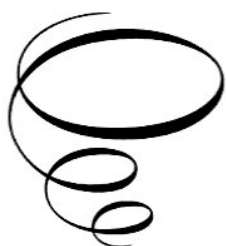


# Ethnic and Cultural Identity in Music and Song Lyrics

Edited by

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE WORLD SINGS “HALLELUJAH”

KATIE J. PETERSON AND PAUL LINDHOLDT

I just come here to sing you these songs that have been inspired by something that, I hope, is deeper and bigger than myself.<sup>1</sup>

—Leonard Cohen

Leonard Cohen was one of the greatest songwriters of our time. Bono of U2 once said, “he reminded me of Keats, or, you know, Shelley” (*I’m Your Man*, 2006). He went on to say that Cohen “is our Shelley, our Byron.” Poet Allen Ginsberg once said, “Dylan blew everybody’s mind—except Leonard’s” (qtd. in Zollo 330). During his lifetime, Cohen wore the hats of poet, novelist, songwriter, performer, artist, and producer—often at the same time. He toured all over the world, and continued to perform into his late seventies (*The Leonard Cohen Files*). He produced thirteen studio albums, the latest of which, *You Want It Darker*, was released Oct. 31st, 2016, exactly one week before his death on Nov. 7th (Ibid.). According to a statement by his manager, Robert Kory, he died peacefully in his sleep after “a fall in the middle of the night.” He lived to be 82, having spent his life everywhere from his hometown in Montreal to Hydra in Greece. He also spent five years on a mountain learning the ways of Zen Buddhism, wrote two successful novels and ten books of poetry, fell in and out of love numerous times, and had two children, Adam and Lorca. However, his life wasn’t all “tea and oranges,” to quote his second most-famous song, “Suzanne”; he lost his father when he was only nine years old, started suffering from serious depression in college, and experimented with many drugs—even being hospitalized for an OD (Kubernik 2014, 14-15, 26-27). He was a serial womanizer, leaving a string of relationships in his wake (Nadel 1996, 210). Yet, in the midst of all of this turmoil, “Hallelujah” was born.

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<sup>1</sup> Addressing the crowd before singing “Hallelujah” at a 1988 concert.

“Hallelujah” is a fascinating subject for analysis, and yet most of the biographies of Leonard Cohen dedicate only a few pages to it. This neglect is surprising, given the immense popularity of the song: more than 600 cover versions on YouTube in more than twenty-five languages. It has also become a standard for singing competitions worldwide, such as *The X-Factor*, *The Voice*, the *Got Talent* and *Idol* franchises. When asked about the numerous covers of it, Cohen said, “it’s a nice song, but too many people sing it.” During the course of our research, we discovered several articles about “Hallelujah” and even an entire book about it, Alan Light’s *The Holy and the Broken*.

However, we noticed important contexts for analysing the song that other writers had not addressed. There is, first, the biographical context in which the song was written. Strangely, not one of our sources connected the lyrics of “Hallelujah” to Cohen’s own life. Such neglect might be explicable because Cohen disliked it when critics read his songs biographically. However, since “Hallelujah” *seems* so personal, we feel it is time to go ahead and take the biographical plunge. Second, not one of the many articles and books we discovered on Leonard Cohen compared—or even mentioned—all six versions of “Hallelujah” that Cohen himself recorded. Comparing all six versions against Cohen’s own career, personal life, and growth as a performer furnishes insight into the author’s inspiration and intention when he released “Hallelujah” into the world. Third, a crucial piece of our analysis of “Hallelujah” is the lyrics. Oddly enough, none of the sources we found on “Hallelujah” looked at the lyrics in depth. If examined at all, they received a couple of lines of treatment here and there, or a stanza at most. We intend to analyse the lyrics from a literary perspective.

