

Precis of *A Philosophy of Cover Songs**

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My book *A Philosophy of Cover Songs* is the only scholarly work of mine that my father ever read. His reaction was that it seemed interesting, but that it took me forever to say anything. So let me sum up.

The book is divided into three parts: The first part is about the history of covers and lays the groundwork for thinking about them. The second part is about appreciating covers. The third part uses covers as a lens for thinking about the ontology of songs.

Let's consider each in turn.

Part one (chapters 1–2)

The book begins with a history of covers so-called and with some philosophical distinctions. Notably, I do not provide a precise analysis or definition of the term *cover*. Rather, I start from how the term is typically used to highlight some phenomena of interest. We should not worry too much about edge cases, where our intuitions struggle to say whether some version is or is not really a cover.

A cover version is typically a musical version (a recording or performance) of a song which covers an earlier recording. Although the earlier version is often called the original, it need not be the first recording of the song. Instead, the so-called original is whichever recording counts

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[†]<https://www.fecundity.com/job>

as canonical for purposes of the cover. For example, contestants on talent search programs often sing “Respect” as a cover of Aretha Franklin, but Franklin’s version itself was a cover of Otis Redding’s. Kurt Mosser [11] introduces the term *base* to describe the target earlier version, and I sometimes regret not adopting that locution. I call the earlier version the *original* or *canonical* version. It’s a necessary condition for being a cover that there’s an earlier version which fills that role.

This is sufficient to mark the rough category of musical versions which we call covers. Reflecting on them allows us to recognize importantly different types of works and different types of covers.

My thinking about cover songs began with a paper that I had coauthored a decade earlier with Christy Mag Uidhir and Cristyn Magnus [8]. In the paper, we made a number of distinctions. We posed those so that every cover version occupied one quadrant of this diagram:

Mimic cover	Referential cover
Rendition cover	Transformative cover

All these concerns arise in the book, but I no longer divide things into four exclusive groups.

The most important distinction— indicated on the lefthand side of the diagram— is between mimic and rendition covers.

Mimic covers are unimaginative parrots, aimed at copying the original as precisely as possible. They are often cheap knock-offs, created in the hope of chiseling off some profits that would have gone to the original. Sometimes they are just technical exercises, created to practice and demonstrate skill.

Rendition covers are not meant to sound exactly like the original. An artist performing or recording a rendition cover does so in relation to the original version but tries to make the song their own.

The righthand side of the diagram represents two further possibilities. Sometimes (we argued) a cover version can differ so much from the original that it is no longer the same song. That makes for a transformative cover.

Sometimes the transformation changes the song so that the new version is *about* the original version. For example, when Sid Vicious alters the lyrics of “My Way” to describe a “prat” who “wears hats” and “cannot

say the things he truly feels”, he is mocking Frank Sinatra who sang the original. We argued that this change in meaning made it a particular kind of new song, one that was about an earlier song from which it was derived. We called this a referential cover.

When writing the book, I realized it was a mistake to frame this in a four-cell rubric of possibilities. It linked together issues that should be kept separate and begged questions which were more contentious than we had realized. Consider three sources of tension.

First, the claim that a cover version can be a different albeit derivative song was more controversial than I expected.¹ So I dropped the label transformative cover as a bit of jargon for a separate taxonomic cell. I now pose it simply as the issue of whether a rendition cover can be of a different song than the original.

Second, we had thought that a referential cover was necessarily a different song than its original. But Theodore Gracyk [4] argued convincingly that reference to the original might be something accomplished by the performance rather than by the song.²

The upshot of these concerns is that it is helpful to make the mimic-rendition distinction binary. This distinguishes rote copies from variations which open new sonic possibilities. We can then ask separately whether a cover version refers back to the original. And we can ask separately whether it is an instance of the same song or not.

Let me highlight two take-aways from the first part of the book: a principled refusal to strictly define ‘cover’ and the distinction between mimic covers and rendition covers.

Part two (chapters 3–4)

The second part of the book addresses appreciating cover versions.

¹E.g., it is disputed by Andrew Kania [6].

