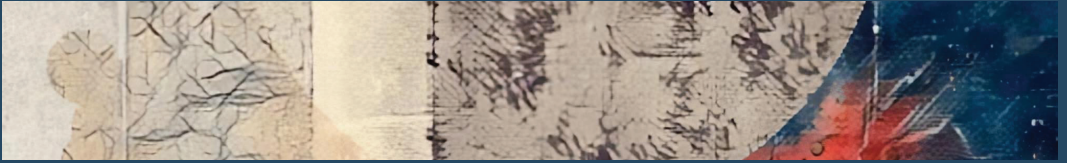




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A PHILOSOPHY
OF COVER SONGS



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3. Listening to Covers

In this chapter, I use the distinction between mimic covers and rendition covers to understand the evaluation and appreciation of covers. Before turning to that, we should talk about the fact that covers get a bad rap.*

The dim view of covers

People often take a dim view of covers. Simon Frith claims that a ‘cover version is almost always heard as bad’ (1996: 69). He recounts, ‘One aspect of learning to be a rock fan in the 1960s was, in fact, learning to prefer originals to covers. And this was, as I recall, something that did have to be learned: nearly all the records I had bought in the late 1950s had been cover versions’ (1996: 70).

This was well set in popular consciousness by 1973, when Ralph J. Gleason wrote in *Rolling Stone*, ‘One of the most interesting developments of the past decade and the predominance of the performer/composer has been the relative absence of “cover” versions of hit songs.’ As I discussed in Chapter 1, this is an exaggeration. There were still covers. Gleason acknowledges as much but insists that ‘the drive for individuality in recent years has prevented most possible instances of this and it’s something to be thankful for.’ The change is not whether there were covers, then, but how they were viewed. What Gleason calls the ‘predominance of the performer/composer’ was actually the rise of a certain ideal—the model of the all-around genius who writes, performs, and records their own songs. This expectation that one person should write and perform the songs, along with conceptions of individuality and authenticity, make covers seem like a bad thing.

Standard 1960s exemplars of the ideal are Bob Dylan and the Beatles, but it requires a certain selective memory to think of them that way.

*Parts of this chapter are adapted from work I coauthored with Cristyn Magnus and Christy Mag Uidhir (Magnus et al. 2013).

Although Bob Dylan is the archetypal singer-songwriter, he is a strange source for the dim view of covers. He both played a lot of covers and wrote songs that were widely covered. His songs are lyrically powerful but lend themselves to musical reimagining. It is unlikely that they would have penetrated our culture so deeply if there had only been Dylan's own versions. Peter, Paul, and Mary had a hit with 'Blowin' in the Wind' just a month after the 1963 release of Dylan's version. The Byrds came to fame with their hit cover of 'Mr. Tambourine Man', and several other Dylan songs figure among their greatest hits. In the 1960s, as Tom Petty puts it, 'The Byrds was where you first heard Dylan' (Zollo 2012: ch. 1). Jimi Hendrix recorded the definitive version of Dylan's 'All Along the Watchtower.' Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' was covered at least a dozen times within two years of its release and became an anthem of change, arguably a standard. I could easily extend this list, but the general point is that appreciating Dylan as a songwriter should give one a positive view of covers, of what they can do both for the writer of the song and for the musician recording them.

Once the Beatles gave up touring and dedicated themselves to studio production, they just made original tracks. So they provide some basis for the dim view of covers. Describing his own start in the 1960s, Petty comments that most bands emulated the line-up of The Beatles and 'everybody knew that they wrote their own songs' (Zollo 2012: ch. 1). In the time he is describing, Petty was playing in a cover band. And the Beatles also got their start playing covers. By one count they had recorded at least twenty-four covers of American rock and roll tracks by 1965 (Zak 2010: 236).

Theodore Gracyk gives several examples of other musicians who got started doing covers. He writes, 'Even as the [Sex] Pistols rose to national fame in the British media, cover versions dominated their live sets' (2001: 7). Regarding the Rolling Stones, 'their early career was dominated by performing and recording cover versions of blues and R&B songs they learned from records' (2001: 15).