Leonard Cohen was no ordinary songwriter. The song took him some five years to write. Most songwriters spend anywhere from a few minutes to a few weeks working on a song—the rest of the time on arrangements and recording. Coming from a literary background, Cohen allowed his songs to mature like fine wines. He was in no rush. Nor was “Hallelujah” the only song that took him years to fine-tune and perfect. “Treaty,” from *You Want It Darker* (2016), was fifteen years in the making. In a 1993 interview, he admitted that he had shelves of notebooks, each filled with verses to his songs that might never see the light of day. Bono said in the Cohen tribute concert film, *I’m Your Man*, that “most of us would be humbled by the things that he throws away” (2006). Cohen also said in an interview that he had to completely finish a verse before he could discard it.

Because he began his artistic career as a poet, and continued to write and publish poetry his entire life, the lyrics of “Hallelujah” warrant the sort of regard that literary criticism brings to lyric poetry. Those lyrics bear up well beneath critical inquiry. The study of versification, known as prosody, may be applied to the lyrics of the song’s seven published verses (Light 2012, ix-xi). Those verses reveal the hand of a master craftsman at work in manipulating the shape of the meter and the rhyme. Such a topic is fertile ground for analysis. Author Alan Light did not discuss it, though, nor do any of the other hundreds of commentators we surveyed. Light, a former editor-in-chief for *Spin* magazine, was more interested in the interplay between the hundreds of cover versions of the song than in its inner workings. Cohen, though, practiced and prepared as a poet, proves worthy and deserving of poetic interpretation for his careful craft.

In order to examine the lyrics to “Hallelujah,” we must first have a reliable copy of them. We first turned to *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*, a collection curated by Cohen and some of his closest friends. However, one only need look at the second line of “Hallelujah” as printed in this collection to realize that it is not perfectly accurate. The line reads, “that David played to please the Lord,” when in fact, Cohen sings “that David played and it pleased the Lord” in every one of his six recorded versions. There are more mistakes like this throughout Light’s commentary on Cohen’s canon, small mistakes though they may be. Since Light’s is the only published book containing the lyrics to “Hallelujah” that came from Cohen’s company directly, a book whose copy Cohen presumably saw, that version still holds value for literary analysis.

Dissatisfied with the accuracy of these lyrics, we next turned to piano/vocal/guitar sheet music published by Cohen’s record label, Sony, to see if the lyrics would be more accurate. They were, but they still did not match any of the six recorded versions perfectly. We then took it upon ourselves to collate the “real” version of “Hallelujah”: one that was more complete and more accurate than existing versions. Thus, the following lyrics (and the order that the verses are in) became a passion-project. Our version of the lyrics below synthesizes nine sources: six recordings of “Hallelujah,” two sheet music versions, and the lyrics from *Stranger Music*. We determined which lyrics were the most accurate by averaging out the results based on 1) which variation of each line was sung/printed the most; 2) if there was a tie, we defaulted to the printed versions rather than the recordings, since the prosody interests us, and 3) if there was no majority for a line, i.e., all the versions of a line differed from one another, we went word-by-word and determined which word order was used most

consistently. For verse order, we followed a similar process of majority. Here are the lyrics to Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah":

V1:

I've heard there was a secret chord  
that David played, and it pleased the Lord  
but you don't really care for music, do you?  
It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth  
the minor fall, the major lift;  
the baffled king composing Hallelujah!

V2:

Your faith was strong but ya needed proof.  
You saw her bathing on the roof;  
her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you.  
She tied you to a kitchen chair  
She broke your throne and she cut your hair,  
and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah!

V3:

Now maybe there's a God above  
as for me, all, all I ever learned from love  
is how to shoot at someone who outdrew you.  
But it's not a complaint that you hear tonight,  
It's not some pilgrim who claims to have seen the light  
No, it's a cold and it's a very broken Hallelujah!

V4:

Baby, I been here before.  
I know this room, and I've walked this floor.  
I used to live alone before I knew you.  
And I've seen your flag on the marble arch,  
But listen, love; love is not some kinda vict'ry march  
No, it's a cold and it's a very broken Hallelujah!