²Moreover, we had thought of referential covers as relatively rare. To return to the example from a moment ago: Although numerous punk versions of “My Way” follow the Vicious version musically, most use the original lyrics. However, Theodore Gracyk and Michael Rings construe covers so that all covers refer to the original [3, 12]. Several of Gracyk’s papers had an influence on me when I was writing the book, and he subsequently incorporated them in his book *Making Meaning in Popular Song* [5]. His book and mine came out at about the same time, but they can productively be read as being in dialogue.

A mimic cover is subject to what Lydia Goehr calls the ideal of perfect compliance [2]. Any deviation from the canonical recording is a defect. If the mimic cover sounds good or bad, then there are two possibilities: Either the features in question are in the original or they are not. If they are, then the mimic just has those properties in virtue of echoing the original. The artistic and interpretive choices were made by the original artist rather than by the musician performing the mimic cover. If the features are not in the original, then it is a failure of the mimic cover— not an artistic failure, but a failure of craft. In either case, we evaluate the mimic cover in relation to the original.

However, there is no single ideal for a rendition cover. Musicians performing rendition covers often say that they hope they have done justice to the song, suggesting there is something normative. But the norm is not simply about what a covering artist should change or keep the same. Some rendition covers are great because they change so much that they reveal unexpected possibilities in the song. Others are terrible precisely because they change too much. There is no formula.

Partly because of this, it is also possible to listen to a rendition cover as its own thing. Take, for example, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' 1981 version of "I Love Rock and Roll." The cover rocks, and the best way to appreciate it is to rock out to it. Note that this is unconditional or non-relational appreciation. It is different than considering whether the cover rocks more or harder than the Arrows' original version.

As such, I argue that we can appreciate rendition covers in two different modes: in relation to the original track or on its own just as a version of the song.

To be clear, my claim is not that these two modes of evaluation will both be rewarding in every case. Rather, they are both open *in principle*. There is nothing conceptually wrong or confused with approaching a rendition cover in either way.

In the case of "I Love Rock and Roll", there is no reward in taking it in relation to the original. For reasons that are particular to that case, considering the cover on its own offers the significant rewards.³

And there are cases where the opposite is true. Eric Clapton's 1974 cover of Bob Marley and the Wailers' "I Shot the Sheriff" could be appre-

³One may note that Jett did not write the song, but that fact can hold even if it is not a cover.

ciated independently of Marley's original. In fact, *Billboard* magazine included Clapton's version among its Top Single Picks with no comment on it being a cover, calling the track "a catchy goof of a winner." However, the staff writers describe it as having "the latino percussiveness and broad outlaw storyline of 'Cisco Kid'" [1]. As I suggest in the book, what the *Billboard* reviewers hear as "latino percussiveness" is better heard instead as the residual reggae influence from the original. So I suggest that it is better not to consider the track in isolation, but instead in relation to the original. We better understand Clapton's version of "I Shot the Sheriff" in relation to Marley's version than on its own, but not because of any general rule. Both modes of evaluation are available in principle. It is just that, for reasons that are particular to the case, one mode overshadows the other.

The two-mode view of evaluating rendition covers is more contentious than I had expected.

One argument against it is that considering a rendition cover on its own is considering the wrong aesthetic object. The artist records a cover in an environment where there is a canonical earlier recording, and they intend for audiences to have it in mind when listening. On Gracyk's account, these intentions are invitations to certain kinds of appreciation and interpretation. The artist "authorizes some associations and proscribes others" [5, p. 134]. Consideration of the cover version on its own refuses to make prescribed associations—the argument alleges—so the second mode of evaluation is defective.⁴

I agree that intentions can and often should figure in our interpretations of musical works. Nevertheless, I think that the argument fails as an objection to the two-mode account of rendition cover appreciation.

Here are some reasons that come up in the book.

First: In many cases, intentions in music-making are too complicated to support the objection. A musician might have no determinate intention at all, not caring one way or the other how the audience takes their version. Or a musician might have an explicitly permissive intention—hoping that listeners who hear it in relation to the original and listeners who do not will both have a rewarding experience. Moreover, in contemporary music production, there will be a whole team of

⁴Responses to this argument appear in chapter 4 and were initially developed for a paper that I coauthored in the time leading up to writing the book [9].

musicians and producers involved; each might have their own intentions.

