Leonard Cohen – I'm Your Man (1988)

1 First We Take Manhattan 5:59 2 Ain't No Cure For Love 4:49 3 Everybody Knows (Written-By – Sharon Robinson) 5:33 4 I'm Your Man 4:25 5 Take This Waltz 5:57 6 Jazz Police (Written-By – Jeff Fisher) 3:51 7 I Can't Forget 4:29 8 Tower Of Song 5:37
Leonard Cohen - Keyboards, Piano, Vocals Anjali - Vocals Mayel Assouly - Vocals, Vocals (Background) Richard Beaudet - Saxophone John Bilezikjian - Oud Tom Brechtlein - Drums Lenny Castro - Percussion Larry Cohen - Keyboards Vinnie Colaiuta - Drums Jeff Fisher - Keyboards Raffi Hakopian - Violin Evelyine Hebey - Vocals, Vocals (Background) Jude Johnson - Vocals Jude Johnstone - Vocals Peter Kisilenko - Bass Sneaky Pete Kleinow - Guitar (Steel), Pedal Steel Michel Robidoux - Drum Fills, Drums, Keyboards Bob Stanley - Guitar Anjani Thomas - Vocals Elisabeth Valletti - Vocals, Vocals (Background) Jennifer Warnes - Vocal Ad-Libs, Vocals, Vocals (Background)

A stunningly sophisticated leap into modern musical textures, I'm Your Man re-establishes Leonard Cohen's mastery. Against a backdrop of keyboards and propulsive rhythms, Cohen surveys the global landscape with a precise, unflinching eye: the opening "First We Take Manhattan" is an ominous fantasy of commercial success bundled in crypto-fascist imagery, while the remarkable "Everybody Knows" is a cynical catalog of the land mines littering the surface of love in the age of AIDS. --Jason Ankeny, Rovi

I’m Your Man reinvented Leonard Cohen at age 53. It is the most fun you can have while being told that life is a terrible joke.

Leonard Cohen appeared on seven of his album covers before 1988, always looking cooler and wiser than his listeners: he was the saturnine poet, the seductive man of the world. On the cover of I'm Your Man he looks better than ever, with his sunglasses and impeccable pinstripe suit—except that he's eating a banana, the slapstick fruit. James Dean would not have looked cool eating a banana. Gandhi would not have looked wise. Cohen's publicist Sharon Weisz snapped the picture at the video shoot for Jennifer Warnes' version of "First We Take Manhattan" and thought nothing of it, but Cohen thought it summed up everything the album was saying about himself and the human condition: Just when you think you've got it all worked out, life hands you a banana.

Cohen was 53 when he released the album that reinvented him musically, vocally, linguistically, temperamentally and philosophically. It quickly became his most successful record since his 1967 debut and many people's favorite. In Sylvie Simmons' Cohen biography, also called I'm Your Man, Black Francis says: "Everything that's sexy about him was extra sexy, anything funny about him extra funny, anything heavy was extra heavy." Triple-espresso Cohen. Six of these eight songs were career highlights that featured on "The Essential Leonard Cohen" and his 2008 comeback tour. Over the years, they have been consistently covered and quoted and folded into popular culture. Not a bad strike rate for an album that, according to Cohen, "broke down three or four times in the making of it."

Cohen was on his knees when he made I'm Your Man. His 1984 album Various Positions had revitalized his songwriting with his embrace of cheap synthesizers and contained "Hallelujah," destined to become a modern standard, but it had been rejected by Columbia Records in the U.S. He was running out of money. Songwriting, never easy, had become "hard labor"—he had been struggling with "Anthem" and "Waiting for the Miracle" for years and wouldn't nail them until his 1992 album The Future. Above (or below) all, he was poleaxed by depression, unable at one stage to get out of bed or answer the phone. He considered retiring and withdrawing to a monastery but he didn't feel he had the spiritual mettle. He felt that the personality he had sustained for so many years—as an artist, lover, friend—was disintegrating. "My own situation was so disagreeable that most forms of failure hardly touched me," he said. "That allowed me to take a lot of chances."

Cohen clawed back his self-respect by telling the truth. His account of writing "I Can't Forget" reminds me of Hemingway's solution to creative block: "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." Originally, the song was about the Jews' exodus from Egypt but Cohen felt he lacked the religious conviction to sing it. "I couldn't get the words out of my throat," he said. So he sat down at the kitchen table, abandoned any pretense to wisdom and began to write one true verse, a twist on Kris Kristofferson's "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down": "I stumbled out of bed/I got ready for the struggle/I smoked a cigarette/And I tightened up my gut."