This should be no surprise. There is not much alternative to starting out playing covers. Perhaps one could come into songwriting just at the same time one came into playing an instrument, playing one's own songs right from the start. More realistically, one might just play standards—songs that either predate recording or which do not have a canonical recording. Nevertheless, most musicians naturally start with covers. The pop singer Halsey comments, 'When I first started out, I was covering other people's

music and doing that... helped me explore what my voice was... [to] pick up on the different things that other artists were doing that maybe I would do for myself or maybe I would have done differently' (Glamour 2018a). Hayley Kiyoko comments similarly, 'I feel like that's how you... start really writing your own music is adding beats and kind of incorporating your own twist to the songs that you love. And that's how I started, too...'. She adds, 'I... grew up playing guitar and singing songs that I wish I had written...' (Glamour 2018b).

This suggests a qualified version of the dim view according to which covers are a thing that a musician should only do when they are starting out. On this view, covers are training wheels to be removed once a band or artist has gotten the balance of serious songwriting.

Admittedly, original songs can provide better marketing. An artist or band is able to establish themselves— to define their brand— not only with their own sound and style but also with their own songs. There is a related financial incentive, because copyright does not protect sound and style. Suppose someone records a song, has enough success with it that others decide to cover it, and one of the covers becomes a hit. The recording artist on the earlier version adds to the song's cachet but does not get paid for the later hit, while the songwriter gets a royalty for every sale. As an example, consider Lori Lieberman, who was involved in writing 'Killing Me Softly' and recorded the original version— but she was not credited as a songwriter and so got no money when Roberta Flack and (later) the Fugees recorded hit versions. So being both the recording artist and the songwriter provides a kind of insurance. This leads to many recording artists being listed as cowriters on songs they record, regardless of their actual contribution. After Elvis Presley was an established star, his manager made it a regular practice that 'younger songwriters had to sign over half of their publishing rights to any song the King was going to record' (Padgett 2017: 162). Although giving out songwriting credit as a way of redistributing royalty money is something that still happens in pop music, young artists do not have the heft to demand it. So it is better for them to have their breakthrough song be one they wrote rather than one they covered.

However, there is also a financial incentive to keep playing covers. As Tony Kirschner notes, for small-time musicians, 'playing covers is far easier and more lucrative' than playing original songs (1998: 251). It is easier to get a gig playing a bar or an event as a cover band than as a band playing



Figure 5: A promotional photo of the King Beats, taken at Lowery Castle in Middleville, New York circa 1965. Image courtesy of Joe Chapadeau.

unknown original material.

This has been true for the whole history of rock and roll, with local music scenes supporting countless small bands. As one example, take the King Beats from Little Falls, New York. They played teen dances and night clubs, making enough money to pay their way through school. They learned to play songs from the radio and played what was popular. These were covers in the original sense of *coverage*. The King Beats had only one original song. Band member Joe Chapadeau wrote the bouncy, Dylan-inspired ‘Nothing About Life At All’ so that the band could appear on the regional TV program *Twist-a-rama USA*. Performances on *Twist-a-rama* are collected on a compilation album that has one song from each of several different bands, and Chapadeau comments that most of the bands had just the one original song.

Cover bands might have no chance of making it big, but bands who play original material probably will not make it big either. Very few bands make it big. Even the longshot at success may depend on being perceived as original, however, because of the sentiment that ‘good rock music must be “original” and not reminiscent of past [work]’ (Kirschner 1998: 253). This tension

leads some musicians to use different names for cover projects than they use for original projects. The same ensemble might opt to use different band names— at once to have a cover band (so as to book gigs) and to avoid the suggestion that their original-material band is just a cover band (in hopes of making it big).

Although many artists develop original material in order to launch their careers, that does not mean they give up playing covers. Recalling the early days with his band Mudcrutch, Tom Petty says, ‘We worked really hard at originals. Because we knew that there wasn’t any way out unless we did. There wasn’t any way to get a record contract if you were just covering the Stones’ (Zollo 2012: ch. 1). Yet he did not stop playing covers. Commenting on the situation decades later with his band the Heartbreakers, he says, ‘I always like the rehearsals better than the shows. Because we play *everything*. Though we might never play what we’re going to play in the show, we play things that we all know, just to keep ourselves amused, and to get our chops up. So covers are a lot of fun’ (Zollo 2012: ch. 12).

Singer-songwriter Shawn Colvin similarly started out playing covers. She says, ‘When I was playing club gigs every night, I was always looking for new material— songs that I could do unexpected things with and interpret in ways that hadn’t been thought of before.’ Although she was signed to a major label in 1989 to record her original songs, she continued to work on covers. ‘So as soon as I got signed,’ she says, ‘I let them know that I had this cover record that I’ve wanted to do, and I’ve been keeping notes on it ever since’ (Cummings 1994: 14). That project was released as her third album, *Cover Girl*, in 1994.

