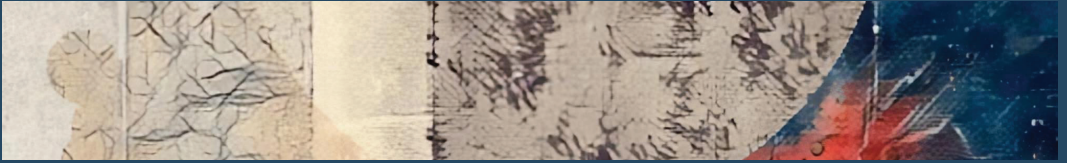




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# A PHILOSOPHY OF COVER SONGS



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## 6. How a Song is Like Ducks

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The last chapter stumbled over questions of song individuation. It considered cases in which it was hard to say whether two versions were— or were not— instances of the same song. In this chapter, I advocate a general meta-physical approach which helps in thinking about those cases.

The core idea is that a song is a historical individual in the same sense that a biological species is. Where a species is a lineage of organisms, a song is a lineage of versions. This supports a principled pluralism about songs.

In addition to helping with the puzzles posed in the last chapter, the view of songs as version lineages helps in thinking about mash-ups, medleys, parodies, and instrumental covers.

### Songs are like species

Artworks, as Guy Rohrbaugh argues, can be understood as historical individuals. He highlights three features of artworks which we can understand by thinking of them that way. First, artworks could have had different properties than they actually do have; in technical terms, they are *modally flexible*. Second, artworks can change over time; they are *temporally flexible*. Third, artworks come into existence and could go out of existence; they are *temporal*.

Regardless of what might be said of other artworks, songs have these features. Consider the example of Bob Dylan's 'All Along the Watchtower.' It is modally flexible because, if Bob Dylan had chosen different lyrics when originally writing it, then it would have different features than it actually does. It is temporally flexible because Jimi Hendrix's cover was not something already present in the song. His innovative rendition changed the song, as revealed in subsequent versions which follow Hendrix's musical choices rather than Dylan's original. It is also temporal, because it did not exist until Dylan wrote it, and if it were forgotten and all records of it de-

stroyed then the song would not exist anymore.

Julian Dodd objects that historical individuals are metaphysically obscure ‘cross-categorical entities’ and argues it would be better to deny that artworks have these features than to accept an ontology that includes historical individuals (2007: 145). In earlier work, I responded to that worry by noting that historical individuals are much-discussed in the philosophy of biology, where a standard view holds that a biological species is a historical individual. The view, originally championed by Michael Ghiselin (1966, 1974) and David Hull (1976, 1978), is now widely held. Although it would be an overstatement to call it a consensus, pockets of opposition are motivated by the details of biology rather than by the thought that historical individuals are somehow incoherent. What is respectable for science is respectable for art. I argue elsewhere that instrumental musical works are like species (Magnus 2013), and a similar argument is given by Charles O. Nussbaum (2007, 2021). Here I want to think of songs as historical individuals in much the same way that species are.

Imagine you go to a pond and see a flock of common mallards out on the water. Focus on a particular middle-aged mother duck. She is a historical individual who started as a duckling, developed and matured, mated. She will, if she is lucky, grow to old age. Eventually, she will die.

That single duck is part of the species, *Anas platyrhynchos*. She is one branch of a lineage that goes back through her parents to generations of ancestors and (with any luck) will go forward through her offspring to generations of descendants. Each of the mallards on the pond is part of that same species, connected to each other and to all other mallards by natural processes of reproduction and development. Thinking of the species as a historical individual means thinking of each organism which is a member of the species as part of that lineage.

A song like ‘Happy Birthday’ can be sung in different places and at different times. Each performance can be thought of as an individual in the same way that each separate mallard can be. Yet all the performances of ‘Happy Birthday’ are connected by cultural and musical processes. To think of them as performances of the same song is to think of them as part of that lineage, which is a larger historical individual in the same way that the species *A. platyrhynchos* is.

