

Covers and Communicative Intentions

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Abstract

Within the domain of recorded popular music, some recordings are identified as “covers.” I argue that covers differ from mere remakes in requiring a particular communicative intention, thus locating cover recordings in the category of extended allusion. I identify aspects of musical culture that encourage and discourage covers, providing an explanation of why covers are rare in the jazz and classical music traditions.

I

In the 2007 Todd Haynes film *I'm Not There*, actress Cate Blanchett plays a character named Jude Quinn. As with the other primary characters in the film, Quinn is clearly modeled on Bob Dylan. In the Blanchett sequences, it is Dylan during his 1966 visit to England. In one scene, Quinn/Dylan introduces his manager to Brian Jones, guitarist in the Rolling Stones. The band's name is never mentioned. Quinn/Dylan merely says, "Norman, this is Brian Jones, from that groovy cover band." On the soundtrack we hear The Monkees singing "(I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone" (1966), a song they did not write and which was regularly performed to great effect by the Sex Pistols in the 1970s. In the context of 1966, calling the Rolling Stones a "cover band" is obviously meant to be an insult. Thanks largely to the combined influence of Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, performance of original material was emerging as a criterion for being taken seriously as a rock musician. Yet saying the same thing about The Monkees at the same time — "Norman, this is Davy Jones, from that groovy cover band." — would not have been an insult. Although a great deal of criticism erupted when it became known that The Monkees relied on studio musicians for their hit records, no such criticism was directed at them for relying on others for their material.

Taken literally, the phrase "cover band" did not apply to either the Stones or The Monkees in 1966. In the case of the Stones, it is, by way of metaphor, a charge of theft. In the case of The Monkees, it is, by way of metaphor, an acknowledgement that their commercial motives negated any expectation that they were to be taken seriously as musicians. Either way, the use of metaphor presupposes a core literal meaning acknowledging lack of authorship. I grant that "cover" can be used in this minimal sense, as indicating nothing beyond the fact that a performer did not write the material that is performed. "Cover" appears to be meant in this way in this observation, from an oral history of the band R.E.M.: "I remember [their first public performance] and I assumed their songs were covers. I knew they were 50 percent covers" (Sullivan 1998: 9). In this narrow sense of "cover," it would be the case that in April, 1980, R.E.M. was a groovy cover band.

Moving beyond this very minimal sense of "cover," why weren't the Rolling Stones or The Monkees cover bands? I propose that it is because they did not intend, by their performances, to invite the audience to hear their work as referencing, reflecting, or deriving from earlier recorded performances of the same music. Since the 1960s, the concept of the cover in such phrases as "cover version" and "cover band" normally refers to a

communicative act of “covering.” The cover record or performance is a version of an existing musical work. However, it is more than a version. It is a version that refers back to a particular performer’s arrangement and interpretation of a particular song.¹ Normally, this aspect of the cover involves referencing a particular *recording* of the song. My analysis rejects George Plaskete’s view that covering is “the musical practice of one artist recording or performing another composer’s song” (Plaskete 2010: 1), which treats everyone who is not a singer-songwriter as a cover artist. Endorsing Plaskete’s minimal, more permissive definition collapses the distinction between a cover and a remake. It does so by ignoring Kurt Mosser’s insight that a cover establishes a relationship to its “base” song (Mosser 2008). The challenge is to explain what that relationship is.

Crudely put, I am operating with the assumption that individuals do something with words and music and images: they communicate with and by means of them. Directing someone to an earlier performance by means of one’s own performance is a complex communicative action that invites the audience to “read” the later performance in light of the earlier performance. To be more precise, I am proposing that paradigm cases of “covering” involve an illocutionary act of constructing an interpretation that requires the audience to refer to, and to make a comparison with, an earlier interpretation of the same music.²

The conditions for achieving this communicative act are less likely to arise outside of a musical culture rooted in recorded sound and mass distribution of performances. In theory, it can take place in any musical community where specific compositions are closely associated with specific performers, and thus a parallel practice could arise in pre-industrial musical communities. But, for reasons that will become clear, it would be uncommon. Consequently, “covering” in the sense that interests me became a common practice only after the twentieth-century recording industry developed a culture in which recordings became a standard means of access to music, creating the conditions in which large numbers of people associate particular musical works with particular arrangements as interpreted by particular performers. In short, the success conditions for the communicative act only become *widely* available in

¹ Throughout this analysis, “interpretation” refers exclusively to a performer’s interpretation of the music and never to the audience’s understanding of what the performer is attempting to communicate.

² Covering often invites a *comparative evaluation* of two recordings. However, that topic is beyond the present scope of discussion.

mass culture when specific recorded performances can serve as reference points for later performances.³

The analysis offered here does not pretend to capture all uses of “cover” in recent popular music. Concepts evolve, and therefore the early uses of a term are not an infallible guide to its present meaning. Within music practice, the idea of a “cover” song appears to have arisen within the popular music recording industry, originally only to refer to an attempt by one record label to cannibalize some of the sales of another label’s hit recording. This initial usage would suggest that “cover,” as noun, is simply an abbreviation of the phrase “cover recording,” indicating nothing more than a remake or re-recording. In this context, the category does not extend to live performances. However, my analysis assumes that the concept of a cover has evolved. It is now a species of remake. Furthermore, I believe that the term can be extended to live performances. Finally, I think that the category of the cover does not apply to some cases that are frequently treated as covers. Those cases are merely remakes.