The upshot of all this is that the dim view of covers is wrong, even in a qualified form. Despite the complex economics of it, there is nothing wrong with playing covers. There can be terrible covers, of course, but there can also be great ones.

Evaluating mimic covers

For a mimic cover, the aim is for the resulting sound to be exactly the sound of the original track. So the standard for a mimic cover is what Lydia Goehr calls the *ideal of perfect compliance* (Goehr 2007: 99).

This is the same ideal as for a sound system when it is used to play a track. For the sake of concreteness, imagine that you listen to the digital stream

of a track played on a low-end gaming headset. If you complain about the tinniness of the sound or about the weak bass, then you are making technical rather than artistic judgements. If you recognize beauty or virtuosic vocals, then you are responding to the track itself. You might make both sorts of judgment at the same time, judging it to be beautiful despite the poor sound quality. In any case, though, you are assessing the sound playing through the headphones in relation to the track itself.

The same lesson holds for a mimic cover, since the ideal of fidelity is the same— that is, any evaluation of a mimic cover considers it in relation to the original. If you appreciate the interpretive choices in the new recording or performance, it reflects on the original track. The musician making the mimic is trying *not* to make any new interpretive choices, but instead just to follow the same interpretation as the original. If you appreciate the skill involved in a mimic cover, that is an assessment of the covering artist but in relation to the original. Their skill is directed at reproducing the sound of the original as closely as possible.

To make the point in a different way: Suppose you are inspecting a replica of a famous sculpture. Finding the replica to be beautiful is either a response to the same beautiful features as in the original (where the replica is accurate) or finding a demerit in the object as a replica (because it has features the original does not). Note that it is different than looking at an original painting of a beautiful subject. In that case, you are not just taking the painting as a mere echo, as documentation of what the subject looks like. An original painting can portray an ugly thing as beautiful. A mimic cover is importantly not a representation of the original, but rather a replica.

This highlights the fact that there is a limit to how great a mimic cover can be. Even if you admire the artisan who makes a replica, you admire merely their craft. The perfect replica would be interchangeable with the original— as good as the original, but no better. Contrawise, there is no limit to how bad a mimic can be. So the dim view of covers often depends on the unstated assumption that all covers are mimic covers. When Sandy Brown notes the distaste for covers, for example, he describes them as ‘near copies of original recordings’ (1968: 622).

We can see this by considering two covers recorded in the mid-1970s for *Top of the Pops*, a record series featuring mimic covers of recent hits. Tracks for the records were recorded quickly, with little time for rehearsal. Tony Rivers, who was one of the uncredited musicians, recounts the effort they

put into their cover of Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody.' After spending the day in the studio recording other tracks, he spent hours listening to Queen's original and working out the vocal arrangement. After recording, they spent more time mixing and producing than usual. Given the complexity of the original, the mimic cover is impressive. According to Rivers, the cover even got some media attention— with one radio host playing both the original and the cover, cutting between the two (Rivers 2007). Rivers and the other musicians are clearly having fun with their performances, but the cover lacks some of the grace and vitality of the original. In short, it is a pretty good mimic cover because it approximates the original.

Contrast that case with the *Top of the Pops* cover of Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition.' Whereas the original has Wonder playing parts on clavinet and on Moog bass, the cover substitutes guitars for the clavinet and bass guitar for the synthesizer. The cover also lacks most of the rhythmic complexity of the original. The result is a disaster.

Evaluating rendition covers

Unlike mimic covers, rendition covers are not beholden to the ideal of perfect compliance. That means that we should not evaluate rendition covers by their sonic fidelity to canonical recordings. So how should we evaluate them?

One could say: Whereas we *compare* a mimic cover to the canonical track, we *contrast* a rendition cover with it. A mimic cover fails insofar as it departs from the canonical version, but a rendition cover is successful only insofar as it departs from the canonical version in artistically interesting or rewarding ways. Michael Rings suggests something like this when he writes that covers invite 'contrastive appreciation', that is 'the appreciation of the cover insofar as it musically contrasts with the previous version' (2013: 59).