I started with ducks because they are easy to visualize and because they are funny, but songs are different than ducks in one important respect. Al-

most all ducks result from sexual reproduction, meaning that each offspring varies from its parents. Performances of songs are like that. Even if the same performer endeavors to perform a song in the same way multiple times, each performance is different. However, songs can also be recorded. A recording can be played back multiple times. If I listen to a digital track and then play it again, what comes out of my speaker is the same track twice. So a better analogy is with a plant species.

Imagine, some distance away from the ducks, a patch of woodland strawberries. The species, *Fragaria vesca*, propagates in two ways. It grows fruit with seeds, which can sprout and grow into new plants. What it does mostly, though, is send out runners: horizontal stems which grow a distance out from the plant, tuck into the ground, and start growing a separate root system and leaves. When the runner withers away, the separate root system can sustain a separate plant. Propagation by runners produces clones of the original plant. This means that the whole patch of woodland strawberries, if propagated entirely by runners, might have all the same genome. We can see each plant in the patch as an individual, but there is also a sense in which the whole patch is the same individual.

There is a new version of a song every time it is performed, just as there is a new organism every time a strawberry seed sprouts. There is also a new version of the song when a new track is mastered in the studio. When that track is recorded as a sound file, sent over the internet to my computer, and I play it back, the process is like a runner propagating a new strawberry plant. The sounds coming out of my speakers are more a clone than a new version. The track altogether, including all of the times it is played, is part of the song as a historical individual.

One might point out that the ducks on the pond and the strawberries in the field have done their natural thing, whereas songs are the work of people. That does not show that one is not a historical individual, though, just that the causal processes which hold one kind of individual together are different than the causal processes that hold another together.

Developing the analogy between songs and species further is the task of the rest of this chapter. It will ultimately help in finding solutions to the puzzles about song individuation which I raised in Chapter 5 as well as to some other puzzles about covers.

Before moving on, I want to point out the metaphysical modesty of my position. Ghiselin claims that the view of species as individuals 'provides

the inspiration for a new ontology with profound implications for knowledge in general' (2009: 254). Rohrbaugh himself describes his approach as 'innovation at the level of metaphysics, the identification of a new ontological category' (2003: 197). However, I am not claiming that historical individuals are among the fundamental building blocks of reality. A historical individual might be thought of as a composite thing or, as John Dupré suggests, a process (2021). Adapting the approach of Richard Boyd, I suggested in earlier work that a historical individual is a particular kind of *Homeostatic Property Cluster* (HPC) (Boyd 1999, Magnus 2013). Nussbaum instead adopts Ruth Garrett Millikan's far-reaching metaphysical picture and sees a historical individual as a *Reproductively Established Family* (REF) (Millikan 1984, Nussbaum 2007). It has also been suggested that a historical individual might be an abstract object which ontologically depends on but is not constituted by its embodiments (for which there does not seem to be an acronym). Interested readers are welcome to look elsewhere for details of those debates. Any of these proposals would suffice for my purposes here.

## Species pluralism

In order to develop the analogy between songs and species further, let's briefly consider some philosophy of biology. (I have written about this at greater length elsewhere (Magnus 2012: 83–96).) Minimally, a species is a lineage: a series of organisms connected by relations of descent. Trying to specify which lineages are species faces pluralism in two respects.

First, *rank pluralism*: It is often indeterminate as to whether a particular group should count as a species, a less specific rank such as a genus, or a more specific rank such as a subspecies. This determination is guided by 'real biological attributes' but is nevertheless 'semisubjective' (Baum 2009: 76). Rank pluralism can be especially vexing in the case of incipient species, a subgroup within a species which is somewhat isolated and on a trajectory to become a distinct species.

Second, *concept pluralism*: There are distinct but legitimate features which might chart the boundary of a species. According to the biological species concept, a species is a reproductively isolated, interbreeding group—members of different species either cannot breed or produce infertile offspring. According to the ecological species concept, a species is a group of organ-

isms that fill an adaptive zone or niche— members of different species do not typically breed, but whether they *could* is irrelevant. The details of these need not concern us, because the point of the analogy is just that there are different features which might be relevant for identifying organisms as members (or not) of the same species.

I am not sure whether every kind of historical individual will admit of rank pluralism and concept pluralism, but species do— and it seems to me that songs do, too.