In contrast to a cover, a mere remake is a new recording of a song that is already known by means of one or more recordings, but where there is either no expectation of, or indifference about, the intended audience’s knowledge of the earlier recording. Tiffany’s 1987 remake of “I Think We’re Alone Now” is a remake but not a cover of the 1967 top-five hit by Tommy James & the Shondells. Tiffany’s audience was adolescent girls, so there was no expectation of prior knowledge of a twenty-year-old hit song. In contrast, The Rubinoos’ 1977 recording almost certainly qualifies as a cover version. There are therefore two distinct intentions that enter into the complex communicative strategy of a cover version. A musician must intend to communicate with a particular audience – many of whom can be expected to recognize its status as a remake – and must intend to have the remake interpreted as referencing and replying to the earlier interpretation.

In summary, I propose that covers are important because they contrast with the related categories of remakes, versions, and interpretations. The interesting difference arises from artistic intention and proper audience grasp of aesthetic communication.⁴ In short, I

³ On the general topic of mass art, see Carroll 1998 and Gracyk 2001.

⁴ There is long-standing resistance to linking artistic intention and meaning. Any attempt to do so provokes charges of committing the “intentional fallacy,” as explained in Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946. However, there is a strong counter-movement, which I support. See Irvin 2006. For the idea of aesthetic communication, see Iseminger 2004.

understand the concept of the cover to be a concept about communicative possibilities, and thus fundamentally concerned with an agent's communicative acts.⁵

II

One way to see that covers differ from remakes is to examine songs that have been recorded multiple times. Carl Perkins wrote and recorded "Blue Suede Shoes" in 1955, and had a rhythm and blues hit with it early in 1956. Elvis Presley recorded it and had a minor hit with it in late 1956. Thanks to general trajectory of their careers, Presley's remake has sold more copies than Perkin's original. In 1991, an Elvis Presley tribute album was released in the United Kingdom, with all proceeds going to a charity devoted to music therapy. The album has a version of "Blue Suede Shoes" by the band Lemmy and the Upsetters with Mick Green – basically, a group assembled by "Lemmy" Kilmister of the band Motörhead. Given the Elvis Presley theme (the album is called *The Last Temptation of Elvis*), this remake is offered as a remake of the Presley recording. However, it is simultaneously a remake of the 1955 Perkins recording even if, by chance, Kilmister and Green did not know the Perkins recording. In contrast to remaking, covering is not transitive. The Kilmister and Green version of "Blue Suede Shoes" is not a cover version of the Perkins hit. Similarly, when the Linda Ronstadt "tribute bands" Blue Bayou and Different Drum perform the songs "Blue Bayou" and "Different Drum," they cover Ronstadt but they do not cover Roy Orbison and The Greenbriar Boys, whose recordings Ronstadt remade when she recorded the two songs. Ironically, a Linda Ronstadt tribute album that features a new Michael Nesmith recording of "Different Drum" would qualify as a remake of The Stone Poneys version (Ronstadt's band at the time) and so also of The Greenbriar Boys recording. Despite the fact that Nesmith wrote the song, in this context it would cover The Stone Poneys hit version.

In light of this difference, consider these two cases of covering in live performance.

- A singer in a band introduces a live performance of "I'm Not Your Stepping Stone" by saying "This one's for Johnny Rotten" (thus referencing the Sex Pistols' lead singer) and then plays a slow, blues-inflected version.

⁵ As with movies, recorded music tracks are frequently group creations. However, this point does not pose a problem for my analysis. Groups can have intentions as a group, through a shared intention. See Livingston 1997, and Bacharach and Tollefsen 2010.

- On another occasion, a singer in a punk band announces, “This one’s for Micky Dolenz” (referencing the vocalist who sang it for The Monkees), then the group plays a punk version of the song.⁶

By virtue of their introductions, the first performance references the Sex Pistols but *not* The Monkees, while the second performance references The Monkees but *not* the Sex Pistols. Yet the first case is clearly that of a remake of a remake. Since it does not automatically reference The Monkees, covering differs from remaking. Remaking is transitive relation but covering is not.

III

One test of an analysis is the plausibility of its application to borderline and highly similar cases. Consider the following examples.

- On two occasions, Bob Dylan has performed the song “The Times We’ve Known” during a public concert. The first time, performing at New York’s Madison Square Garden in 1998, he introduced the song by saying, “A guy playing up the street that I’ve always liked – Charles Aznavour’s his name. ... I’m going to play one of his songs. I usually play these things all to myself, but I feel like I’m all by myself now.”⁷ Dylan then performed an English-language of “Les Bon Moments,” a song written by and closely associated with Aznavour.
- In the United States, Eric Clapton’s only number one pop hit is “I Shot the Sheriff,” recorded in 1973 and released the next year. Clapton’s version is not a radical departure from the one that Bob Marley recorded with The Wailers earlier that year. Arguably, the Clapton recording did more for Bob Marley than it did for Eric Clapton, promoting reggae in a radio market where it was seldom heard. Ironically, Clapton was not comfortable with reggae and did not want to record the song or release it, but was urged to do so by his band mates and producer.

⁶ Something more complex would be taking place if someone in the audience had just yelled, “Play some Sex Pistols!” In that case, referencing Dolenz would be very much like referring to the Sex Pistols as a groovy cover band.

⁷ My transcription from audio recording.

