

Researchers identify criteria for 'secular hymns'

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Steve Thomsen. Credit: Nate Edwards/BYU Photo

Justin Timberlake sang it for a Haiti earthquake-relief fundraiser. Pentatonix put it on their Christmas album. Red Sox fans listened to it at the first game after the Boston Marathon bombing. Makes sense: the song's called "Hallelujah," after all.

Thing is, Leonard Cohen's now iconic song "is not religious," said BYU Communications Professor Steve Thomsen. "It's about Cohen's failed attempts at relationships."

Yet it's a song listeners have connected to on a spiritual level. And it's not the only one: Thomsen's recent article in the *Journal of Media and Religion* identifies a group of what he and coauthors call "secular hymns," including "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," "Don't Stop Believing," "Imagine," "Free Fallin'" and "What a Wonderful World."

"It's not surprising—in the absence of other sources—that music, which is very powerful in and of itself, can create that spiritual feeling," said Thomsen, who teamed with communications

professor Quint Randle and communications master's student Matt Lewis to generate a list of criteria for what makes a pop song a secular hymn.

Lewis and Randle both moonlight as songwriters and performers, so "when Steve brought this idea up from a scholarly perspective, I totally honed in on it," Randle said. "I'm like a kid in a candy store."

In the article, the trio acknowledges that a growing number of people—particularly millennials—don't identify with a specific religion but still consider themselves spiritual. "We wondered what fills in the gap for these people," said Thomsen.

Daniel Stout, *Journal of Media and Religion* coeditor, called their resulting article "a breakthrough discussion of how people find the spiritual in popular culture. It's one of the first peer-reviewed articles about how the cultural categories of entertainment and religion are blending, especially for young adults."

To create their secular-hymn criteria, the trio looked at Cohen's "Hallelujah" as a baseline and explored other songs that have been used repeatedly in public settings for purposes that cross over into the spiritual. Secular hymns, they determined, need to transcend generations, like traditional hymns. "That became a principal component: there had to be multiple generations that have come to see something in that song," Thomsen said.

Secular hymns typically also include religious themes without being overtly religious. "Hallelujah," for example, "is about redemption and deliverance and our profane experience on Earth," said Randle. "Most traditional hymns are about deliverance and redemption, so all we're doing in some of these secular hymns is finding ways of creating or interpreting that same redemption and deliverance in [pop music](#)."

And as "Hallelujah" has been, secular hymns can

be used to set the tone for grieving, celebration or other kinds of reflection—whether on a family, community or national level. Ultimately, said Thomsen, "these songs are created and then take on a life of their own."

For listeners looking to tap into their spirituality, "these types of artists will have more meaning, because it's not just about puppy love anymore, it's about redemption and deliverance," Randle said. "It shows the diversity of rock and roll or pop music, and shows that there are things out there that are redeeming in some ways."

More information: Steven R. Thomsen et al. Pop Music and the Search for the Numinous: Exploring the Emergence of the "Secular Hymn" in Post-Modern Culture, *Journal of Media and Religion* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2016.1209392](https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2016.1209392)

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