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THE BITTER TASTE OF PRAISE: SINGING HALLELUJAH

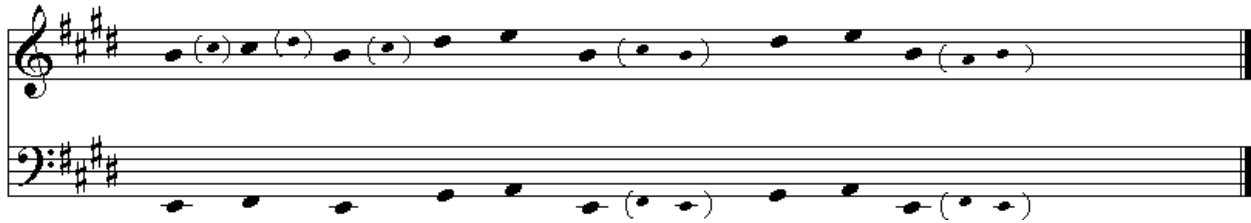
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I

It has become common currency among musicologists of popular music to worry about maintaining the twin positions of fan and scholar. One starting-point for this investigation was to try to observe my own becoming a fan, with respect to one particular example. The second was an abiding interest in the application of sacred imagery to secular contexts within popular culture. I explore these in tandem in this article.

The “bard of bedsits” (Clarke 1989, 256), Leonard Cohen, was an acquired taste in the late 1960s. Writer of gloom-laden songs about failed relationships, he found a ready audience particularly among a growing student community who wanted their songs thoughtful rather than simply entertaining. The bleakness of his view was ably captured by the liner photography of albums like *Songs from a Room* (Cohen 1969), by the sparse textures (voice and nylon-strung guitar, with occasional tasteful string chords and wordless female vocals), unemotional delivery and enigmatic lyrics of a song like “Suzanne” (Cohen 1968). The song’s structure is outlined in example 1, where its simplicity is self-evident.

EXAMPLE 1. Structure of Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" (1968)



Again and again, we move through the same lazy pattern of consecutive fifths between bass and monotonal voice, each melody note decorated by its upper neighbour, these decorations attracting their own bass parallelism later in each verse. And the lyrics, in their introversion, remind us of "Suzanne," with whom we "want to travel blind," but who also, in our search for her love, in which we "will lean that way forever," find only that "she holds the mirror" (Goldstein 1969, 82-83). By 1974, things had moved on. Cohen had lost his audience—pop music had become complicated and self-congratulatory in its sophistication.

II

2001 saw the release of the state-of-the-art animated film *Shrek*. As is now standard practice for mass circulation films, it contains a soundtrack of previously existing songs, in a range of styles, some of which are (loosely) related to the action on the screen at that particular time. Towards the end of the film, the two main characters (if that's the right word) part acrimoniously, a moment underpinned by a cleverly edited version of John Cale singing the song "Hallelujah" (2001).¹ In comparison to the remainder of the soundtrack, this song is texturally sparse and rhythmically plain. It is however emotionally taut, and seems to mark an attempt on the part of

¹ In fact, this is the same version as the one found on Cale (1991), except for one verse that has been cut, obviously for synchronization purposes. See <http://www.xs4all.nl/~werksman/cale/movies/shrek.html> (accessed 23 October 2004).

the production team to suggest what someone in Shrek's position would be feeling like at the time. The imagery of the song makes any literal interpretation rather absurd, but is crucial in trying to evaluate how successful the song is.

John Cale has recorded the song at least twice (Cale 1991; 1992). In what follows, I refer to the 1992 live recording, considered by fans to be the definitive version.² The lyrics appear in a number of places on the web (although no two sites offer exactly the same transcription)—the first I encountered was at <http://members.aol.com/mjhinton/poems/hallelujah.htm> (accessed 23 October 2004).³ Example 2 provides a structural outline of the melodic and bass motions, repeated for each of the five verses.

² Throughout this article, I shall be making much of fan discourse, which of course takes up so much web space. The main sites from which I draw here are: <http://www.chromehorse.net/rants/rants01/hallelujah.htm> (accessed 23 October 2004); http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=005Uc5 (site now discontinued); http://home.comcast.net/~g_m/LC-ng-90-95/ (accessed 23 October 2004); and <http://www.dreamworksrecords.com/rufus/ubb/Forum1/HTML/002693.html> (site now discontinued).

³ These lyrics are currently available at <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/SongUnid/60D1D06648D73CF54825696A00157F11> (accessed 23 October 2004).

EXAMPLE 2. Melodic and bass motions in John Cale's "Hallelujah" (1992)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for John Cale's "Hallelujah". Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff, both in 6/8 time. The first system (measures 1-9) shows a steady melodic ascent in the treble staff and a corresponding descent in the bass staff. The second system (measures 10-17) continues this linear motion, with a notable appoggiatura (a half-note rise) in the treble staff at measure 11. The third system (measures 18-24) shows the melodic line breaking its linear path with a descending interval in measure 19, followed by a return to the linear ascent.

