's interesting that you moved from Montreal to Greece, since the Greek Orthodox church is kind of the link between the Roman Catholic liturgy and Judaism.

COHEN: There are many things about Greece; the most important is the climate. I came from Montreal, I had never been warm before. I remember laying on a rock after I'd been there two months and feeling some interior sliver of ice melt from inside my bones. I thought, God...the universe is benign. I was drawn mostly by the sun.

MUSICIAN: I understand that somehow during the course of your travels you ended up in Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion.

COHEN: I don't know why I did any of these things. I do remember that Fidel Castro used to be laughed at in America. He'd make these five-hour speeches - apparently he speaks beautifully - and he'd say, "They're going to invade us," and people thought that was a big joke. But I thought they were going to invade them.

So I went down there and immediately found myself accurately described as a "bourgeois individualist poet." I said, "That's right. Suits me to a tee." I wrote a poem in one of my early books: "The Only Tourist in Havana Turns His Thoughts Homeward."

I was walking on the beach in the middle of one night and was suddenly surrounded by about 11 guys with Czechoslovakian submachine guns; I was an American who didn't speak Spanish, and they thought I was the first guy off the landing boat. I was the first guy arrested. It was a bit tricky to sort this thing out. But they happened to be very gracious. Wherever they took me, by the end of the night we were drinking toasts to each other and "the friendship of the people," and they let me go.

A little later it hit the newspapers in North America that the airport had been bombed. I'm in this little seedy hotel in Havana and somebody knocks on my door and says, "You have to go down to the Canadian consulate right away." They don't like the look of me there because I really do look like a Cuban revolutionary - I had a beard and wore khakis. Finally I'm brought in to one of the secretaries of the consulate - I'm pretending to be pretty tough. And he says to me, "Mr. Cohen. Your mother is very worried about you."

MUSICIAN: Speaking of dangerous missions, you also collaborated on an album with Phil Spector [*Death of a Ladies Man*]. What was

that like?

COHEN: Phil didn't like to go out very much at the time [1975], but he came to the Troubadour when I played there. He liked it very much so he invited me to his house. Then he locked all the doors. He wouldn't let me leave. So I said, "Well, let's do something interesting, 'cause it's mighty boring here, Phil."

It was like one of these classic Hollywood moments: We sat down at the piano and started writing songs. And over the next month we wrote some very good ones. The execution on the album was all wrong, though. I think Bill Medley should have sung them, or somebody else produced them, or something. The recording was a nightmare. I hear Phil is very calm these days, very happy. And he's a delightful man in any case, one on one. But in the studio he was different. It was very stressful when he'd approach you at three in the morning with a bottle of Manischewitz in one hand and a .45 in the other. And he'd put his arm around my shoulder and shove the .45 under my neck and he'd say, "I love you, Leonard."

There were a few moments like that. It's a good story, isn't it? In retrospect.

MUSICIAN: Now that they're teenagers, what do your kids think of your music?

COHEN: I just spoke to my son - he's 15 -- on the telephone and he said, "Dad, I've just been listening to *Various Positions* and I want you to know I really respect your writing." It was pretty nice. I gave him a cassette of *I'm Your Man* before it came out and both my children recited all the lyrics to me.

MUSICIAN: So they're fans.

COHEN: They are very judicious. They understand I'm not Depeche Mode, but I think they take the measure of it. My son has started to write lyrics, so he knows what some of the problems are.

MUSICIAN: Does he want to be a musician?

COHEN: I don't think so, but he happens to be gifted in that realm, so

there'll always be that temptation. He's a very good singer - a real singer. His pitch is good, he could do it.

MUSICIAN: He could sing your songs.

COHEN: He could, but I don't think he's interested in the business, in a career in showbiz. I never was. I never thought I was until I had the revelation that I was a songwriter living in L.A.

MUSICIAN: And now you're getting adjusted to it?

COHEN: Yeah, I like it.

I'm Your Band

I'm Your Man's production co-ordinator Roscoe Beck calls Leonard Cohen's tour group "the world's quietest band." Here's how it's done: Leonard Cohen strums a black Chet Atkins model Gibson (acoustic/electric) with nylon strings by D'Addario. The guitar is tuned two steps down (from C to C) to compensate for the changes in Cohen's voice, which has lowered over the years. He also plays an old Spanish model acoustic, and a Technics SXX350 keyboard.

Guitarist Bob Metzger uses a vintage Fender Telecaster, with a Strat for a backup, and a Washburn Monterey custom acoustic model. When sitting, he slides around on a Showbud pro custom three-pedal steel. Amps include a Fender reverb and Vibrasonic reverb.

Oudist John Bilezkjian plays, well, an oud. No name or model, but he's been offered up to \$40,000 for it.

Basses of choice for Steve Zerkil include a '66 Fender (fretless) and a Tamaha BP1600 (fretted). He also doubles on keyboards--a Roland D50 and Juno 60--and triples on trumpet. Keyboardist Bob Furgo, meanwhile, doubles on violin--a German Stradivarius copy and a

Barcus Berry. Behind the boards, he plays a Yamaha DX7, with Roland digital piano module, a Roland DEP5 and a TOA D3 mixer. Tom McMorran also includes the DX7 in his arsenal, along with a Yamaha KX88 with Roland S-550 sampler, Oberheim Matrix 12, Roland SDE1000, Boss CE 300, a Yamaha SPX 90 and a Yamaha MV802 mixer.

Steve Meador plays Yamaha recording series drums, with Paiste cymbals.

**Once again, I thank Ann Holmes
for her extraordinary generosity and her sweet friendship.**

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