The actress Rebecca De Mornay, who began dating Cohen after I'm Your Man, summarized his attitude at the time: "Let's get down to the truth here. Let's not kid ourselves." The truth, as Cohen saw it, was bleak. He had reached the end of a period of spiritual inquiry. His investigations would resume during the '90s when he spent years studying with the Zen master Roshi on California's Mount Baldy, but on I'm Your Man he had reached a conclusion about how the world worked, and it gives the album a wry fatalism. His capacity for action is circumscribed by forces beyond his control. He is chained to music ("Tower of Song"), or a woman ("I'm Your Man") or the memory of a woman ("Ain't No Cure for Love") and there's nothing he can do about it. Bob Dylan said that with Various Positions Cohen's songs were becoming like prayers—"Hallelujah," "If It Be Your Will"—but there are no prayers here, and nobody to answer them.

To the extent that I'm Your Man is political—with its allusions to racism, inequality and the Shoah—it is the opposite of protest, because protest is futile here. The bomb has already dropped. The flood has occurred. The plague has arrived. The language of politics or religion or romance has lost its power to console or inspire. All that Cohen can do is describe the blasted terrain without flinching and find a way to inhabit it with some modicum of dignity. "I got some sense that the thing has been destroyed and is lost and that this world doesn't exist, and this is the shadow of something, this is the fallout, the residue, the dust of some catastrophe, and there's nothing to grasp onto," said Cohen, demonstrating his ability to deliver an answer in an interview that's as finely turned as a poem. The album describes the aftermath—a state beyond pessimism or anxiety or hope. "A pessimist is somebody who is waiting for the rain," he said. "Me, I'm already wet."

I'm Your Man is the most fun you can have while being told that life is a terrible joke. Because Cohen is a published poet and novelist and a limited musician, his grasp of pop music is often underrated, but he was enough of an entertainer to realize that this lyrical pill would require a lot of sweetening in the studio. The album began to take shape when Jeff Fisher, a keyboardist whom he had met in Montreal, arranged "First We Take Manhattan." Cohen felt that if these words were couched in "serious Leonard Cohen music," then they would be intolerable for both him and the listener. The song needed cinematic scope (Fisher's version reminded him of Ennio Morricone's work with Sergio Leone) and a beat you could dance to. The synthesizer enabled him to write to rhythms he couldn't play on the guitar but it also connected him to cities, modernity, the tempo of the street. Fisher's version, which resembles a militarized Pet Shop Boys, convinced Cohen the album was possible.

Then there's the voice, which had acquired a morbid gravitas ideally suited to delivering hard truths but was not yet a midnight croak. Cohen shows considerable range here, executing each

syllable with deadly precision on “First We Take Manhattan”; as intimate as a late-night phone call on the title track; a more ravaged version of his younger self on “Take This Waltz”; jaded and urbane on “Tower of Song.” His backing singers Jennifer Warnes and Anjani Thomas serve as confidants, accomplices, angels and hecklers, encircling that voice like garlands on a statue. Finally, and most importantly, there are jokes. It may be the humor of the gulag or the cancer ward—the black comedy of low expectations—but no less funny for that. “When things get truly desperate,” said Cohen, “you start laughing.”

The only man of action on the record, the only optimist, is the deranged narrator of “First We Take Manhattan.” Cohen had become fascinated by extremist rhetoric, from the KKK to Hezbollah, because its “beautiful world of certainty of action” stood in exotic contrast to his own sense that the human condition is defeat and failure. (“Anthem,” which he attempted during the I’m Your Man sessions, would articulate the consolation embedded in his anti-utopian philosophy—“Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That’s how the light gets in”—but not for another four years). The fanatic believes he knows exactly what needs to be done. The fanatic can always get out of bed. Obviously, Cohen didn’t endorse any of these ideologies, so he imagined a movement of one, leaving it unclear whether the narrator is an impotent fantasist or a genuine threat. The understanding of the mindset is chilling but, Cohen reasoned, “I’d rather do that with an appetite for extremism than blow up a bus full of schoolchildren.” Zack Snyder, in a rare instance of good taste and humor, deployed it at the end of Watchmen, where it speaks for the deranged utopianism of Ozymandias.