After spending the first half verse around G/A, the melody line rises by step to E (each step structurally harmonized), falling back to C (via a passing-note) and then back to A and finally to the lower tonic, the lowest note of the line. It is only in the appoggiatural rise to A (the beginning of the refrain) that the entirely linear motion of the line is broken—this marks a clear structural break. Harmonically, the song plays frequently with vi. In the first half verse, this subsides through IV and V to I, but in the second half, it is both reinforced by iii and appears underpinning the melodic apex. The refrain then alternates IV and vi before coming to rest on I via V. Every harmony is in root position, a normal situation in popular music. As far as texture is concerned, Cale accompanies himself on the piano and articulates each chord simply through a regular quaver arpeggiated pattern, doubling the bass in octaves and providing the occasional

bass passing-note on the bar's final quaver (for example, between the initial C and A). The power of the song, then, lies less in its music, than in the combination of the lyrics and the way they are vocally articulated.

It begins with Biblical imagery, and with the calming effect David's harp playing had on Saul. The writer takes licence here, emphasising the mysterious power of music (1 Sam. 16:23). Even with such a bold start, uncertainty is hinted at, not only in that the chord may not be known, but that it may itself not exist (it's only hearsay). The "you" who doesn't really care for music is neither of these but, bearing in mind the genre we are dealing with, it may be assumed to be a lover. So what might we have? A love song to someone who doesn't like music? Bizarre indeed! Some lover, though, as is made clear in the rather offhand "do ya," where speech overtakes sung words. So, the singer goes on to explain. A special moment this. Popular music discourse is not known for its aesthetic content, which normally consists of little more than the assertion of taste (as we shall shortly see). Here, however, we get a glimpse of a more thoroughgoing understanding. The line rises, through IV and V to vi, as the lyric explains that it "goes like this". The vi is identified as "the minor fall," and the IV as "the major lift". But "fall" coincides with a steadily rising line, and "lift" with a wonderfully lightening upper neighbour note. So "fall" and "lift" are here emotional terms, although they come at the point at which the interval between melody and bass switches from "bare" fifths and octaves towards the more emotionally filled thirds and (with the upper neighbour) sixths. After this momentary explanation (to the lover) we switch back to the "baffled King," who must be David. Here, the implication is that the chord was secret not because it was hidden, but because it symbolises the power of music, which is baffling, even to the one composing. And, even to the one who is singing, for Cale clearly has to push from the diaphragm to reach this top E—the force is audible. What is he composing? This word *Hallelujah* (equally baffling) which, repeated four times,

forms the refrain. It is the point at which the melody line falls, and proceeds via that childlike, gapped segment of the melodic scale. The emotion is not childlike, however—far from the simple praise implied by the lyric, the final syllable of the verse’s “hallelujah” approaches a sneer, as the sound issues from the side of Cale’s mouth.

We move smartly into the second verse, but immediately lose control of who “you” is. Originally the (presumably female) lover, it is now David, and we recall the Biblical narrative in which he is intoxicated by Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:2-3). The contrast between the first verse’s “do ya” and this verse’s “overthrew you,” with the second word enunciated very roundly, suggests at least respect for the one who falls under the spell of such an intoxicating woman. The tying to a kitchen chair introduces a strong sense of domesticity (although sitting in front of a piano, explaining the workings of a phrase to an individual sat close by is hardly less domestic), but we continue with a switch of images to Samson, defeated as his hair was cut. The defeat here is marked by an amazing image, as “hallelujah” is drawn, almost conjured, by “Bathsheba” from the lips of “David”. He is surely unwilling (the word has to be “drawn” out), but powerless to prevent his helpless infatuation.

No respite—on to the third verse. David and Bathsheba vanish—we are back in the kitchen as the singer argues that love is not something in which one succeeds, but that it is a “cold and broken hallelujah”. After the expressive subtleties of the first two verses, it seems to me that we are now left to allow the words to speak for themselves, and the final imagery probably strikes home to most listeners as the “hallelujah” moves from the second verse’s joy to this verse’s pain. In the fourth verse, however, we return to uncertainty. The singer complains about being kept in the dark, by “you”. (Again, the “do ya” is hardly respectful in the singer’s loss of tone.) But who is this? Is he singing to his lover? Is David singing to Bathsheba? To his Lord (God, as opposed to Saul)? And where is down below? In the first instance, it is surely his lover’s genitalia. In the last, it is

presumably the earth, viewed from a heavenly perspective. In the second half of the verse, however, it is surely the first of these interpretations which governs, and “hallelujah” refers again to intense, surely orgasmic joy, represented by the “holy dove,” as the “moving” is wonderfully actualised by the rising bass.

