

"The song was begun, and the chord pattern was developed, before a woman's name entered the song. And I knew it was a song about Montreal, it seemed to come out of that landscape that I loved very much in Montreal, which was the harbor and the waterfront and the sailors' church there, called Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secour, which stood out over the river, and I knew that there're ships going by, I knew that there was a harbor, I knew that there was Our Lady of the Harbor, which was the virgin on the church which stretched out her arms towards the seamen, and you can climb up to the tower and look out over the river, so the song came from that vision, from that view of the river. At a certain point, I bumped into Suzanne Vaillancourt, who was the wife of a friend of mine, they were a stunning couple around Montreal at the time, physically stunning, both of them, a handsome man and woman, everyone was in love with Suzanne Vaillancourt, and every woman was in love with Armand Vaillancourt. But there was no... well, there was thought, but there was no possibility, one would not allow oneself to think of toiling at the seduction of Armand Vaillancourt's wife. First of all he was a friend, and second of all as a couple they were inviolate, you just didn't intrude into that kind of shared glory that they manifested. I bumped into her one evening, and she invited me down to her place near the river. She had a loft, at a time when lofts were... the word wasn't used. She had a space in a warehouse down there, and she invited me down, and I went with her, and she served me Constant Comment tea, which has little bits of oranges in it. And the boats were going by, and I touched her perfect body with my mind, because there was no other opportunity. There was no other way that you could touch her perfect body under those circumstances. So she provided the name in the song." – Leonard Cohen

In 2006, the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) found Suzanne Verdal, who inspired the song. She was a dancer and traveled around the world, but in the '90s, she hurt her back and was living in a homemade camper in Venice Beach when they found her. She revealed that Cohen lost touch with her by the time he recorded it, although she did meet him briefly after one of his concerts in the '70s, where he commented that she gave him a beautiful song. Responding to Cohen's quote, "It's not just the copulation. It is the whole understanding that we are irresistibly attracted to one another, and we have to deal with this. We are irresistibly lonely for each other, and we have to deal with this, and we have to deal with our bodies and with our hearts and souls and minds, and it's an urgent appetite," Verdal said, "I was the one that put the boundaries on that because Leonard is actually a very sexual man and very attractive and very charismatic. And I was very attracted to him, but somehow I didn't want to spoil that preciousness, that infinite respect that I had for him, for our relationship, and I felt that a sexual encounter might demean it somehow. That precious relationship produced a great piece of art."

Suzanne's Story - BBC Radio 4FM June 1998 - <http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/verdald.html>

SUZANNE

LEONARD COHEN (1965)

Suzanne takes you down  
To her place by the river  
You can hear the boats go by  
You can spend the night forever

And you know the girl's half crazy  
And that's why you want to be there  
And she feeds you tea and oranges  
That come all the way from China

And just when you want to tell her  
That you have no love to give her  
She gets you on her wavelength  
And lets the river answer  
That you've always been her lover

And Jesus was a sailor  
When he walked upon the water  
And he spent a long time watching  
From the lonely wooden tower  
And when he knew for certain  
Only drowning men could see him  
He said "All men are sailors then  
Until the sea shall free them"

But he himself was broken  
Long before the sky would open  
Forsaken, almost human  
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

And you want to travel with him  
And you want to travel blind  
And you think that you may trust him  
For he's touched your perfect body  
With his mind.

Suzanne takes you down  
To her place by the river  
You can hear the boats that go by  
You can spend the night forever

And the sun pours down like honey  
On our lady of the harbor  
And she shows you where to look  
Amid the garbage and the flowers  
There are heroes in the seaweed  
There are children in the morning  
They are leaning out for love  
And they will lean that way forever  
While Suzanne holds her mirror

Neil Diamond 1971  
Album: Stones