CHAPTER 11

The Broken Hallelujah: The Super Hit as Sacred Space

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Introduction

It was many years ago on a late night. A long work session had ended, and a CD I hadn't yet heard was taken out and put on the CD player. Gentle guitar tones and the softest, purest male voice made me completely vigilant: I heard Jeff Buckley sing Hallelujah for the first time. I don't know how many times the song was played that night. But I do know that I sensed how music and light filled the room, embracing me, as the experience of time passing vanished. I was surprised by the stirring effect of the continued repetition of the word of praise in the midst of a bitter love story, and by the strange feeling of peace which accompanied it. Buckley's Hallelujah still has much of the magic I experienced on my first encounter. Furthermore, it continues to manifest itself as something sensual, beyond what music normally does. And it continues to open up to a state of consciousness that is a strange mixture of intensity and tranquility; for me it has a particularly transcending force.

The song was originally written and composed by Leonard Cohen and came out on his album Various Positions in 1984, but it was only after Buckley's version in 1994 that Hallelujah gradually achieved remarkable popularity. Of course it's impossible to wring from a musical work an explanation of its beauty or magical quality, or, for that matter, its popularity. But I choose to believe that some of the particular qualities that I experience in the song can also be felt by others and thus be interesting to explore. In this article, then, I wish to develop an understanding of some of the aspects that establish the particular sensibility and transcendence created in Buckley's cover version of Cohen's Hallelujah. In the process, there is also a discussion of the transformation of the sacred, which I believe Buckley's cover version represents, and of the new meanings which this transformation generates.

A Super Hit is Born

Genesis

There was no particular stir after Cohen's first recording of Hallelujah in 1984; nor was there when Bob Dylan was the first artist to play his own concert
version of the song four years later. Cohen himself continued working with the song, and John Cale reported that when he wanted to make his own version of the song in 1991, Cohen sent him all of 15 pages of text with stanzas that he could choose from. Cale himself said that he chose the lyrics he liked best, and his version was the one that Jeff Buckley used in his *Hallelujah* on his debut album *Grace* in 1994. This version of the song was not a particular success either; but well-known artists like Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello, Bono and Jimmy Page gradually became more and more aware of Buckley and impressed by his music, and concert tours where the CD was promoted showed good results. During the first two years, *Grace* achieved golden records both in France and Australia. Nonetheless, not until several years after Buckley died in a drowning accident in May 1997 did his *Hallelujah* truly become popular, and in the years 2006–2009, it was on the hit list in one country after another and was used in numerous TV series and films. Clearly, unusually many experienced that this song related deeply to their lives. This was not only shown by the placements on the hit lists and by the sale of records, but also by the stream of cover versions which now in earnest started turning up.

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1 Where no other source is given, this and the following information on *Hallelujah*'s history is taken from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallelujah_(Leonard_Cohen_song). [Accessed on Jan. 3, 2011]. The lack of source references in a few Wikipedia documents which I have used for my article, is problematic. However, whether some of the factual information in these sources is completely correct does not affect the main perspective or arguments presented here. After my article was finished, two new books related to its theme have been published: S. Simmons, *I’m your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012) and A. Light, *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen and Jeff Buckley and the Unlikely Ascent of “Hallelujah”* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013). The latter, sadly, rarely provides sources for the information given, and never in a scholarly way. Therefore it is in principle as problematic as the Wikipedia sources just mentioned. Neither of the books brings new information regarding the material I have used for the present article, though.

