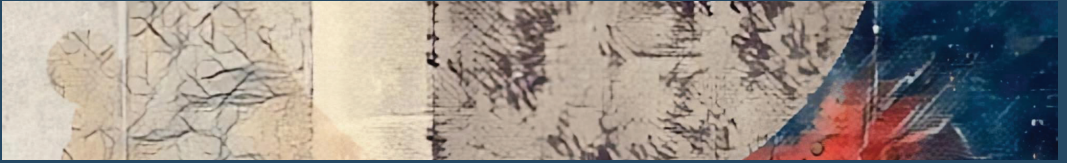




P.D. MAGNUS



A PHILOSOPHY
OF COVER SONGS



Contents

Introduction	1
1 What is a Cover?	3
The dictionary definition	4
Five problems	4
Looking for the real definition	7
The history of covers	8
Early days	8
Hijacking continues	13
Covers that hark back	17
The lessons of history	20
Covers and remakes	22
Covers and film remakes	23
Covers and mere remakes	24
What are we doing here?	26
Conclusion	28
2 Kinds, Covers, and Kinds of Covers	31
Musical works	31
Tracks	34
Performances	35
Songs	36
The slipperiness of ‘work’	38
Terminology	40
What is it that a cover is a cover of?	40
Mimics and renditions	43
Conclusion	47
Interlude: Cover Bands	49
3 Listening to Covers	53
The dim view of covers	53
Evaluating mimic covers	57
Evaluating rendition covers	59
Lyrical changes	60
Genre shifts	63
Two modes of appreciation	64
Originality and rocking out	65
When artists try to hijack their own hits	67
Intentions or appreciative standards?	69

Introduction

Cover songs are a familiar feature of contemporary popular music. Musicians describe their own performances as *covers*, and audiences use the category to organize their listening and appreciation. However, philosophers have not had much to say about them.

A common philosophical approach is to consider historical positions—for example, asking what Plato or Kant said on a topic. That makes no headway here, because Plato and Kant had nothing to say about cover songs. How could they? A cover is a version of a song that was first recorded by someone else, so covers require the technology to record and play back music. If Plato or Kant wanted to listen to a song again, they had to find performers to play it again.

Nevertheless, philosophy provides a valuable toolbox for thinking about covers, and the philosophy of cover songs illustrates some general points about philosophical method. Why is it that people have been announcing the death of covers for as long as there have been covers, while musicians keep making them? To answer that, we need to introduce distinctions. There are different kinds of covers.

As much as we need distinctions, however, we also need to recognize that honing our categories to diamond precision can be pedantic and doctrinaire. There are some distinctions which are not worth making.

A philosophical account of cover songs would be perverse if it were just an ethereal abstraction, so I discuss lots of different examples in this book. You may already be familiar with some of them. Others may be new to you. When it matters what a particular record sounds like, there is no reason to take my word for it. Most of the recordings that I discuss are readily available on the internet. You should listen and decide for yourself.

Please keep two things in mind about the examples.

First, you may find that you have different opinions about some of them than I do. Where the disagreement is incidental to the broader philosophical

point, I ask you to substitute an example which you find more agreeable.

Second, despite all of the examples I address, there are many more that I have had to leave out. If you find yourself thinking about examples that I do not explicitly discuss, then I invite you to apply the distinctions and moves I make in the book. Part of the fun of thinking about cover songs is that there are interesting examples all over the place.

This book is divided into three parts, each containing two chapters. Although issues recur at different places, I have tried to make the chapters stand coherently on their own.

The first part is about *how to think about covers*. Chapter 1 reviews the history of covers and topples some possible definitions of 'cover.' Even though there is no clear definition, we can get by without one. I take cover songs to be the ones that are typically called that, and that is enough to get going. Chapter 2 introduces several distinctions which can help us understand covers better: First, between songs, performances, and tracks. Second, between mimic covers and rendition covers.

The second part is about *appreciating covers*. Chapter 3 uses the difference between mimic and rendition covers as the key to thinking about how we evaluate and appreciate them. Chapter 4 discusses covers which have an especially strong connection to the original—the original is either alluded to by the cover or changes how we hear the cover. Evaluating and appreciating these covers turns out to be tricky.

The third part is about *the metaphysics of covers and songs*. Chapter 5 poses some puzzles about the metaphysics of cover versions. Although a cover is typically a version of the same song as the original, there are some interesting and striking counterexamples. Chapter 6 develops an analogy between songs and biological species. Like species, songs are historical individuals. This shows how to resolve the puzzle cases from the previous chapter and also helps in thinking about oddities like mashups, parodies, and instrumental covers.