My idea is to see a song as a lineage of versions connected by relations of inspiration and copying. Just as the members of a species are organisms of common descent, the versions of a song are performances/recordings with historical continuity and causal dependency. Just as biologists can make judgements about species given the interests and considerations salient in a particular case, people interested in music can make judgements about songs.

## Rank pluralism for songs

Rank pluralism can be illustrated with several examples which came up in earlier chapters.

First: When asked to change the word ‘cocaine’ to ‘champagne’ in his song ‘Listen to Her Heart’, Tom Petty refused on the grounds that ‘it would have made it a different song’ (Zollo 2012: ch. 16). Yet imagine a cover of ‘Listen to Her Heart’ which followed the music and lyrics of the original and changed just that one word. I suspect that many fans would consider it the same song. Petty’s insistence to the contrary should make one wonder whether it is a larger change than one would otherwise imagine. Even so, Petty is not obviously right. There is no precise amount of difference that makes two versions different songs.

Second: I argued in Chapter 5 that Aretha Franklin’s cover of Otis Redding’s ‘Respect’ is a different song than Redding’s. Franklin’s version has become the target of countless covers, and someone might cover it without knowing about Redding’s version. Women who sing ‘Respect’ as a showcase for their vocal prowess often perform fairly straight rendition covers of Franklin’s version. Kania suggests that my coauthors and I ‘are misled into thinking that Franklin’s “Respect” is a recording of a different song than Redding’s because her version has become the standard that later covers

take as their target (from which most people learn the song, etc.)' (2020: 242). Contra Kania, the fact that Franklin's version became canonical makes an important difference, and I do not think that we are misled at all. In the biological analogy, Franklin's cover was the first member of an incipient species. If it had no descendants, then it might just as well be counted as a mutant version in the species of Redding's original. But it was fruitful, the first member of a new lineage.

Rank pluralism about songs means that this judgement (that Franklin's version is a different song than Redding's) is somewhat subjective. However, it responds to real musical and historical features of the case. Franklin's version does start a separate lineage, and covers of Franklin's version are a distinct kind of version from direct covers of Redding's. The element of subjectivity is whether we call it a separate *song* as opposed to a *sub-song* (or whatever we want to call the song analog of a sub-species).

Third: I suggested in Chapter 5 that Hilary Duff's 2008 'Reach Out' is an interpolated cover. That is Claire McCleish's terms for a cover that uses the chorus or refrain from an earlier recording to connect new lyrics and rapped verses (2020: ch. 5). Whereas McCleish sees an interpolated cover as almost but not quite the same song as the original, Dan Burkett suggests that 'Reach Out' is simply the same song as Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus' (2015). Admittedly, a cover of 'Reach Out' would sound strikingly different than a straight rendition cover of 'Personal Jesus.' Nevertheless, Duff's track is descended from Depeche Mode's. They form part of a lineage. The subjectivity is just in deciding whether we call them the same song.

These examples show that questions of whether two versions are the same song will not always have univocal or straightforward answers. Rank pluralism means that different answers are possible. Nevertheless, any answer must respond to the underlying musical and historical features of the versions.

## Concept pluralism for songs

Concept pluralism requires that there be different ways of thinking about what makes two versions the *same song*. Let's start with the distinction between song identity defined by lyrical content and identity defined by musical features. By highlighting lyrical continuity, we can recognize genre-shifted covers that change the sound of the song considerably. By highlight-



ing musical features, we can recognize instrumental covers that omit lyrics entirely.

Note that this resolves the Fitzgerald dilemma, from the end of the last chapter. Considered in terms of musical features, Ella Fitzgerald's 'Mack the Knife' is straightforwardly the same song as Louis Armstrong's and Bobby Darrin's versions. Her improvised lyrics follow the melody of the original. Considered as words, though, the new lyrics make for a different song. The space created by pluralism makes it possible to recognize both intuitions as legitimate. The underlying fact is that her version is in the lineage of earlier versions. One might consider it as just a remarkable mutant in that line; if other people started covering Fitzgerald's version, one might instead see it as the progenitor of a new line.