I’m Your Man, which Cohen produced himself, has a reputation as Cohen’s synthesizer album, but each lyric demands a different setting. There’s a country song, a Casio blues number, a waltz, a Quiet Storm ballad and whatever the hell “Jazz Police” thinks it is. A friend of mine calls any near-masterpiece flawed by one outright howler a case of “Jazz Police Syndrome” and it’s hard to disagree, even if you accept Cohen’s intention to make “something quite wild and irresponsible,” inspired by hip-hop and the theme of a Pynchonesque “superagency” that secretly controls the world. Frenzied abandon isn’t one of Cohen’s natural modes, especially when it’s expressed through the medium of slap bass and stumbling drum machines. The joke fails to land.

“Jazz Police” is the most extreme manifestation of Cohen’s dedication to the sound and the language of “the street.” He made the album in fragments, in Paris, Montreal and Los Angeles, a city that he felt was “really, truly an apocalyptic landscape.” I’m Your Man is his least spiritual, least poetic, least romantic album. It has no patience for beautiful abstractions. “Ain’t No Cure for Love” (its title inspired by L.A.’s AIDS crisis) and the title track take sentimental clichés—I’m addicted to love, I’ll do anything for love—to brutal extremes. Love is the monkey on his back and he’ll go to any lengths to appease it, even if it means erasing his identity. “I’m Your Man” fades out with Cohen still singing, as if he’s going to keep prostrating himself at the feet of the

object of his desire until he gets an answer. There's a very good chance she's not listening.

Cohen leaves the street just once, diverting all of his poetic energies into "Take This Waltz," his lush version of Lorca's 1930 poem "Little Viennese Waltz" that first came out in 1986 on the 50th anniversary of the poet's death. He said that translating his favorite poet took him 150 hours and a nervous breakdown, which may not be hyperbole because it must have been a mammoth task to honor Lorca's sinister dreamscape while thoroughly Cohenizing the language. Lorca's striking image of a forest of dried pigeons becomes "a tree where the doves go to die"; the melancholy hallway becomes "the hallways where love's never been." Lorca wrote it during the year he spent in New York, and Cohen's song retains that dance between the old world and the new as well as the one between love and death.

If you had to boil I'm Your Man's worldview down to just two songs, one would be "Everybody Knows," a grim litany of human cruelty and injustice with a chorus like a Balkan wake. "It pushes things very, very far just to get a laugh," he said. It's been serially abused by posturing self-styled mavericks who miss the humor, from Christian Slater's character in the 1990 teensploitation flick Pump Up the Volume to conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, but that's not Cohen's fault. He doesn't valorize his cynicism or claim that it requires special insight. Everybody knows this stuff deep down, he's saying. Let's not kid ourselves. At a press conference in 2013, Cohen was asked by one earnest journalist what he thought about the state of the world. He paused and smiled and said: "Everybody knows." Of course.

The other keystone is "Tower of Song," which suggests Beckett's famous line, "I can't go on; I'll go on," reworked as a stand-up comedy routine. "I was born like this/I had no choice/I was born with the gift of a golden voice" is the most famous of a string of very good jokes. Cohen laughed when he wrote that line: "a laugh that comes with the release of truth." Elsewhere, he holds out the possibility that, despite all we've been told, things might not be as bad as he imagined: "There's a mighty judgement coming but I may be wrong/You see you hear these funny voices/In the Tower of Song." Even the music is comical, with its rinky-dink keyboard rhythm and faltering one-finger keyboard solo. On his comeback tour it functioned as both light relief and the key to his whole career—he recited the lyric when he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008. Here, its droll resignation steers the album away from futility at the last moment. This is Cohen climbing out of his depression by accepting his lot as a singer and writer—a lifelong resident in the tower he described as a combination of factory and bordello. Songwriting is how he makes himself useful. It's not much, but perhaps it is enough.

Right up until his death on November 7, at the age of 82, Cohen was a great believer in useful songs. He once told a story about a conversation that helped him summon the conviction to

finish the album when he was in a trough of despair. A friend told him that her father, who also suffered from chronic depression, had recently had a dream that made him feel better. It was a dream about Cohen. “I don’t have to worry because Leonard is picking up the stones,” he told her, smiling.

I’m Your Man gives the impression that Cohen took this responsibility very seriously. It’s not an uplifting album, but it’s a strangely reassuring one, because you feel that Cohen is working like a dog on the listener’s behalf to make the intolerable tolerable. Leonard is picking up the stones. ---Dorian Lynskey, pitchfork.com

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