In the final verse, though, we are back to the present, to the failed relationship, its inevitability, and the bitterness this calls forth (“all I ever learned”). The rising line simply treads the same ground we have had before, as the new images (complaint, pilgrim) only reinforce the earlier ones (the victory march)—indeed, we even return to the “cold and broken” hallelujah—this word’s eightfold repetition during the final refrain, to a rising and then falling minor third, seems to symbolize the impossibility of moving forward. So, this is a song which seems to explore a single present, that of a bitter failure, overlain as it is with the possibility of something greater, but a possibility not actualised. Why, then, does it have such a strange title?

The song “Hallelujah” appears on the soundtrack CD to the film. But it’s not, however, Cale’s version (2001). On the soundtrack CD, it is sung by Rufus Wainwright (2001), son of the 1960s “folksinger” Loudon Wainwright III. This simple substitution has caused much confusion among fans of the film, who cannot reconcile their memory with Wainwright’s voice. The reason is not far to seek: Wainwright is a comparatively new singer, who records for a label run by DreamWorks, the company who produced the film. What about his version? Four differences are immediately obvious. Aside from his voice’s much lighter tone, there is no sense of effort at the higher pitches—no sense of world-weariness. There is no doubled bass (perhaps the performance’s faster pace is something to do with this), and the final vi-V-I becomes replaced by a I-V-I—the difficulty identified by the vi in Cale’s version is here not so present. His basic piano figuration is subtly less interesting (the right hand portion of the opening of the verse is transcribed in example 3)—both Cale and Wainwright

subtly emphasise the top point of the arpeggio, but for Cale this is the second quaver of every second beat (example 3a): for Wainwright it is the “more normal” first (example 3b).

EXAMPLE 3a. John Cale, “Hallelujah” (1992), piano (right hand figuration)



EXAMPLE 3b. Rufus Wainwright, “Hallelujah” (2001), piano (right hand figuration)



Perhaps Wainwright misheard Cale’s subtlety here. There are subtleties in diction too. Although most versions of the lyrics posted on the net give “Baby I’ve,” in the third verse, Wainwright clearly sings “maybe I’ve”. And “holy dove” becomes “holy dark”. He is, of course, openly gay, which may have affected his choice of word. Moreover, the disdain in Cale’s “do ya” is missing—Wainwright’s vowels are more open throughout.

Neither interpretation seems invalid, although Wainwright’s is very clearly modelled on Cale’s—the extent to which it is, we shall see later. Neither, however, give too much clue to that strange title. It is a word one would not, necessarily, expect to find in the world of secular popular song. It entered, presumably, via gospel, where it is of course common. Thus Judy Collins’ singing of Mike Settle’s “Sing Hallelujah” (Collins 1962) (example 4).

EXAMPLE 4. Judy Collins, “Sing Hallelujah” (1962), excerpt



It appears in other religiously-inspired contexts, such as George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" (1970) (example 5) and Shania Twain's "God Bless the Child" (1995) (example 6).

EXAMPLE 5. George Harrison, "My Sweet Lord" (1970), excerpt



EXAMPLE 6. Shania Twain, "God Bless the Child" (1995), excerpt



In a secularised context, the same joyous take can be found in ZZ Top's "Chevrolet" (1972), in U2's "Whose Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses?" (1991) (example 7) and in various versions of the song "Hallelujah, I Love Her So" (Charles 1957; Belafonte 1958) (example 8).

EXAMPLE 7. U2, “Whose Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses?” (1991), excerpt

Musical notation for U2's "Whose Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses?" (1991), excerpt. The notation is in 4/4 time, G major, and features a major third interval for the word "Hal-le-lu-jah".

Hal - le - lu - jah

EXAMPLE 8a. Ray Charles, “Hallelujah, I Love Her So” (1957), excerpt

Musical notation for Ray Charles' "Hallelujah, I Love Her So" (1957), excerpt. The notation is in 4/4 time, C major, and features a blue third interval for the word "Hal-le-lu-jah".

Hal - le - lu - jah I just

EXAMPLE 8b. Harry Belafonte, “Hallelujah, I Love Her So” (1958), excerpt

Musical notation for Harry Belafonte's "Hallelujah, I Love Her So" (1958), excerpt. The notation is in 4/4 time, C major, and features a blue third interval for the word "Hal-le-lu-jah".

Hal - le - lu - jah I just

It is remarkable that all but one of these examples set the word “Hallelujah” to the interval of a major third (both Belafonte and Charles shorten this to a blue third, for stylistic reasons). The odd one out here is Judy Collins, where the falling minor third carries connotations of strength in spite of appearances.

