

2008

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“Cover Songs”: Ambiguity, Multivalence, Polysemy

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I Introduction

The notion of a “cover song” is central to an understanding of contemporary popular music, and has certainly received its share of attention in writing about contemporary music, from the mainstream press to slightly more technical ethnomusicological studies such as “Cross-Cultural ‘Countries’: Covers, Conjuncture, and the Whiff of Nashville in Música Sertaneja (Brazilian Commercial Country Music)” (Dent, 2005). In many major U.S. cities, musicians make a living in “cover” bands, recreating the music of well-known groups such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, U 2, the Who, ABBA, The Dave Matthews Band, The Grateful Dead, and others. Consumers of popular music will easily identify a favorite “cover,” a favorite tribute album devoted to “covers” of a particular musician or group, and often even a favorite “cover” band. In short, the term “cover” song is used without the recognition that there are many different kinds of “covers,” and thus that the reference of the very term “cover song” is systematically ambiguous. For instance, in his thoughtful discussion of two Pet Shop Boys “cover” songs, Mark Butler writes “Like hip-hop re-workings of classic soul riffs or Beethoven’s use of recitative in his instrumental works, covers provide an intertextual commentary on another musical work or style” (Dent, 1) yet fails to recognize that the kind of “cover” involved will be fundamentally relevant to what sort of “intertextual commentary” results. Similarly, in his defense of cover songs, Don Cusic notes that “From an artist’s perspective, covers are important because they (1) provide a song proven to be a hit to the repertoire, (2) show an important influence on the artist, and (3) give the audience something familiar when introducing a new act” (Cusic, 174). Yet, again, the specific kind of “cover” song involved here importantly informs all three of the criteria listed and how they are evaluated. And while usefully distinguishing between “covers” and “hijackings” of songs, Michael Coyle’s analysis of “covers” still fails to do justice to the fact that there are many distinct kinds of “covers,” with a wider range, than he successfully indicates (Coyle, 2002).

At first glance, the term cover song seems straightforward enough: artist 1 performs/records song x; artist 2 in turn performs/records song x, and is thus said to cover either song x or artist 1’s version of song x. One might be tempted to supplement this formal definition with the notion that a cover song is necessarily later, chronologically, than the song being covered; yet, as we will see, this modest addition can lead to such paradoxes as a songwriter covering his or her own song. To clarify some of these issues, and to avoid such paradoxes, I will use the term “base” song, rather than “original” song; for my purposes here, the term “base” will be used to identify a song that, due to its status, popularity, or possibly other reasons, is taken to be paradigmatic, and thus the version to which all other recordings or performances are compared. With this terminology in hand, we can begin to identify the various species of the genus “cover,” although it will be clear from what follows that such a list is not intended to be exhaustive,

and that the boundaries between one species and another cannot be sufficiently sharp and rigid to prevent their being breached; both aspects indicating, again, the systematic ambiguity of the term itself.

In what follows, I seek to differentiate some different kinds of “covers” in contemporary popular music, in order that these distinctions be kept in mind in discussing the phenomenon of “cover” music. I will introduce a brief sketch of a solution, from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, that allows the term “cover song” to be maintained as a useful musical notion, while still acknowledging that the term itself is fraught with semantic pitfalls. (Hereafter, because it is used throughout as a technical term, “cover” will be used without quotation marks.) I should note that to avoid complications that would overwhelm this discussion, I limit myself to “popular” music recorded or performed after World War II. I have also not tried to give exhaustive lists of cover songs, but have been content to offer a few examples of each of the different kinds, and have generally remained within the ambit of music produced in the United States, with some exceptions (particularly for British artists covering American songs).

I will then conclude with an brief account of how this solution might be applied, as well as indicating a number of questions that remain.

II Species of covers

II.a. Reduplication covers

The kind of cover song I have in mind under the term “reduplication” may be regarded as one of the limits to the legitimate use of the notion of cover song; some might well object that in this case, we are no longer really using the notion of a cover song in an appropriate manner. However, in that we have an attempt to provide an exact copy of a song, a record, or a performance, it isn’t clear why such an attempt doesn’t fall under the general rubric of a cover, admittedly at one extreme of that rubric.

Obviously enough, these kinds of covers are invariably live performances; they tend to be evaluated on how precise and accurate the reduplication, or re-enactment, of the base performance is. (Were a band to attempt to reduplicate a studio recording, it would either fail as an attempt to be an accurate reduplication or generate the peculiar situation—perhaps of more interest to those doing metaphysics, or readers of Borges, than those analyzing popular music—of an indistinguishable reduplication of a recording.[1])

Perhaps the best known group devoted to this idea is the Grateful Dead cover band Dark Star Orchestra (DSO). According to its own website,

What Dark Star Orchestra does is recreate the Grateful Dead. Not with hippie wigs and fake beards but through the live music. They play the set list song for song in the same arrangements used by the Dead members of that period. When you're at a DSO show you may really be in the Providence Civic Center back in May of '81. Or you could even be at the 1973 Denver Coliseum show listening to Weather Report Suite. Who knows?
(<http://www.darkstarorchestra.net/homeframe.htm>)

The idea of DSO, then, is to take a concert of the Grateful Dead and reduplicate it, including comments to the audience, breaks for tuning, and other details to increase the verisimilitude. Clearly enough, the enduring popularity of the Grateful Dead's music and the demand to see it performed, or recreated, has led to a successful career for the DSO. (It should be noted that this sets up a remarkable metanarrative involved for those who tape DSO shows, in that they are taping shows that seek to reduplicate tapes of Grateful Dead shows.) Similarly, I once saw the band ex-Liontamer open for the British group Wire—whose most recent release, ironically enough, was "The Ideal Copy"—by playing an exact and in-sequence live version—including what on the recording appear to be spontaneous spoken remarks—of the earlier Wire recording "Pink Flag."

