

## This old man is showing me how to face death

I'm no music critic, which will be immediately apparent as you read this meditation on Leonard Cohen's new album. I'm a longtime fan.

And I strive, with varying degrees of success, to be a spiritual man. I admit that being both those things makes me biased when it comes to this exquisite new album.

Leonard Cohen is 82 years old. Not long for this world, you might conclude.

So to hear him sing "***Hineni, hineni, I'm ready, my Lord***" really pulls at the heartstrings.

***(Hineni is Hebrew for "Here I am." But in a spiritual sense. As in the way Abraham says it when God calls his name in Genesis 22:1).***

The title song of his new album, ***You Want it Darker***, features the choir of the same Montreal synagogue where Cohen's father and grandfather both served in high positions. There's also a gorgeous vocal solo by the synagogue's cantor, Gideon Zelermeyer.

It's like in his eighties the grand old master is returning to his beginnings. Remember, this is the man who withdrew from music in the 1990s after a breakdown to devote himself to Zen monastic studies on California's Mount Baldy.

Although Cohen didn't see this as a challenge to Jewish belief. The tradition of Zen he practiced didn't include prayerful worship and made no affirmation of a deity. But this album feels very worshipful.

*You Want it Darker* is a brooding hymn. It's almost Gregorian. Cohen sounds like he's resigned to his fate. Death awaits him. Just around the corner. And he's ready. He sings to God:

***If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game / If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame / If thine is the glory then mine must be the shame.***

On another song, he makes a stark confession:

***I don't need a reason / For what I became / I've got these excuses / But they're tired and lame / I don't need a pardon / There's no one left to blame***

There's no sharp edges. No fight left. Nothing to lose. He has a hard-earned equanimity about him. He stands before God empty-handed and vulnerable. There's an appealing lack of pretence here.

Cohen has grown old like we all should – aware of our foolishness, at peace with God, and willing to declare his praises.

In the song, ***If I Didn't have Your Love***, Cohen sings of how desperately he needs God's love. He imagines the sun losing its light and the stars dropping from the sky, the oceans drying up, and the trees losing their life.

With this apocalyptic image of desolation in view he concludes:

***Well that's how broken I would be / What my life would seem to me / If I didn't have your love to make it real***

It's like a biblical psalm.

I suppose we all wonder at one time or another how death will come for us, and how we'll prepare ourselves for our final breath. We've seen a hundred movies where heroic characters face their final battle and die gently in the arms of their friends as they utter their last words.

No one really dies like that. We die in hospital beds. With catheters and starched sheets and beeping devices. It's hard to see it as heroic. And yet there's something beautifully heroic about this album.

Here's a fragile old man standing up to his full height, acknowledging his foolish ways ("I struggled with some demons / They were middle class and tame"), and bowing his head humbly before God.

Cohen once told his fans not to listen to his musings on life, but rather to listen to the mind of God. It's good advice, but it's still nice to see a man old enough to be my father showing me how to face death with a prayer on his lips:

***Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name / Vilified, crucified, in the human frame***

All this dear old man has left to say is,

***"Here I am, I'm ready, Lord." Hineni, hineni, hineni, hineni***

Rev Dr Mike Frost