It can also be found in contexts where it appears ironically. An early appearance is in Richard Thompson’s “We Sing Hallelujah” (1974). This song is presented as a series of verses likening “a man” to a series of things which fail—the tone is one of inevitable inability to transcend, although the upbeat lyric and harmonies belie this. It is underpinned by the presence of the rough-and-ready

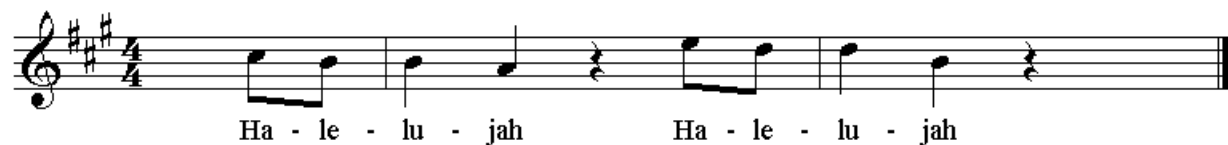
crumhorn. In the chorus, “we sing hallelujah,” presumably in ironic praise, for this failure, and to a falling fourth (with a prominent minor third—see example 9).

EXAMPLE 9. Richard Thompson, “We Sing Hallelujah” (1974), excerpt



A similar tone is present in Nick Cave’s recent “Hallelujah” (2001).⁴ Here, the song plays over an almost incessant dorian i-VII (a-G) and is characterised by a rather dark timbred violin (lacking treble frequencies), which begins the song with a rising octave scale whose reach from the F# ($\hat{6}$) to the tonic A never manages to extend the interposing G to an G#. The song is “about” the safety secured by refusing to take a risk in moving from an unsatisfactory situation to one which might, possibly, represent an improvement. There is a notable similarity with Cale—on the repeat of the word “Hallelujah,” the line shifts from $\hat{3}$ -2-1 to $\hat{5}$ -3, with a growing roughness (through exertion) of tone, parallel to that in Cale’s singing. The phrase transcribed in example 10 is repeated at every appearance of the word.

EXAMPLE 10. Nick Cave, “Hallelujah” (2001), excerpt



⁴ Fans of coincidence should note that folk-singer Kate McGarrigle, who appears as backing-singer on this track, is the mother of Rufus Wainwright.

Note the emphasis on the minor third (the first phrase is doubled a diatonic third higher by backing singers, and the second a third lower, in each case suggesting major thirds).

There are, then, certainly two clear senses in which the term “hallelujah” appears. In the first, it is an exultation of praise, as we might expect. In the second, it represents either the desire for, or the recognition of the impossibility of, such praise. And, there is an equivalence between minor and major thirds settings, (irrespective of a song’s key), as to which of these senses is employed. And yet, the term is still used—there is surely a wilfulness here, a refusal to bow to the inevitable. And, even with Wainwright’s purity of tone, the song from *Shrek* falls into this latter category.

III

Neither Cale, nor Wainwright, are the author of the song used on the soundtrack to *Shrek*. This honour falls to Leonard Cohen (1984), with whom I began. The song as he originally recorded it is a very different animal. It contains only four verses, the first two as sung by both Cale and Wainwright, and two totally different verses.⁵ Fan discourse at around the time Cale issued his first version assumed Cale’s third, fourth and fifth verses were his own, and were “pale” by comparison.⁶ However, Cale has himself clarified their origin in a recent interview: “After I saw him perform at the Beacon I asked if I could have the lyrics to ‘Hallelujah’. When I got home one night there were fax paper rolls everywhere because Leonard had insisted on supplying all 15 verses. Nobody recognises my version but I always save that song until the end of the set.” (Walsh 2001, 13)

⁵ These lyrics can be found on Leonard Cohen’s official website, http://www.leonardcohen.com/lc09_05.html (accessed 22 October 2004).

⁶ As at http://home.comcast.net/~g_m/LC-ng-90-95/1036.htm (accessed 23 October 2004), for example.

The first thing to notice about Cohen's original is its speed—4:30 min. for four verses as opposed to Cale's 4:00 min. for five. There are a number of other notable variations. First, there is Cohen's deep, and comparatively inexpressive voice. The accompaniment is sparse: bass, minimal kit, arpeggiating synthesiser, an occasional guitar, and gospel choir—humming softly in the verses, but breaking out into harmonized “hallelujah's” in the choruses. The final line before the chorus replaces Cale's iii-vi with V/vi-vi, a strategy also employed by Wainwright (who may have borrowed this from yet another version, discussed below). The playout consists of multiply-repeated, almost self-indulgent, “hallelujah's”. Cohen clarifies his intention here (in at least explaining this coda) in a 1995 interview with Robert Hilburn: “I wanted to write something in the tradition of the hallelujah choruses but from a different point of view. [...] It's the notion that there is no perfection—that this is a broken world and we live with broken hearts and broken lives but still that is no alibi for anything. On the contrary, you have to stand up and say hallelujah under those circumstances.”⁷ As a practising Buddhist, Cohen's acceptance of this state of affairs seems palpable in this song—there's little apparent emotion in his voice, with the exception of the last verse, where he admits to culpability in the failure of the relationship. Here, with nothing left to do but stand before “the Lord of Song” with hallelujah on his lips, song fails him, and he merely speaks it.

