TV scene stealer is new star of iTunes generation

By Geoff Edgers
Globe Staff / March 14, 2008

If you watch television, the song has by now become unmistakable: A spare piano chord, a breathy voice, and opening lines flecked with biblical references before a quietly uplifting chorus kicks in. This is "Hallelujah," a 23-year-old song that has become the most trafficked tune of the soundtrack era, setting the mood for dozens of TV shows and films.

This week, the no-longer cult classic achieved loftier status. Its most popular cover version, released by the late Jeff Buckley in 1994, zoomed to number one on the iTunes download chart, thanks to that ultimate signifier of 21st-century ubiquity, a performance by an "American Idol" competitor. At the same time, Leonard Cohen, the song's enigmatic 73-year-old composer, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, serenaded with a version of the song by popular Irish balladeer Damien Rice.

"This is a watershed moment," said Michael Barthel, a Syracuse University graduate student who last year presented an academic paper on the song's staying power. "Every generation discovers 'Hallelujah,' and right now, a whole new generation of people is discovering it."

How does a rock-era song becomes a standard at a moment when radio play is hopelessly fragmented and pop songs are more beat-driven than lyrical? More often than not, it's delivered in the background of a wordless montage featuring life, death, or heartache. Among the TV shows that have given "Hallelujah" prominent play are "House," "The West Wing," "Cold Case," "The L Word," "Nip/Tuck," "Lost," and "Ugly Betty." With its somber tone, "Hallelujah" has been used to dramatize real-life tragedy, as well, including episodes of "Without a Trace" and "Third Watch" centered on Sept. 11, not to mention a "Dateline NBC" program on the Virginia Tech shootings.

"It's so emotional and has a slow build and definitely can pack a punch," said Alyson Vidoli, music coordinator for GO Music Services, which finds music for "House," "Dexter," and several other shows.

"Somehow, it always seems to fit for the moment, and when you hear it, you say, 'We need more songs that are inspirational,' " added Tom Calderone, executive vice president of VH1.

Singer Brandi Carlile calls "Hallelujah" the "best song ever written."

"We have jazz standards and folks standards that have been passed down to generations," said Carlile. "We don't have that in rock and roll right now. So it's kind of exciting to think of a song like 'Hallelujah' being sung 200 years like a folk song may be."

It's an unlikely path for a song that was barely noticed upon its release. Cohen, a Canadian cult hero, wrote "Hallelujah," and recorded it in the early '80s for his "Various Positions" album. In the past, he has described it as "a song about
the broken,” but the singer, who rarely talks to the press, declined an interview this week.

The album did not make a dent in the record charts. The song’s long path to iTunes began in the early ’90s when another cult hero, former Velvet Underground member John Cale, decided to re-record “Hallelujah” for a tribute album to Cohen.

“I called and asked him to send the lyrics,” Cale said this week. “I had one of those old fax machines. I went out to dinner and my floor was covered in paper. There were 15 verses of this song. I went through and just picked out the cheeky verses.”

Cale’s recording - stripped down and sung with a simple piano accompaniment - would be embraced by Buckley, who was the son of ’60s and ’70s singer Tim Buckley. Cale’s version has been used on the sitcom “Scrubs” and in “Shrek,” but it is Jeff Buckley’s recording, released on his 1994 album, “Grace,” that has been featured most often in television shows. And it doesn’t come cheap. Vidoli said that the rights to use a big song like “Hallelujah” can cost as much as $40,000, which most cable networks can’t afford.

Networks, however, haven’t shied away from the Buckley rendition. “The O.C.” used it twice before featuring another version, by singer Imogen Heap, to mark the death of Marissa, a lead character, in the show’s third season. In “Ugly Betty,” the Buckley version plays as a character collapses and dies of a heart attack.

Many, though, hadn’t heard the song until last week’s ”American Idol” performance by the blue-eyed, dreadlocked finalist Jason Castro. “I thought it was fantastic,” said Kaore Bonell, 37, a business consultant in Los Angeles. “I had to research it and see who did it before and what it was about.”

He also had to own the song, and bought Castro’s ”Hallelujah” on iTunes. Heeding the advice of ”Idol” judges who praised the Buckley version on the air, thousands of fans downloaded that one in addition, or instead.

The post-”Idol” surge pleased Mary Guibert, Buckley’s mother. But she has grown concerned that the version recorded by her son, who drowned in 1997, may be reaching saturation. Guibert does not have the authority to deny permission for the song’s use but is consulted by his record label when requests are made.

”It’s not special if it’s everywhere,” said Guibert.

Fans of the song, though, say they see no reason to stop playing it.

”If you were to tell me that playing this song as a cover is totally cliche, I’d tell you so is breathing,” said Amanda Palmer, singer with the local punk cabaret duo The Dresden Dolls.

”Has there been too much Beethoven played by orchestras?” said Howard Kramer, curatorial director for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ”The cool thing is, a guy like Leonard Cohen is not a young man. He’s never been particularly commercially successful as a musician. If this is going to make him a very comfortable old man, great for him.”

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