



The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of "Hallelujah"

By Alan Light

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"A venerated creator. An adored, tragic interpreter. An uncomplicated, memorable melody. Ambiguous, evocative words. Faith and uncertainty. Pain and pleasure."

Today, "Hallelujah" is one of the most-performed rock songs in history. It has become a staple of movies and television shows as diverse as *Shrek* and *The West Wing*, of tribute videos and telethons. It has been covered by hundreds of artists, including Bob Dylan, U2, Justin Timberlake, and k.d. lang, and it is played every year at countless events—both sacred and secular—around the world.

Yet when music legend Leonard Cohen first wrote and recorded "Hallelujah," it was for an album rejected by his longtime record label. Ten years later, charismatic newcomer Jeff Buckley reimagined the song for his much-anticipated debut album, *Grace*. Three years after that, Buckley would be dead, his album largely unknown, and "Hallelujah" still unreleased as a single. After two such commercially disappointing outings, how did one obscure song become an international anthem for human triumph and tragedy, a song each successive generation seems to feel they have discovered and claimed as uniquely their own?

Through in-depth interviews with its interpreters and the key figures who were actually there for its original recordings, acclaimed music journalist Alan Light follows the improbable journey of "Hallelujah" straight to the heart of popular culture. *The Holy or the Broken* gives insight into how great songs come to be, how they come to be listened to, and how they can be forever reinterpreted.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, December 2012: An entire biography dedicated to a single song might seem excessive at first. But when that song is "Hallelujah"--a decades-old, epic ode to sex, spirituality, and everything in between--such a spotlight is not only justified but arguably necessary. Leonard Cohen spent years painstakingly penning the lyrics and wound up with more verses than anyone has ever heard. The song has been rerecorded, reimaged, reinvented, and ultimately immortalized through (occasionally) gloriously great and (too often) tragically terrible renditions. It is, as author and music journalist Alan Light puts it in *The Holy or the Broken*, "one of the most unexpected and triumphant sagas in the history of popular music." With this complex and fascinating story, Light succeeds in doing for a song what some biographers struggle to accomplish for human subjects: He captures the essence and importance of a living, breathing entity, and his telling is at times as moving as the masterpiece itself. --Robin A. Rothman

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Leonard Cohen's mysterious, hymnlike song Hallelujah has been praised by Bob Dylan and compared favorably to the poems of W. H. Auden and James Fenton. It appears on lists of the greatest Canadian songs of all time and the greatest Jewish songs of all time. It has been performed by hundreds of performers, from Justin Timberlake and Celine Dion to Jeff Buckley and, most famously, k.d. lang, at the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics, in Vancouver. What is most remarkable about its history is that it only became a popular sensation decades after its initial release. When Hallelujah first appeared on Cohen's 1984 album *Various Positions*, hardly anyone noticed the enigmatic song with its dark Old Testament imagery linking the stories of King David and Samson and Delilah. Author Light calls it not only one of the most loved and performed popular songs of its time but also among the most misunderstood. Is it a celebration or a lament? An international anthem or a statement of national pride? Light chronicles the remarkable trajectory of the song, tracing its improbable popularity over time as it appeared on the soundtrack of *Shrek* (performed by Rufus Wainwright), on countless television dramas, in homemade videos, and even in church services. A must for music fans. --June Sawyers

Review

"Thoughtful and illuminating... [Mr. Light] is a fine companion for this journey through one song's changing fortunes." (*The New York Times*)

"A combination mystery tale, detective story, pop critique and sacred psalm of its own." (*The Daily News*)

"Brilliantly revelatory... A masterful work of critical journalism." (*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review))

"A deeply researched mixture of critical analysis and cultural archaeology." (*Los Angeles Times*)

"Keeps the pages turning... A well-constructed, consistently enlightening book, which should have Cohen devotees and music fans alike seeking out their favorite version of the song." (*The Boston Globe*)

"Fresh and compelling." (*Entertainment Weekly*)

"Reverentially details every stage in the [song's] evolution—and along the way, he reveals the compelling stories behind some of its most iconic interpretations." (*The Atlantic*)

"Absorbing...Eloquent... Light expertly unpacks the song's long, strange journey to ubiquity." (*The Village Voice*)

"A must for music fans." (*Booklist* (starred review))

"Reads like an investigative oral biography of a song. A true songography." (*Pop Matters*)

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