

New Leonard Cohen bio alludes to his years in Westmount

BY MARTIN C. BARRY

In the eight years since Westmount-born singer/songwriter/poet Leonard Cohen's death, his legend and image have seemingly become almost inescapable – whether on Canada Post mailboxes, on the brick façades of downtown Montreal skyscrapers, or in feature films based on chapters of his life.

Who?

So, the question as to how many people actually know who Leonard Cohen is might seem a little pointless in a place like Westmount, where he grew up at 599 Belmont Ave.

Yet not all the Westmount High School seniors nor the Roslyn elementary pupils who took part in an exchange on October 30 (moderated by *Gazette* columnist Bill Brownstein, also a Westmouter) with the French author of a new biography on Leon-



From left, *The Gazette's* Bill Brownstein (a Westmouter) interviewed author Christophe Lebold about his Leonard Cohen book at Westmount High School on October 30.

ard Cohen, knew the answer right off.

Getting biblical

Leonard Cohen: The Man Who Saw the Angels Fall (ECW Press) was written by Christophe Lebold, an associate professor at the University of Strasbourg in France, where he teaches literature, rock culture and performance studies.

The 500-plus page work is a thorough exploration of Cohen's life, based on dissertation work Lebold completed in university. Among other things, he suggests that Cohen aspired to walk in the footsteps of a number of different Jewish biblical heroes.

While the lyrics of several of Cohen's songs allude to angels, Lebold maintains this was also one of Jacob's preoccupations. And since Cohen had a well-deserved reputation as a ladies' man, Lebold suggests this was in keeping with King David – who seduced women and sang psalms.

After first becoming acquainted with Leonard Cohen's music through his parents, who owned several of Cohen's 33 rpm vinyl recordings, Lebold said he had a tough decision to make at one point during postgraduate university studies when he was trying to come up with the topic for a thesis.

"It was either Shakespeare or Leonard

Cohen," he said. "I loved both of them. And I still have this close relationship to Shakespeare as well. He's very dear in my heart."

As Lebold noted, Leonard Cohen's first published novel, *The Favourite Game*, contains numerous passages about "Leonard Cohen growing up here in Westmount."

Some of the scenes take place at Roslyn School, where Cohen was enrolled before attending Herzliah High School in Montreal, where one of his teachers was the legendary Canadian poet Irving Layton.

Fighting demons

Lebold maintains that for Leonard Cohen, "writing was really a way to fight demons."

He claimed Cohen never got over his father's death when he was nine years old. He said that from an early age, Cohen began to suffer from severe bouts of depression. "And he had that most of his life," he said. "Until he was in his late 60s, I'd say, he had regular periods."

"Sometimes he would still be functional, and sometimes he would completely collapse and be dysfunctional," he added. "But he knew he had to deal with it somehow. And his way of dealing with it was through art."

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