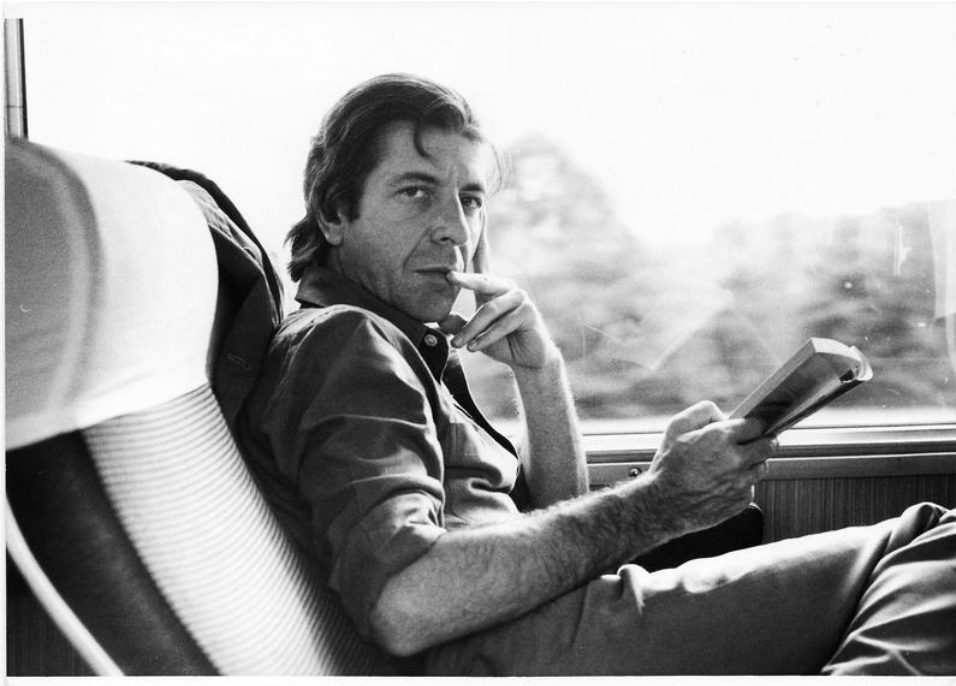


Review: Hallelujah! Leonard Cohen's Music is Being Honored at the Jewish Museum



Leonard Cohen
(Courtesy of Old Ideas, LLC)

Apr 12, 2019 · by [Deborah Solomon](#)

Leonard Cohen was the greatest-ever singer-songwriter who had a bad voice. Cohen, who died in his native Montreal in 2016, was famous for both his brilliant lyrics and his limited vocal range. His voice, at best, was gritty and gravelly; on bad days, it was so raspy you might think he had a bronchial infection. But his voice remained his best instrument – at least in terms of authenticity – and you can listen forever to songs like “Hallelujah” or “Suzanne,” to name a couple of his best-known songs.

“[Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything](#)” is the title of a potent and entertaining exhibition now at the Jewish Museum. Organized by the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal, the show cuts a new path down memory lane, dispensing with yellowed musical scores and other memorabilia. Instead, the museum has assembled a group show consisting of 13 brand-new works of art, most of them installations, and all of them commissions undertaken in a spirit of Cohen homage.

The show opens with a raucous, hour-long concert-in-video, George Fok's “Passing Through.” But a better place to start is in the gallery next door, which is reserved for Kara Blake's “The Offerings,” a documentary-style portrait worth watching in its 35-minute entirety. You sit in the dark, on a low, beanbag-like chair, mesmerized as Cohen tosses off his delightful profundities on five enormous screens.

Upstairs, on the second floor, the lights come back on and the installations become more playful. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's "The Poetry Machine" consists of a vintage Wurlitzer organ whose keys, when you press them, produce audio snippets of Cohen's poetry. Anyone can sit down at the organ and create their own poetic cacophony. At the other extreme, an installation titled "I Heard There Was a Secret Chord," by the Canadian collective called Daily Tous les Jours, invites you to sit on a large octagonal bench and join along in a hummed, wordless, pre-recorded version of "Hallelujah." It's a surprisingly calming experience. The piece re-invents humming – a famous source of irritation for those who overhear it – as a form of social connection and mental well-being even as it skirts the edge of kindergarten simpleness.

Of all the works, the pithiest one is also admirably low-tech. Taryn Simon has opted to enclose a front page of the *New York Times* in a glass vitrine, as if it were a medieval manuscript as opposed to yesterday's news. The date of the paper: November 11, 2016, a Friday when the *Times* happened to carry a story about Trump meeting with Obama as well as Leonard Cohen's obituary. It is rare that we can see history changing before our eyes, but you can see it on that one page – you see that a beautiful life has ended, and that a menace has risen. It's a chilling sight. One way to move beyond it: hum loudly.



'Listening to Leonard, 2017' (Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal/Photo: Guy L'Heureux)