V5:

You say I took the Name in vain;  
I don't even know the name.  
But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?  
There's a blaze of light in every word;  
it doesn't matter which you heard,  
the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!

V6:

There was a time ya let me know  
What's really goin' on below  
Ah, but now you never show it to me, do you?

I remember when I moved in you,  
And the holy dove, she was movin’ too  
And every single breath that we drew was Hallelujah!

V7:

I did my best, it wasn’t much.  
I couldn’t feel, so I learned to touch.  
I’ve told the truth, I didn’t come to fool you.  
And even though it all went wrong,  
I’ll stand right here before the Lord of Song  
With nothin’ on my tongue but Hallelujah!

In addition to analysing the lyrics, we also wanted to examine the musical choices that Cohen made in each arrangement. The table that follows is the result of that examination:

<b>Cohen’s “Hallelujah” Versions Side-by-Side</b>						
Year Recorded	1984	1988	1993	2008	2009	2013
Year Released	1984	1994	2016	2009	2010	2013
Album	<i>Various Positions</i>	<i>Cohen Live</i>	<i>Legendary FM Broadcasts</i>	<i>Live in London</i>	<i>Songs from the Road</i>	<i>Live in Dublin</i>
Length	4:40	6:54	7:59	7:20	7:32	7:25
Type	In-Studio	Live	Live	Live	Live	Live
City	New York	Austin	Kongresshaus	London	Indio	Dublin
Country	USA	USA	Switzerland	UK	USA	Ireland
Verse Order	V1 V2 V5 V7	V4 V6 V3 V7	V4 V6 V3 V7	V1 V2 V3 V4 V6 V7	V1 V2 V3 V4 V6 V7	V1 V2 V4 V5 V6 V7
Time Sig.	12/8	12/8	12/8	12/8	12/8	12/8
Tempo	56 bpm	43 bpm	42 bpm	54 bpm	54 bpm	55 bpm
Key	C Major	Bb Major	A Major	C Major	C Major	Bb Major
Instr.	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Keys/ Synth	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Organ	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Organ	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Organ - Sax	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Organ - Mando- lin	- Drums - Guitar - Bass - Organ -Mando- lin
Solo	N/A	Guitar	Guitar	Organ	Organ	Organ
Ending	Fade Out	Rit.	Rit.	Rit.	Rit.	Rit.

Among the dozens or hundreds of extant verse forms that poets have used in all languages throughout the centuries, Cohen's "Hallelujah" does not immediately match up with any other. Possibly it is a nonce form, one the singer originated to match a unique mood. These lines from the famous "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge match the meter: "So twice five miles of fertile ground/With walls and towers were girdled round;/And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills . . ." (ll. 6-8). However, not only are these lines aberrant lines within the Coleridge poem, they also end in a downward fall rather than in an upward lilt like Cohen's song.

Cohen follows a scheme of six-line verse stanzas known as sextets or sixains. The pattern of his rhyme and his meter is consistent throughout all seven stanzas. The lines rhyme AABCCB. In each stanza, the first and second lines of iambic tetrameter couplets rhyme (i.e., AA), as do the fourth and fifth lines (i.e., CC). The third and sixth lines of iambic pentameter likewise rhyme with each other (i.e., B and B). Remarkably, the rhyme of all fourteen pentameter lines in all seven stanzas is precisely the same: they all either rhyme with the title word *hallelujah* or repeat that word at the end of the stanza in the form of the single-word refrain of exultation. Such a rhyme is a type that we know as a feminine rhyme, the final syllable being unaccented or unstressed. If we take the four-syllable title word metrically, we see that it is two spondaic feet. The third syllable (*lu*) is the one most emphasized or stressed.

