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Singing 'Hallelujah' this Christmas season

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It's the season for Handel's "Messiah," with glorious renditions of the "Hallelujah" chorus soaring from small church rafters to symphony halls to shopping mall flash mobs. Yes, it's technically an Easter hymn, but we traditionally associate it with Christmas. Handel masterfully captured the deeply human impulse of praise, of raising our voices to the heavens in joyous song.

Another, more contemporary "Hallelujah" has become so iconic that its story has warranted a newly released book of its own. Leonard Cohen's ballad "Hallelujah" has been covered by hundreds of artists and is in numerous movie and TV soundtracks. Perhaps the most whimsical inclusion was in the movie "Shrek." Alan Light, a music journalist and former *Rolling Stone* magazine editor, has chronicled the song's journey in *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of "Hallelujah"*. The CBC Books website not only gives a book review, it also provides links to recordings by Cohen, Buckley and Bono.

In 2006, Kelly Mooney, a young woman from Prince Edward Island in Canada, was asked by her parish priest if she had ever heard of this lovely song, which repeats "hallelujah" in the chorus, and could she sing it in church on Easter Sunday? She went home and looked at the lyrics. Returning to her pastor, she said "Oh, Father, I don't think this is a good idea!" She went home and rewrote the lyrics. The finished product melds the passion story with one of the most moving melodies of our time. She wrote to Cohen, asking for mechanical rights to the song, which, surprisingly, she received two years later. Mooney tells this story and sings the song on YouTube.

The endless list of artists that sing covers of "Hallelujah" are a credit to the musical and poetic genius of Leonard Cohen. The fact that he gave permission for it to be transformed into a Christian song is a credit to Leonard Cohen, the man.

Hallelujah! Whether an earthy response to life's deep moments or a glorious song of praise to God, the word has power to stir the mind and move the heart.

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