Leonard Cohen – Old Ideas (2012)

01 – Going Home 02 – Amen 03 – Show Me The Place 04 – Darkness 05 – Anyhow play
06 – Crazy To Love You
play
07 – Come Healing 08 – Banjo 09 – Lullaby 10 – Different Sides

Leonard Cohen's Old Ideas is 'more of the stuff that has made Cohen indispensable for six decades: desire, regret, suffering, misanthropy, love, hope, and hamming it up'.

If long-term music fandom teaches you anything, it is that the value of your investments can go down as well as up. Your idols can develop feet of clay and ears of cloth. And then there's idols like Leonard Cohen. The Montreal poet found an acoustic guitar thrust into his hand in the mid-Sixties, the better to prostitute his art via the medium of pop. It is not wild hyperbole to say that he might be the finest master of his craft alive today, with a body of work on the human condition told in riddles and coated in tar. "Hallelujah" is one of his that has, itself, been prostituted widely. Even Cohen's latterday works (Ten New Songs, Dear Heather) maintain a high pleasure-to-piffle ratio.

In our hero, we also have an ordained Buddhist who would have sat out his twilight years up a mountain, smiling down upon our worldly foibles were it not for the fact that a former confidant made off with his pension pot . He is 77 – not the sort of age when a monk can easily give up non-violence. So the sage has swapped robes for natty suits, come down off the mountain, toured the world for two years, sired a grandchild, and made one more album for the road.

"I've got no future, I know my days are few," he rumbles cretaceously on "The Darkness", the album's pre-release taster. "I thought the past would last me, but the darkness got that too." The guitar parts and piano are just as exquisite as the lyrics. "Going Home" opens Old Ideas with a self-deprecating address setting the album's tone: dark, with twinkles; an implacable higher power just offstage.

Old Ideas is not all about death, betrayal and God, juicy as these are. As the title suggests, it is more of the stuff that has made Cohen indispensable for six decades: desire, regret, suffering, misanthropy, love, hope, and hamming it up (here's a line from "Banjo": "There's a broken banjo bobbing on a dark infested sea"). So sepulchral is Cohen's famous baritone on the devotional "Show Me The Place" that it's hard to suppress a giggle.

If you have to find fault, Cohen's pleas for reparation ("Come Healing") can never quite skewer you as comprehensively as his bleaker material. But anywhere you dip your net, you catch some depth. "Crazy To Love You" is vintage Cohen, prostrating himself (before some woman, or is it his song-craft?), referencing his own "Tower Of Song", throwing out glittering runes: "I'm tired of choosing desire/I've been saved by a blessed fatigue/The gates of commitment unwired/And nobody trying to leave." But for the weight of experience, the simple guitar accompaniment takes you right back to his first albums.

The musicianship throughout is uncluttered and swinging – a relief for those still rueing Cohen's lengthy synth phase. A bodyguard of angelic female voices (longtime collaborator Sharon Robinson, the Webb Sisters) wafts about, adding to songs like "Different Sides", and not distracting overmuch elsewhere.

No fan would ever have wished Cohen's misfortune upon him. But his loss has undoubtedly been our gain. This is no hasty hackwork, aimed at shoring up the bank balance, but a work of wry righteousness. Updates of "Hallelujah" are conspicuous by their absence. --- Kitty Empire, guardian.co.uk

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