The clever rhymes that Cohen invented to harmonize with the title word constitute a large part of the song's lyric charm. They include "music, do you?" "overthrew you," "what's it to you?" "come to fool you," "before I knew you," "to me, do you?" and "who outdrew you." The first of those seven rhyming phrases ends with the casual pronunciation "do ya?" in three of his six versions (1984, 1988, 1993). Indeed, it is the playful interchange between the devotional formality of the title word contrasting the vernacular informality of the rhyming phrases that so charms. There are also internal rhymes such as "drew the," which deepen the language-music.

If all art originates in conflict, sparks aplenty fly from this song. Street-smart snarls counterpoint the title word of praise that concludes each stanza, particularly in the rhymes. The speaker is torn between reverential regard for the beloved and wounded reprisal. Notes of grief or regret also enter, as in the line "it all went wrong."

The interplay between the shorter (tetrameter, or four-beat) lines followed by the longer (pentameter, or five-beat) lines creates a build-up of tension followed by a welcome release achieved in the longer lines of



each stanza. A number of commentators mentioned in Light's book characterize such build-up and release as orgasmic. Indeed, form quite clearly follows function in the song. The dynamic form of the rhyme and meter, that is to say, follows the function of some of the most arresting and explicit diction. Stanza six, arguably a rueful backward glance toward some lost erotics, contains the lines, "There was a time you let me know/what's really going on below," followed by, "I remember when I moved in you."

Jeff Buckley, whose cover of "Hallelujah" has proven over the decades to be most enduring—more persistent, really, than the original recording—declared the song an homage to "the hallelujah of the orgasm. It's an ode to life and love" (Light 2012, xi). Other musicians likewise note the song's suggestive connection to sex. Strange, then, that critics have been so hesitant to connect the song to Cohen's personal life. Our guess is that kindly sensitivity to his privacy has kept speculation in check. Since Leonard Cohen died in 2016, some probing might now take place without violating that privacy.

Alan Light, the foremost biographer of the song, has capably compiled commentary from other musicians and spliced it to the songwriter's life, but even he was hesitant in his 2012 book to personalize any motives behind its composition. Light did concede that the song "tormented [Cohen] for years" (xvi): a pointed disclosure that invites a biographical reading of the lyrics. A tormented artist, an enigmatic song, and a growing consensus on its sexuality all hint at a hidden context. Cohen acknowledged he had "started a journal chronicling my failures to address this obsessive concern with the melody" (Light 2012, 4). Its lyrics obsessed him too, judging by the many discarded verses he wrote. Originally recorded in 1984, the song underwent a major revision and a rerecording first in 1988. Light acknowledged that "this edit foregrounded the pains of sex and romance, offering hope as a more defensive protection against defeat, a backstop to prevent us from giving in to despair" (40). The emotional waters of the song run deep, obsessively so. We believe a previously unexamined biographical basis of the song might go some way to explaining its artistic force.

An arresting lyrical flourish in the song comes early. In the first sentence, third line, the speaker asks, "you don't really care for music, do you?" In folk and pop songs, direct address is common enough. Two comparable songs share its accusatory tone. Those songs are "Lady Writer" by Dire Straits and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" by Bob Dylan. The lyrics of all three use the second-person point of view in a similarly snappish manner, and the circumstances of composition of all

three songs bear close comparison. Dylan sings, in a song that foretells a breakup, “you just kinda wasted my precious time” (1963). Dylan’s song was written for the artist Suze Rotolo, who also appears on the cover of the album with him (McLellan, 2011). Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits bitterly addresses a woman who spurned him: “I know you never read a book” and “You couldn’t hardly write your name” (1979). According to journalist Fiona Gruber, “The lyrics of the 1979 Dire Straits song is about a breakup.” Cohen’s lyric is less acerbic, more vernacular and clever, than either of its predecessors.

Part of the memorable ingenuity of the “Hallelujah” lyrics lies in their integration of irony. Deploying the vehicle of music, the poet indicts the addressee with a distaste for music. That tone of indictment or accusation evaporates after the first sentence. But because it opens the song, it adds a personal note that permeates the rest of the song. Coupled with the note of lamentation and nostalgia that informs the final verses, the erotic line “I remember when I moved in you” deepens the song’s intimate and private mood. Listeners might be forgiven if they feel like voyeurs invited to peep into the songwriter’s private life by a set of open blinds.

