



## Warnes' Raincoat

Rebirth of a Ladies' Man

One of this year's most unexpected musical pleasures has been the album *Famous Blue Raincoat* featuring Jennifer Warnes' inspired renditions of Leonard Cohen songs.

It's not that the idea of covering Cohen is new — such singers as Joe Cocker and Judy Collins did that as far back as the 60s. It's more that until now no one has had the insight or ability to portray Cohen, over the consistency of a whole album, as a substantial writer of beautiful songs; that is, of bewitching melodies as well as fascinating words. (Certainly the maudlin old croaker himself was never fully able; his vocal equipment simply wasn't there.)

Warnes not only has a voice that is straight-out gorgeous, she has the intelligence to interpret Cohen with sparkling perspicacity. She also has the experience. Jennifer Warnes has worked as backup singer for Cohen, both on tour and in the studio, on and off since 1973. However her fascination with the man goes back even further, as she recently told *Rip It Up* from her home in Los Angeles.

"I grew up with Leonard's writing like everyone else did in the 60s," she says. "I read *The Spice Box of Earth* and played those first two albums and fell in love with him. I even met him in '69, though I didn't tour with him until '73. We were both in a city in Connecticut, doing concerts in different halls. I wanted to meet him. He was in the lobby of the hotel. We just shook hands; I was such a big fan."

"In 1973 I was in Nashville doing a television show with Waylon Jennings, and Leonard was at Columbia Studios rehearsing for a tour in Europe. Someone made a phone call to our offices and said did we know anybody who would like to go on tour with Leonard, singing background. I said, 'Yes, me,' and they said, 'Well get over here right away,' because they hadn't been able to find anyone. So I went over and of course I knew all his songs, so I walked in a sang them to him, and he said, 'Get your passport,' and four days later I was in Europe with Leonard. It wasn't an accident. Those kinds of things you sort of take as beautiful destined-to-be moments."

"From that point on, every collaboration that I've had — with Leonard or anyone else — seemed to have a magic to it."

### Union Dues

And some of Warnes' other collaborations have been very successful indeed, most notably those which involved film themes. She won an Oscar for her performance on the *Norma Rae* soundtrack in 1979, which led to working

with Randy Newman on his *Ragtime* score.

"Everyone that worked on the *Norma Rae* theme was a big fan of Randy Newman and we were trying to write in his style. A couple of months after we won the Academy Award Randy called me up and said, 'Hey, I really liked what you did.' And then he said, 'Can you sing this little melody?' and he played it over the telephone. I said yes and so he said, 'Why don't you come down to the studio on Friday and we'll lay it down?'"

"So I showed up on Friday and there he was with an orchestra of the size that you'd gasp — four contrabasses, six grand pianos. I was asked to stand under a microphone and sing live with all that, to Randy's conducting. It was the shock of my life. I'll never forget that day. It was one of the most dramatic moments that I've ever had."

Yet even more dramatic was to be the astonishing success of Warnes' next film theme performance, her duet on 'Up Where We Belong' with Joe Cocker. That song (although since somewhat diminished by its use in the 1984 NZ political campaign) not only scooped up Academy Awards and Grammys, it hit No 1 all over the world. What is never realised, in all the talk of it being Cocker's comeback record, was that it was Jennifer who chose Joe, not vice versa.

After the success of *Norma Rae* and *Ragtime*, Warnes was asked by 20th Century Fox what else she'd like to do for a film song. "I said, 'Well I saw Joe Cocker a few days ago, backstage at a Bonnie Raitt concert, and I wanted to sing with him.' Fox thought this was the strangest idea they'd ever heard of. The guy said it was like mixing orange souffle with beef tartare. But they wanted to go for it because it was so unusual."

### Tender

Despite the song being initially given to her, Warnes harbours no ill feeling that it has come to be identified with Cocker. Her voice is tender as she recalls those days of heady stardom.

"I knew it was for Joe, that a lot of attention was from people who were so glad he wasn't dead and that he was doing well. There is a part of us all that fears that the high speed of this modern world leaves the tender ones behind in

the dust. I think that when someone as fragile and as beautiful as Joe surfaces for another round it makes people relieved for their own fragile heart. I think that when he was shown [at the Academy Awards] walking straight down the steps on TV with god-knows-who, this girl, they were happy."

"I knew that's what was going on. I knew nobody knew anything about me, didn't know who or what the hell I was, but that was okay. I was learning a lot from the process at the time and my ego is not so wild that I care. Besides, Joe taught me to sing live instead of lip-syncing. I've never lip-synced since then, and little things like that mean a lot. I've learnt from the people I've been with."

### Genuine

Nonetheless, of all the people Jennifer Warnes has worked with and learned from, it is Leonard Cohen who counts for most.