- "Piece of My Heart" was written by Jerry Ragovoy and Bert Berns. Its first known recording was by rhythm and blues singer Erma Franklin, who scored a major hit with it by the standards of R&B sales in 1967. The following year, singer Janis Joplin made it over with Big Brother and the Holding Company's version on the album *Cheap Thrills* (1968). Big Brother drops the horns and piano and ramps up the guitars, but Joplin's vocal closely follows Franklin's modeling of the melody. In contrast, country-pop singer Faith Hill had never heard either of those recordings when she recorded "Piece of My Heart" in 1993.⁸ As a result, her arrangement and interpretation—in the sense explained below—owed no debt to the familiar precedent recordings. Hill's interpretation became a number one country hit in 1994. Not surprisingly, Hill's melody line follows the contours of the well-known melody, but the pauses and inflections are strikingly different from the 1960s hits.
- In a nightclub, a pianist says "Here's Monk's 'Ruby, My Dear,'" then performs a version of it that very closely follows the solo piano version featured on Thelonious Monk's 1965 album, *Solo Monk*.⁹
- Over the course of 1961 and 1962, Herbert von Karajan recorded Beethoven's nine symphonies with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Their interpretation of Symphony No. 6 is considered the one weak link in the set. In 1977, they recorded the Beethoven symphonies again. The 1977 recording of the sixth symphony is regarded as a great improvement over its predecessor.
- Released in 1965, "The Last Time" was the first Rolling Stones single that was credited to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards as songwriters. It surfaced in a major way again in 1997 when the underlying music of The Verve's hit, "Bitter Sweet Symphony," was based on a sample of the Rolling Stones song, appropriated not from a Stones recording but from an instrumental arrangement by The Andrew Oldham Orchestra. Although a license for the sample was initially in place, a lawsuit ensued over the issue of whether the sample exceeded the negotiated length; The Verve lost,

⁸ See Dickerson 2001: 56.

⁹ Kurt Mosser calls this sort of case a "reduplication cover" (Mosser 2008). However, I see no reason to call it a "cover" at all. I believe it is more common to call such performances either "tribute" performances (as in calling a group a "tribute band") or "impersonation" performances (as in, "The hotel was hosting a convention of Elvis impersonators"). The audience is expected to evaluate performance style, by reference to recordings that are imitated. However, when the derivative performances are celebratory without positioning themselves as commentary, they lack the intentional complexity of a cover's employment of allusion.

and their own songwriting credit is now replaced by “Jagger/Richards.” This event highlights the irony that the chorus of “The Last Time” is itself the Rolling Stones’ arrangement of a segment of “This May Be the Last Time,” a 1950s gospel recording by the Staple Singers.

My position is that the Dylan and Joplin performances are live and recorded covers, respectively.¹⁰ None of the others are covers. The Clapton, Hill, and Rolling Stones examples are remakes. The Verve’s “Bitter Sweet Symphony” is neither a cover nor a remake, nor are any of Herbert von Karajan’s recordings of Beethoven’s sixth symphony.

Hill’s remake of “Piece of My Heart” is much like Tiffany’s remake of “I Think We’re Alone Now” in that the intended audience would not be expected to know the earlier recording. Yet they differ in that Hill went to lengths to avoid Joplin’s influence, whereas Tiffany Darwish appears to have learned the song by listening to the 1967 hit before recording of it. Similarly, Clapton learned “I Shot the Sheriff” from The Wailers’ recording and The Rolling Stones learned “The Last Time” from the Staple Singers recording. These recordings are remakes. Nonetheless, Clapton and the Stones were both appropriating music from foreign traditions and their source recordings would not have been familiar to their intended audiences. Similarly, Tiffany’s intended audience was of young pop music fans could not have been expected to know a 1967 pop hit. Joplin, in contrast, was American singer remaking a song that had been a minor American radio hit *in the previous year*. American radio was not as stylistically segregated as it is today, and Joplin would have expected many of her listeners to compare her version with Franklin’s. Consequently, it was a cover. Lacking this expectation, the Clapton, Hill, and Tiffany remakes cannot be construed as the illocutionary acts of inviting comparison to earlier interpretations of the same music. Hence, they are not covers.

IV

My analysis draws support from the differences in conventions in the broad musical genres of classical music, jazz, and popular music. While the pianist in my jazz example could reasonably expect that some members of the audience might know Monk’s solo piano

¹⁰ For sake of simplicity, I am treating a recorded performance as a performance. The Joplin recording might well be spliced together from multiple vocal “takes.” However, that detail is not important to the subsequent analysis, in which a virtual performance will be treated as if it were a performance *simpliciter*.

recording, it is not a cover in the way that Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" is a cover. There are virtually no covers in the classical and jazz worlds, in part because they continue to operate with different views of the role of recordings in their respective musical cultures. Because jazz and classical recordings continue to be treated as transparent devices for listening to performer's interpretations of works,¹¹ performers cannot assume that audiences know particular recordings as reference points for hearing their interpretations as referencing and thus "covering" an earlier performer's interpretation of that same work. To see why this essential requirement is difficult to achieve, we must distinguish between a musical work, a performer's interpretation of it, and other variations and supplementations that arise in its performance.

In classical music, for the most part, performers perform composed works, the essential features of which are conveyed to the performer through a score, employing a visual notation. Suppose that a pianist is planning to perform Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 21 in B flat major. The performer interprets the notation and determines what performances of it should sound like. The performer then works out her approach to the piece, and practices that approach.¹² Although one pianist's general way of playing the sonata may be roughly the same as another's (e.g., taking the movements at roughly the same tempo), each will be slightly different if they have developed their approach from personal study of the score. For each pianist, each particular performance will be slightly different from every other; at the same time, two performances by a single pianist will be highly similar if they arise from the same practice regime (e.g., Glenn Gould performing J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations on different nights during his summer 1959 appearances in Europe). In addition, the performer's interpretation will often be influenced by ideas about the conventions for performance that prevailed when the composer wrote the work, by the performer's own training as a performer (e.g., how much vibrato should be allowed in a singer's voice?), and by having heard performances of the work.