Many pundits and fans characterize Cohen’s prime musical genre as “erotic despair,” and videographers have created dozens of steamy interpretations of work. His early song “Suzanne,” first published in 1966 as a poem, contains the line, risqué for the time, “you’ve touched her perfect body with your mind.” The song was written for a dancer in Montreal, Suzanne Verdall, one of several women identified at various periods in his career as muses (Simmons 2012, 124-30). The lyrics are outright autobiography, Cohen and all his commentators claim that his relationship with the married Ms. Verdall was allegedly platonic. His affairs with a long list of women artists and celebrities who came later were far more publicly erotic. Not all his songs about love and lust strike notes of indictment or desperation, though; consider the country-inflected “Closing Time,” a song about what happens after the bar closes down for the night.

The five-year journey to compose “Hallelujah” began at exactly the time his relationship with a second Suzanne was breaking up. That relationship resulted in two children, Adam and Lorca, born in 1972 and 1974. The woman was Suzanne Elrod, a painter from Miami. The two met in New York in 1969 when she was living with another man. Ten years later Leonard and Suzanne split, in 1979, the same year he began working on the song (Simmons 2012, 338). They were “together” for ten years. We put the word in scare quotes to highlight the shakiness of the relationship. Cohen was on the road and in the California monastery more often than he

was in Montreal, Greece and Franklin, Tennessee, with his common-law wife Suzanne. At the same time, he was also often preoccupied with other women.

The songwriter's distaste for his marriage is well documented. Just after his son Adam was born, he wrote to himself, in an unpublished archival manuscript, "Fuck this marriage [and] your dead bed night after night" (Simmons 2012, 271). In the same manuscript, he resolved to "study the hatred I have for her and how it is transmuted into desire by solitude and distance". Correlation must not be confused with causation, of course, but the twisted desire in this journal entry, coupled with the accusation implicit in the lyrics of "Hallelujah," make his vexed relationship with the mother of his children a probable source of inspiration for the song. Few parents would be willing to indict a lover publicly when they knew the mutual children would be apt to chance upon that indictment. As a point of comparison, Cohen's remorse about identifying Janis Joplin explicitly as the sex partner in "Chelsea Hotel #2" has by now become legendary. "Leonard expressed regret on several occasions later at having named Joplin as the fellatrix and muse of the song," Simmons wrote (200). He could not risk the same mistake with Suzanne.

In 1974, in the months before daughter Lorca was born, Cohen was recording *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*. He was on tour in Europe and the Middle East. He travelled to and lived in war zones in Israel and Ethiopia. In those travels, he was acting out political convictions, in part. But he was also "avoiding the war that awaited him at home with Suzanne" (Simmons 2012, 275). A month before Lorca was born, he returned to Montreal (Nadel 1996, 189). There, an interviewer asked him about marriage. He declared marriage to be

a discipline of extreme severity. To really turn your back on all the other possibilities and all the other experiences of love, of passion, of ecstasy, and to determine to find it within one embrace is a high and righteous notion. Marriage today is the monastery; the monastery today is freedom'." (281)

Such a paradox lies at the heart of his religious and his spiritual journeys alike. Five years after the interview, in 1979, Suzanne would leave him forever. That same year, he began the arduous process of composing "Hallelujah."

The confessional lyrics and matched melodic structure of the song "Hallelujah" point to a neglected source. We believe that source was his life with his common-law wife. What was perhaps an open secret among

his biographers and critics while Leonard Cohen was still alive, writing, touring and reading, might now finally come to light. His ten-year marriage that resulted in two children must certainly have crept into his consciousness and songs. We believe that marriage helps explain the enduring allure of “Hallelujah,” the deep feelings that so clearly imbue it, and the enigmatic quality of the lyrics sung so sincerely by the many hundreds of performers who have covered it.

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