Let's consider three examples in more detail.

First, consider the case of George Harrison's 1970 'My Sweet Lord.' The musical structure strongly resembles that of the 1963 hit 'He's So Fine', written by Ronnie Mack and made famous by the Chiffons—so much so that the publisher which owned the rights to 'He's So Fine' sued for infringement. In his ruling on the case, Judge Richard Owen writes, 'It is clear that "My Sweet Lord" is the very same song as "He's So Fine."' This is, under the law infringement of copyright and is no less so even though subconsciously accomplished' (NY Times 1976). Of course, the law does not always get ontology right. What counts as the same for the law might not be the same in fact. Note, however, that the legal question was whether Harrison's track counted as copyright infringement. There was not and is not a legal sense to 'same song', so the judge can be understood as applying— as well as he can— the ordinary sense of the words. By focussing on musical features, he judges the two to be the same song.

The lyrics to 'My Sweet Lord' are about religious transcendence. The background vocals juxtapose 'Hallelujah' with 'Hare Krishna', 'Hare Rama', 'Guru Brahma', and other Hindu mantras. In contrast, the lyrics to 'He's So Fine' are about romantic attraction. The nonsense syllables 'Do-lang-do-lang' are repeated in the background vocals. Although religious transcendence can be a metaphor for romantic love (and vice versa) both 'My Sweet Lord' and 'He's So Fine' strike me as being literal about their topics. The mantras in Harrison's lyrics do not mean the same thing as the nonsense syllables in Mack's lyrics. So, focussing on lyrics, the two are obviously different songs.

The point could be put this way: Someone playing the instrumental part of ‘My Sweet Lord’ is also playing ‘He’s So Fine.’ Someone singing ‘My Sweet Lord’ is not also singing ‘He’s So Fine.’ Highlighting the former, *same song*; highlighting the latter, *different song*.

Second, consider Paul Anka’s song ‘My Way.’ It is set to the tune of Claude François’ ‘Comme d’habitude’, but Anka did not translate the French lyrics. In fact, he says that he thought the French original was ‘a shitty record, but there was something in it’ (McCormick 2007). Anka acquired publishing rights to the song and, after a conversation with Frank Sinatra, wrote new lyrics from Sinatra’s point of view. If we focus on lyrics, ‘My way’ and ‘Comme d’habitude’ are obviously different songs— and that is how most people think about them. Why? Perhaps just because Anka secured legal rights to the tune. In the case of ‘My Sweet Lord’, the legal question of copyright infringement foregrounded the sense in which it was the same as ‘He’s So Fine.’ Talk about ‘My Way’ tends to focus instead on the meaning of the lyrics, as when contrasting Sinatra’s original version with Sid Vicious’ cover. Because Anka had made a deal for the rights, the continuity with ‘Comme d’habitude’ is not especially interesting.

If pluralism is correct, though, there ought to be at least some contexts in which ‘My Way’ and ‘Comme d’habitude’ are described as the same song— and there are. Jacques Revaux originally wrote the tune without lyrics and sent them to a publisher in London who would add lyrics and record a demo. English language lyrics were written by a young David Bowie, as ‘For Me’, and a demo was offered to several artists with no success. Revaux later ended up playing the demo for François, who wanted to use lyrics that he had written independently. A website featuring an interview with Revaux treats the demo of ‘For Me’, François’ ‘Comme d’habitude’, and Anka’s ‘My Way’ as the same song (What The France 2020). That makes sense, because talking to the songwriter who wrote the melody and bridge of the song foregrounds musical features.

In this case, too: Someone playing the instrumental part of ‘My Way’ is also playing ‘Comme d’habitude.’ There are instrumental versions posted on-line labelled as being covers of both. However, someone singing ‘My Way’ is not singing ‘Comme d’habitude.’ Highlighting the former, *same song*; highlighting the latter, *different song*.

The examples so far were ones where a focus on musical features supported a judgement of *same song* but a focus on lyrics supported a judgement

of *different*. The reverse is also possible.

