

“Hallelujah”—Jeff Buckley (1994)

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Essay by Dave Lory and Jim Irvin (guest post)*



Jeff Buckley

Jeff Buckley’s recording of “Hallelujah” was not the original, and he wasn’t singing the song as conceived by its author, yet it has come to be widely regarded as the definitive version.

The song was written and composed by Canadian poet and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934-2016), who said in interviews that it took at least four years and two notebooks to write an unspecified number of completed verses. “I don’t know if it was eighty, maybe more, or a little less.” Cohen recorded a four-verse version of the song in June 1984 as part of his album “Various Positions,” then revisited the song with alternative lyrics in 1988, a performance captured on the album “Cohen Live!” in 1994.

Cohen’s unmistakable vocal delivery, which has been described as a “near monotone rumble” and “a brazenly unmusical drone,” is the opposite of Buckley’s high-register lyricism and precision. Cohen accepted one Canadian music award saying, “Only in Canada could someone with a voice like mine win Vocalist of the Year.” His version of “Hallelujah” is full of wry irony.

Raised in an orthodox Jewish family, later becoming a Zen Buddhist, Cohen often used religious imagery in his work. In “Hallelujah,” the stories of two Biblical couples--King David and Bethsheba, Samson and Delilah--represent the transformative powers of music, hubris, and lust. David and Samson both have ruinous relationships with their women. David is a musician. Samson has great hair. Both are poets, warriors and adulterers. Cohen could identify with all these qualities, some more lightheartedly than others. While citing Cohen during the PEN awards for Song Lyrics of Literary Excellence in 2012, novelist Salman Rushdie spoke of the song’s “jaundiced comedy.”

“Hallelujah” has also been celebrated for its uplifting melody, the ascending second half of the verse is particularly moving, while the chorus--simply the title repeated four times--makes the song function as both a gospel soul-stirrer and a kind of hymn for atheists, “I wanted to push the Hallelujah deep into the secular world,” Cohen said.

When an album paying tribute to Cohen, “I’m Your Fan,” was being prepared in 1991, John Cale, singer, producer and former member of the Velvet Underground, elected to sing “Hallelujah,” the first time anyone else had recorded the song. (Bob Dylan had sung it live in the 1980s.) He wasn’t familiar with the recorded version, having only seen Cohen perform it on stage, but he knew Cohen, so he called him to ask for the lyrics. Cohen sent him, by fax, at least 15 verses. Cale picked his favorite five, “the cheeky verses,” all of which, coincidentally, had appeared in one or the other of Cohen’s recordings.

Jeff Buckley, an unknown 24-year-old singer, recently relocated to New York from LA, was more a fan of Cale than Cohen and listened to “I’m Your Fan” to hear Cale’s contribution, which closes that album. Struck by its spare vocal and piano arrangement, Buckley decided to include “Hallelujah” in the long, rambling sets he was playing each week at the Sin-é cafe on St. Mark’s Place in Manhattan. These were intimate shows--just Buckley and a borrowed electric guitar--before small, appreciative audiences, covering a wide variety of material, including works previously performed by Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Edith Piaf and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, distilling all Buckley had absorbed in a lifetime of musical exploration. Those shows made Buckley’s name in New York and won him a recording deal with Columbia Records in 1992. Many who attended were especially moved by his “Hallelujah.” Buckley would sing it slightly differently each night, but always emphasized the simmering sexual tension of the verses Cale had selected. He said that he thought the cry of “Hallelujah” was orgasmic. Buckley inhabited the song so well, many fans initially assumed he had written it.

When it came time to pick songs for his first album, “Grace,” Buckley decided--with producer Andy Wallace and A&R executive Steve Berkowitz, who had signed him to Columbia Records--to record a mix of original material and the best of the covers he had developed at Sin-é. Everyone agreed that “Hallelujah” had to be included. Though he would often use it as the climax to his live appearances, Buckley placed it in the middle of the album, a highpoint from which he could step into the finest of his own compositions, “Lover, You Should Have Come Over.”

Beginning with an exhalation of breath, Buckley’s performance, compiled by Wallace from five takes of the song, features him accompanied only by his delicate, skillful guitar playing, an arrangement akin to Cale’s and understated in comparison to subsequent covers, which often used choirs or orchestras to gild the song’s power.

Jeff Buckley drowned, aged 30, in a swimming accident in the Wolf River Harbor in Memphis, Tennessee, on May 29, 1997 before completing his second album. He was singing a favorite Led Zeppelin song in the water shortly before he disappeared. Music was the love of his life, and that love went into everything he sang. Though never released as a single in his lifetime, his version of “Hallelujah” slowly grew in the public’s affection to become the version that other artists would most often discover, pass on and record themselves, “giving the song the final shove into the American consciousness,” said “USA Today.” The song has been covered over 300 times, with versions by k.d.lang, U2, Rufus Wainwright, Michael McDonald, Bon Jovi, Paramore, Justin Timberlake, Amanda Palmer, Jake Shimabukuro and Neil Diamond.

In March 2008, a performance of “Hallelujah” on the TV talent show “American Idol” sent Buckley’s recording to #1 in the Billboard Digital Songs chart, almost 11 years after his death. Later that same year, three versions of “Hallelujah” charted simultaneously in the UK, with another talent-show winner, Alexandra Burke, going to #1, Buckley’s version to #2 and Cohen’s original to #36. Cohen wondered for a while if too many “Idol” competitors or TV and movie climaxes were utilizing his song, but then decided he didn’t mind. He noted, however, the irony that his most popular work started out on the one album “Various Positions” that had, originally, been rejected by his long-term label, Columbia Records, the label which handled Buckley’s recording.

Jeff would have been astonished, maybe unsettled, to know that this performance has made it into the National Registry, but it is no less than he deserved. He has become synonymous with this beautiful song. Indeed, no one who knew him can now hear the word “Hallelujah” without thinking of him.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.