

Carol Service 2024 – ‘Hallelujah’

It's summer 1984, and a songwriter of astronomical talent and middling success walks into a pokey studio in New York. He's clutching a set of battered notebooks which contain about 150 verses of a song that he's been writing and re-writing on and off for ten years. A song that has been driving him to utter madness, residing tormentedly in his mind. The brutal recording process whittles the number of verses down to just four and the song is *finally* wrestled into existence.

It flops. The record company hates both the song and the album, and (this is almost unheard of) simply refuses to release it. Subsequently, it enjoys a tiny release in Canada in December 1984, but nowhere else. The song, agonised over for ten years, is quickly forgotten, a footnote in musical history.

Seven years pass. Surprisingly, the song is rediscovered. Another artist is allowed access to the songwriter's drafts, and replaces the final two verses with three others. It works, and the revised version is sung on the Jools Holland Show in 1992. Word starts to spread, and the song starts to be recorded by others, and others, and then in 2001 appears on the soundtrack of one of the biggest grossing films of all time. By 2008 the song has achieved the almost unique feat of being number 1 *and* number 2 in the charts at Christmas, recorded by two different artists – a battle eventually won by that year's winner of X Factor.

Fast forward to 2024 and that obscure, over-looked, under-estimated little song has been covered by more than three hundred artists: a song that once had its maestro banging his head against the floor in frustration, is now world-famous and belongs to us all. It's part of the cultural air we breathe. I wonder if you can guess what it is? Here's how it starts:

I heard there was a secret chord, that David played and it pleased the Lord, but you don't really care for music, do you... (Sound familiar? Here's the rest of the first verse...) It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth, the minor falls and the major lifts, the baffled king composing Hallelujah. Hallelujah...

I've long been fascinated by this song. I find it touches me on a very deep level, much more than most songs ever do – but at the same time for many years I wasn't sure what to make of it: the biblical references, the tortured spirituality. I've listened to multiple cover versions, in most of which you'll find this line twice: 'it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah.' The spiritual message sounds sarcastic, cynical – hallelujah almost as a defiant shaking of the fist at God...

...but I'd never heard Leonard Cohen's original version or read the lyrics to his last two verses. And in those, it's not 'a cold and broken hallelejah', it's 'the holy or the broken hallelujah'. When I finally saw this, suddenly I could connect with the song in a whole new light. **It's all about finding the holy in the brokenness of our world:** a secret chord which pleased the Lord, a strong faith which wrestles with its worldly appetites, a fading love affair which brings God-given highs but ends in recrimination and accusations of spiritual apathy.

And yet, and yet, a thread of grace runs through the song, at least as Cohen wrote it. Into this broken world comes something holy, in our mess the singer can still cry 'Hallelujah.'

It sounds very much like the Christmas Story. The holy breaks into our mess. A teenage mother who bears disgrace, a husband who lives with lifelong innuendo, two groups of outsiders – one dreaming of revolution, the other dreaming of revelation – invited to share in something they had no right to be a part of. And what's often missed is that this story, as St. Luke tells it, is full of song. Songs of praise which nevertheless acknowledge the darkness and the brokenness of our world:

My soul magnifies the Lord, sings Mary, as she reminds herself – and us – of the rulers and the proud who have so often lorded it over the humble and the hungry.

Praise be to the God of Israel, sings Zechariah, as he reminds himself and us that God's people are usually hated and have enemies.

Glory to God in the highest sing the angels, while the shepherds cower, terrified on the hillside.

Lord you now let your servant go in peace, sings Simeon, while reminding Mary and us that a sword will pierce her heart.

It's a holy or a broken Hallelujah – or maybe, it's both. Maybe that's the point. Maybe we only find the truly holy in our brokenness and mess. Holiness which keeps itself totally apart, which cuts itself off from anything that pollutes is not the holiness of the God of the Bible. This God gets his hands dirty. This God finds Adam and Eve in the garden, calling 'where are you?' This God finds Moses in exile and Gideon in the winepress and even Saul hiding behind the luggage. This God finds Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the Magi – he even finds Herod, though Herod refuses to admit it. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The Christmas story is the holy and the broken Hallelujah.

So, if you'll allow me, I've written some more verses to Leonard Cohen's great song – he had 150, 6 more won't hurt. This is the Nativity Hallelujah...

A teenage girl, in the prime of youth,
Was surprised and awed by angelic truth
That God's Son would share our broken planet through her....
Never mind 'good news,' she was terrified;
Yet in faith and trust she boldly cried:
'The Lord's servant who obeys his word: Hallelujah.'

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

A carpenter, working in his shed,
Heard the village gossip with shame and dread
That another joe had met his girl and 'knew' her....
He planned divorce, but received a dream
That things were not as they might seem;
It's a heavenly parent, the Spirit's 'Hallelujah.'

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

The village roughs, on a dark hillside,
Told tales to keep eyes open wide
That Rome's vast pow'r soon got what's coming to her....
And then the sky was filled with light:
'Glory to God' o'er their flocks at night –
Angelic song, a Saviour's birth: Hallelujah!

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

Some sorcerers from lands afar,
Bewitched, beguiled, by a glinting star
Risked life and reputation to pursue her....
Jerusalem was left astir,
As gold and frankincense and myrrh
Were brought in global tribute: Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

An aging king, in an ivory tower –
A corpse decaying, a fading power –
Heard talk a coming new King overthrew you...
He ranted, raved, sent soldiers out
To wreak havoc, but his luck ran out:
The King was safe in exile, Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

A family in a broken world,
A plan awaits God's time unfurled;
Salvation comes, O precious child, right through you.
Although the goads they wear you down,
A wooden cross to a golden crown:
It's the holy in our broken 'Hallelujah.'

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

As I close, I'd like to read you one more verse – it's the last verse of Cohen's original, and, once the song became famous, and formed the final encore to all his concerts, is a verse he would often sing kneeling. It was, if you like, Cohen's prayer. This Christmas, today, could it be yours?

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

Amen.