Third, consider 'House of the Rising Sun', a traditional song probably best known in the Animals' 1964 hit version. Jeanette Bicknell describes a friend who thinks that the song *must* be in a minor key and have triple meter (like the Animals' version). Confronted with Woody Guthrie's 1941 version, which is in a major key and has duple meter, her friend protests that it is not 'House of the Rising Sun' at all. 'The words are the same,' she says, 'but changed harmonic structure, melody, time signature, key. There's a breaking point and I can't define it but I know it when I hear it. This is Woody Guthrie's song "X", with words from "House of the Rising Sun"' (2015: 15). Bicknell herself disagrees, arguing that Guthrie's song is a *bona fide* instance of 'House of the Rising Sun' precisely because it shares lyrics with other versions of the song. She writes, 'Treating these major and minor key versions as being of "the same" song allows us to ask questions about the song's trajectory across time and the ways in which different communities have changed it' (2015: 16). It seems to me that, recognizing the fact of pluralism, both Bicknell and her friend are right. Bicknell appeals to lyrical continuity so as to trace a larger historical individual, while her friend appeals to musical difference for aesthetic and appreciative reasons.

One might object that neither party should accept this rapprochement. According to the objection, pluralism is just a vacuous attempt to let everybody be right.

The objection fails for several reasons. First, even given pluralism, same-song judgements must still be responsive to facts about the versions in question. In order for two versions to be of the same song in even one respect, there must be a sufficient historical connection between them and they must share features upon which that respect depends. If we are interested in the lineage that includes both Guthrie's version and the Animals', we might treat them as members of the same genus rather than as the same species—there is a lineage that includes both, regardless of how we parse that lineage into songs. Second, pluralism provides an explanation of conflicting or diverging intuitions in particular cases. Bicknell and her friend reach different conclusions precisely because the difference arises from employing different song concepts. Third, it is productive to think in terms of version-lineages rather than demanding univocal answers to questions about song identity. All the cases I discuss in this chapter are meant to serve as examples of that.

## Lyrics as words, lyrics as meaning

Making same-song judgements on the basis of lyrical content may look at the specific words used, as in the examples which I discussed in the previous section. It is possible instead to look at the function of the lyrics— their contribution to the overall meaning of the song.

To recall a point from Chapter 3: As Theodore Gracyk notes, songwriters may have ‘open-ended intentions’ such that ‘elements of a lyric that seem to refer to concrete things and situations are merely exemplary’ (2001: 66). Willie Nelson sings about ‘a girl in Austin, Texas’ instead of ‘a girl in New York city’ when singing Paul Simon’s ‘Graceland’, and that substitution fits with the core meaning of the line and the song. So Nelson’s version counts as the same song even though he sings different words.

In other cases, preserving the function and meaning *requires* that the lyrics change between versions. Bicknell gives the example of ‘Happy Birthday’, which changes on each occasion so that it is addressed to whoever is having a birthday (2015: 8).

So lyrical faithfulness can be understood either as singing the same words or as singing words that preserve the overall meaning. This difference explains what was vexing about the covers of ‘California Über Alles’, discussed in the previous chapter. The cover by Vio-Lence uses the same lyrics as the original, singing about Jerry Brown and ‘Carter power’ in 2020. It is the same song as the original (considered with respect to preserving exact words) but a different song (considered with respect to meaning). It is a bit like singing ‘Happy birthday to Greg’ on every occasion, because there was a guy named Greg who once had a cool birthday party. The Disposable Heroes Of Hiphoprisy’s cover changes the lyrics. There is no absolute standard for how much difference is required for it to count as a different song, but perhaps the Disposable Heroes’ cover is a different song considered with respect to preserving exact words. If we see the song instead as a specified meaning, a structure for commenting on the current California governor, then the Disposable Heroes’ lyrical changes are faithful to the original.