Clearly such tribute bands, which range from bands doing a few covers of a given artist or group to DSO's attempt to recreate the Grateful Dead concert "experience" can, in some sense, be said to be doing covers; indeed, the most faithful covers possible. Such an approach, then, serves to provide one limit to the very notion of a cover song, in that, presumably, if such a band is successful in what it seeks to do, one would be unable, on the basis of the sound alone, to distinguish the base from the cover.

II.b. Interpretive covers

II.b. 1 Minor interpretations—the homage

In the vast majority of discussions of cover songs, the conception of a cover song involved is that of one artist interpreting another. It should be noted that such songs tend to be sufficiently well-known that the cover versions are quickly recognized; in some cases, such cover versions can become popular enough to replace the base recording and become identified with the newer or later version thus becoming, in the end, a "new" base recording to be, again, covered by others. This is wide enough of a category as to require two subspecies, what I will call "minor" and "major" interpretations (while recognizing that, again, there are not sharp boundaries here; indeed, the boundaries here are probably at their fuzziest).

A minor interpretive cover tends to maintain the general sense of the base song, including tempo, melody, general instrumentation, and lyrics; in this way, as the earlier citation from Cusick noted, such a cover serves as an homage to the base song, allowing its influence to be recognized, while maintaining the original integrity of the base song. Such minor interpretive covers might include Talking Heads' cover of Al Green's "Take Me to the River," The Byrds' cover of Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," The Beatles' cover of the Isley Brothers' "Twist and Shout," Jason and the Scorchers' cover of Dylan's "Absolutely Sweet Marie," Los Lobos's cover of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On?" and The Who's (or Blue Cheer's) cover of Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues." Such covers provide a good bit of information to an audience of what a band has listened to and thought enough of to record and/or perform; it tells, for instance, the Talking Heads' audience that the band has listened not just to Al Green, but more likely than not to a good bit of Rhythm and Blues; while not part of that tradition, its references to it help establish its musical bona fides and emphasize the importance of those sources. The tendency to establish one's musical pedigree has been particularly pronounced in the case of contemporary country music, where artists cover "classic" country hits (often Ernest Tubb, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Lefty Frizell, Patsy Cline, among others whose

country “credentials” are beyond questioning), such as the Dixie Chicks covering Wynette’s “Stand By Your Man.” In a similar fashion, an artist who seeks to be seen as being aware of the tradition of country music and thus establish his or her credentials with a potentially suspicious audience may provide a homage-like cover, of either an extremely well-known song (e.g. Emmylou Harris’s cover of Cline’s “Crazy”) or a relatively obscure song which suggests a vast knowledge of the tradition (e.g. Gram Parson reviving the music of the Louvin Brothers and thus helping make it known to an entire generation.)

II.b. 2 Major interpretations

It should be clear enough already that the notion of a cover song is systematically ambiguous, ranging from virtual recreations of songs to those interpretations that extend, develop, and augment the base song in relatively minor ways. It should also be clear that the boundary between what is being called here a “minor” interpretation and its contrast—a “major” interpretation—is itself quite vague. While such interpretations, in general, are often what is meant when the notion of cover song (without distinction) is under discussion, there does seem to be a difference between the relatively minor changes outlined above and the kind of interpretation that fundamentally alters the song. Those variations can include one or more changes to the tempo, melody, instrumentation, and lyrics; the base song should still be recognizable at the cover’s reference, but the resulting cover, in a fundamental sense, becomes a new song, albeit without the irony of a distinct category to be discussed, the “send-up” cover. The most successful of these are not only the kinds of songs most frequently mentioned in conversations about cover songs; some even replace the base song; no doubt many would identify “Respect” as an Aretha Franklin song, in spite of the earlier outstanding version of Otis Redding (as noted by Redding himself in one of his own live recordings of the song).

At the same time, it should be recognized that certain songs, for a variety of reasons—from a catchy “hook” to particularly insightful or intriguing lyrics—lend themselves to such major interpretations, often resulting in covers from many different musical traditions and perspectives. The music of Bob Dylan is probably the most fecund source of covers, from entire albums devoted to bluegrass and reggae covers of Dylan songs, to what is often regarded as the most successful cover in contemporary popular music, Jimi Hendrix’s cover of Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” (the song has been covered an enormous number of times, by U 2, the Dave Matthews Band and, among many others, Pat Boone) [2]. Hendrix, of course, takes an austere and minimalist recording of lyrics that are, even for Dylan, obscure and polysemous and changes it into a driving rock ‘n roll song featuring extended displays of Hendrix’s virtuoso guitar work. Other “major” interpretations would include, in addition to those mentioned, Ricki Lee Jones’ cover of David Bowie’s “Rebel Rebel,” (perhaps) John Coltrane’s cover of “My Favorite Things” from “The Sound of Music,” Rachid Taha’s cover (“Rock el Casbah”) of The Clash’s “Rock the Casbah,” and the Cowboy Junkies’ cover of the Velvet Underground’s “Sweet Jane.” All such covers qualify as major interpretations in that the resulting cover is quite distinct from the original song, maintains some minimal contact with the base song, and yet offers an utterly new reading of it. Again, such versions challenge an easy or quick application of the term “cover song” itself: for example, is Coltrane’s instrumental version of a Broadway tune a cover at all? If not—and why it isn’t requires some argument—should a distinct category be assigned to such a relationship? If it is a cover, what kind of cover is it, and what kind of assumptions are involved in so assigning it?[3]

