

PETER GABRIEL, IGGY, AND MORE SALUTE THE GENIUS OF LEONARD COHEN

“HE WAS a very dear friend of mine,” says musician and producer Larry Klein of the late Leonard Cohen. “About five years after he passed in 2016, I thought, there’s this wealth of great songs to work with, do a record and hopefully enable people to hear them in a new way. But the other reason was that I just wanted to keep him in the air around me, because I missed him so much.”

He’s talking about *Here It Is: A Tribute To Leonard Cohen*. Released on Blue Note, it features 12 Cohen songs, two of them instrumentals, the others sung by 10 different vocalists, each of them backed by the group of largely jazz musicians that Klein assembled. The songs span Cohen’s musical career and include the less covered as well as the obvious, with a line-up including Norah Jones, Gregory Porter, Mavis Staples and James Taylor. Sarah McLachlan does the honours on Hallelujah: “She sang it as if her life depended on it,” says Klein. “You cast voices to songs, but the priority for me is that I want to have the person sing something that they feel in their blood. David Gray (who does a bereft version of Seems So Long Ago, Nancy from *Songs From A Room*) had fixated on that song for a long, long time, so serendipity has a hand in it, as well.”

Another voice is Peter Gabriel, who sings *Here It Is* from *Ten New Songs* and notes, “anyone looking at an empty page trying to write a song lyric sits in the shadow of the mountain that was Leonard Cohen.” Iggy Pop, meanwhile, takes on *You Want It Darker*, speaking the words in a deep, dark voice over dramatic drums and sax. It’s worth noting that Iggy and Cohen have history. In the days before Tinder, when Iggy was

recording in LA, the two teamed up to answer a personal ad from a woman seeking a man with “the raw energy of Iggy Pop” and “the elegant wit of Leonard Cohen.” Don Was took a photo to certify the reply.

Though instruments and arrangements differ, the album’s overall mood has much in common with the concerts on Cohen’s remarkable late-life tour – the vocals soft, dark and half-spoken, the music detailed and textured, but restrained in service of the lyrics. Says Klein, “Everything that we did had to serve the poetry, because I knew that Leonard was constantly frustrated, even on his own versions of songs, that the music was getting in the way of the words.”

Arguably, the most intense tracks are the two without words – instrumental versions of *Avalanche*, with Immanuel Wilkins on sax, and *Bird On The Wire*, with guitarist Bill Frisell. “I hope he would have loved it,” says Klein of his friend. “When I was working on it, I had his voice sort of in the back of my head. [But] he was very forgiving to people when they covered his songs.”

Klein tells MOJO that his former spouse Joni Mitchell also hoped to contribute. “She was anxious to do it. She’s been working her way to regain all sorts of things, and she’s been wanting to sing again, she just hadn’t gotten to the point where she had the confidence to go into the studio.”

Does he think she might record again? “I wouldn’t be surprised,” he says. “She’s a hard worker. She’s working at regaining the ability to play guitar, and what that means is that she’ll start experimenting, and who knows what’s gonna come with that?”

Sylvie Simmons

Here It Is: A Tribute To Leonard Cohen is out on Oct 14 on Blue Note.

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