From the perspective of the audience, classical music performance generally displays two sets of skills. First, there is a display of skill as an interpreter of the notated work. Second, there are performance skills in realizing the work for an audience (or, in the case of conductors, the performance skill of leading a group of musicians through a coherent

¹¹ See Gracyk 1996: 37-67, and Kania and Gracyk 2011.

¹² For an analysis distinguishing five types of interpretation in performing a composed musical work, see Davies, 2002.

realization for an audience). The performer's combined efforts, merging score interpretation with a practiced realization of it in performance, is the performer's interpretation of the work. A performer may have different interpretations over a lifetime, as when Glenn Gould's 1955 interpretation of Bach's Goldberg Variations (realized in both studio and live recordings) gave way to Gould's 1981 interpretation (realized in a studio recording but never performed for an audience).

The point of this overview is to call attention to the way that several distinct sets of artistic properties are in play when a classical work is performed for audience. For example, a listener can evaluate different objects of attention. A listener can concentrate on the work — as a composition, is Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 21 better or worse than Haydn's Piano Sonata No. 52 in E flat major? The listener can evaluate the interpretation — is Héléne Boschi's reading of the Haydn a sound one, or is she more astute about the Schubert? Finally, the listener can concentrate on the actual playing — despite his obvious intelligence, doesn't Gould's audible humming to himself spoil his playing of the Goldberg Variations? Hopefully, the listener evaluates all three objects of attention. However, a positive evaluation of one of the three is never a prerequisite to a positive evaluation of either of the other two. There is the weak work, intelligently interpreted and flawlessly played. There is the great work, given a questionable interpretation, but played with gusto. Finally, Gould is dead and his humming is present via recordings. Humming aside, the 1955 and 1982 studio recordings of the Bach variations can be compared and evaluated *as* recordings, giving us a fourth object of attention. And so it goes with the other permutations.

The general point here is that a performer never simply performs the musical work. Most music requires realization by performers in performances. As such, a musical work for performance underdetermines how it is to be performed. Therefore a third object for evaluation, an interpretation, interposes between work and performance. Different listeners approach music with different levels of awareness of the work/performance distinction, but informed listeners routinely take notice of the difference. The classical world is not uniform, of course. Some composers have attempted to minimize the possibility of performance interpretation, most notably by composing electronic music without the intervention of notation. However, looking at the long tradition of composed music that stretches from, say, Claudio Monteverdi to Henryk Górecki, it is fair to say that it is a tradition of composed works, performer's interpretations, and performances for audiences.

The important point, before we think again about Bob Dylan and The Verve and Faith Hill, is that there are no covers in the classical tradition. Each performance presents the work. However, in performing and thus directing the audience's attention to the work, each performer also displays artistic decisions about that work. Except in the special case of some electronic music, the audience cannot experience an otherwise uninterpreted work.

Another complication arises when a second layer of interpretation mediate between work and audience. Many composed works have both versions and arrangements, which are intermediate between the work and its interpretation. Sophisticated listeners attend to the way that a performer or ensemble is interpreting or navigating a particular *version* or *arrangement* of a work. Most often, versions are revisions or alterations made by a work's composer, while arrangements are due to someone else. Versions and arrangements provide competing and/or derivative performance choices for a single work. For example, Anton Bruckner revised his works and thus created multiple versions of them. Reflecting these differences, his symphonies are available in several published editions, including the Haas (1944) and Nowak (1954) editions. These editions give different performing versions. Works also have multiple arrangements. Beethoven prepared an arrangement of his seventh symphony for a wind ensemble. During his lifetime, it was probably performed more frequently in this manner than with a full orchestra. Most often, arrangements are the work of someone other than the composer. Hanns Eisler was one of several composers who undertook preparation of a chamber orchestra arrangement of Bruckner's seventh symphony. In either case, arrangements can plausibly be regarded as interpretations of works that in turn require interpretation by performers.¹³ Thus, there are cases where four distinct objects of evaluation are in play when a classical work is heard, as when one says, "I don't much care for Bruckner's seventh, but I like what Eisler did with the first movement. Unfortunately, the conductor did not understand Eisler's work and rushed the tempo, which led to a lack of control in the orchestra's playing."¹⁴

The concept of the work arrangement is important to my analysis about covers. Bob Dylan has performed several distinct lyrics for his song "Tangled Up in Blue," generating

¹³ There is an interesting issue of how an arrangement differs from a derivative work, but that topic cannot be pursued in this context.

¹⁴ This example points to a complication that is not important to my argument. Hans Eisler worked from a particular published edition of Bruckner's symphonies, and thus we have five objects of audience interest and evaluation: the work, the version, the arrangement, the conductor's interpretation, and the orchestra's performance.

versions. In addition to the introduction of many impressive electric guitar breaks, Jimi Hendrix's version of "All Along the Watchtower" features a tricky time change that is not present in Dylan's original recording. It is a distinctive arrangement. In a mass culture setting, many songs are associated with a particular recording, which is understood to be the "original," and it serves as the standard in terms of which others count as remakes. (Although the Hendrix version of "All Along the Watchtower" is normally regarded as the standard version, it is a remake and a cover.) When a particular recording functions in this manner, audiences also know a particular arrangement and interpretation as if essential to the song. Aural memory treats the song as if "thick" with properties that the song itself does not have. The communicative act of covering exploits this association.