Particularly because of the most successful cover versions, such major interpretations

often function as the paradigm of the cover song in general, in spite of what we have seen, and will see below, are operational uses of the notion of the cover song that diverge, often quite a lot, from that paradigm. (One might wonder if a song such as the Allman Brothers' "Mountain Jam" even qualifies as a "cover," in this case of Donovan's "First There is a Mountain." While such a question implicitly supports the idea that "cover" is a systematically ambiguous term, in this case the Allman Brothers seem simply to have adopted the "hook" from the base song, and thus their version does not qualify as a cover; rather, the relationship between the two songs might be better regarded as closer to the kind of relationship as that which holds between a hip hop song and the base song it "samples" [e.g. Nas's "Get Down," which samples James Brown's "The Boss."])

Hence, to reduce cover songs to major interpretations of cover songs is to neglect important other kinds of cover songs, and such a reduction thus neglects, again, the systematic ambiguity that "cover song," used indiscriminately, conceals.

II.c Send-up (Ironic) Covers

Many cover songs indicate directly a degree of respect for the base song covered, offering a version, or interpretation, that refers to the base song as one deserving respect; indeed, often the base song is re-discovered because of the cover version; no doubt many only learned of Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" after hearing Elvis Presley's cover, and one might suggest the same for Lambert, Hendricks and Ross's "Twisted" (perhaps better known through Joni Mitchell's cover), Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally" (known via the Beatles), or even Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" (which many may associate with the Grateful Dead). As we will see, the analysis of such concepts as "respect" and "authenticity" are a subset of a more general, and deeply problematic, conception of "intention," and determining the intention underlying one artist's recording of another is fraught with substantial philosophical difficulties. Indeed, one standard and long-standing solution is simply to eschew the artist's intent, and to critique the very attempt to include it in one's analysis as succumbing to the "intentional fallacy" (see Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946.) This certainly simplifies things, but with cover songs as much as in any other such analysis, to do so risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater on the basis of some aesthetic rigidity, rather than trying to incorporate some degree of the author's intent, while doing so in a careful and qualified manner. Having said that, however, another kind of cover song can be identified, which provides a challenge to the listener to re-think the base song in terms revealed by the cover: the "send up" cover.

Perhaps the best-known example of this sub-category of cover song is Sid Vicious's version of Frank Sinatra's "My Way" (written by Paul Anka, but certainly identified with Sinatra). The send-up cover refashions the base song into an entirely new product; often, as in the case of this Sinatra cover, fundamentally through the use of irony. (At the same time, such an approach must be distinguished from a mere "parody," which deserves its own discussion.) "My Way" is a reflection on life, sung by one approaching its end. Sinatra's version appeared in 1969, when he was 54 (and some 30 years before his death). Sid Vicious's version appeared in 1979 (the year of his death from a heroin overdose, although from a 1978 recording). The concluding verse indicates part of the contrast, with the Sinatra version followed here by Vicious's:

For what is a man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught.
To say the things he truly feels;
And not the words of one who kneels.
The record shows I took the blows -And did it my way!

For what is a prat, what has he got
When he wears hats that he cannot
Say the things he truly feels
But only the words, not what he feels
The record shows, I fucked a bloke
And did it my way

Furthermore, in the send-up version Vicious sings the first verse in a rather lugubrious way, drawing out syllables and almost putting one in mind of the stereotypical drunken guest singing at a wedding; at that point, the song picks up the beat, adds percussion and bass, and becomes a fast, if not frenetic, quasi-comic version. Sinatra's version is duly reverent of both life and the values with which one lives it; Vicious's version wholly subverts it into a sneering confrontation with death (to the opening lines of the first verse "And now, the end is near/And so I face the final curtain," Vicious adds "Ha ha ha!"); adding to the subversive context is the fact that within a year Vicious would, in fact, be dead, not long after his girlfriend Nancy Spungen's death (both from heroin overdoses).

Similarly, Devo's cover of the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" takes the base song's somewhat insipid lyrics about failing to be satisfied by consumer marketing—particularly relative to sex—and, giving it a rather exotic rhythm, refashions it into an anthem of existential despair combined with an oddly upbeat optimism. On Mark Butler's reading, The Pet Shop Boys' take U 2's "Where the Streets Have No Name" from a "spiritual contemplation" about the possibility of "transcendent freedom" to an affirmation, even a celebration, of community, specifically gay community (Butler, 2). The Snoop Doggy Dogg (now Snoop Dogg) party song "Gin and Juice" is a celebration of alcohol, marijuana and easy sex, combined with some rather dubious sexual politics. In the hands of the "alternative country" band The Gourds, the cover version includes bluegrass instrumentation and distinctively southern drawls, subverting a song about urban and African-American culture to a somewhat ridiculous sounding set of observations coming from white country musicians. At the same time, the cover version—in addition to its immediate humorous aspect—challenges the listener to confront certain questions about racial identity, and in that way suggesting that rather than the two versions being from radically distinct cultures, some things—including alcohol, drugs, and dubious sexual politics—are considerably more universal than they might appear to those marketing this music. In short, the successful send-up cover provides a subversive context that can reveal layers of substance and even unsuspected meaning.