A further example is provided by JK-47’s 2021 cover of Tupac Shakur’s 1998 track ‘Changes.’ (The original ‘Changes’ itself is an interpolated cover, sampling the hook of Bruce Hornsby’s 1986 ‘The Way It Is.’ In JK-47’s cover, the hook is sung by Bronte Eve rather than being sampled.) Jacob Paulson, who performs under the name JK-47, is an indigenous Australian. His cover begins and ends with a sentence in the language of his people, and it

leaves out Tupac's lyrics which refer specifically to the American situation. Yet Paulson retains the lyrics from the original which he felt were the most powerful. He says, '[Tupac] was talking about something real, and that's what I wanted to do. Tupac goes in... for how it is in America, so I had to keep it real and tell... how it is in Australia and how it is as an indigenous person' (JJJ 2021a). By focussing on the specific words that Tupac raps in his original, JK-47's cover might count as a different song. By focussing on the core meaning of the song, however, it is plausible that JK-47 would have been doing something different if he had rapped the exact same words. To fit the core meaning of the song, he had to rap about his own situation.

Concept pluralism requires that there be multiple ways of thinking about what makes versions the *same song*, and I have argued for three: musical features, lyrics (considered as specific words), and lyrics (considered as overall function or meaning).

## Further puzzles resolved

In the remainder of the chapter, I want to consider some other puzzle cases which can be better understood by thinking of songs as version lineages: mash-ups and medleys, parodies, and instrumental covers.

### Covers, mash-ups, and medleys

A cover can target more than one earlier version. In the simplest case, a cover can target a version which is itself a cover such that both the earlier cover and the original are important influences. In Chapter 4, I gave the example of college a cappella groups covering 'Bitches Ain't Shit.' The groups take the lyrics from Dr. Dre's original and musical features (including the stark genre shift) from Ben Folds' earlier cover. Folds' cover is the direct offspring of Dre's original. Because the a cappella group is informed by both the original and the earlier cover, it is the offspring of both of them— not something that occurs in biological lineages, but something which can easily occur in musical version lineages. The complete lyrical continuity makes it plausible to see them all as versions of the same song.

More puzzling are versions which cover earlier versions from two separate lineages. In live performances in the mid-2010s, Chris Cornell took the music from U2's 'One' (from their 1991 album *Achtung Baby*) and the lyrics

from Metallica's 'One' (a different song, from their 1988 album *And Justice For All*). Cornell explained that he searched the internet for U2's lyrics but that Metallica's lyrics had come up as the first hit. Musician and producer Rick Beato calls it 'one of the most creative cover songs of all time' (2019). Is it really a cover? Blogger Steven Richard refers to it instead as a 'mash-up' (2018). I am unsure whether it is right to call it a mash-up either, because mash-ups in the usual sense digitally combine elements from two tracks into one recording. For example, the Reddit community *r/mashups* defines a 'mashup' as 'a song or composition created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another.' Regardless, the ontology of Cornell's 'One' is similar to that of a mash-up. As Christopher Bartel argues, 'Mash-ups are musical works in their own right, and yet also happen to be interesting cases of works that instantiate parts of other works' (2015: 305). Cornell sings a song— a work in its own right— made from parts of two other songs. At the cost of introducing jargon, we might call it a *mash-up cover*. (The digital kind of mash-up would then be a *mash-up remix*.)

As another example, consider Jon Sudano's YouTube videos which he labels as covers. In dozens of videos posted from 2016 to 2019, Sudano plays the music from the track he claims to be covering but sings the lyrics of Smash Mouth's 'All Star.' After getting through a chorus of 'All Star', he sings a few words from the ostensible target of his cover. Like Cornell's dual version of 'One', Sudano's versions set the lyrics of one song to the tune of another. One reporter describes them both as 'covers' and as 'Smash Mouth mashups' (Siese 2016). That is, they are mash-up covers.

Mash-up covers differ from typical covers in the way that a hybrid differs from a typical species. They are a version resulting from two distinct lineages. If other artists were to cover Cornell's 'One' or one of Sudano's All-Star performances, then it would start a new lineage and a novel song. If that does not happen, then there is little need to make same-song judgments and it can be regarded as a hybrid oddity.

