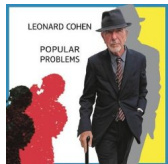


Leonard Cohen - Popular Problems (2014)

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1. *Slow* (3:25) 2. *Almost Like The Blues* (3:28) 3. *Samson In New Orleans* (4:39) 4. *A Street* (3:33) 5. *Did I Ever Love You* (4:11) 6. *My Oh My* (3:37) 7. *Nevermind* (4:40) 8. *Born In Chains* (4:56) 9. *You Got Me Singing* (3:32) Leonard Cohen - Composer, Vocals Joe Ayoub - Bass Alkexandru Bublitchi - Violin Charlean Carmon - Vocals (Background) Donna De Lory - Vocals (Background) Dana Glover - Vocals (Background) James Hurrah - Guitar Patrick Leonard - Composer, Instrumentation, Keyboards Brian Macleod - Drums

Leonard Cohen's *Popular Problems* is an uncharacteristically quick follow-up to 2012's *Old Ideas*. That record, cut in the aftermath of a multi-year tour, revitalized him as a recording artist. Producer Patrick Leonard (Madonna, Bryan Ferry) serves as co-writer on all but one tune on *Popular Problems*. While Cohen's sound has revolved around keyboards since 1988's *I'm Your Man*, Leonard gets that the real power in the songwriter's lyrics are best relayed through his own simple melodies. Everything here -- keys, female backing chorus, acoustic instrumentation, etc. -- is in their service. As always, Cohen's songs -- delivered in his deepest earth rasp -- offer protagonists who are ambivalent spiritual seekers, lusty, commitment-phobic lovers, and jaded, untrusting/untrustworthy world citizens. He is them, they are him: strangers hiding in plain sight. Opener "Slow" is paced by a blues vamp from an electric piano and kick drum. "...You want to get there soon/I want to get there last..." is delivered in a streetwise croak. It's a fine career metaphor, but the hilarious double entendre is self evident, too: "...All your turns are tight/Let me catch my breath/I thought we had all night." "Almost Like the Blues" employs a 12-bar variant exoticized by hand percussion. Cohen juxtaposes visions of global horror with worry over bad reviews; he's culpable because of his vanity. Gospel provides illustration on some of the better songs -- there are no weak ones. It's used with razored effect on "Samson in New Orleans" to address the devastation -- physical, emotional, spiritual -- left by Hurricane Katrina. Cohen really attempts to sing "Did I Ever Love You." Though it comes out a measured growl, its impact is searing. It shifts from gospel to country jaunt only to circle back, underscoring the bitter, vulnerable truth in the lyric. He observes: "The lemon trees blossom/The almond trees wither," before asking: "Was I ever someone/Who could love you forever?"; he knows the answer. The keyboards and tablas in "Nevermind," a narrative of treachery and global hypocrisy, create skeletal, tense funk. They're appended by Donna De

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Lory's Arabic chant for peace and safety in contrast to the lyric's scathing accusations. Gospel returns on "Born in Chains," a gentle but gripping first-person account of spiritual seeking with references to Judaism, Christianity, and Cohen's adopted Zen: "...I've heard the soul unfolds/In the chambers of its longing...But all the Ladders of the Night have fallen/Only darkness now/To lift the longing up." On set closer "You Got Me Singing," Cohen, accompanied only by acoustic guitar and violin, lays out hope: "You got me singing even though the world is gone/You got me thinking I'd like to carry on." It's an open-ended, affirmative sendoff. Popular Problems reveals that at 80, Cohen not only has plenty left in the tank, but is at his most confident and committed. This is his finest recording since 1995's The Future. --- Thom Jurek, Rovi

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