II.d. Parody covers

In addition to the standard, if not paradigmatic, covers—minor interpretation, major interpretation, and send-up covers—we have seen one logical extreme of the very idea involved: the reduplication cover. As a preliminary formal account of what a cover is, I offered this:

artist 1 performs/records song x; artist 2 in turn performs/records song x, and is thus said to cover either song x or artist 1's version of song x

Clearly enough, a reduplication by artist 2 of song x fits this definition; indeed, the more successful the reduplication is, the closer we approach the logical extreme of an identity relation where the two are sonically indistinguishable. In contrast, the other extreme of the relationship between base and cover song would be the parody, where the relationship between the two versions is at its most tenuous; just as with reduplications, one might well argue that such parodies don't fall under the range of the rubric of cover song at all. Given how fuzzy the boundaries are throughout any such taxonomical discussion, I will simply take reduplications and parodies as the end points of the continuum to which the term "cover song" refers.

The parody cover goes well beyond the ironic relationship between a base song and its send-up cover; rather, the parody simply uses the base song as a reference, in order to produce a distinct version that may have little, if anything, to do with the lyrical or general musical content of its base. For instance, there is very little concern that Homer and Jethro's parody cover "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyeballs" would ever be confused with the Perry Como hit "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes." "Weird Al" Yankovic is perhaps the best known such current "musician," producing such parodies as "Eat It" (of Michael Jackson's "Beat It"), "Canadian Idiot" (of Green Day's "American Idiot"), "Amish Paradise" (of Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise"), and "Girls Just Want to Have Lunch" (of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"). There is also the threat, in this context, of a cover song (in this case unintentionally) coming to be treated as a parody, or even going beyond a parody to a performance so inept, or involving a song-choice so inappropriate, that the cover itself becomes a novelty song; one might include here Dolly Parton's cover of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," or William Shatner's cover of the Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

In sum, if we take "cover song" as a genus, we can identify a continuum of species that ranges from an attempt to reduplicate a given song or performance to a parody that maintains only the most minimal connection with the song being parodied. In between these two extremes, we find a wide range of other kinds of covers: homages, or minor interpretive covers that are very closely related to, and show a great deal of respect for, the base song; major interpretations, that refashion the base song into a song so distinct that it virtually functions as an independent creation, and can even become identified as the paradigmatic version of the base song; the send-up cover, that subverts the base song into a distinct song, but with an ironic distance and a reworking of meaning that distinguish it from a major interpretation cover, and the parody, which simply exploits the base song for comic effect. Clearly enough, then, the term "cover song" must be regarded as systematically ambiguous, and in any conversation or discussion of cover songs—particularly when it is a question of evaluating a cover song—it is crucial to make clear what specific kind of cover song is involved.

III. Reference: A philosophical excursus

The above discussion seems to generate a not uncommon dilemma that can accompany the attempt to make technical terms more precise. "Cover song" seems to be a useful classificatory term, that allows a rich and useful discussion of historical influence in music, and allowing us to identify specific songs and artists who have maintained their

importance across distinct musical eras. At the same time, as I've tried to show, the term functions better as a general term (or genus), rather than a taxonomical notion (or species) that does much work. Thus the dilemma: either "cover song" is sufficiently systematically ambiguous that it fails to provide the kind of informative semantic content sought, or it is used in such a way as to conceal the ambiguity that allows us to make informed evaluative judgements when those judgements may depend precisely on making explicit what the more ambiguous term conceals.

Philosophers—particularly in the Twentieth century—exerted a great deal of energy on the "problem" of reference, for they kept confronting puzzles that resisted solutions. (It should be noted that this is a very oversimplified picture of a central, longstanding, and notoriously controversial set of issues in the philosophy of language.) A famous example is the problem of substitution instances: if "Venus" refers to the morning star, and "Venus" likewise refers to the evening star, why does the assertion "The morning star is the evening star" seem meaningful (in the sense of requiring astronomical observations to confirm or disconfirm it) in a way that "Venus is Venus" does not? An equally famous example concerns non-existent objects: why does "all unicorns have one horn" seem (in some—quite controversial—way) true while "all unicorns have two horns" seem false?

A standard, and once traditional, approach, when disambiguating the reference of a term, is to identify its necessary and sufficient conditions; thus, "triangle" might be defined as a three-sided, three-angled polygon. Any reference to an object as a triangle that lacked one or more of these conditions failed; any reference that satisfied the entire set of necessary and sufficient conditions succeeds. (This approach tends to be more explicit and successful in relatively narrow domains, such as definitions within elementary mathematics.) The idea, in general, was that a given object could be characterized with a set of properties; a term that appropriately conjoined these properties would then provide a successful reference to the object in question. This turned out to be quite difficult for natural languages, in that the attempt to identify in a non-arbitrary way such conditions, whether for a common noun or proper name, turned out to be rather hopeless. While one may do so for a simple, well-defined mathematical notion, providing necessary and sufficient conditions for such terms as "love" or "courage" or even "Socrates" seemed to be impossible and, ultimately, pointless.

More recently, an attempt has been made to revive something analogous to the goal of this traditional approach, using sophisticated techniques (which need not detain us here) in quantified modal logic. On this "new theory" of reference, a given term—whether referring to a common noun or proper name—will be "baptized" by providing a set of essential properties that refer, and the term is then said to function as a "rigid designator." While this theory has led to a number of useful analyses, and spawned an enormous amount of critical literature, the relevant aspect for our purposes is, again, the challenge of identifying with any hope of success the "essential" features of a given object in order to make a successful reference. (Those interested in the details of this may wish to begin with Donnellan, 1966 and Kripke, 1980).

