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OLD IDEAS by Leonard Cohen *- by Jim Green*

Leonard Cohen is fast becoming the unofficial patron saint of our meditation community. The credentials are impeccable: a Jewish, sometime Zen Buddhist monk with a strange and intimate take on the Saviour ? remember this from 1967?

And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said: "All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them"

Oh, and he?s a ladies? man, a singer, an ex-drunk, a poet, a depressive, an artist, a bard and a prophet whose work has spanned many decades and whose vision spreads even further. Cohen playfully offers yet more identities in the opening lines of his new album, Old Ideas:

I love to speak with Leonard
He?s a sportsman and a shepherd
He?s a lazy bastard
Living in a suit

And, talking of identity, who?s this speaking, if it?s not Leonard? God? His muse? A Doppelgänger? Is he possessed?

?he only has permission
To do my instant bidding
Which is to say what I have told him
To repeat

And then comes a chorus of heartbreaking simplicity:

Going home without my sorrow
Going home sometime tomorrow
Going home to where it's better than before
Going home without my burden
Going home behind the curtain
Going home without this costume that I wore.

?Leonard? ? whoever that is - is preparing for death.

The temptation in reviewing this album is simply to quote verse after verse of these haunting lines. But I no longer know how they read on the page. It?s poetry for sure, but above all, they are songs. And what songs. All of his moods and registers are here. I tried to organise the ten songs into his core modes, the fundamental Cohen grammar. We have the Devotional (Going Home, Show Me The Place, Come Healing), the Pithily Apocalyptic (Amen, Banjo), Romantic Noire (The Darkness, Anyhow, Crazy To Love You, Different Sides) and Whimsical-Minimalist-Zen (Lullaby, Banjo).

Keen-eyed readers will see that Banjo appears as both Pithily Apocalyptic and Whimsical-Minimalist-Zen. Which is the joy of Cohen. As I review the ten songs, I realise that they could pretty much all be smuggled in and out of each category. Over again, we find ourselves asking, Who?s he talking to, God or his lover? Is he in his bedroom (or someone else?s) or is he at prayer?

No matter ? those of you who know Cohen will already be prepared to share in his old ideas. For those of you who don?t, there?s probably one old mistaken idea which has somehow percolated through to you over the decades. Namely, that Cohen sings songs of monotonous despair: Leonard is depressing. As usual with merely received wisdom, nothing could be further from the truth. There is a hard-won, clear-eyed joy woven into this ?manual for living with defeat? (Going Home). And discovered wisdom:

O, see the darkness yielding
That tore the light apart
Come healing of the reason
Come healing of the heart

O, troubled dust concealing
An undivided love
The heart beneath is teaching
To the broken heart above

(Come Healing)

And if the angels in Heaven sound anything like his backing singers, I can?t wait to get there.

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