The relevance of this point turns on the idea of "thicker" and "thinner" musical works. In observing that musical works for performance always underdetermine how they are to be performed, it is important to notice that different musical traditions—and different works within the same tradition—treat relatively fewer or more musical features as defining properties that determine which performances counts as accurate or complete performances of a particular work. Where Haydn specifies that the second movement of his Symphony No. 92 is an adagio, conductors understand that it should be performed at a slower tempo than the fourth movement's presto. If it is too slow to recognize as Haydn's music, a performance can be dismissed as not really a performance of Haydn's work. But how slow is too slow? Given that no conductor has ever stretched the Adagio to last more than ten minutes, there seems to be consensus that twenty minutes is *too* slow. At the same time, this symphony is not in the tradition of musical works for which the precise time length of each movement is a composer-determined feature. Still, in comparison with jazz and popular music, classical works in the mainstream repertoire are relatively "thick" in their constitutive properties, which is to say that the composer's work of specifying what belongs to that work in performance generates a detailed normative standard concerning the instrumentation, note sequences, tempos, and other properties that should be present in all performances of that work.¹⁵ Musical works that delineate more performance properties are ontologically thicker than works that delineate fewer performance properties.¹⁶ As evidenced by Monk's "Ruby, My Dear," jazz standards are much thinner than classical symphonies. Popular songs are also relatively thin in their

¹⁵ See Davies, 2001: 20.

¹⁶ See Davies 1991.

constitutive properties; Big Brother and the Holding Company did not perform “Piece of My Heart” inaccurately by dropping the piano out of the instrumental arrangement. Notice that every *work* for performance is ontologically thinner than its *performances*: given the total set of properties that ought to be present in its performances, that set will be the common subset of the two sets of properties that distinguish any two of its performances.

As a final point about “thick” and “thin,” we may observe that *arrangements* are thicker in constitutive properties than the works they arrange (e.g., compare the three distinct arrangements of “Piece of My Heart,” which can be differentiated from one another by noting the presence of distinguishing properties that are not normative for performing the *song*). However, a mass culture of recorded music associates a recorded song with a particular arrangement and performance interpretation. When the same song is subsequently performed for an audience that can be expected to know these associations, the new interpretation can generate meanings that arise from its degree of similarity to, and degree of departure from, the reference recording. So a cover does more than interpret a song. It also positions and directs the new interpretation through contrast with an existing arrangement and interpretation of it.

As with other music, most jazz performances offer multiple objects of evaluation. Unless it is pure improvisation, musicians perform a particular musical work. Monk’s “Ruby, My Dear” is an established “standard” in the canon of jazz tunes. Monk devised several arrangements of it, based on performance circumstances; there is the classic 1957 quartet arrangement, in which Monk lets John Coltrane’s saxophone carry the melody, and there is the solo piano arrangement, referenced in my earlier example in which the pianist sticks to the arrangement on *Solo Monk*. However, a pianist can copy more than the arrangement. If a pianist mimics the precise timing of the *Solo Monk* recording, then a knowledgeable jazz fan can admire the tune, arrangement, and performer’s “chops” or piano technique (e.g., by evaluating the pianist’s ability to mimic Monk’s idiosyncratic timing). In admiring the tune and arrangement, the knowledgeable listener appraises Monk’s contribution. Admiring the piano playing, the listener appraises the performer. However, the mimic minimizes the fourth variable, interpretation.¹⁷ Notice that interpretation can carry over from performance to performance, as can arrangements. But since two pianists can develop different yet

¹⁷ Minimized, rather than eradicated, since the decision to stick to Monk’s version is itself an interpretive decision of some (minimal) interest. This tactic is not common with covers, but an interesting case is Todd Rundgren’s *Faithful* (1976), which includes sonic recreations of six well-known tracks from the 1960s, minimizing the differences.

recognizable interpretations of Monk's solo piano arrangement, interpretations are thicker in their identifying properties than are the arrangements.

I think that it is standard practice in jazz circles to treat the performance of standards in roughly the way that classical audiences treat the warhorses of the classical tradition. Yet there is an important difference. Jazz performances are evaluated for their exploitation of the performance forces available in the particular performance. When the Bill Evans Trio performed the Gershwin song "My Man's Gone Now" in 1961, knowledgeable jazz fans did not regard the absence of sung lyrics as a significant interpretive decision. The trio had neither vocalist nor horns, so there was nothing to be gained by comparing the Trio's version to the song's treatment by vocalist Nina Simone or horn player Miles Davis. As a result, jazz performances are almost never covers.

Granted, someone might say, "I liked the jazz trio last night. They covered Monk and Gershwin." However, I propose that this use of "covered" is synonymous with "performed." Nothing is conveyed by it that would not be present in "They performed Monk and Gershwin." Furthermore, jazz audiences find little value in performances that simply replicate the interpretation of an earlier performer. It might be interesting to hear someone copy Monk's playing for one tune, but a jazz set that consisted of someone other than Monk playing *Solo Monk* in order, just like the record, will not interest most jazz fans. The jazz audience focuses on real-time interpretation as developed in the particularity of the performance. Because the interpretation is shaped by the performance means available (e.g., which instruments are on the bandstand tonight?), there is limited evaluation of a particular performance *as of* a particular arrangement. The jazz audience expects, and rewards, performer interpretation of the work beyond the decision to imitate. (Within certain schools of jazz, characterized by the Duke Ellington Orchestra in the 1930s and 1940s, audiences are also expected to be aware of the distinct contributions of the arranger and the performers. The orchestrations that Gil Evans provided for Miles Davis carried this tradition into the next generation of jazz.)