In contrast to both the traditional and "new theory" attempts to outline a successful theory of reference is that of Ludwig Wittgenstein's, sometimes called a "cluster theory" of reference. In very brief terms, Wittgenstein regards a term as identifying a fuzzily defined set of properties; a successful use of those terms will involve a sufficient number of that set—a cluster of properties—to allow a communicative reference to that object. In this sense, Wittgenstein's emphasis is on reference, or meaning, being tied to how that term is

used to communicate, and if the term is used in an appropriate way, the communication is successful. The standard example to illuminate this idea is that of a “game.” One can identify a number of things as games—war games, board games, a child’s game of tag, mathematical games—which may resist either the specification of necessary and sufficient conditions, or the identification of essential properties that any game must possess. Yet all can be called “games,” and if we are able to convey an idea that a given example is a game, we have successfully used the term to refer by our reference carrying with it a sufficient cluster of properties. In this sense, games are said to share among them a “family resemblance,” an analogy Wittgenstein seems to take quite literally. We may be able to recognize out of a randomly assembled group of people those who are related (who are in the same “family”) without having any hope of explaining in terms of a conjunction of features—let alone essential properties—those family members possess.

“Cover song” is precisely the kind of term best dealt with by a theory along the line of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance.” Clearly enough, the fact that if a song qualifies as a cover—although that determination is not itself without its share of perils—indicates that there is a relationship between the cover song and its base. At the same time, however, not to go further, and specify what kind of cover is involved, is to risk putting forth an evaluative judgement that fails to take into consideration the specifics of that relationship. In short, before turning to showing how this might work, across the continuum from reduplication covers to parody covers, we see that there is a relevant relationship between a base song and its cover; that relationship is sufficient to establish lyrical, instrumental, rhythmic, melodic, and no doubt other properties that constitute a cluster, sufficient enough to convey the idea that the relationship between the two songs establishes that a given song is a “cover.” Yet, as I hope to show, we can then go on to discuss more specifically the relationship involved by invoking the relevant kind of cover, which will allow a fuller and more accurate evaluation to emerge.

IV. Evaluating Cover Songs

There is a greater benefit to this discussion than merely making the relevant language used in discussing cover songs more precise, although that benefit shouldn’t be overlooked. More useful still is that this increased precision allows a more accurate and rigorous discussion of the cover song, the base song, and the relationship between the two. For instance, in a discussion of a base-cover relationship, what kind of cover is involved should play a role; to say that a give song is a “respectful, authentic” version of its base song is to categorize it as a minor interpretation, whereas a discussion of a cover song that subverts the entire context of the base song, as a send-up cover, tells us a great deal about the nature of the cover song that is involved, and allows us to move quickly to a consideration of the relevant details. It makes a great deal of difference in discussing, to take a single example, Ry Cooder’s cover of Burt Bacharach’s “Mexican Divorce” as a “faithful,” minor interpretation; were it to be interpreted along the lines of a send-up (or even parody), we have thereby identified a number of evaluative notions that appropriate in one context would be inappropriate in another. Here, there is very little room for irony, or comedy, or lyrical subversion; in classifying it as a minor interpretation, we can then focus on how the distinct vocal phrasing (probably, in Cooder’s case, also informed by the Drifters’ version), how the clarity and austerity of the instrumentation emphasizes the lyrical content, etc..

Indeed, Cooder, alone, presents virtually the entire palette of cover version possibilities,

from his near-reduplication of Willie Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground" (which he then re-interprets for the soundtrack to Wim Wenders's "Paris, Texas"), to his minor interpretation of the Rolling Stones' "It's All Over Now" (itself a version of a Bobby and Shirley Womack song) that gently transforms it with a Caribbean-style rhythm, to his major interpretation (with Earl Hines) of Blind Blake's "Ditty Wah Ditty," to his send-up cover of the Depression-era "One Meat Ball." Perhaps the only kind of cover that is difficult to find in Cooder's recordings is the parody, although his version of Solomon Burke's "Look At Granny Run" comes close; Burke's version itself is, admittedly, already rather playful.

Much of that written discussing the cover song phenomenon has been done in terms of "respect," "honesty," and, especially, "authenticity." Thus George Plasketes writes

The arts have always borrowed from their past. The imitation intrinsic in the act of covering in music, even with the honorable intent of homage from a disciple, is incongruent with authenticity (Plasketes, 150).

Here it is quite clear that to say that one artist "covers" a song is simply inadequate as an analysis. Aretha Franklin "borrows" from Otis Redding in a much different way than Sid Vicious "borrows" from Frank Sinatra. To discuss "imitation" without qualification is to conflate the kind of "imitation" one finds in the most execrable "tribute" bands, those bands who have made a serious craft out of reduplicating another artist's performance, and those covers that refer but develop—in a major or minor way—their own interpretations. A discussion of Blood, Sweat, & Tears version of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child" is inadequate if it is simply called a "cover" or an "imitation," without considerably more detail being offered. Finally, we see in this quote the important philosophical point that all such discussion of authenticity lead to: that of the artist's intent. While recognizing the controversies and difficulties associated with determining such intent, it is also clear that in many cases of cover songs, intent is either obvious (as in a reduplication or parody) or irrelevant (as in the case of a successful cover song transforming the original into an independent work of creative art). A detailed examination of such issues can be found in Livingston, 2005.