To underscore the difference from mimic covers and classical practice, let's call this proposal the ideal of *rewarding deviation*. The ideal of perfect compliance sets a uniform standard for a mimic cover, because it can be satisfied only by sounding one specific way. The ideal of rewarding deviation is more complicated. It might be satisfied in different ways, because there is no limit to the ways a rendition cover might differ from the original.

Although I said things like this in some earlier work, I now think this view would be a mistake.

First, the rewarding features of a rendition cover are not just the ways in which it diverges from the original. It may also be rewarding for the ways in which it matches the original. For a mimic, which aims at matching the original in all respects, the differences are all failures of skill. For a rendition, however, the differences reflect interpretive choices— that means that the similarities, too, reflect interpretive choices. This is especially clear for lyrics, because opting to sing even the same words can mean something different because the context of the cover is different than the context of the original. I explore this point further in the next section.

Second, a rendition cover can be a great version of the song apart from any consideration of the original. It can be beautiful, powerful, or moving— features that it just has on its own without considering its relation to the original. This point will come out further on.

Lyrical changes

A rendition cover may have different lyrics than the original while still being the same song. Take the example of Willie Nelson's 1993 cover of Paul Simon's 1986 'Graceland.' In his original version, Simon sings, 'There is a girl in New York City / Who calls herself the human trampoline.' Willie Nelson sings 'a girl in Austin, Texas' instead.

How should we think about this difference?

Gaynor Jones and Jay Rahn suggest that the potential for a cover to be different than the original means that the covering artist simply does not care what the original artist had in mind. They write, 'This range of variability is probably related... to the audience's and performer's lack of concern about the composer's intentions' (1977: 85). This seems wrong, at least in this case, because Nelson's choice of 'Austin, Texas' is arguably in line with Simon's intention.

Gracyk points out that songwriters typically have 'open-ended intentions' such that 'elements of a lyric that seem to refer to concrete things and situations are merely exemplary.' As such, 'specific places, objects, and people... function as placeholders for ideas more than as references to the individuals they mention' (2001: 66). Simon's song is not about New York especially. The verse continues that our lives are 'tumbling in turmoil', and that message is the verse's more central function. To use Gracyk's word, New York City is serving as a *placeholder* for where the girl is from. Austin, Texas fits Nelson's idiom better, and it does not have any significance which

would undermine the central function of the verse. So making that substitution respects Simon's intention— not for what specific words to sing, but for what open-ended meaning the lines are supposed to have.

This view is problematic if intentions are private, mental things. Consider a different example: Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' song 'Listen to Her Heart' opens with the lines, 'You think you're gonna take her away / With your money and your cocaine.' Suppose one were to cover it and replace 'cocaine' with 'champagne.' Both are things that might tempt someone. One might suppose that Petty has an open-ended intention which allows for such a substitution. As it happens, Petty's intention was more specific. The record company wanted him to change 'cocaine' to 'champagne', but he refused. Petty offers this reason: 'Because it would have made it a different song. I didn't really see the character as caring about the price of a bottle of champagne. Cocaine was much more expensive' (2012: ch. 16). I happen to know about this because Petty discussed it in an interview, but what if he had not? If his record company had not asked for the change— giving him the occasion to refuse— then there would be no way for anyone else to know that his intention was specific rather than open-ended.

Petty says that changing that one word would make it 'a different song.' Even if that seems too extreme, it is possible for a rendition to change so much that it is no longer the same song as the original. That is a matter of metaphysics rather than appreciation, though, so let's set it aside for now— see Chapter 5.

I have to admit that I have no idea what Simon's intention was when writing 'Graceland.' Perhaps, because of his personal experience, he had in mind a character who was specifically from New York City. Perhaps the girl in New York City was a specific person he knew, and her inclusion in the song was a shout out to her. Nevertheless, I think that Nelson's word substitution when singing 'Graceland' is fine *regardless* of what exactly Simon might have been thinking. That is, I do not think that the songwriter's intention carries all the weight. Rather, word substitutions have to fit within the overall meaning of the song. The meaning of the song depends not just on intentions, but also on the content of the song and the musical conventions of the community.