"I think that the genuine care that occurs when we work together causes good things to happen in both our lives. The quality of the friendship is so high that I never have the feeling that I'm alone in this world as long as he is in it too. I'm not his girlfriend and he's not my boyfriend, but there's a connection that will last our lives long. It's very deep and very close."

"I don't write as well as he does and he doesn't sing as well as I do, and so we each have something to give. As long as both of us gain, the ball seems to keep rolling. I'm constantly astounded by the fact that I even know him because he's so amazing. We sit around the dinner table and he'll tell us a new poem and we all can't chew our food it's so incredible. I have to say I've never lost my sense of being awestruck by the writer. For that I just feel that my life has had a lot of meaning in connection with it."

### Deference

Yet despite such deference, Warnes also feels that, in a small way, she may have contributed to Cohen's own development.

"He doesn't need a co-writer, but in some situations I can add a more melodious leaning to a song. I have a wide range in my voice so I'll reach for notes that I really can hit and he won't. He'll keep within his range. So if I influence his melody some, it's usually to widen

the range a bit."

Cohen was altering lyrics of his songs on *Famous Blue Raincoat* even as the album was being recorded. "He hung out at the studio



Leonard Cohen: croak and dagger man.

for about four months off and on. I'd be in the vocal booth and he'd be in the studio writing as I was singing. He was very interested in helping us with our versions, but he would never interfere with something I felt strongly about. In the end I'm the one who had to walk in those shoes."

One thing that doesn't affect her relationship with him is Cohen's publicly perceived persona. To many people his work is regarded as celebrating, at best a sentimental sexism, at worst full-blown misogyny. Warnes is thoughtful as she comments.

"I really don't have a stand on that because I consider myself a feminist and I consider myself one of his better friends. I don't have a personal problem with it. I think the fact that I was able to walk around in his works of art as though they were my own proved that his work is accessible to women, very accessible. I think that, for example, 'I Came So Far for Beauty' is an incredible tribute to what women are up against."

Nor is she at all concerned that, so far in her career, her biggest successes have all been in association with men. "I've never even thought about that one," she laughs. "I don't have those considerations when I'm working. I work with a lot of women you know. I employ women too. My engineer's a woman."

### Candour

There's a refreshing candour in Warnes' conversation, a freedom from both inflated egotism and

false modesty. Asked about her early career she mentions her start in a West Coast production of the Broadway-goes-hippie musical *Hair*.

For many years and several albums she struggled against confused management by record companies. When the Cocker single came along, says Warnes, "it gave my career a tremendous boost but it still didn't help the record companies know how to sell me. I had two-and-a-half years with MCA that were very troublesome."

"Finally it wasn't until I walked away from them and gave up on trying to suit the market. I stopped paying attention to singles and formulas in corporate thinking. I moved over to a little studio and used my friends and produced my own tunes. It wasn't until then that I got any identity ... If you think everyone else knows better than you, you can waste many years."

Warnes is justifiably proud of *Famous Blue Raincoat*. "I had been walking around with ideas for it for quite a while, and I sensed in the small label Cypress an opportunity to speak of my private dreams without any executives breathing down my neck. That alone was such a relief after years of toil that I didn't care if it sold. It was a chance for me to do what I felt and heard. When I think of what it is I really do well, it's interpret Leonard's material. I've been inside of it. I have sung on and helped him arrange his records. I understand a big, cumbersome, poetic ballad pretty well and how to frame it. So when I wanted to burst out with something that I had complete control over, it was to take what I actually knew a lot about."

### Bad Songs & Sad Songs

The fact that the album is devoted to a songwriter other than herself worries Warnes not a whit. "I think the music industry suffered when all the songwriters started to sing and all the singers started to write songs. It just took a nose dive!"

Bouyed by all the positive responses to *Famous Blue Raincoat* she is tempted to devote another album to another songwriter. She would be very selective about whom she chose however. "There are very few. I enjoy some Jim Webb songs that have never

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## The Headless Chickens Winners of the 1987 Rheineck Rock Award

Congratulations to The Headless Chickens, winners of the 1987 Rheineck Rock Award.

In announcing The Headless Chickens as winners of the 1987 Rheineck Rock Award, Rheineck also wishes to congratulate all other entrants in this highly

successful promotion of New Zealand Rock. As winners, The Headless Chickens will receive

\$30,000 towards the cost of recording an album, for release under the guidance of the Award's Advisory board. A similar sum will also go towards promoting a tour by the band to publicize their album.

Rheineck also wishes to thank the Judging Panel — Doug Hood, Colin Hogg and Judy Anaru.

They performed a tremendous role in judging the entries, and are continuing their contribution by now assisting with the production and release of The Headless Chickens' new album.



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