Others have recognized at least part of the complexity involved in cover songs. As Dasein observes, "In the best tributes the covering artist steals a song from the original and makes it their own, while they keep, even exaggerate, its original spirit. It's a tough trick, demanding authenticity and empathy" (quoted from Plasketes, 150). Yet again, we see the notion of the term "cover"—here "covering artist"—employed as if there isn't, beyond a rough family resemblance that it must satisfy to qualify as a cover simpliciter, a range of presuppositions. Clearly, some of the cover versions of songs mentioned above treat the base song with such reverence and respect that they could hardly be said "steal" the base, or original, song. Not only does the term "stealing" imply at least some degree of failing to acknowledge the source, certainly the point of many of the covers considered here is neither to make the song the covering artist's own, nor to provide an exaggerated version. Rather, by first establishing the kind of cover under discussion, we may well see in a specific case the source acknowledged, its influence respected, while the song remains very much that of the base song's performer. Yet again, it is clear that without recognizing the systematic ambiguity of the very notion of cover song, important distinctions, relative to the evaluation of that cover, are concealed.

It was noted earlier that much of the critical discussion of cover songs is given in a context

of exploring “authenticity.” Before turning to some final, unanswered questions about issues that arise with cover music, I want to suggest that such an approach generally commits one of two mistakes: begging the question, or attempting to explicate one problematic term by simply replacing with another equally, or more, problematic term (traditionally a strategy criticized as an *obscurum per obscurius*). While the difficulties remain, disambiguating the very term “cover song” can at least clarify what is at issue.

To be sure, some of these issues revolving around authenticity and authorship have not been entirely ignored in the literature on music, although in general the relevant philosophical issues have been given rather short shrift, particularly in writing on popular music. Except for extensive discussion in the ethnomusicological literature, which lies beyond the scope of this paper, the most interesting discussions of these issues tends to be found in the literature on the other arts, such as painting, sculpture, and (especially, for what are probably obvious reasons) photography. One of the most detailed examinations of the problems here is a discussion of what is involved in the restoration of a work of art (Dyksta, 1996.) Dykstra recommends a strategy I largely follow here—neither a casual assumption that the artist’s intentions are easily known, nor a rejection of the very possibility that those intentions can be informative to an understanding of a work of art, but rather rigor within an interdisciplinary approach:

Purposeful discussion of the role of the artist in the artwork requires careful language and deliberate understanding of the essential nature of art. Precise language, commonly understood, is the first step in this direction. The importance of unambiguous language is paramount. Clear language among the disciplines will be necessary to describe how the artist's individuality and the individuality of his or her work can be fulfilled and maintained in conjunction with three other factors—the historical contexts in which the artwork is documented and perceived; the traditions of connoisseurship that give it reference; and the physical and temporal characteristics of the media employed (Dykstra, 218).

A number of writers have suggested that cover songs display a certain degree of “authenticity,” as if that quality is something that can easily be established, if not assumed. In his own challenge to traditional notions of authenticity, Cusic writes

By demanding that singers write their own songs, the public is “cheated” of hearing great singers and musicians interpret a great song. And by denying that a recording is only “authentic” (a favorite term these days) if the singer wrote it, the creative genius of the non-singing songwriter is denied (Cusic, 176).

In a quite different context, Edward Armstrong seeks to show that

Eminem takes stands on the two modes of authenticity construction. He legitimizes himself in terms of both the white-black and violent misogynist axes while rejecting a key element of gangsta rap's oppositional nature--i.e., the underclass, evocative use of the "N-word." The lynchpin of my analysis is what goes "unspoken" in Eminem's lyrics--his refusal to say "nigga" in any of his songs (Armstrong, 336).

Cusic here places “authentic” in scare quotes, but not because of any particular problem with the term itself, which his own account employs as if its meaning is transparent. Rather, he wishes to dispute the idea that only those who originate a given piece of music—specifically the singer-songwriter—can be said to be “authentic.” This fails, of course, to provide any semantic content to the problematic term itself. Similarly, Armstrong spends a good bit of time addressing the question of how Eminem “constructs” his own authenticity through a dialectical strategy of opposition and embrace of the culture of the “other”—all without ever saying what it is to be authentic. In both cases, the analyses of these authors assume “authenticity” without providing any criteria for what satisfies its use; that is, they beg the question by assuming what they need to demonstrate.

When one does see the idea that a particular version of a cover song is more authentic than another, or simply achieves some admirable level of “authenticity,” these notions are, in turn, glossed in terms of “respect,” “honesty,” “tradition,” and “authorship”:

In order to understand how this works, scholars must also move beyond fixed notions of rock as “authentic” and pop as “inauthentic” and focus more broadly on the strategies involved in constructing authenticity in diverse musical traditions (Butler, 14).

In general, the terms used to clarify authenticity rely heavily—if implicitly—on the artist’s intent. Even where authors are particularly careful, as Mark Butler is here, the question of authenticity—whether constructed “strategically,” or “intertextually,” or “dialectically”—remains unanswered, and the criteria that must be satisfied for a song (or cover) to qualify as “authentic” remains at the level of a dogmatic presupposition. The explanation of authenticity in these other terms reduces to an explanation of intent, and to determine the latter is at least as difficult as the former. Thus, the burden of the question of authenticity is simply moved, to the question of intention; while not always made explicit, this doesn’t respond to, but merely avoids, the fundamental issues involved.