Note that changes in meaning are not simply a matter of changing words. As Dai Griffiths comments, a 'rendition can be "straight" but context changes meaning' (2002: 61). He offers an extended discussion of women cover-

ing Bob Dylan's 1966 'Just Like a Woman.' In her 1970 cover, Roberta Flack changes the viewpoint of the song to be first-person. For example, where Dylan sings 'And she aches just like a woman / But she breaks just like a little girl', Flack sings 'I ache just like a woman / And I break up like a little girl.' Dylan dismisses Flack's version, saying in a 1975 interview that 'she got the words wrong' (Travers 1975). However, that seems to miss the point. If Flack had sung exactly the same lyrics, it still would have offered different interpretive possibilities than when Dylan sang them. Griffiths also discusses Judy Collins' 1993 cover. The instrumentation and vocal style are changed, but she follows Dylan's lyrics verbatim. Griffiths suggests several interpretive possibilities: Collins can be heard as addressing another woman as 'a friend or even a mother to a daughter.' Although she might be addressing a lover, Griffiths recounts that when he taught the example his students would go to great lengths to avoid interpreting it that way. He suggests that 'we bring slightly different expectations to female covers that allow a lesbian interpretation, where with male covers we might leap more swiftly to a gay interpretation.' Regardless, there is another interpretation which neatly avoids the question of who Collins is addressing. Her version can be seen as 'a strict rendition of the original in the manner of classical music' (2002: 53). There may be no deeper significance to Collins singing the same words as Dylan than that Collins approaches covers in that way.

To take another example: Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi' is a meditation about progress and loss, until the last verse. Then it becomes personal with the lines 'Late last night, I heard the screen door slam / And a big yellow taxi took away my old man.' Note that the phrase 'my old man' could either mean her boyfriend or her dad, but the context of Mitchell's other work makes it clear she means her boyfriend. Harry Styles does a cover and sings the same words. In his version, I find that I hear the phrase as father rather than as boyfriend. It is a subtle difference, but the change results even from Styles singing the *same* words. Other cover artists opt for different words. Counting Crows substitute 'took my girl away', replacing Mitchell's almost-rhyme with a line that does nothing like rhyming. Keb' Mo' changes the lyrics to 'Late last night, she heard the screen door slam / And a big yellow taxi took away her old man.' This puts it at a distance, so the singer is not singing about his own loss but instead about hers (Mitchell's?). Bob Dylan changes the lines to 'Late last night, I heard my screen door slam / A big yellow bulldozer took away the house and land.' Dylan's cover of 'Big Yel-

low Taxi' thus leaves out the only reference in the song to the titular taxi. It might be seen as conveying the same core meaning, though, since he retains most of the lyrics and the central themes of progress and loss.

These examples underscore why it is shortsighted to evaluate rendition covers just for the ways they depart from the original. Even singing the same lyrics reflects a choice to do so, one which can be considered in evaluating the cover.

Genre shifts

Rendition covers are often in a different genre than the canonical recordings. Consider the Cardigans' covers of 'Iron Man' and 'Sabbath Bloody Sabbath', both originally by the heavy metal band Black Sabbath. Also worth a listen is their a cappella cover of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Mr. Crowley.' It is hard to say exactly what genre the Cardigans are. I have seen suggestions such as alternative, indie, ambient pop, and Swedish pop/rock—I am not sure that the last of those is really a genre. Regardless, they and their covers are certainly *not* heavy metal. Lead singer Nina Persson has said that their covers of Black Sabbath 'take their rock songs and make them really wimpy pop music.'

The Cardigan's 'Iron Man' tells the same story using the same words as Black Sabbath's original. Yet one could hardly mistake one version for the other. The emotional content is different. One might find Black Sabbath's faster, louder version to be more threatening and the Cardigan's softer cover to be more melancholy. This difference in emotional valence is not enough to make it a different song, but it certainly makes for a different listening experience.

Michael Rings argues that covers which are in a different genre than the original are interesting for two reasons.

In the first place, Rings writes that 'the interest generated by genre resetting in rock covers is produced via a manipulation of listener expectations' (2013: 57). His idea is that these covers can surprise us by treating familiar material in an unfamiliar way. 'My proposal,' Rings writes, 'is that much of the pleasure in listening to these covers comes from following a familiar song's progress through an unfamiliar (relative to the song) stylistic landscape: *how will this next passage sound within the conventions of this new genre?*' (2013: 60) Of course, although one can attend to differences in how the song sounds in its new setting, it does not follow that this is the predominant interest of such covers. First, one can only sincerely *wonder* how the rendition

goes on the first listening. Hearing it again, one *remembers* how it went. If anticipation and surprise were the primary appeal of a genre-shifted cover, then it would stop being interesting after one had heard it enough to be familiar with it. They would be disposable novelties. Many genre-shifted covers, like the Cardigans' 'Iron Man', are not like that. Second, there is a way in which rendition covers can be aesthetically interesting when there is no change in genre. For example, all the covers of 'Big Yellow Taxi' discussed in the previous section are in roughly the same genre. Surely at least some genre-shifted renditions are rewarding in *that* way, rather than in virtue of the genre shift itself.