Having seen *Shrek*, and having become intoxicated by the song, I decided to teach it in late 2001 as part of an undergraduate module I run, focusing on the changing nature of the addressed subject of the song, as outlined above, through a comparison of the three versions (Cale's, Wainwright's, Cohen's) that I have discussed so far. The reaction among my students which most surprised me, was the astonishment that I hadn't included discussion of Jeff Buckley's recording (1994). It appeared that, for my class of 19-20 year olds, that 1994 recording was special, and

⁷ This can be found at <http://www.serve.com/cpage/LCohen/hilburn.html> (accessed 23 October 2004). It is a theme

somehow defining in a way that these three weren't. It was at this point that I began to ask whether this response ought to be considered normative, making assumptions about who comprises Buckley's committed audience (at that time, my only knowledge of Buckley was as the now-dead one-album son of the late Tim Buckley, doyen of 1960s coffee houses). For, if the discourse surrounding "Hallelujah" assumed this knowledge, I was behaving ignorantly. Had I, indeed, entered it at an inappropriate point?

How does Buckley's interpretation differ from those of Cale or Wainwright? Dai Griffiths hears Buckley "performing the Cale cover rather than the Cohen original" (Griffiths 2000, 176), but in so hearing, he ignores Buckley's harmonies. Buckley accompanies himself on electric guitar, but with no distortion (it has a fairly resonant echo, reminiscent of the early style of Billy Bragg). The guitar is capped at the fifth fret, depriving it of any real bass; although Buckley adopts an arpeggiation pattern as per his model, he approaches v_i from V/v_i immediately before the refrain (as did Cohen and Wainwright)—his voice is light and high in register, matching the guitar. He sings the same lyrics as do Cale and Wainwright, but incorporates a solo guitar passage before the final verse. This passage conveys no sense of craft—indeed, there are points where he seems to be waiting for inspiration. This almost conversational nature is matched by his approach to the lyrics. He is sometimes slightly late, conveying the impression that he is working out just the right way to express himself prior to doing so. This quality is intensified when, within what is a generally considered enunciatory style, he reverts to a glottal stop on the end of the word "let," and inserts place-holders such as "you know" before "I used to live alone" (although he does carefully pronounce the "you" in "do you," as opposed to Cale). Perhaps the best single word to describe his performance is "ecstatic," suggested by a number of factors: the register; his apparent inability to finish the song

he acknowledges returning to many times. For example, see Zollo (1997, 334).

(the inordinately long holding of what sounds as if it is going to be the final syllable “u,” but turns out not to be); the somewhat wild repeats of the word “hallelujah” and; the tone when he sings of “mov[ing] in you” with its obvious sexual reference. These are amplified, I think, by the evident compassion coming from his gentle tone in singing of “moonlight,” a tone which becomes heavier through the verse until he acknowledges she “*drew* the hallelujah” from “you”. This ecstasy is clearly intended. Buckley does not attempt to bring out the “rapturously bleak” (Walsh 2001, 15) qualities of the song, insisting that “Whoever listens carefully to ‘Hallelujah’ will discover that it is a song about sex, about love, about life on earth. The hallelujah is not a homage to a worshipped person, idol or god, but the hallelujah of the orgasm. It’s an ode to life and love.”⁸

IV

We have, then, four different interpretations of the song, two of which (Cale’s and Cohen’s) appear in more than one location. How do these manifest themselves in the discourse of “Hallelujah”? It seemed to me that the best way of discerning this was to tap into the wealth of interpretive material available on the Internet. My question (“how do listeners respond to these varying interpretations?”) has been addressed both in relation to the song’s appearance on the *Shrek* soundtrack, and also simply in its own terms.

The first thing to observe is that the identity of the interpreter clearly matters to listeners. Here is an exchange which took place on 13 August 2001 (all spellings and punctuation here and elsewhere as in the original):⁹

A: In year’s-worst-film *Shrek* there’s a bit where John Cale’s cover of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” suddenly starts playing. It is excruciating.

⁸ Quoted on <http://www.jeffbuckley.com/rfuller/buckley/faq/13grace.html> (accessed 23 October 2004).

B: Not John Cale, its Rufus Wainwright and it is sweet and much lovelier then the song entitles.
The worst does however come from Shrek . Samshmouth doing daudream beliver.

A: Are you SURE it's Rufus Wainwright? If so his version is really really close to Cale's.

B: Yes. I own the Soundtrack . I have not heard Cales though.

A: Ahh, but one of the Amazon.com reviews sez that for another of the songs they use a different version to the one in the film. So maybe that happened here.

B: I OWN THE SOUNDTRACK. THE SOUNDTRACK LISTING SAYS RUFUS. RUFUS HAS SAID HE HAS DONE IT. IT IS BY MOTHERFUCKING RUFUS WAINWRIGHT !
sorry oon occasion i have to be right.

A: ...I know it is Rufus on the soundtrack but IS IT RUFUS ON THE FILM???

