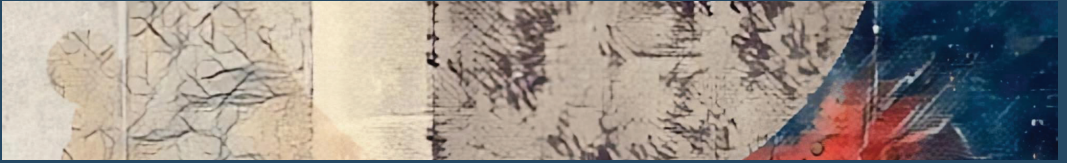




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# A PHILOSOPHY OF COVER SONGS



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# Interlude: Cover Bands

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In August 2014, Christy Mag Uidhir at the blog *Aesthetics for Birds* held a contest which asked philosophers to answer, in 50 words or less, the question ‘Can a band be its own cover band?’



Figure 4: The announcement of contest results.

In a basic sense, a cover band is just a band that plays cover songs. Lots of cover bands play songs from many different sources, songs connected perhaps just by genre or sound. Other cover bands— so-called tribute bands— aim to reproduce the music of a specific band or artist. These often have humorous names, like Fan Halen (a Van Halen cover band), BC/DC (an AC/DC cover band from British Columbia), or Iron Maidens (an all-female Iron Maiden cover band).

The contest was prompted by a conversation I had with Christy, and he asked me to judge it. So I did not write an entry. However, I felt that the contest prompt suggested an obvious *No!* answer. I expected to see entries

going something like this—

1. By definition: A cover version is performed by someone other than the original artist.
2. By definition: A cover band of X plays cover versions of X's songs.
3. The original band is the original artist and not someone else.

Therefore, the original band cannot be a cover band.

Whatever I might have written then, that is no longer something I would write. The dictionary definition of 'cover' supports the first premise of the argument, but that definition is subject to all of the problems that I discussed in Chapter 1. The word 'cover' is not precise enough to support such an argument. We could *make* it more precise by stipulating a definition, but that would be arbitrary and doctrinaire.

Another strategy—the one pursued in most of the contest entries—is to argue that a band can, in some sense, be a different band than they originally were. Here is Bree Morton's winning answer:

Sure! Imagine a band that secretly re-unites, pretends to be a cover band of itself, and is taken as such by its new audience. Whether they fess up or not, by posing as a cover band successfully and being taken as one, they have become a cover band of themselves.

Jim Hamlyn earned honorable mention for composing a similar thought, less precisely but in verse:

A band can be a cover band  
 By a form of exaggeration and  
 By mocking, shamming or otherwise hamming  
 Their art as if by another's hand.

These arguments play on an ambiguity of what it is to be the same band. The band in the scenario is the same band in one sense because it has the same members playing the same parts. The band is a new band in another sense because band identity is a social fact, constituted by the members presenting themselves in a certain way and being accepted by the audience.

It is contentious whether one of these approaches to band identity is the right one. See, for example, the disagreement between James Bondarchuk

and Ley Cray over whether the band Black Sabbath continued to be the same band after Ozzy Osbourne left (Irwin 2013: chs. 11–12).