This is not to say that the artist’s intent is superfluous; rather, it is to recognize the difficulty in determining, unambiguously, what that intent is. In a fascinating discussion of the sculpture of Duane Hanson, Kimberly Davenport makes precise at least part of what is at stake in being suspicious of an analysis that ignores the artist’s intent, as well as those analyses that rely on a much too-easy assumption that such an intent is transparently accessible:

Central to the issue of intent is where to turn for authority. Once this is acknowledged, the underlying constructs become apparent, not all of which would regard the artist’s intent as fundamental. Key to this issue of authority is the question of how one defines art or understands it to be constituted. The modernist view, for instance, considers the object in isolation, so the authority rests with the viewer. The art historical view seeks to keep the object always located in the particular moment of its conception, comparing it with other works by the same artist, thus acknowledging that authority rests in the overall body of work. However, the wider boundary of “art” within which the work exists necessitates reflective concern for the authority of the artist’s intent (Davenport, 40).

Thus, specifically in the case under consideration here, the artist’s intent should be a factor, but certainly cannot be the determining element in making an aesthetic judgement

about the “success” of a given cover. Rather than worrying, then, too much about authenticity or intent, perhaps we can do better in identifying a cover as a certain kind of cover—an identification that must always be seen as provisional—and then proceed to delineate its features and qualities (and problems) on the basis of that identification. This, of course, leaves plenty of room for arguing about whether or not a given song has been appropriately classified; for instance, should Tori Amos’s cover of Neil Young’s “Heart of Gold” be regarded as a major interpretation, a send-up, or even a send-up approaching a parody, challenging the assumptions of the base version? The advantage here is that the presuppositions of a specific cover, e.g. a send-up cover, as opposed to a minor re-interpretive cover, are explicit, thus making clear what issues are appropriately at stake in the argument. Clarifying these issues won’t settle the matter, but will allow us to focus the discussion in such a way as to make it much more productive, if only by focusing on the appropriate questions that are presupposed by, and structure, the analysis.

V. Some Remaining Questions

The very term “cover song” is systematically ambiguous; to use it without indicating that ambiguity conceals issues that are fundamental to any analysis or evaluation of a given cover song, and of that cover and its relationship to the song it is said to cover. Rather than treating the term as if it refers univocally, the suggestion here is that a range of different species of cover songs exists along a continuum; membership in that continuum is best regarded in terms of Wittgenstein’s conception of “family resemblance,” and any song that qualifies as a cover must satisfy a minimal—albeit not arbitrary—set of conditions indicating that resemblance. What specific kind of cover a given version should be taken to be, and whether in fact a song qualifies at all as a cover, and what role authenticity and artistic intent play in evaluating a piece of music, remain as topics about which useful and fruitful discussions can go forth. To be sure, a kind of circularity arises here, as it often does in discussions of artistic intent. Thus we characterize a cover song as representative of a specific kind of cover based on the intent it is seen to display, while that intent is determined because of the kind of cover song involved. While I’m not sure how to avoid this circularity, it may well not be a crippling or vicious circle; in any case, it serves to indicate that there are a number of questions, swirling around this topic, that remain to be addressed. The more important result, however, is to recognize that if any such discussion carried out on the assumption that there is no particular dispute about the term “cover song” itself is at best naïve and at worst misleading and intellectually irresponsible.

A number of questions, of course, persist in providing what one might call the “phenomenology” of the cover song. I want simply to raise two or three of them here, in order to indicate some of the relevant issues that remain, while doing so in the hope that making the relevant language involved a bit more precise may help in clearing these issues up, if only in part.

V.a. Identifying an “original” song

When Hendrix records a song written and performed by Bob Dylan, there is very little difficulty in identifying the Dylan version as the original song, or using the language I have employed here, the base song. Few would reject the claim, that is, that Hendrix covers

Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower." Difficulties arise, however, when certain recordings of songs are identified as "standard" or "paradigmatic." The difficulties become acute in the case of a singer-songwriter who performs his or her own song well after a standard version has been established. Two well-known examples suffice to clarify the problem, and to raise the fundamental issue of the role chronological sequence plays in establishing the original-cover (or base-cover) relationship.

Carole King, throughout the 1960s, was an enormous success, co-writing with Gerry Goffin a string of hits for various artists, such as "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" (a 1960 number-one hit for the Shirelles), "The Loco-Motion" (a 1962 number-one hit for Little Eva), and "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" (a 1967 hit for Aretha Franklin). The latter, of course, has become a classic and covered by a number of other artists, although almost certainly most strongly identified with Franklin. King then recorded the song itself on her 1971 release "Tapestry." What, then, is the cover version here? It seems counterintuitive to suggest that King's own performance is the cover, in that it is, obviously enough, originally her own song. Yet it also seems counterintuitive to suggest that Franklin's earlier and paradigmatic version should be, in any relevant way, a cover.

Willie Nelson presents a similar situation. Few singer-song pairings are more closely identified than Patsy Cline's 1961 recording of Nelson's "Crazy"—indeed, many country music fans would regard (and, quite possibly, correctly) the song as a Patsy Cline song. While Nelson recorded a demo of the song, only released much later, he has also recorded later versions of the song; as with King, the same issue arises—it seems wrong to regard Nelson's version as a cover, but just as wrong to regard Cline's as a cover, particularly given the latter's status within country music. Without being able to pursue it here, it is clear that yet another issue is involved, relative to the audience (or intended audience), that may well include issues of class, gender, race, era, and other variables. One audience might identify a given song with a specific artist while a distinct audience might regard that same song as one that should be appropriately identified with a (possibly much) different artist.