“In a pivotal scene, when Shrek and his true love are separated, their feelings of despair and isolation are played out against John Cale's version of Leonard Cohen's crestfallen anthem 'Hallelujah.'” [www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2001/05/18/shrek]

“Rufus Wainwright's cover of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' (not heard in the film, where it was sung by John Cale, but Wainwright is part of the DreamWorks family and he has an album coming out a few weeks after the release of Shrek)”

[music.barnesandnoble.com/search/product.asp?ean=600445030527]

A: I WIN! I WIN!

B: Sorry ;)

A: The more I think about Shrek the more awful it seems.

Note the vehemence with which these views are expressed, a point which has been discussed at some length with respect to Internet exchanges by Robert Walser (2003, 33-37). And the identity

⁹ http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=005Uc5 (site now discontinued).

of the singer is not a trivial matter: critical judgement, here, appears to rest on the aesthetic qualities of the voice involved. Here is another exchange from the same list, from 10 January 2002:

C: ...I'm both a Rufus Wainwright and a Leonard Cohen fan, and I truly find Wainwright's version of Cohen's Hallelujah to be an excellent adaptation of the original. Wainwright's tendency toward operatic swooning somehow works...in a completely opposite way from Cohen's croakingly effective gruffness. Please tell me why you disagree.

D: Because Rufus Wainwright deserves to be beaten with sticks for existing. Good deal Jeff Buckley's dead, imagine a duet between those two bastards.

The distinction adopted here is very much in terms of vocal approach (“swooning”/ “gruffness”). On a discussion list intended to focus on Rufus Wainwright,¹⁰ we find a number of attempts to compare these versions:

E: ...keep in mind that i, too, think rufus has the midas touch. but... jeff buckley's cover of “hallelujah” is better than rufus wainwright's version. here's my stance:
i was hardly disappointed with rufus' take on the song (just downloaded it), but i noticed that he doesn't really *indulge* in the song as much as jeff's cover does. that is not to say that rufus' version isn't beautiful or that it's anticlimatic, because rufus does a wonderful job with it. i just don't connect with his soul as i did with jeff buckley's version -- which i fell in love with before he died. of course, since his death it has made me cry like a baby.

F: I like both, but ultimately Buckley's takes the cake. It's just those subtle touches; it's a much more painstaking version and the climactic parts are hit with such power and grace by Jeff&crew that I can't help but find it overall preferable to the sweet, well-delivered meat and potatoes version Rufus offers us. Plus Jeff rhymes “do ya” and “-ujah” in the way it was intended. Which I like...

The key points here are Buckley's "indulgence" and "grace" (actually the title of Buckley's album on which "Hallelujah" appears). They are not, however, performed by "Jeff&crew'," since Buckley's is a solo version, guitar also played by him.

G: I like both versions, though Jeff's does have more emotion to it. Rufus does do a lovely job with the song, but Jeff just seemed to be more *into* it.

H: I know I'm in the minority, but I cannot get into Jeff Buckley's version, or Jeff Buckley at all. I find his high, "I'm singing like an angel" voice to be really annoying.

Being "into" it seems an alternative way of talking about "indulgence," although the latter post hears this more as "self-indulgence," because of the implied self-awareness on Buckley's part.

The difference comes down to probably no more than a matter of taste.

I: I first bought Jeff Buckley because of someone's comment on this message board (I don't remember who): "His voice sounds like what I imagine an angel sounds like..." I bought a JB cd, and that is how I now describe JB: HIS VOICE SOUNDS LIKE WHAT I IMAGINE AN ANGEL SOUNDS LIKE.

J: I'm gonna say that Jeff's is the most amazing thing ever. I adore Rufus... you all know this. But when you compare the covers... Jeff's has SO much emotion packed into it and you can feel and see the music. That's the most amazing thing about it I think.

Similar terms here: angelic yet again, and an excess of emotion.

K: You guys all need to keep in mind that Rufus could not soar and fly like an eagle when the song was recorded as background music on a movie. My guess is that he was constricted by the requirements of the movie maker. I'm sure if Rufus had wanted to, his song could have dominated and been the subject of these accolades instead of blending perfectly with the scene and the movie. A soundtrack is meant to compliment the movie not overpower it.

¹⁰ <http://www.dreamworksrecords.com/rufus/ubb/Forum1/HTML/002693.html>, 30 December 2001-1 January 2002 (site now discontinued).

Here, alone in this conversation, we find a post which tries to conceptualize the recordings, to concern itself less with simply how the recordings sound, than why they might sound that way. It contains an error, though, in that Wainwright recorded for the CD soundtrack, not for the movie itself.¹¹

J: What I'm saying is this... Rufus's version is completely gorgeous... gorgeous and beautiful. Buckley's is like... BOOM. It hits you. I'm not saying Rufus *can't* do that. I'm just saying... this time he didn't. But even he himself was a bit stunned by Buckley's cover... so I dunno...

L: Jeff Buckley was a bright light that comes around once in a generation, if we're lucky. It's not only his vocal prowess & songwriting talent, but his uncanny ability to get inside other peoples' songs & make them truly his own. God, I miss him.

