

# APPRECIATING COVERS

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## ABSTRACT

A recording or performance of a song is a *cover* if there is an earlier, canonical recording of the song. It can seem intuitive to think that properly appreciating a cover requires considering it in relation to the original, or at least that doing so will yield a deeper appreciation. This intuition is supported by some philosophical accounts of covers. And it is complicated by the possibility of *hearing in*, whereby one hears elements of the original version in the cover. We argue that it can nevertheless be just as legitimate to consider a cover version on its own as it is to consider it in relation to the earlier recording that it is covering. In some cases, these two modes of appreciation will offer distinct rewards. In other cases, one mode will be substantially more rewarding than the other. The details matter, especially in complicated cases like covers of covers, but neither mode is privileged in principle.

## KEYWORDS

Cover Songs, Rock Music, Hearing In

Suppose you listen to Johnny Cash's 2002 track "Hurt" and come to appreciate it. You later learn that it is a cover, that the song was written by Trent Reznor and originally released by Nine Inch Nails in 1994. You listen to the original. You compare the two. What is the relation between the appreciation you had before you learned that it was a cover and the appreciation you have afterwards? Does learning about the original necessarily provide richer appreciation of the cover?

An intuitive response would be to say yes. Knowing more must lead to greater appreciation. While considering the cover on its own provides a superficial take, exploring it further can only deepen one's appreciation.

This intuition is motivated in part by the fact that, in case of a cover, the artist records or performs a song that already exists in an earlier *original* or *canonical* recording, and the Nine Inch Nails' version of "Hurt" was clearly canonical when Cash's version was released. However, it is now common for people who hear "Hurt" to only think of it as a Johnny Cash song. Reacting to the music video of Cash's version, Bono commented, "Trent Reznor was born to write the song, but Johnny Cash was born to sing it." Reznor himself said in his reaction to the video, "Tears welling, silence, goose bumps... that song isn't mine anymore."<sup>2</sup> The Johnny Cash version is now, at least to some people, the canonical version of the song. So it is possible that someone now might cover the Johnny Cash version, without having heard the Nine Inch Nails' original or, at least, without having it in mind.

Just learning that a version is a cover might change your appreciation for it. For example, you might think of it as less original or compelling when you learn that the person singing is not the same person who wrote the lyrics. However, assessing the cover to be original was appreciating it on the basis of a false belief, and the revision is motivated by the correction, rather than by learning anything specific about the original. So let's suppose that your initial appreciation did not rely on false beliefs: You knew that Cash did not write "Hurt," but did not know about the earlier version. Your later evaluation involved considering specific facts about the original version, not merely that there was one.

We argue that the intuition we posed above is incorrect, but let's step back from the example of "Hurt" to consider this appreciative puzzle in general. There are several accounts of cover songs in the philosophical literature. In section 1, we review some basic distinctions between types of covers. Our interest is primarily in the so-called rendition covers, those which are not

meant to sound exactly like the original. In section 2, we consider accounts which suggest that it is either impossible to appreciate a rendition cover without knowing about the original, or that such appreciation is always importantly incomplete. In section 3, we argue against both allegations of impossibility and incompleteness. In section 4, we argue that which modes of appreciation are relevant and rewarding ultimately depends on the details; we then consider how the details matter in a number of specific cases.

## 1. TWO MODES OF EVALUATING COVERS

Covering is paradigmatically the practice of a musician recording or performing a song that has already been recorded by somebody else. The difference between recordings and performances does not matter for most of the discussion that follows, so we will write “version” to mean an instance of a song—either a recording or a performance.<sup>3</sup> To be clear, we are not offering an analysis of the concept *cover*. Rather, we are taking at face value the versions which are identified as covers in common parlance. This is not to say that our conclusions do not extend beyond covers, but we take those as our primary target. Paradigmatic covers are in rock or pop music. Although there are exceptions, a jazz performer is more likely to be described as playing a standard than as performing a cover. So most of our examples will be rock or pop versions.

Cristyn Magnus, P.D. Magnus, and Christy Mag Uidhir distinguish several categories of covers.<sup>4</sup> Following Andrew Kania, we will refer to these authors as the Mags—“to save some space!”<sup>5</sup>

An initial distinction the Mags make is between what they call *mimic covers* and *rendition covers*. A mimic cover is intended to sound as close to the canonical version as possible, whereas a rendition cover is not. Note that both mimic covers and rendition covers can end up sounding different than the original. For a mimic cover, however, this is always a defect—a failure of craft. In a rendition cover, the artist offers the song in their own style or idiom. Differences may reflect interpretive and performative choices, and so the artist may refigure the song into a different genre or rearrange it for different instruments. Whether this is rewarding depends on the details. It may make the cover better, worse, or just different than the original.