Note that the causal influence for mash-up covers is different than for the more familiar case of medleys. For example, when asked to perform a cover of the Cyndi Lauper song 'She Bop', the band Gwar begins with a genre-shifted rendition and then 'seamlessly transitions into an excellent cover of the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop"' (Kurp 2015). It is a medley, with a clear distinction between the first section (when they are covering Lauper)

and the second section (when they are covering the Ramones). More complicated medleys work similarly. For example, Weird Al Yankovic's many polka medleys stitch together several different songs, set to accordion and sung in Yankovic's distinctive voice. Ray Padgett notes that 'these polka-fied medleys of popular songs were honest-to-goodness covers. He sang the words straight, not adding any of his own lyrical jokes. The humor came in the music, recontextualizing well-known songs into ridiculous... arrangements' (2017: 142). Even though more songs are melded together in Yankovic's medleys, the sections still appear one after another.

Although a medley and a mash-up both instantiate parts of other songs, the difference is that a medley only instantiates one at a time. The parts of a medley are played in series, first one and then the other. In contrast, a mash-up includes parts of both source songs simultaneously. In his version of 'One', Cornell plays parts of U2's song and Metallica's song in parallel.

This underscores the fact that identifying a version's pedigree— saying what lineage it is in— is not just a matter of identifying its influences. It also requires recognizing what parts of the earlier versions appear in the new one and in what combination. The details of the causal influence matter.

## Parodies

Aside from the medleys, Weird Al Yankovic mostly makes parodies. For example, 'Eat It' has lyrics about eating food set to the tune of Michael Jackson's 'Beat It.' These are typically not considered covers even though, as I noted in Chapter 1, it can be hard to say why. Although his earliest parodies had accordion parts in rock and pop songs, his later parodies have often been crafted so as to sound like the originals. Yankovic and his long-time band labor over that effect, so that a listener hearing a parody out of context might mistake it for the original. Yankovic says, in an interview with Lily Hirsch, 'It's like a forensic kind of thing where we... try to figure out everything that the original musicians did in the studio. And if we're baffled, sometimes we'll approach the original musicians.' Drummer Jon Schwartz describes it as 'an exercise in backwards engineering.' Hirsch also notes that the work to make the sound match goes beyond just what the musicians play and how. Production engineers are also crucial to making the parody track sound as much like the original track as possible. (See Hirsch 2020, ch. 2.)

Admittedly, the instrumental parts are not quite mimics. Yankovic's parodies are often sped up somewhat, to enhance the comedic energy. And

sometimes changes are made to bring the melody within his vocal range. Even so, I have different intuitions about the question *Is Weird Al singing the same song as Michael Jackson?* than I do about the question *Is Weird Al's band playing the same song as Michael Jackson's band?* Their careful effort to make the instruments and production sound the same are enough to shift my focus to musical features, and I find *Yes* a tempting answer to the latter question.

Regardless of whether we call it a cover, a track like 'Eat It' is a child of 'Beat It' in much the same way a cover would be. When the Japanese punk band Shonen Knife covered 'Eat It', they were making a new version in a lineage that goes back to Michael Jackson.

Not all of Yankovic's parodies are like that, however. Some are original comedic songs in a particular style. For example, his original song 'Dare to be Stupid' is a parody in the style of Devo, and his 'You Don't Love Me Anymore' is a parody in the style of Extreme's 'More Than Words.' In the former case, 'Dare to be Stupid' is not the offspring of any one Devo song, nor is it descended from all Devo songs the way that a medley or mash-up would be. In the latter case, 'You Don't Love Me Anymore' is inspired by a particular song but only in its overall style. This is a kind of descent that has no clear analogy in biological lineages.

Hirsch provides some helpful vocabulary to distinguish these possibilities. Parodies which target specific earlier tracks or songs, in the way that 'Eat It' parodies 'Beat It', are *direct parodies*. Parodies which target a style or feel, in the way that 'Dare To Be Stupid' parodies Devo, are *style parodies*. Direct parodies extend a lineage in the way that covers do, whereas style parodies do not.

Even among direct parodies, it is worth distinguishing between different ways the parody can relate to its target. Parodies like 'Another One Rides the Bus' and 'Eat It' have lyrics that match the meter of the original but are about unrelated things. Although they are direct parodies, they are also *non sequiturs*.

