

# The Record That Changed My Life



**Drew Gonzales:** The maestro behind the thrilling, neo-calypto unit Kobo Town finds solace in Leonard Cohen's *You Want It Darker*.

A few years ago, I was flying back from a tour in Europe and perusing the music collection of the in-flight entertainment system when I finally settled on Leonard Cohen's final album, *You Want It Darker*. From the very first note I was caught, and listened to it again and again in its entirety the whole way home.

To my shame, I knew little of Cohen save his best-known songs and had no context for the lyrics on the album but the words themselves. But these words hit me like nothing else and seemed to voice so much of what has lurked in my own heart and unsettled my thoughts. To my untutored ears, all of the songs together formed a long, anguished address to a God he was letting go of—a meandering prayer that was honest enough to be unsure of its own destination.

All my life I have talked to God. As a young child, I assailed a dimly conceived deity for things that I did not get. Some were reasonable requests (“please help my parents to stay together”), others were less so (“give me wings so I can fly to my grandparents whenever I want”). Nothing was supposed to be impossible for the Omnipotent, and I think I took my family's breakup and my enduring flightlessness as a sign that such a being did not exist.

Later, as a teenage atheist, I spoke to a God I did not believe in—conscious that my

silent conversation partner was simply the sum of my hopes and fears projected onto an infinite yet imaginary canvas. I eventually found my Road to Damascus, however, and in the ensuing years have—in a fleeting, distracted way—addressed myself to one whose image has been coloured by a dozen shifting moods and theologies.

Yet I never did so with the heart-breaking honesty of Leonard Cohen.

As I listened on that bumpy flight, I thought of the Psalms, which, like Cohen, widen the discourse with the Divine beyond the narrow spectrum of praise and petition. They are full of rejoicing and gratitude, hope and despair, raging and cursing, and even some finger-pointing at Heaven for standing by as the wicked trample the good. Through this album, Cohen likewise laments the unremitting sorrow of our condition and even calls God to account for the “*million candles burning for the help that never came*”.

Some have suggested that this whole record is a chronicle of his loss of faith. Indeed, the title track bewails the atrocities wrought in the name of religion, which have so darkened our human past, while in another he cautions the listener to steer a way “*past the altar and the mall / past the fables of creation and the fall*”. In yet another, he apologizes to God for “*the ghost I made you be*”, concluding that “*only one of us was real and that was me...*”

Yet these doubts—like the complaints of the psalmist—are sung against a backdrop of deepest longing, which he expresses with raw and unrivalled eloquence:

*“If the stars were all unpinned / And a cold and bitter wind / Swallowed up the world without a trace / Ah, well that's where I would be / What my life would seem to me / If I couldn't lift the veil and see your face”*

This particular song reminds me of the more apocalyptic passages in the

Qur'an, replete with a darkened sun, fallen stars, and an ocean drained of its waters should he ever lose the love of his unnamed Other. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You” declared St. Augustine, and few have ever left such a record of this restlessness like Leonard Cohen.

By the time my flight was approaching Pearson, I realized that I was staring out the window the whole time, and somehow the shifting view—the ripples of the dark ocean far below, the sunrise breaking over the rolling clouds, and the grey ribbons of highway stretched across the GTA—seemed to intensify the many spiritual moods Cohen captured so beautifully and painfully in these songs. And I thought how, despite their intimacy, these were not private poems tucked away in a hidden journal but recorded and shared with the world, that the face he turned to God was the one he presented to us.

As I disembarked, I made a hundred resolutions to be a more honest man—to my family, to my audience, to myself—and hoped that at some point in my life I would be able to cry *hineni* (here I am Lord!) with a voice as true as that which struck me so forcefully on this album. I suppose only time will tell.

LEONARD COHEN



YOU WANT IT DARKER