The Mags also distinguish *referential covers*, where the lyrics of the cover are changed so that it is partly about the original version. For example, the Meatmen sing a version of “How soon is now?” in which they change the lyrics, so that it becomes an

attack on Morrissey who sang the original version. We say more about referential covers below.<sup>6</sup>

The Mags argue that renditions can be appreciated in two different modes: You can consider the cover version on its own, as a performance or a track. Or you can consider it in relation to an earlier recording which you treat as canonical. The Mags do not say anything about how these two modes of evaluation are related, and that is the puzzle we started with.

## 2. THE THREAT OF COLLAPSE

In this section, we consider accounts by Theodore Gracyk, Andrew Kania, and Jason Leddington which could collapse the two-mode view of evaluating covers. These authors suggest that the legitimate appreciation of a cover always considers it in relation to the original.

### Covers as allusions

In his analysis, Theodore Gracyk distinguishes covers from mere remakes.<sup>7</sup> A *remake*, in Gracyk's sense, is a version of a song which is based on an earlier recording. And he conceives of a cover as "a remake, part of the intended appeal of which is its *being* a remake ...[i.e.] a cover is a remake that presupposes audience familiarity with another recording."<sup>8</sup> Audience familiarity with the original is important, because the cover is meant as an allusion to the original version. Gracyk explains: "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."<sup>9</sup> But as an analysis of covers, this has bizarre consequences, which Gracyk himself recognizes. Widely recognized covers such as Eric Clapton's 1974 version of "I Shot the Sheriff" (covering Bob Marley and the Wailers) and Tiffany's 1987 version of "I Think We're Alone Now" (covering Tommy James & the Shondells) would not count as covers. They are just remakes, on Gracyk's analysis.

To avoid these odd results, we follow Kania in taking Gracyk's proposal not as a definition of cover, but instead as distinguishing two varieties of covers in much the way that the Mags do.<sup>10</sup> Although Kania suggests that Gracyk's mere remakes correspond to the Mags' mimic covers and that Gracyk's saturated allusion covers correspond to renditions, this strikes us as mistaken in both respects: On the one hand, there can be mere remakes that

are renditions. Gracyk's own examples suffice here. For example, Eric Clapton's "I Shot the Sheriff" is clearly a rendition in Clapton's own voice, shifting the genre of Marley's original from reggae to rock. And on the other hand, there can be mimic covers that are saturated allusions. Musicians can make new versions that are intended to sound precisely like the original but in a way that refers to the original recording. Tribute bands arguably perform in this way. And consider Mostly Other People Do the Killing's 2014 album *Blue*, a note-for-note remake of Miles Davis's 1959 landmark album *Kind of Blue*. The group made every effort for the tracks on *Blue* to sound exactly like the tracks on *Kind of Blue*, but the album's *raison d'être* is that the listener should know that it is a remake. So, *Blue* is both a saturated allusion and a mimic.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Gracyk's categories cross-cut the Mags' categories.

Nevertheless, it seems like there will be some rendition covers which are saturated allusions to earlier recordings. These could present a challenge to the Mags' account of evaluation. Kania writes that "it is impossible to properly appreciate an allusion without considering what it is an allusion *to*."<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the only possible mode of evaluation for a saturated allusion rendition is to consider the cover in relation to the original. The Mags make a similar move for what they call referential covers. In order to understand what the referential cover is about, one needs to consider the original version, they argue, so one cannot evaluate the referential cover on its own.<sup>13</sup> On the Mags' account, however, referential covers are relatively rare. They recognise only cases where the lyrics are changed, so that they refer to the original version or the original artist. If Gracyk is right about saturated allusion, many more covers have a referential quality than just the small class that the Mags recognise.

#### Pictorial covers and hearing in

Unlike the Mags and Gracyk, Jason Leddington does not aim to provide an exhaustive taxonomy of covers. Instead, his primary focus is the phenomenon of *hearing in*. Hearing in is most naturally understood as an analog of the visual phenomenon of *seeing in* (also called "seeing as" or, following Wollheim, "representational seeing").<sup>14</sup> When we look at a portrait, we typically experience it as seeing the subject of the portrait rather than seeing a representation and inferring the person. For example, we see George Washington in the famous painting by Gilbert Stuart. The subject is an intentional object of our perceptual engagement. This need not be veridical, of course; we see Pegasus in the movie

poster for *Clash of the Titans* even though Pegasus does not exist. This is some mix of intentional and phenomenological.

Likewise for sound: *hearing in* happens when we hear some object or event as an intentional object presented through a more immediate representation. We can hear a friend speaking in the murmur of voices in the room. We can hear a C minor chord being played on a guitar in “All Along the Watchtower” replayed on a stereo. In such cases we hear the activity, event, or object in the sound or in the music. Importantly for present purposes, we sometimes hear the canonical version of a song in a novel rendition.