For the first time, we find a recognition that it is a matter of interpretation, that this is not simply authentic expression, but it is the sense of putting something from another's point of view. This is, of course, a fundamental feature of the song as Cohen originally write it, since it takes a variety of authorial voices.

M: Honestly and I will definately draw ire over this one. I like Buckleys version the least. which ranks the song behind the versions done by cale (i am a hardcore VU supporter), rufus and the original by leonard cohen. buckley just annoys me. the way its been done makes it seems like anyone with a semi whiney voice should cover the song

For “angelic,” then (or perhaps “self-indulgent”), read “semi-whiney”. This implies a nasal tone, which Buckley does not appear to have—the “angelic” sense is perhaps due to his very open-throatedness.

¹¹ At least, that is my assumption. It is possible that Wainwright recorded the song for the movie but that Cale's version was subsequently swapped for it. I have been unable to ascertain whether this was the case.

N: I actually think I like Rufus's version better. I heard from so many ppl that Jeff's was incredible, but I was expecting it to be better...

O: Let me just say that Rufus' version of "Hallelujah" is simply divine. I love it. However, nothing can match the sheer, heart-felt emotion of Jeff Buckley's version. Not even Leonard Cohen (whom I am a big fan of, as well). I regard Jeff Buckley's version of that song to be one of the most perfect few minutes ever put on record. You can hear everything the man is feeling; he is pouring his heart out to you through the words of a master lyricist. Rufus' version is moving, sweet, romantic and earthly. Jeff's version is like a kiss from an angel and a hug from god. Nothing can compare.

So, even the divine is lower than the angels, especially when they are rooted to the earth. Graceful, angelic, emotional, seem to be the qualities in Buckley's version which make it stand out—it appears to be listeners who do not enjoy these qualities who, correspondingly, dislike Buckley's version. To return to my starting-point for looking at Buckley, however, and my attempt to use the song in teaching, the one comment I do recall from an avid fan of Buckley's was that his version was "less religious; than Cale's". There is not, then, a uniform taste operating here, nor even a reason for holding that taste, although the evidence is clearly limited.

One post clearly argues why Cale's version is interpretatively "correct":

I believe the kitchen chair is an allusion to a woman's attempt to domesticate a man, to get him to commit, to become part of her home, like the furniture, children, and appliances. She ties him to her kitchen chair: she holds him with her domestic hospitality, her nurturing love. But then she cuts his hair—takes away the strength he feels he has as a strong, independent man. But he says "hallelujah" because he loves her.

Seems to be a religious bifurcation here between those who see the "cold and broken hallelujah" and those who see the song as paen to the ultimate triumph of love. The key would be the last lines:

And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Seems you could have it both ways, but I think it means that John Cale's interpretation is right: it's a cold and lonely hallelujah. The sight of Bathsheba on the roof compels you to love, arouses the desire and unquenchable longing, but "love is not a victory march"—there is no final consummation that endures, but in the unquenchable longing is spiritual beauty, the ability of a human to cry out "hallelujah" no matter how broken his circumstances.

In a sense, is this a hymn to Cohen's life as a rambling gypsy womanizer who never settled down?¹²

Note that, for the author of this considered interpretation, because Cohen is the songwriter, the temptation to read the song as autobiographical, even with the emphasis on Cale, is irresistible. The intentional fallacy dies hard.

In not using Buckley, I was perceived by my students as being outside the discourse surrounding "Hallelujah". Part of what I am documenting here, in order to focus on it, is just the process of entering that discourse. Some difference in conceptualisation of the intentions of these different versions is perceived by people—there is a sense in which one cannot really prefer Wainwright's type of approach to Cale's without comparing the former to Buckley's—there is less of a sense of having to compare Cale with Cohen, but this is possibly because, as author, Cohen is permitted to rise above such comparison. However, there is not just one discourse. Simply put, we can see that respondents to Wainwright's site assume familiarity with Buckley's version, and apologise when they have only just encountered it. On the independent Greenspun site, however, it is familiarity with Cale which is much more strongly assumed (perhaps there is an issue surrounding age, here). There is, then, no required knowledge to enable one to speak about "Hallelujah," particularly when, as we shall see, there is very little reference indeed to one further track.

V

So, we have not exhausted the recorded performers of “Hallelujah”. Bob Dylan, no less, has performed the song twice, in Hollywood and Montreal in the summer of 1988.¹³ These performances are unfussy in style (accompanied only by electric guitar, bass, and kit) and represent a crude combination of the versions already discussed, since the lyrics are the ones Cohen uses, the vehemence of the vocal approach recalls Cale’s, while the highly conversational approach (the rhythm is extremely flexible and Dylan often ignores the melody in favour of intoning stretches of lyric) is closer to that of Buckley. In 2004, Kathryn Williams recorded a typically understated version, underpinning her gently arpeggiated guitar with a tenor cello line and subtle stand-up bass. Although her version is perhaps based most directly on Cohen’s (she sings the musically accurate “minor chord” for the more poetic “minor fall”), her final “hallelujahs” appear to have learnt most from Jeff Buckley. The gender of her addressee is left ambiguous.