Consequently, there is an important general contrast between jazz and popular music. As a general rule, the jazz audience attends to and evaluates each individual performance as a manifestation of the particular players on that occasion. Differences in interpretations of the same work are generally tied to their particular skills. Although recording technology did a great deal to generate the popularity and internal development of jazz, and while certain

recordings are regarded as particularly significant by the jazz audience, particular recordings are not regarded as the primary objects of critical attention except as vehicles for providing access to particular exemplary performances. A jazz fan who does not know Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* hardly counts as a jazz fan, but *Kind of Blue* is nonetheless treated as a transparent vehicle for hearing stellar performances by a particular group of players. Davis's multiple performance of "So What" can be compared via different recordings, and so a fan can evaluate changes in his interpretation and in his "chops" over the course of different tours with different ensembles. The *Kind of Blue* arrangement and "original" performance also serves as a reference point for its interpretation by subsequent groups. On *Kind of Blue*, "So What" is arranged for trumpet and two saxophones, making it very different from the hornless arrangement by the Qhuit Gran Band. That quartet may expect listeners to hear "So What" as their arrangement of a Miles Davis piece, but there is no sense in which they are remaking part of *Kind of Blue*. Since they are not remaking it when they record it, they are not covering it.

Although jazz depends on recordings, jazz is not sufficiently phono-centric to generate a culture of cover recordings. Popular music operates differently. In popular music, particular recordings become important focal objects for evaluation.¹⁸ A jazz fan who knows the six tunes from *Kind of Blue* only from Miles Davis live recordings would not be regarded as strange in the same way that a rock music fan would be for knowing all ten songs from Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* without ever having heard that album.

V

To summarize the argument to this point, a distinctive musical culture is a pre-condition for the complex communicative activity that I am attributing to covers. Covers require a musical culture that is conducted to a large extent by way of recorded tracks, and in which musicians are expected to write their own material. The first of these conditions is required to establish the audience's facility in comparing later arrangements and interpretations with earlier ones. The second condition establishes that remakes of familiar material are the exception and not the norm. In an earlier era, when singers were not expected to be songwriters, Dylan's performance of Charles Aznavour would not be very noteworthy. However, Dylan is the paradigm singer-songwriter in recent popular music, so his decision to announce that he is

¹⁸ See Gracyk 2001: 13-50.

performing the work of another singer-songwriter is significant. (Similarly, his decision to assign the title *Self Portrait* to an album of covers is noteworthy in interpreting and evaluating that album.)

Together, the importance of recordings and the general expectation of authorship make it plausible to regard some remakes as intended to refer to particular earlier interpretations. Although a remake may derive from an earlier recording, by copying it, not every remake references what it remakes. As I will explain below, these conditions allow some remakes to function as extended allusions that reference the earlier recording, and not merely as different interpretations of the same work. In a musical context where audiences cannot be expected to know particular interpretations and arrangements, small differences cannot matter as differences, and in a context where musicians are not expected to write what they perform, the decision to adopt or deviate from an established arrangement and/or interpretation cannot carry much interpretive weight. When they are both present, these two cultural conditions make it possible to have a groovy cover band.

VI

Another contributing factor in the culture of covers is the pop music tradition of one-hit wonders: singers and bands who are known for one and only one recording. The performer is not valued as an exceptional performer. The performer's other work is irrelevant to the evaluation of the recording; indeed, it may be valued all the more *because* the performer is otherwise uninteresting. Instead, the attraction will be the way that a particular song, arrangement, interpretation, and performance comes together in a particular recording. The song may be of negligible interest. A case in point is Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky," which created a pop hit in 1970 by appropriating the boogie style of John Lee Hooker (yet without being a cover of any particular song). Ten years later, The Vapors' "Turning Japanese" was a one-hit wonder of the new wave movement. To even know that the song was written by David Fenton is to qualify oneself as a true aficionado of new wave music. At the same time, these songs are not compelling *as songs* in the way that particular musical works are standards in the classical and jazz canons. A jazz musician or classical performer who made only one successful record during an extended career would be considered an inferior musician, or else someone with very bad luck. In popular music, so many recordings are released each year that having even one successful recording is considered a great success.

Having a single hit is an accomplishment, not an embarrassment. *Writing* one hit song is not regarded as equally noteworthy.

VII

The important element of my position on covers can now be fully articulated. A cover is a remake, part of the intended appeal of which is its *being* a remake. A remake is a new *recording* of previously recorded material. In contrast, a cover is a remake that presupposes audience familiarity with another recording of it, which it thereby “covers.” As such, a cover always contrasts with a particular arrangement as interpreted by a particular performer. Where a performer cannot expect the intended audience to have access to or knowledge of an “original” recording as a standard for comparison, there may be a remake but there is no cover.¹⁹ Since most of the classical repertoire predates recording, classical works are not associated with “original” recordings. Hence, there are no remakes, and thus no covers. Although jazz has a tradition of important recordings, there is little interest in the exceptional, one-of-a-kind recording by a musician who is otherwise unremarkable. Lacking a focus on particular recordings as central objects of evaluation, there is, again, limited evaluative concern with remakes. These points begin to explain why covers are not important to these traditions. However, there is an additional dimension, as there must be in order to provide a positive explanation of why they do matter in popular music.

