



What began with a Leonard Cohen poem has evolved into a new album for his romantic partner, Anjani Thomas.

Poetry in music

Singer Anjani Thomas and legendary Canadian singer-songwriter-poet Leonard Cohen celebrate their collaboration with her new album, *Blue Alert*

LEIGH ANNE WILLIAMS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

As Anjani Thomas begins to talk about her new album *Blue Alert*, the familiar baritone rumblings of Leonard Cohen, the album's co-creator, can just be heard in an adjacent room in a Toronto hotel.

Cohen wrote all the lyrics for the album but has stepped aside to give Thomas the spotlight.

The result is *Blue Alert*, an al-

bum of songs that grew from an intimate professional collaboration between the romantic partners.

"It was the greatest musical experience of my life — and more than musical," Thomas says, praising Cohen as her great friend and mentor who not only wrote the lyrics but advised her on new ways to approach music and her singing.

Cohen says it was an easy al-

bum to produce. He rarely exercised a veto. "Maybe the music had to be adjusted or the lyric had to be adjusted, so there was a great deal of give and take."

But he says that it didn't start out to be an album at all. It began with the song "Blue Alert."

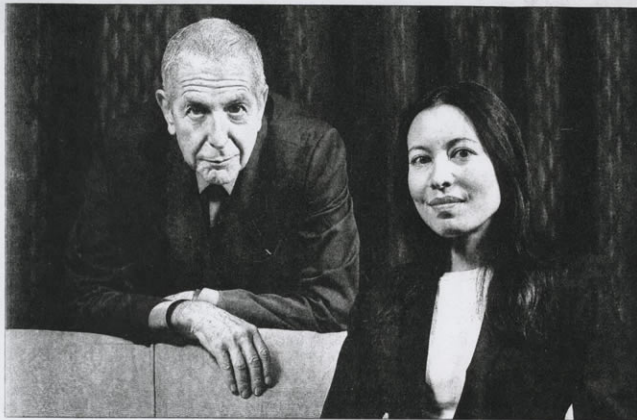
"Anjani just saw the lyric on the table and hijacked it," he says with a smile. She wrote some music for it that she thought Cohen could use, but

when she played it for him he thought she should sing it and the album grew from there. "The whole process is somewhat mysterious," he says. "The best things come unbidden."

Thomas sings all the songs, wrote all the music and plays almost all of the instruments.

Although Thomas's voice is the only one heard on the album,

► Please see Thomas, E2



AARON HARRIS/CANADIAN PRESS

Anjani Thomas saw a poem written by her romantic partner, Leonard Cohen, and turned it into a song, "Blue Alert."

Songs of love and longing

► Thomas From E1

Cohen's poetic presence is felt. In that way, this solo album is a beautiful duet of bittersweet love songs.

Thomas is not unfamiliar to Cohen fans, who have heard her backing vocals on his recordings of songs such as "Hallelujah" and on several recent albums. But her musical career started long before she met Cohen.

Raised in Hawaii, she trained as a classical pianist and was teaching by the time she was 14. She soon discovered R&B, pop and jazz, and later moved to New York where she sang and played in jazz clubs. *Blue Alert*, her third album, has jazz elements, but Thomas says she didn't want to make a jazz record.

"It's representative of the music I grew up with. I loved James Taylor and Carole King and the

folk tradition. I wasn't really as into country music until I started working with Leonard, but there's a little bit of everything," she says. "First and foremost, it's an intimate record."

It is an intimate creation in several ways — firstly in its substance. Each song contains Cohen's precise observations of the heart in various relationships.

Beginning on a breathy, sexy note, the title track describes a passion wild enough to require a colour-coded warning:

"There's perfume burning in the air/Bits of beauty everywhere/Shrapnel flying; soldier hit the dirt."

Collectively, the album's 10 songs map out a vast emotional territory: songs of love, separation, memory, regret and longing.

The last song, "Thanks for the Dance," a waltz eloquently set to

piano and clarinet, is a remarkable song that might be the beautiful and heartbreaking history of one marriage or the stories of all the dancers swirling on the floor. Think of it as a sequel to Cohen's 1984 hit "Dance Me to the End of Love."

The album is also intimate in

'It was the greatest musical experience of my life — and more than musical'

Anjani Thomas on her collaboration with Leonard Cohen

its expression. Thomas's style is quiet and meditative. "I'm not interested in the pyrotechnics of the voice," she says.

"Mainly what I do are ballads that kind of slow you down and make you think about things." Her voice, which can go from the clear angelic sounds often

heard in the background chorus of Cohen's hits to smoky depths, has a subtle palette of shades in between to evoke such introspection.

Cohen says Thomas always had a great voice, but he thinks something new and "irresistible" entered into it recently.

"Most times people get old and bitter and rigid, but sometimes it works more gracefully and you become more open and more generous and your voice sinks into a deeper place.

"I think that's what happened with Anjani."

Thomas will do a live performance at Indigo in the Manulife Centre, 55 Bloor St. W., on May 13 at 4 p.m. Cohen's new book of poetry, *Book of Longing*, published by McClelland & Stewart, is now in stores.