In the second place, Rings maintains that 'genre resetting in covers can also generate a more hermeneutic brand of interest by providing an intertextual dimension that may serve to enrich a listener's interpretative engagement with the song' (2013: 57). Elaborating on this dimension, Rings suggests that such covers are 'a way for rock artists and appreciators to engage in a critical dialogue about rock itself— its history, its categories, its multifaceted culture' (2013: 63). His idea is that changing the genre of a song raises questions about how to categorize and think about the music, and that certainly can happen. When the band Social Distortion recorded a punk cover of Johnny Cash's 'Ring of Fire', they were responding to discussions of 'what's punk and what's not punk' and legitimizing the subgenre of cowpunk (Hodge 2017). However, I think it overintellectualizes the process to say, as Rings does, that 'contemporary rock audiences... find interest and entertainment in sustaining such a conversation' (2013: 63). Social Distortion's cover is at most implicitly an argument, and one can legitimately appreciate it without making the historical and social dimensions explicit. For someone who just likes classic country and punk, the enjoyment of cowpunk need not be an occasion for conversation.

Some genre-changing covers are successful just because the resulting version sounds good. The Cardigan's 'Iron Man' is a beautiful and haunting track. It has these features independently of whether or not it shares them with the original. A listener can respond to these features without having the original in mind.

Two modes of appreciation

What these examples show is that there are two broad approaches to appreciating a rendition cover.

First: Appreciation without having the earlier track in mind. Listen to it just as you would to an original recording of that song. We might call this an *aesthetic* mode of evaluation, appreciation informed by *immediate features* of the version.

Second: Appreciation in relation to the canonical track. Consider both how the cover diverges from its source and how it remains faithful. Employing this approach, we might pay attention to musical features (sounds), to meaning (significance), or to both. In some cases, keeping things the same in the cover will have a different significance than in the original. In others, considerable musical changes result in little change to the meaning. We might call this an *etiological* mode of evaluation, appreciation informed by *provenance*.

I do not want to overburden my account with extra jargon, and the distinction can be put in plain language: *There are two modes in which one might evaluate a rendition cover— on its own or in relation to the original. Neither of these modes is necessarily better than the other.*

Discussing how they decide which songs to cover, Paul Dempsey of the band Something For Kate says that it has ‘got to be something that you feel like you can sing with as much honesty and conviction as the original, as the person who wrote it. Something you can identify with and kind of sing honestly’ (JJJ 2021b). Bands who take this attitude try to produce renditions which at once capture what they like about the original while also sounding like it is theirs. In addition to examples discussed above, take R.E.M.’s cover of Leonard Cohen’s ‘First We Take Manhattan.’ The track was recorded for the 1991 tribute album *I’m Your Fan*, a project explicitly aimed at making a younger audience more familiar with Cohen’s work. Yet, as Ray Padgett notes, R.E.M.’s version of the song makes it ‘sound like it was theirs to begin with’ (2020: 62). It is rewarding to listen to it both as an R.E.M. track (without regard to it being a cover) and as a variation on Cohen’s less driving original. There is value in considering it in both modes.

Originality and rocking out

One may object that it is impossible to judge the originality of a rendition cover without comparing it to the earlier version— so, the argument would conclude, one can only properly evaluate a cover by considering it in relation to the canonical version. For example, you might be less impressed with Joan Jett and the Blackhearts’ 1981 ‘I Love Rock and Roll’ when you learn

that it is a cover of a 1975 version by the Arrows.

As a first answer to this objection, note that originality is only one artistic virtue. The 1981 cover *rocks*, which one can notice without having the original in mind. The comparative judgement that the cover *rocks harder* than the original—which it does—is different than the non-comparative judgement that it rocks. Why should we suppose that the relative properties of originality and rocking-harder are more important than the immediate property of rocking?

Pressing the objection, one might insist that proper appreciation of a cover still requires considering originality as one factor among others. If that were so, though, how many possible influences would one need to take into account?