In the interesting sense of “cover” and “covering” that goes beyond the mere idea of a remake, the cover song or cover performance communicates the performer’s awareness of, and attitude toward, a particular recorded fusion of musicianship and musical work. General influence is insufficient. Some original songs by popular musicians are derivative without being covers. They adopt the style of an earlier genre, as when Savoy Brown’s 1969 single, “Train to Nowhere,” is a relatively pedestrian original blues song that appropriates several styles without referencing any particular song or musician. It involves appropriation of style without being a cover. The Plimsouls’ original song “A Million Miles Away” was a minor hit in 1983, thanks to its prominent presence in a movie soundtrack. The song’s arrangement sounds remarkably like The Byrds at the height of their psychedelic-pop glory, yet it does not imitate or otherwise reference any particular Byrds track. Hence, it is not a cover. The

¹⁹ Some “tribute” albums are intended to call attention to neglected songwriters, as with *Sweet Relief: A Benefit for Victoria Williams* and *The Inner Flame: A Rainer Ptacek Tribute*, and so are not sets of covers as is *The Last Temptation of Elvis*.

requisite level of particularity is at the level of being able to name the particular recording that is being “covered.”

Live performance covers are a special case and cannot be expected to satisfy all of the conditions I have detailed. At the New York concert in 1998, Dylan covered Aznavour by performing “The Times We’ve Known.” Paradigmatically, remakes and covers are recordings. Dylan never released a recording of the Aznavour song, and so there is no remake and thus no cover in the strict sense. Nonetheless, I propose that there is courtesy sense of the term “cover” that applies here. Dylan is using the occasion of the live performance to call attention to the career of a French recording artist whose own 1967 recording of “Les Bon Moments” was an international hit. If Aznavour had merely written the song but had not himself popularized it, there would be no question of a cover. For example, Kris Kristofferson wrote “Me and Bobby McGee” and “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” among many other songs, and these are closely associated with the recorded versions by Janis Joplin and Johnny Cash, respectively. Suppose that a country-influenced rock band records its debut album, and the album features these two songs alongside twelve original songs. I suspect that the knowledgeable audience would regard them as covers of Joplin and Cash – but, absent further specification, not of Kristofferson, even though he has recorded them himself. Thus, Dylan covers Aznavour because Aznavour is himself a recording artist; Dylan would not be covering Aznavour in concert if Aznavour were merely a songwriter. This point confirms that The Monkees were not a cover band. Although they did not write “I’m Not Your Stepping Stone” and most of their other hits, their recordings are the original hits.²⁰

Because a cover recording or performance must intentionally reference a prior recording, cover status may hinge on relatively subtle points. Had Dylan said nothing about Aznavour, it would not be a cover. Dylan often performs obscure songs. In this respect, he draws on this background in the folk music tradition. The folk music tradition revolves around the performance of traditional songs, frequently of obscure origin, that circulate in multiple versions, reworked by performers over time. Although certain recorded performances of folk songs are regarded as exemplary, folk music is like jazz in being a performance-centered tradition rather than a recording-centered tradition. For evidence that Dylan’s background in folk makes his verbal comment about Aznavour relevant to the performance’s status as a cover, consider this fictional response to Dylan’s performance of

²⁰ Although “I’m Not Your Stepping Stone” had already appeared as an album track on *Midnight Ride* (1966) by Paul Revere and the Raiders, the Monkees’ version was the major radio hit.

October 8, 1994, in Boston: “The surprise of the evening was that Dylan covered ‘Two Soldiers.’” The surprise arises from the fact that Dylan rarely performs that song. “Two Soldiers” is a traditional song from the nineteenth century, and it appears that Dylan performed it that night because its first line references the city of Boston. Here, clearly, nothing is changed if we substitute “performed” for “covered,” as in, “The surprise of the evening was that Dylan performed ‘Two Soldiers.’” In contrast, something changes if we say, “The surprise of the evening was that Dylan performed Charles Aznavour,” where this phrasing calls attention to the song’s authorship. In the actual case of the New York concert, Dylan’s spoken introduction to the Aznavour song shows that he intended to do something more. Dylan plays the song because he wants to make his audience aware of Aznavour as a performing musician. Aznavour’s authorship seems beside the point. In contrast, in “covering” the song “Two Soldiers” in Boston, Dylan does not communicate his respect for any other musicians. (Even if someone in the audience knows from the liner notes of a Dylan album that Dylan learned the song from Jerry Garcia, it does not follow that Dylan’s performance involves Dylan’s act of communicating something about Garcia.)

VIII

In distinguishing covers from remakes, I have suggested that we must look at precedence, cultural context, performance context, and other variables. But what is the point? Why should we want to say that Dylan *covered* Simon and Garfunkel when he put “The Boxer” on *Self Portrait* (1970), but that he was not covering Joan Baez when “Copper Kettle” appears on the same album? The point of distinguishing between remakes and covers is that the latter alludes to a particular musician’s treatment of the same material. On my analysis, covers are extended allusions to previous works. An allusion is an intended reference that is established by textual similarity to a source text, creating an association that goes beyond mere substitution of a referent.²¹ Although remakes will always satisfy the requirement of textual similarity, mere remakes do not require allusion, because the similarity between tokens produced by different performers is insufficient to establish reference to specific antecedent tokens.

The presence of the act of alluding invites comparison as an element of the audience’s interpretation and evaluation. Consequently, to say that songs such as “The Last Time” make

²¹ See Irwin 2001, and Gracyk 2007. Although less common, literature also creates the conditions for extended allusion that is much like covering (e.g., Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as a cover of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*).

the Rolling Stones a cover band, rather than a band that remade American songs they liked, is to say that our response to “The Last Time” should reference the source material. The joke of calling them a “groovy cover band” in *I’m Not There* is that Quinn/Dylan is saying that he knows the sources of their material, and he knows what they’re doing to it in interpreting it. I take it that they’re “groovy” in that he admires their range of sources, but the remark is also meant to indicate that he has a level of musical awareness of their appropriations that is lost on the pop audience.