More importantly, there is one key version which is not mentioned within the discourse I have discussed so far, that of U2 lead singer, Bono. This appears on a second tribute album to Cohen, with versions by a range of artists, released in 1995 (Bono 1995). It is important particularly to the larger project outlined here, in that the word “Hallelujah” is very much a part of Bono’s lexicon. Bono chooses a different course through the various lyrics Cohen has left. There’s no reference to Bathsheba here, nor to the holy dove—Bono’s version is altogether more down-to-earth, so he strives for the transcendent in a different way. The texture is even sparser than that of either Cale or Wainwright—all we have is a thudding dance groove (no treble frequencies on the drums, and no cymbals), various filtered atmospherics which tend towards the deep, as if underwater, and a

¹² Quoted on <http://www.chromehorse.net/rants/rants01/hallelujah.htm> (accessed 23 October 2004).

sporadic free jazz trumpet line which drifts in and out of the texture. Bono speaks his five verses, in a somewhat melodic but typically rather gruff voice, singing only the “hallelujah”. There is no harmonic component to the song, but under “hallelujah,” the original bass is hinted at. However, since these are the only suggestions of harmony, rather than the original ionian IV-vi, we are left with an aeolian VI-i—a far more negative context. Verse 1 moves straight through to verse 2, with no refrain. The refrain appears after verse 2, as the drum filter reverses to produce a very trebly sound, with the entry of the rudimentary bass. The groove drops out for the beginning of verse 3 before returning, and the verse is followed by a short refrain. Verses 4 and 5 have their refrains, but on each appearance it is extended, such that the song’s opening (spoken, rather negative lyrics) is reversed at its ending, dominated as it is by Bono’s constant reiteration of “hallelujah,” albeit still in an aeolian context. Arguably, listeners might supply the unspoken major resolution that they would have been able to hear from Cohen, Cale and Buckley (and purchasers of this particular album would almost certainly have had a wide knowledge of Cohen performances and performers—at the time, he remained something of an acquired taste). Bono’s rendition is thus qualitatively different from all the others we have encountered. Rather than remaining mired in the situation, to which “Hallelujah” is a recognition that brokenness “is no alibi for anything” (Cohen), or remaining in ecstatic utterance, in which it is just another “ode to life and love” (Buckley), through the song Bono demonstrates transcendence. I have argued elsewhere (Moore 2002) that this is a strategy U2 have adopted in their recent music, i.e. to subvert the subversions of secular postmodernity.

This is not the only location for Bono’s endless hallelujahs. On the recent *Elevation* tour, the regular closer was “Walk on,” which Bono finished with a few choruses of “Hallelujah” (see example 11).

¹³ My thanks to Dai Griffiths and Lee Marshall for enabling me to hear these.

EXAMPLE 11. U2, “Walk on” (n.d.), excerpt

Ha - le - lu - jah Ha - le - lu jah

Note the rising major third to which the word is sung. The effect of this on audiences was clear: “two heart-stopping moments occurred: Bono smashed up against the pulsing screen as the guitar screams of ‘The Fly’ died away, and during the encore, his quotes of Leonard Cohen’s ‘Hallelujah’ at the end of ‘Walk On.’ That’s elevation, all right. But don’t try to stick a label on it.”¹⁴

VI

I began thinking about the issues surrounding this song out of my concern that I had been negligent in my ignorance of Jeff Buckley’s recording, in the face of my forthright students. It seems to me, though, that there is no “right” point to enter a discourse (unless that point be the one at which one actually does enter it). E. H. Carr’s view on the historian’s entry into discourse represents my own:

We sometimes speak of the course of history as a “moving procession”. The metaphor is fair enough provided it does not tempt the historian to think of himself [sic et seq.] as an eagle surveying the scene from a lofty crag... The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession. And as the procession winds along, swerving now to the right and now to the left, and sometimes doubling back on itself, *the relative positions of different parts of the procession are constantly changing...* (Carr 1987, 35-36. My emphasis.)

My point of entry is with this strange Hebrew word, “hallelujah”. The repertoire employs ironic appropriations of the word (Cohen, Cale, Thompson) and, even with the translation to the secular realm, “authentic” usages (Collins, Charles, Twain). However, it also comprises tracks which, in different ways, move from the former position (the very appropriation of Cohen’s song itself) to the latter. It is this transcendence which matters to listeners to Buckley, and to me, as I listen to Bono.

¹⁴ Reviewed on <http://www.vh1.com/thewire/reviews/u2.jhtml> (site now discontinued). An mp3 file of the Calgary performance is available on <http://www.albaclick.com/Users/U2/sanjose.htm>.

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