Consider ‘The Last Train to Clarksville’, which was written for the Monkees by Bobby Hart and Tommy Boyce. It was meant to sound like a Beatles song and directly inspired by the Beatles’ ‘Paperback Writer’. Although it is not a cover, it is not very original when compared to its influences. A cover might be unoriginal in the same way, by drawing too much from other influences.

Tom McDonald complains about formulaic punk and heavy metal covers, writing that “within six seconds you know what the next three minutes holds for you” (2021). This predictability is not internal to the cover itself, but instead because the covers follow a standard formula. You know what to expect because you have heard other covers that use the same formula. So the judgement that such a cover is unoriginal does not depend on comparing it to the canonical version of the song, but to other tracks and covers in the same genre.

Returning to the example of ‘I Love Rock and Roll’: If we consider just the Arrows’ earlier version, then the 1981 cover may seem to add little. However, Jett made an earlier attempt in 1979, which she recorded with Paul Cook and Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols. The 1979 cover is unconvincing. It does not rock the way that the 1981 cover does. So what is added in the 1981 version, although subtle, is nothing trivial or easy. If it were, they would have added it in the earlier version.

So it seems to me that all or most of the value in Joan Jett and the Blackhearts’ version of ‘I Love Rock and Roll’ is found in its immediate features—that is, in rocking out to it. There is little appreciative gain in listening to it along with the original. Even if you disagree, surely there *could* be such

covers—ones which stand on their own as works of music.

One could try to turn this around to mount a different objection to the two-mode account. If the 1981 cover of 'I Love Rock and Roll' is best appreciated for its immediate features, rather than in relation to the original, then one of the modes is decisively better than the other. This objection misunderstands the point of distinguishing the two modes of appreciation. The point is not that both modes are equally rewarding or that both will always offer significant rewards. Rather, there is no way to know *a priori* how rewarding either mode will be. In some cases, both approaches will be rewarding. In other cases, one approach will dominate. In still other cases, a cover will be terrible and neither approach will be rewarding. In order to figure out how a specific rendition cover fares, we have to listen. General principles will not tell us.

Is a cover better if it rewards appreciation in both modes than if it rewards appreciation in just one? Yes, all things being equal—but all things are never equal. The immediate experience of listening to Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' 'I Love Rock and Roll' would be very different if it were also wildly different than the Arrows' original. So I am not saying that covers ought to be appreciable in both modes or that covers which reward appreciation in both modes are better. That would underwrite the conclusion, just on principle, that R.E.M.'s 'First We Take Manhattan' is better than Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' 'I Love Rock and Roll.' I like both and refuse to decide between them. Even if you think them comparable and consider one to be better than the other, it must be for particular features of them. The details matter.

When artists try to hijack their own hits

Although it is not usually considered a *cover* when a musician records a new version of one of their earlier tracks, the framework for appreciating covers can be helpful in thinking about how to assess those remakes.

In 2012, the band Def Leppard recorded new versions of some of their classic songs. The recordings were part of a struggle with their label, which had control over the original versions of the band's songs. They called these new versions 'forgeries' and tried to make them sound as much as possible like the originals. Lead singer Joe Elliot said of the effort, 'I had to sing myself into a certain throat shape to be able to sing that way again' (Rolling

Stone 2012). These new versions are not literally forgeries, of course. And whether we call them covers or not, these new tracks are mimic versions. The commercial rationale is exactly the same as for predatory covers which are supposed to take sales and radio plays which might have gone to the original. The artist doing the mimic in this case is the same as the artist who recorded the original, but a similar effort is required because it is their older selves trying to sound just like their younger selves did. Evaluation of these new tracks should work the way the evaluation of a mimic cover does. Success or failure is measured by fidelity to the original.

At about the same time, Suzanne Vega released *Close-Up*, a four-album series featuring acoustic versions of her earlier hits. Part of her motivation was that she did not own the masters to her earlier hits. Unlike Def Leopard's forgeries, however, Vega's new versions are not meant to sound like the tracks from the earlier albums. Instead, they are intended to capture more of the sound of her live performances. Earlier, many artists produced recordings in that style for MTV's *Unplugged*. The difference here is that Vega's *Close-Up* versions are explicitly meant to be played instead of her original tracks. Although it may seem wrong to call them covers, they are renditions. Evaluation of them follows the same lines as the evaluation of rendition covers.