Normally, allusion is a local, small-scale aesthetic effect brought about when one text intentionally parallels and thus references and another text, and where it is intended to be understood in that way by at least some of its audience. One of my favorite allusions in popular culture is visual: the photograph on the front the Rolling Stones album *Get Yer Ya-Ya’s Out!* (1970) shows drummer Charlie Watts and a mule. If you look closely at the mule, it has been arranged to illustrate Bob Dylan’s lyric “jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule” from “Visions of Johanna” on the *Blonde on Blonde* album (1966). While that allusion is relatively trivial, beyond answering the question of why they procured a mule for the photo, many allusions enrich the alluding material. It is a means by which accessible works remain accessible while generating interpretative problems and a consequent aesthetic richness. Normally, an allusion is a brief or relatively small aspect of a text. Covers are somewhat different. They are saturated allusions. Every aspect of the performance is to be treated as referencing all aspects of the earlier recording at parallel points in the performance. (Notice that if the reference were merely to the song, and not the recording, then no such comparison could be expected. As relatively “thin” types, popular songs do not have features such as synthesizer squeals, handclaps, and girlish breathlessness. These are features of arrangements, not songs.)

Consider, in this light, two remakes of “I Think We’re Alone Now.” There is nothing in the music or lyric that genders the song. Rather obviously, the original hit was sung by a man, and the presumption is that the second party of the “we” is a girl. However, this is an artifact of the performance. Due to her voice, the Tiffany remake of “I Think We’re Alone Now” shifts to the perspective of an adolescent girl, and the second party in the “we” is, presumably, male. In the original version, the chorus is followed by three seconds of percussion that mimics a heartbeat, which ties back to the lyric of the chorus. In Tiffany’s remake, the breaks after the choruses do not follow this pattern; the few seconds that lead to the next verse are

filled with frenetic electronic percussion and, later, synthesized sound. Because songs are musically “thin,” there is no “correct” musical decision here. Yet differences in arrangements drive interpretive differences. Feeling your lover’s heartbeat conveys a discovery of intimacy. To drive the point home, Tiffany’s remake is actually a different version, because it opens and closes with an additional bit of lyric that asserts, with evident pride, “I can change your heartbeat.” Despite its lingering veneer of innocence, Tiffany’s version is about the manipulation of sexuality. The original hit was about the discovery of it. By contrast, the remake thus makes an assertion about teenage maturity. Female agency is highlighted.

However, I have asserted that Tiffany’s version is a remake and not a cover, where that distinction is grounded in my understanding of the intended audience and the time lag between versions. My understanding of the recording would change if I thought that Tiffany’s version of “I Think We’re Alone Now” is a cover, not just a remake. As a cover, it would allude to the 1960s version and the audience would be invited to hear it as a response. However, I have shown that remaking a song does not necessarily set itself up as a response to earlier interpretations. A cover version differs from a mere remake by responding to, and being about, the song as performed in a certain way by a previous band. As such, if it were a cover, Tiffany’s version of “I Think We’re Alone Now” would make a comment about differences in attitudes toward teen sexuality in the different decades. As a cover, it would also call attention to the way that 1980s instruments and dance beats dominate the material. Beyond the gender change of the main vocal, there would be significance in the alteration of a signature moment of the original hit when the heartbeat percussion is replaced by updated electronic instrumentation. This shift would signal a certain ironic distancing from the relative innocence of the song’s overt sentiments. However, this only works if the later combination of arrangement (e.g., the use of synthesizers) and performance interpretation (e.g., Tiffany’s oddly slurred vocal at certain points) can be laid against the earlier arrangement (e.g., the use of a “thump thump” heartbeat pattern in the percussion break) and performance (e.g., a vocal that conveys concern and agitation, with occasional interludes of intimacy, but never sexuality). But, I stress that I do not think it is a cover, because Tiffany’s audience was not positioned to make the comparison. In contrast, the Rubinoos’ 1977 recording is without question a cover, and a fairly close one in its retention of the arrangement of the earlier hit. It thus invites interpretation as a commentary on teen sexuality; released in the heyday of punk

rock, I take it that it endorses a certain degree of innocence. In the context of their self-titled debut album, that interpretation seems beyond question.

Because they are not covers, Clapton's "I Shot the Sherriff" and Dylan's "Copper Kettle" do not ask the audience to understand Clapton's and Dylan's performance by reference to The Wailers and Joan Baez, respectively. In their performances, Clapton adopts the persona of someone who is charged with a killing and Dylan adopts the persona of an Appalachian bootlegger. But Clapton and Dylan do not comment on someone else who adopts such a persona. With a cover, the singer can both adopt a persona (by arranging it in a particular way) and comment on earlier adoptions of that persona (by inviting comparison to a previous arrangement and thus adoption of a persona). Through interpretive choices, a cover can either endorse the earlier interpretation (by closely following it) or repudiate it (by reworking it stylistically). With mere remakes, an arrangement's differences cannot be taken as commentary on earlier musicians' interpretation and performance choices.

In permitting some remakes to function in the additional category of a cover of previously recorded music, popular music can introduce a level of allusion that is not typically permitted in the classical and jazz traditions. The supposed simplicity of popular culture is greatly complicated by the existence of covers.

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