Ledington coins the term *pictorial cover* for a cover version where the artist intends for the audience to hear the original in the new version. As he writes, “In many cases, we can—and are *meant to*—hear the canonical track in the cover, and this constitutes a good bit of our aesthetic interest in it, even if the cover is also independently musically interesting.”<sup>15</sup> To use Gracyk’s term, pictorial covers make saturated allusions to the originals—but they go further, because the phenomenal experience of listening to the cover is meant to be different.

Ledington offers as his exemplar Stevie Ray Vaughan’s instrumental cover of Jimi Hendrix’s “Little Wing.” He suggests “anyone familiar with the Hendrix will hear both its guitar and vocals in the Vaughan; and much of the pleasure we take in listening to the latter lies in appreciating how it allows us to hear the former in what is a very different piece of music.”<sup>16</sup> This is tempting perhaps because Vaughan’s version is instrumental, and it is easy to hear in the song’s lyrics. This phenomenon can occur with any instrumental cover, but it is not necessarily an instance of hearing in the original. What must be heard in a pictorial cover is not just features of the *song* but features of the canonical, original *recording*. Having the words of the song come to mind is not enough—one must hear them in Jimi Hendrix’s voice. Ledington’s claim that anyone familiar with the Hendrix original will hear it in Vaughan’s version is simply false. We do not.

Nevertheless, we agree with Ledington that there are pictorial covers. Consider a group of musicians hired to play as a cover band in a bar. Their renditions will not differ too much from the originals, because the crowd needs to be able to dance and sing along. The audience is typically very familiar with the originals, and the band wants to evoke those. So a typical cover band can be seen as playing pictorial covers. Something similar may be said for more sophisticated cover bands who post videos

of their covers to the Internet, such as Postmodern Jukebox, Scary Pockets, and Tim Akers & The Smoking Section. People who share a Postmodern Jukebox rendition of a song on social media often do so precisely because of their fondness for the original version of the song being covered, and part of the charm of their rendition is that one can hear the original in it.

#### Two kinds of possible failures of appreciation

The considerations above suggest two different (but ultimately related) ways of denying the Mags' two-mode account of rendition evaluation:

**Impossibility:** Covers (or at least covers in a sizable class) can only be evaluated at all by considering them in relation to the canonical versions of which they are covers.

**Incompleteness:** Covers (or at least covers in a sizable class) can only be fully appreciated by considering them in relation to the canonical versions of which they are covers.

Kania and Leddington might be arguing for either or both of these claims. Kania writes that “it is impossible to properly appreciate an allusion without considering what it is an allusion *to*” (Impossibility), but summarises the point this way: “if [a rendition cover] is a saturated allusion, it cannot be fully appreciated without comparison to the original” (Incompleteness).<sup>17</sup> Leddington concludes that “fully appreciating a pictorial cover requires the sort of familiarity with the canonical track that allows you to hear it in the cover. ... If you can't hear the canonical track in the cover, then all you hear are the cover's surface features, and you are auditorily and aesthetically missing out on something essential about the work.”<sup>18</sup> By emphasising the first sentence (“*fully* appreciating a cover”), this reads as a claim of Incompleteness. By emphasising the last sentence (“missing out on something *essential*”), of Impossibility.

We will argue against both of these general claims. However, we accept that there are some specific cover versions which ought not be evaluated on their own—that is, versions for which the cover ought to be evaluated in relation to the original version. This will depend on the details of the particular cover version though, and will not follow from simply being a cover or from being a member of a broad class of covers.

### 3. THE THREAT AVERTED

In this section, we defend the Mags' two-mode account of rendition evaluation from what we have called Impossibility and Incompleteness.

#### Against Impossibility

Recall that the claim of Impossibility is that it is impossible to evaluate a cover without considering it in relation to the original version. As George Plasketes writes, "The cover song inherently invites comparison and contrast as a duet between the original and its version(s)."<sup>19</sup> We have considered arguments that this holds especially for referential, saturated allusion, or pictorial covers.

It might seem as if, arguments notwithstanding, Impossibility is a nonstarter. There is a straightforward sense in which you can certainly make an aesthetic judgment about a cover version on its own. You can listen to it and find it beautiful, ugly, inspiring, saddening; you may evaluate it to be harmonically rich, singable, or danceable; and so on. These are reactions to the cover version itself. They are the kind of reactions you can have to the cover version if you are ignorant of the fact that it is a cover or if you are unfamiliar with the original. Our point is simply that this kind of reaction is often still possible even after you learn that it is a cover and become familiar with the original. You might separately judge the cover to be more or less beautiful than the original (etc.), but that does not mean that the categorical judgement is impossible.