In other cases, Yankovic writes lyrics that are about the original song. His 1992 'Smells Like Nirvana' not only echoes the musical features of Nirvana's 1991 hit 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', but also gently mocks the mumbled singing of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain. Even if it is not a cover, it refers to Cobain and Nirvana much in the way that the Meatmen's cover of 'How Soon Is Now' refers to Morrissey and the Smiths. Contrast Pansy Division's 'Smells



Like *Queer Spirit*, also from 1992. The Pansy Division track changes the lyrics to make it a song about growing up gay. Jon Ginoli of Pansy Division insists, 'Not a parody, an affectionate tribute' (Lapriore 2001). Regardless, the change makes it about something else entirely.

Another referential direct parody is Yankovic's 2011 'Perform This Way', a parody of Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way' from the same year. The lyrics of the parody are a send up of Lady Gaga's performance persona—but it is also a celebration of individuality and personal expression, just like the original. The difference between the two is not so much the overall message as that Yankovic's version is packed with jokes. In terms of overall meaning, 'Perform This Way' may be the same song despite being a parody.

### Instrumental covers

Popular usage readily identifies instrumental versions of songs as covers. This shows that it is possible for a version to count as a cover without retaining any of the lyrics from the original. There is a perfectly ordinary sense in which one can hear an instrumental version of a pop song, played perhaps in the background at a shopping mall, and say 'I know that song!' That is, an instrumental cover can count as the same song as its lyrical original.

It is less clear what to say about the rare cases of covers adding vocals to tunes that started out as instrumental. For example, Hugh Masekala's recording of the Philemon Hou composition 'Grazing in the Grass' was a hit in 1968. The group the Friends of Distinction added lyrics and had a hit with their cover in 1969. Is the Friends' cover the same song as Masekala's original? It is tempting to say that it is, just as an instrumental version of the Friends' 'Grazing in the Grass' would be the same song. Yet it is unclear what we should say about an alternative version which added completely different lyrics to the music of the original. Would it be the same song as the Friends' version?

Fortunately, this does not need to be just a thought experiment. Consider the tune 'Popcorn', written by Gershon Kingsley and released on his 1969 album *Music To Moog By*. A 1972 version by the band Hotbutter reached #9 on the Billboard Pop Singles chart. There have been literally hundreds of covers, some of which have added lyrics. A 1972 version by Anarchic System opens with the lyrics, 'Like a pop-corn in your hand / is your castle made of sand / life goes up and life goes down / and life goes round and round and round.' Several subsequent covers have used the lyrics from that

version, but other artists have written their own. A 2003 version by Fiddler's Green, making no mention of popcorn, opens 'There's a cold wind blowing. / Will you find your way home?' A 2011 version by the Brits and Pieces simply has 'You've got popcorn in your mouth' and rhythmic repetition of the word 'pop.' (Coen van der Geest's website at popcorn-song.com is a treasure trove of information.)

Are these versions of 'Popcorn' all the same song as Kingsley's original? Are they the same song as each other? With the concept of musical features in mind, the answer is *Yes*. With lyrics in mind, *No*.

Thinking in terms of lineages and pluralism: All the covers are offspring of Kingsley's version, just as The Friends' 'Grazing in the Grass' is an offspring of Masekala's. The versions which add different lyrics to 'Popcorn' are siblings to one another. Musical and historical connections determine a family tree, but we have some freedom in parsing this family tree into songs.

## Conclusion

The last chapter ended with Jeanette Bicknell's suggestion of a pragmatic approach to questions of song identity. The answer to whether two versions count as the same song, she says, should depend on 'Who wants to know, and why?' The view of songs as historical individuals fits nicely with such an approach.

The reason it matters who is asking is not because of some wild relativism where everyone gets their own reality. Rather, there are versions standing in different relations of inspiration and causation. These version lineages exist, regardless of who is asking.

Because of rank pluralism, one person might judge a certain degree of difference to be enough for two versions to be different songs while another person does not. Because of concept pluralism, people might look to different kinds of features in judging whether two versions are the same song. Given their different interests, they might privilege musical features, the words of the lyrics, or the overall meaning of the lyrics—and these can lead to different answers.