Though by that time Leonard Cohen had long been considered a folk god and one of modern music’s greatest poets, his nine-song LP “Various Positions” created little fanfare when it was released in 1984. Though the album contained such soon-to-be classic Cohen compositions as “Dance Me to the End of Love,” “If It Be Your Will,” and the now-immortal “Hallelujah,” Cohen’s label, Columbia, refused to release it in the US due to its expected middling commercial prospects. Eventually, the album was picked up and distributed by the independent label Passport Records.

The musical contents of “Various Positions”—“Hallelujah” among them—would have been fully regulated to the world of obscure album cuts had the song not resonated so strongly with at least one Cohen devotee, and then another, and then another, ultimately giving the song a spectacular and unexpected after life.

The first disciple was John Cale, founding member of the seminal rock group the Velvet Underground. When a Cohen tribute LP, “I’m Your Fan” (1991), was in the works, and Cale was asked to take part, he chose to cover “Hallelujah.”

In contrast to Cohen’s original treatment, which has a far more forceful and gospel feel to it, Cale slowed down the melody to the song and turned this potential rabble-rouser into a powerful lament. Cale also codified the song’s lyrics into the form we recognize today. As created by Cohen, “Hallelujah,” originally, had a plethora of verses. Cale recounted several years after, “I called and asked [Leonard] to send the lyrics. I had one of those old fax machines. I went out to dinner and [when I returned] my floor was covered with paper.”

Forced to cull Cohen’s words, Cale chose the verses of the song that are today the most sung. They were the ones that would eventually be replicated by Jeff Buckley in his historic 1994 version of the song. For better or worse, Cale’s edits in some ways split the subject of the song: what remains in “Hallelujah” is almost half spiritual/religious in subject matter while the other half is a love song, the latter being longing, tragic and even sexual in nature.

For many listeners—and Cohen devotees—Cale’s revised “Hallelujah” was the highpoint of the “I’m You Fan” album. Cale would go on to resurrect it often in concert and Cale’s version would serve as the closing theme for the 1996 bio pic “Basquiat.”

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Jeff Buckley was born in 1966, the son of folk and jazz artist Tim Buckley, though he and his father met only once during his youth. Despite his father’s absence, the younger Buckley also
had musical leanings and, by his early 20s, was already gigging around New York City playing
his own brand of guitar-based rock. Around 1992, Buckley was house sitting for friends in
Brooklyn when he came upon an album titled “I’m Your Fan.” Playing it, he became intrigued
by a song he heard—“Hallelujah.”

Soon Buckley was strumming it on his guitar. In Buckley’s hands, “Hallelujah” seemed to
become imbued with even greater longing than Cale’s already meditative version. Soon, the
almost decade-old Cohen tune would be a regular component and major highlight of Buckley’s
folk club sets. By the time—1993—that Buckley began work on his first album, it was all but
assured that “Hallelujah” would be one of the proposed CD’s central selections.

Buckley’s only completed LP, “Grace,” was released in 1994. His now exalted version of
“Hallelujah” served as a literal centerpiece for the album; it is number six on the CD’s litany of
songs.

Upon its release, Buckley’s “Grace” album rose to only 149 on the US album chart. Still, its
good critical notices (and collection of outspoken fans like Robert Plant and Jimmy Page)
allowed Buckley some level of cachet. He toured the US and Europe, collaborated with various
other musicians, and began work on a follow-up LP.

Following his musical muse, Buckley moved to Memphis in early 1997. Sadly, in May of ’97,
during an impromptu, late-night swim in Memphis’s Wolf Harbor River, Buckley drowned. He
was 31 years old.

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As gorgeous as Buckley’s “Hallelujah” was, it was, with his sudden and tragic passing, fated no
doubt to become a footnote had it been for the next development in the remarkable chain of
events that has made “Hallelujah” such a modern-day standard.

In the early 2000s, movie producer/director Steven Spielberg and his production company,
Dreamworks, were putting the final touches on their soon-to-be-blockbuster animated film
“Shrek.” During one heartfelt moment in the film, as the green ogre hero is pining for his love,
Princess Fiona, the filmmakers slotted in Cale’s version of “Hallelujah.” As the finalizing of the
film progressed, they soon realized that not only did this very mature song work well in this
children’s film, in fact, there was nothing else that could possibly take its place!

Though Cale’s version of the song appears in the actual final film, Canadian singer-songwriter
Rufus Wainwright produced his own version for the movie’s very successful soundtrack.
Wainwright, hence, became yet another voice, a vessel, in the chorus of voices that were slowly
bringing the majesty of “Hallelujah” to the masses.

After the opening of the film in May 2001, “the ‘Shrek’ song,” as it came to be known to many,
slowly began to work its way into the memories of both young and old via the highly successful
animated movie and its soundtrack.

But though both Cale’s and Wainwright’s version stood the chance to become the song’s
definitive interpretation, Buckley’s earlier take would soon take over in prominence—via the
tragic events of 9/11.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, radio, TV outlets and the nation in
general struggled with a means to express their collective grief. As always, people turned to
music. Cable channel VH1 was one of the first major broadcasters to make use of Buckley’s
“Hallelujah” as a musical backdrop to the stark footage of destruction and heroism that flooded
in after the tragedy. Soon, innumerable other broadcasters and almost every radio station across the country were playing Buckley’s haunting, moving “Hallelujah” as both tribute and comfort. Slowly, steadily, “Hallelujah” became a part of the culture.

Yet despite that massive, albeit tragic, platform, Jeff Buckley’s “Hallelujah” had still yet to peak.

Sadly, the events of 9/11 were not the end of tragedies in people lives or in the life of our country. And throughout these other times of mourning, “Hallelujah” has often been there. Along with it being used at national events and on the evening news, the song has also found itself often evoked at people’s funerals.

However, the song’s vivid, yet obscure lyrics—sometimes spiritual, sometimes secular, sometimes suggestive—and its hopeful chorus (“Hallelujah!”) have transformed it into anything but a dirge. As often as it is used in times of mourning, it has also been utilized in times of celebration.

Since the start of the new century, the song’s omnipresence has only grown. It has become a go-to number for a variety of musicians, a modern-day “Yesterday.” Along with its frequent performance in folk clubs and on TV talent shows, “Hallelujah” (in its stripped down, Buckley/Cale approach) has been covered by the likes of k.d. lang, Bono, Willie Nelson, Imogene Heap, Chris Botti, Bon Jovi, Justin Timberlake, Celine Dion, and Il Divo. Couples have even danced to it on TV’s “Dancing With the Stars.”

Still, despite this multitude of voices and versions, the late Jeff Buckley’s version of “Hallelujah” remains the standard bearer. The public certainly seemed to think so; in May 2008, 11 years after his passing, Buckley’s version hit number one on the “Billboard” chart.

Many things have served to make “Hallelujah” the cultural touchstone that it has become: Leonard Cohen’s fine song craftsmanship, the multiple interpretations of its lyrics which he skillfully built into the song; Buckley’s searing yet thoughtful treatment of it; even Buckley’s tragic death which has only added to the song’s sense of loss. Those and other reasons, along with the song’s trajectory into the public consciousness, are detailed in author Alan Light’s excellent 2012 meditation on the song and its unexpected lifespan in his book “The Holy or the Broken.”

Long before “Hallelujah” became a popular selection for both public remembrance or for private reflection, Buckley’s recording of it was an extraordinary achievement—the perfect meeting of artist and song that, together, crafted something ethereal and sublime. That it has since become such a part of America’s soundscape only underscores its importance and the power of music to unite and touch so many people. In other words, it’s the definitive example of what it means to be part of the nation’s National Recording Registry.