

Political songs of love and hate

Leonard Cohen's spiritual side had an erotic edge—and an eschatological one.

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When Leonard Cohen's world tour arrived in Chicago in the spring of 2009, Barack Obama's success was still feted with banners hanging from streetlights in the new president's hometown. At the theater, the stage was bathed in similar reds and blues—and though the world was in economic crisis, the atmospherics of hope worked. "Sail on, O mighty ship of state," [sang Cohen](#), "To the shores of need past the reefs of greed / Through the squalls of hate."

When Cohen died earlier this month, I could not help but think back to that astonishing tour. It was necessitated by a dishonest manager who made off with most of Cohen's apparently modest fortune, but the tour's career-spanning setlist, globe-spanning itinerary, and pin-sharp musicianship spurred a revival that was more than just pecuniary. Cohen—an esoteric bard and an acquired taste, seemingly past the peak of his influence—nudged back toward the limelight at a propitious time. He released three new albums and didn't leave the road permanently until 2013.

There was always more to Cohen than the gloomy love songs, however profound those were. ["Hallelujah"](#) has been covered to the point that it can legitimately be

called a standard; the song's distinction comes largely from Cohen's weaving of biblical and erotic language. This was a recurring move in his songs: a [stanza about Jesus between two about a muse](#); an [adaptation of a Jewish liturgical text with images of madness and despair](#); [Marianne, who held him like a crucifix](#).

This reliance on religious language was sometimes shocking but rarely cheap. It gave Cohen's lyrics a center of gravity that was beyond love and hate, hope and despair—but could bear all of them. [“If It Be Your Will”](#) is a more religious song than plenty of hymns. The packed house that heard Cohen that night in Chicago didn't strike me as rife with regular church- or shul-goers, but they heard enough about God to tide them over for a while.

Leaving us when he did, however, it is Cohen the political songwriter who presents himself to our attention. Because his spiritual side always had an eschatological edge as well as an erotic one. Its ambivalence could lean toward hope ([“Every heart to love will come, but like a refugee”](#)) or horror ([“You see the wheels of heaven stop / You feel the devil's riding crop / I've seen the future and it is murder”](#)) or self-deprecating irony ([“There's a mighty judgment coming, but I might be wrong”](#)). And that eschatological sensibility sounds very different now than it did when he launched his comeback.

The fatal proximity of love and hate, which Cohen diagnosed so brutally in his love songs, has proven to be the defining story of European and American politics so far this century. After 9/11, we told ourselves that the great threat to democratic institutions in our age was Islamic extremism. But it turned out to be ourselves all along: our own rejection of our weather-beaten institutions, our suspicion of one another, our stomping on the diaphanous norms that protected us. Today the bright-eyed center-left—which might have adopted a song like “Anthem” or “Democracy” as a rallying cry—is out of power everywhere, and a far right is on the move, one openly hostile to pluralistic liberal society.

It feels trite to say it, but Cohen was onto something when he wrote [“First We Take Manhattan”](#) in the voice of a terrorist. I've been listening to it a lot lately:

You loved me as a loser,
But now you're worried that I just might win.
You knew the way you could have stopped me,
But you never had the discipline.

How many nights I've prayed for this,
To let my work begin.
First we take Manhattan,
Then we take Berlin.

Germany, which still welcomes refugees but is home to a resurgent far-right movement, has federal elections next October.