



The Wordless Leonard Cohen Songbook

George A. Walker

The Porcupine's Quill (Sep 15, 2014)

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Beautiful engravings capture the long life of a music legend.

The Wordless Leonard Cohen Songbook, by Toronto-based artist George A. Walker, delivers exactly what the title promises. The book includes eighty wood engravings that depict Cohen's life and influences, from his childhood to his recent tours. It's a cool idea, and the engravings are beautifully done. The presentation might limit the material's appeal to Cohen's existing fan base, but the book is a lovely keepsake for that audience.

The engravings originated as an eightieth birthday tribute to Cohen, and were originally printed as a limited edition by the artist. The songwriter behind masterpieces from "Famous Blue Raincoat" to "Chelsea Hotel" has led an interesting life, giving Walker plenty of material for his artwork. From the first image of a young Cohen riding a tricycle to the several engravings of him as an elder statesman on stage, Walker creates visuals that tell the musician's life story. He uses the contrast of black and white well, ages his subject accurately, and evokes the singer's appearance without the engravings looking too photographic.

Some of the images are inspired by famous photos of Cohen with his contemporaries, imaginatively depicting Jimi Hendrix, his then-lover Janis Joplin, or Phil Spector (shown pointing a gun at Cohen). Others depict figures who drew Cohen's interest, including poet Federico García Lorca and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. These images are interspersed with portraits or performance images of Cohen. The book's foreword suggests viewing the engravings while listening to music, and they do flow nicely when perused as a Cohen album like *I'm Your Man* or *Songs of Love and Hate* plays in the background.

While most of the engravings stand alone perfectly well, the book would benefit from a list of image titles or descriptions; this could be provided in a way that wouldn't impede the engravings' visual impact, but would provide context. With the format as is, much of the work's significance may be lost on more casual Cohen fans or on curious parties looking to learn more about him. (The identities of some of the influences depicted may not be immediately clear even to Cohen devotees.) With no text other than the introduction, a foreword, and an essay in the back about Cohen's embrace of Zen Buddhism—the introduction being the only one of the three written by Walker—there is opportunity to offer a little more information.

That said, *The Wordless Leonard Cohen Songbook* definitely succeeds as an art book, thanks to the quality of Walker's engravings; and as a collectible for Cohen fans, thanks to how well the artist captures his subject.

JEFF FLEISCHER (February 13, 2015)

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