Second: Even if the artist's intention were unequivocal and constituted a determinate invitation to listen to the cover in relation to the original, taking up the invitation can preclude other kinds of appreciation. As Deena Weinstein [14] and Jason Leddington [7] have argued, having the original in mind when hearing a cover can change the phenomenology of listening. That kind of listening could make less-reflective, less-informed listening impossible, and I do not think that the change will always be for the better.

To sum up: My two-mode account of appreciating and evaluating rendition covers holds that in principle a rendition cover might be appreciated either in relation to its original or on its own. Which of these modes are actually rewarding will depend on the details of the particular cover, not on any general rules.

There is more detail in the book, of course, but I hope this shows that there are interesting issues— and even some controversies— about how we appreciate and evaluate covers.

Part three (chapters 5–6)

The third part of the book is about the ontology of songs.

Chapter 5 uses covers to pose some puzzles about song identity.

In it, I elaborate what I call the Songs About Songs Argument.⁵ Return to the example of Sid Vicious, singing about Frank Sinatra in his cover of “My Way.” It is plausible to think that changing the lyrics in this way makes it a slightly different song.

Nevertheless, one might feel in this case that there is a sense in which the cover is the same song even while recognizing a sense in which they are different. But what is song identity, if it can hold in one sense but not another?

Chapter 6 offers an answer.

A song, I argue, is an historical individual in much the same way that a biological species is. Whereas a species is a lineage of organ-

⁵My coauthors and I had argued in just a sentence or two that a cover which refers to the original must be a different song than the original. I spell it out more carefully in the book.

isms extended by biological reproduction, a song is a lineage of versions extended by copying and influence.

A familiar lesson from the philosophy of biology is pluralism about species. There can be real ambiguity as to whether a category is a species, a subspecies of a larger category, or a genus divided into smaller categories. Moreover, there are different kinds of features which taxonomists can look to when marking the boundaries of species.

Songs admit of similar pluralism.

There is no set amount of deviation required for a version to count as a new song rather than just an odd version of the same old song. Consider Aretha Franklin's 1967 recording of "Respect." If I ask you to sing a bit of it, you will probably sing parts that Franklin added and which were not present in Otis Redding's original. Her version successfully launched a new lineage, so that performers covering the song now typically have her version in mind and may not even know about Redding's. There is a strong case to be made that Franklin's "Respect" is not the same song as Redding's "Respect", even though hers is often identified as a cover of his. Even if one insists that Franklin's version is the same song, it is clearly an important sub-song— or whatever we want to call the musical analogy of a subspecies.⁶

Moreover, we get different answers about which versions are the same song depending on which features we focus on. If we focus on the meaning of the lyrics, I have suggested, Sid Vicious' "My Way" is a different song than Paul Anka's "My Way." Yet the general structure and many of the words are preserved in Vicious' version. Focussing on that continuity, they count as the same song. For most purposes, "My Way" counts as a different song than the French original which Anka licensed and wrote his own lyrics for.⁷ Yet the tune is exactly the same, and there are contexts in which they are counted as the same song. As I write:

Someone playing the instrumental part of 'My Way' is also playing [the French original]. There are instrumental versions posted on-line labelled as being covers of both. How-

⁶Further examples are provided by what Michael Rings calls *irreconcilable covers* which are so different than their originals that they feel like they must be different songs, yet we might still see some sense in which they count as the same song [13].

⁷Jacques Revaux and Claude François' "Comme d'habitude."

ever, someone singing ‘My Way’ is not singing [the French song]. Highlighting the former, *same song*; highlighting the latter, *different song*. [10, p. 118]

So reflecting on covers highlights some advantages of this account of song ontology. In each of these cases, there is a causal history of transmission and influence: from Redding to Franklin, from the French version to Anka, from Anka to Vicious. Their musical versions are part of historical lineages, and different contextual factors can lead us to draw boundaries around songs in different ways.

Connections

I risk getting too caught up in details. There are more examples and applications in the book than I have time to discuss here.

Let me end with this thought:

The term *cover* and the phenomenon of cover versions have only been around for the last 75 years or so. A cover version exists in relation to an earlier canonical recording, so it requires that recording be the default way we listen to music. Covers reflect the way that recording has changed how we listen and relate to music. So covers provide an interesting window into contemporary music.

References

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