King and Nelson present an odd situation, then, where on a fairly standard conception of cover song, they would be said to be covering songs they themselves created, or a situation in which the original song, inextricably identified with one singer, only later becomes a cover. These issues are raised here to provide just more evidence that the very term "cover song" is fraught with ambiguity; while some may wish to solve this problem by simply identifying the original song with its score, sheet music, or even the original artist's conception, that solution appears either arbitrary or counterintuitive. I have suggested above that rather than speaking in terms of an "original-cover" relationship, that a "base-cover" conception may be ultimately more fruitful, this hardly solves all the issues involved here, including how the "base" song itself is to be specified.

V.b Artist's re-recordings

The music of Bob Dylan has been such a source for musicians from such a wide variety of traditions that his name is inevitably involved in any discussion of cover songs. Unsurprisingly, his music also raises a question that deserves a discussion that has been neglected in cover songs—can artists be said to cover their own songs? Even for those extremely familiar with Dylan's oeuvre, Dylan can perform songs in concert

that may be almost wholly unrecognizable; many of us have had the experience of being entirely unable to identify a familiar Dylan song until we are able to discern its lyrics—and if the version presented is sufficiently distinct, even then the song may remain unrecognized. Clearly enough, if Dylan originally wrote and recorded a given song, and then either records or performs a different version of that song, one might simply say he is providing another version or an interpretation of it; this is a standard occurrence for performing artists, and the issue of covering music need not arise. But if the new version is so distinct as to be either difficult or impossible to recognize, what is the relationship between the earlier and later versions? Again, we seem to confront a problem that can be solved arbitrarily, if dogmatically, simply by asserting that they are two distinct songs, two songs with only the most tenuous relationship, or, in fact, the same song with two different interpretations. Yet, if another performer or group had produced a version sonically identical to the later version that Dylan provides, one wouldn't hesitate to invoke the notion of the Dylan song being covered. In any case, the metaphysics of this issue seems part and parcel to determining what, precisely, is involved—and revealed—in our use of the ambiguous term “cover song.”

V.c. Instrumentals

Virtually all literature addressing the topic of cover songs focuses exclusively on songs with lyrical content, and I have followed that tradition in the examples given above. At the same time, one might ask what is fundamentally distinct about a lyrical song being covered by an artist, and an instrumental song being recorded by an artist. Is the latter sufficiently different from our understanding of what is involved in covers to exclude it from that category? If so, it is not clear why. Thus, Bill Monroe's classic bluegrass mandolin instrumental “Rawhide” has not only been recorded and performed by hundreds of other musicians, it is often taken to be one of the songs that establishes the bona fides of the bluegrass mandolinist. When Rob McCoury or Ricky Skaggs records a particularly incendiary version of “Rawhide,” or J.D. Crowe records a version of Dylan's “Nashville Skyline Rag” that emphasizes his banjo work, these interpretations seem not to fall under the rubric of “cover song,” but it isn't entirely clear what precise difference is involved, again without invoking some dogmatic, arbitrary notion such as “cover songs are by definition versions of lyrically-based songs.”

It may well be objected that some of the questions I have raised here—is Carole King's “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” a cover of a Shirelles' song? Can an artist cover himself or herself? Can instrumental recordings be called covers?—are simply issues of semantics. This is almost certainly true, for the entire range of issues I have tried to explore, and with any luck clarify, here are ultimately questions of semantics. However, in this case, to call a question one of “semantics” is not taken to be term of opprobrium; rather, it helps emphasize that “cover song” involves the semantics of a systematically ambiguous term, one that needs a good bit more clarification before a more adequate analysis and evaluation of cover songs can be provided.[4]

Notes

[1] In this context, Steve Bailey considers the covers Todd Rundgren recorded with his band Utopia on his 1976 “Faithful”: “Rather than altering the songs in a sacrilegious manner, Rundgren offered nearly exact replications of the original works, covers so ‘faithful’ as to be pointless” (Bailey152.) Bailey's focus is on

“ironic” covers (those I refer to as “send-up” covers); as I argue here, this is only one of many different kinds of covers. A reviewer of an earlier version of this paper also noted that for economic reasons, such reduplicative versions were anonymously recorded, presumably with the intent of avoiding royalties while passing off the music as the original. This may be yet another logical extreme of the cover song; or it might simply be regarded as plagiarism, and thus theft. The same reviewer mentioned the phenomenon of karaoke, which again raises demanding puzzles about the relationship between “base” and “cover,” and what assumptions and implications are involved.

[2] When this topic came up in a course on the Philosophy of Music I recently taught, to a group of students that included several music majors, the students were unanimous in identifying “All Along the Watchtower” as a Hendrix song. For bluegrass covers of Dylan, see Tim O’Brien’s “Red On Blonde” (1996); for reggae covers, “Is it Rolling Bob?: A Reggae Tribute to Bob Dylan” (2004). A Website devoted to the topic (<http://www.dylancover.com>) lists over 20,000 recorded covers of Dylan songs; as of this writing, some 500 were added in just the last six weeks.

[3] This issue was raised by a reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper. As he or she notes, the history of Broadway shows itself must be contextualized historically, as indicated by the development of the term “Original Broadway Cast Recording.” At the same time, this simply provides more support for the idea that the very term “cover song” is systematically ambiguous.

[4] I would like to thank Mark Brill, Albino Carillo, Phil Farris, John McCombe, and Damon Sink for helpful conversations relative to this topic. The anonymous reviewers for this journal provided some incisive and provocative remarks about an earlier draft, only some of which I could fully address here.

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ISSN 1357-0951

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