

LEONARD COHEN'S LOVE ELEGIES

GABRIEL ERTSGAARD

Leonard Cohen
Hallelujah & Songs from His Albums
Sony Music, Legacy, 2022

There are no new songs on Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah & Songs from His Albums*, and only one previously unreleased recording. Yet this posthumous collection arguably does one thing better than any prior Cohen release—it clarifies his place among the great elegiac poets. The songs that made Cohen's name—such as "Hallelujah" and "Suzanne"—are love songs, but this doesn't explain their full power. Just as importantly, these songs are elegies.

What is an elegy? This genre of poetry stretches back to ancient times, and its equivalent appears in cultures around the world. That's because the elegy is a poem of lamentation for the dead, and the experience of loss is universal. Although elegies are poems of mourning, they're also poems of consolation. That marks a key difference between elegy and tragedy. Elegy takes the subject matter of tragedy, but

insists on resolving toward a different attitude.

Cohen's songs put a twist on the ancient genre, for they tend to be about the deaths of relationships rather than the deaths of people. Perhaps that's why they are more obviously love songs than elegies. Yet if we look at his most famous song, "Hallelujah," or the song that first made him famous, "Suzanne," we see that elegiac combination of mourning and consolation. Both songs tell stories of doomed romances, weighted with biblical allusions. In both songs, the speaker is grateful for these relationships despite his pain, and that gratitude is the source of his consolation.

Not every Cohen song follows this template, but his best songs often give us twists on it. "Bird on the Wire" places the Cohen persona earlier in the relationship, before it is clearly doomed (although there are warning signs). The same could be said of "I'm Your Man." "Famous Blue Raincoat" is an elegy for a friendship rather than a romantic

relationship, with consolation rooted in gratitude. “Anthem” is an elegy for political idealism, with consolation rooted in hope. In “Recitation w/ N. L.” loss and consolation melt together into a gray slurry of resignation. Conversely, “Come Healing” offers a hymn to its titular theme. No song claims to capture the full truth; they all offer us fragments of experience.

The collection ends with the titular songs of Cohen’s final two albums: “You Want It Darker” and “Thanks for the Dance.” In the former, Cohen finally wrestles with a literal death—his own. This may be his greatest and most Jewish song, as he confronts God in the face of terminal cancer. Yet Cohen finds himself praising God even as he rages. This tension certainly suits the songwriter’s corpus, but it would also fit the Book of Psalms. In his dying days, the elegiac poet sang us his own elegy.

When Cohen was awarded a posthumous Grammy for this song, we had every reason to believe it was his final utterance. But the wily troubadour had one last gambit. He’d already entrusted others with the task of shepherding a final album across the finish line. Three years later, *Thanks for the Dance* appeared, based on the same recording sessions as *You Want It Darker*.

“Thanks for the Dance” returns to and subverts the classic Cohen formula of

gratitude for an imperfect relationship. Unlike his earlier hits, this song suggests that the speaker and his dance partner have weathered storms together and made their relationship work over the long haul. However, there’s still a hovering sense of things drawing to a close, and due to outside knowledge, we cannot help but recognize the voice of a dying man saying goodbye. Yet the bitter edge of “You Want It Darker” has faded, while thanksgiving remains.

When Cohen’s fellow Canadian k. d. lang sang “Hallelujah” at the Vancouver Olympics in 2010, the announcer called it a song of peace. At the time, I was skeptical. A song of love and longing, surely, but how was “Hallelujah” a peace song? I’ve since come around to the idea. In an age when polarization and rage threaten to overwhelm our civil institutions, resolving toward gratitude is indeed a peacebuilding practice. In his music, his living, and his dying, Cohen took us to that field Rumi wrote about—beyond good versus evil, beyond joy versus sorrow, where we might look upon the messiness of life and say, “Thanks for the dance.”