After a bitter dispute with a music manager who had bought the masters to her first six albums, Taylor Swift ultimately decided to rerecord them. Since she hopes that her new versions (the ones she owns) will displace the originals in digital streaming and licensing, she has made the instrumentals and production of the new versions sound as much like the originals as possible. The first of these do-over albums was released in April, 2021. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, a remake of 2008's *Fearless*, debuted at #1. The album includes six bonus tracks, songs written at the time of the earlier album but recorded in 'a hybrid style that split the difference between the two eras' (Willman 2021). The core of the new album is mimic versions—whether we call them covers or not, the ideal is perfect compliance. The bonus tracks are just originals—songs written earlier in her career, but without any earlier recording to compare them to.

Brandon Polite argues that we should understand Taylor's Version differently. He suggests that her project is an act of aesthetic disobedience, expressing themes of independence and empowerment (Polite, forthcoming). If that is right, then listening to the tracks as mimics misses the point.

Instead, the entire album should be understood as props in a bigger performance.

Regardless, Def Leppard's 'forgeries' and Vega's *Close-Up* versions are not part of such a grand drama. Rather, they reflect what Brown calls the 'jackal thinking behind cover versions' (1968: 622). That is, they are intended to earn royalty money which would otherwise have gone to the original recordings.

Is the distinction grounded in intentions or in appreciative standards?

When I introduced the distinction between mimic covers and rendition covers in the last chapter, I did so in terms of the intention with which they are made: Mimic covers are intended to sound like the original, while rendition covers are intended to sound different. In this chapter, I have argued that the appreciative standards for the two are different: Mimic covers are subject to the ideal of perfect compliance, while rendition covers are not. It is not clear to me which of these— intention or appreciative standards— should be taken as the defining feature that separates mimic covers from rendition covers.

The two sets of criteria usually yield the same result, but perhaps it is possible for them to diverge. Consider the *Top of the Pops* cover of 'Superstition', discussed earlier. The musicians had the task of making a track that sounded as much like the original as possible, given a limited amount of studio time. With an eye to intention, it is a mimic cover— and the result is pretty bad by the standard of mimic covers, hampered at the outset by the fact that guitars are playing keyboard parts. The cover might seem less terrible treated as a rendition cover. For a rendition, the substitution of one instrument for another is an artistic choice. For example, Jeff Beck opts for guitars in his cover of 'Superstition' (released with the supergroup Beck, Bogert & Appice a month after the *Top of the Pops* cover). No surprise, since Beck is a guitarist. However, Beck's version also shifts the sound from funk to rock with corresponding musical changes throughout. His intention clearly makes it a rendition cover, and it is well regarded. Considered as a rendition, the *Top of the Pops* cover follows the original too closely— so it is still pretty bad. The point, though, is that it is differently bad if considered

as a rendition cover.

It is possible to imagine a case which is intended to sound the same as the original but fails to do so in a way that is unintentionally novel and interesting. Considered as a mimic cover, it is terrible. Considered as a rendition cover, it is great. In such a case, the intention would make it a mimic cover. It would be more rewarding to consider it as a rendition cover instead, so the pursuit of such rewards would count it that way. Take that as a thought experiment, because I do not have a convincing example.

If the difference between a mimic cover and a rendition cover were an intrinsic metaphysical fact, then the right answer would be the one that gets that fact right. However, the difference is not intrinsic. If it is determined by the intention, then it depends on a relation to the artist and context of creation. If it is determined instead by which categorization makes engaging with the version more rewarding, then it depends on the audience and the context of appreciation. So the difference between the two approaches is not a disagreement about what exists but instead about which context we want to emphasize. If we proceed from the point of view of the artist, then intention is primary. If we proceed from the point of view of the audience, then appreciation is primary. We can usually start from either end, because they yield the same outcome in most cases.

Considering whether a musician's recording should even count as a cover, Gabriel Solis writes, 'what matters is both how she plays these songs and how she and her audiences think about them' (2010: 311). These are the same considerations that make it the kind of cover it is. At least in principle, though, how a musician plays and how audiences think about it could diverge.

Conclusion

To sum up: It is inappropriate to take a dim view of all covers. How to sort good covers from bad ones depends on the kind of cover in question. A mimic cover, subject to the ideal of perfect compliance, is good just insofar as it echoes the canonical version. A rendition cover is more complicated. It can be appreciated for how it sounds. It can also be appreciated in relation to the canonical version—both for how it follows and how it diverges from the canonical recording, both for differences in sound and differences in meaning.