So the claim of Impossibility requires that the categorical aesthetic judgment is somehow illegitimate or confused. This may be plausible for mimic covers. A mimic cover is meant to sound as close to the original version as possible, so suppose you listen to a mimic cover and find it beautiful. If there is the same beauty in the original version, then you are equally disposed to make a judgement about the original. If there is not, then you have identified what is actually a defect in the mimic. Any assessment of the mimic cover reflects on the original, much in the way that an assessment of a plagiarised work does. So aesthetic judgement of the cover in isolation turns out to be in a certain sense impossible. This accords with the Mags' claim that evaluating a mimic cover is always in relation to the original. Most saturated allusions and pictorial covers are not mimic covers, though. Although understanding an allusion *qua* allusion requires knowing about the original, it is unclear why finding a saturated allusion cover to be beautiful would necessarily implicate the original.

For a pictorial cover, however, one might argue that finding the cover beautiful without considering the original encounters it in the wrong way. The argument would go like this: Imagine someone views a large pointillist painting but stands so close that they just see distinct dots and are unable to resolve it into a picture. If they judge the painting to be beautiful under these circumstances, we might think that they have not really judged it properly. Similarly, if someone listens to a pictorial cover without hearing the original in it, then the beauty they attribute to it is misplaced.<sup>20</sup> Unless this defense is successful, Impossibility fails.

Surely there are ways in which we encounter a painting or a performance that miss the point and evaluate it as the wrong kind of object—as in the case of the pointillist painting seen only as dots. However, not all mistakes we make in viewing and assessing pieces of art make aesthetic assessment impossible. One might think that Cezanne’s “The Potato Eaters” was painted instead by Gauguin, or that Gerry and the Pacemakers’ “Ferry Across the Mersey” was by the Beatles, but still correctly assess beauty, harmony, emotional tone, or other aesthetically interesting features.

For Impossibility to stand, assessing a cover without knowledge of the original must necessarily (and not just in some cases) be the first sort of error rather than the second. It must be the case not just that we make some mistakes (like attributing the singable nature of the melody to the person singing it now,) but that the mistakes we make undermine assessing it at all as a song, performance, or track. And this strikes us as implausible. Not only can our assessments of the beauty of the cover, its harmony, its emotional tone, and so on stand without appeal to the original, they can stand even if we make mistakes about attribution or origination. This is in contrast to the case of standing too close to the painting, where aesthetic assessment of the points is simply assessment of the wrong object.

A separate problem with Impossibility is that, in appreciating a cover, it may be unclear whether it is a saturated allusion, a pictorial cover, or neither. If we are unable to say for sure, then it seems reasonable to evaluate the cover both on its own and in relation to the original. Gracyk says that for a version to be a saturated allusion, the artist “must intend to communicate with a particular audience... and must intend to have the remake interpreted as referencing and replying to the earlier interpretation.”<sup>21</sup> He gives the example of Bob Dylan performing a song by Charles Aznavour and transcribes the monologue in which Dylan introduces the song.<sup>22</sup> Artists are not always so explicit about their intentions, however.

Where all we have is a recording of the cover itself, it will typically be unclear whether there is such a communicative intention. Consider the example of Sid Vicious's 1978 cover of "My Way." The Mags argue that Sid Vicious's changes to the lyrics include revising them to be about Frank Sinatra, who sang the canonical original.<sup>23</sup> Nadav Appel argues instead that "most of the changes are *non sequiturs* and mainly give the impression that Vicious forgot some of the original lines and replaced them with swear words on the spot."<sup>24</sup> Although Appel suggests that this question should be left to "punk historians," there is probably no historical evidence that could settle the question of whether Vicious is thinking of Sinatra. Vicious, unlike Dylan, is unlikely to have provided an eloquent description of his intentions.

Even where we have strong suspicions, we may be wrong. Ray Padgett discusses the work of Juliana Hatfield, who has a "rich and varied side gig in tribute albums." Why did she record so many covers? Padgett writes, "I thought I knew the answer: She adored the artists she was paying tribute to. As I promptly learned, I thought wrong."<sup>25</sup> In his interview with Hatfield, she revealed that her motivations varied from the desire to record with a friend of hers, to the chance to meet a legendary producer, to mere whim. Given her intentions, she would have participated in the projects even if she did not know they were covers or if there had not been an earlier version.<sup>26</sup>

And it is not just a limitation in our ability to tell. There may be no fact of the matter as to whether a version is a saturated allusion to an earlier version or not. An artist might have no clearly defined intention about how the work should be understood (which is plausible for the drug-addled Sid Vicious singing "My Way.") Alternately, an artist might have an open-ended intention. Perhaps they want listeners both to listen to their version as its own thing and to consider it in relation to the original, or they may be happy for audiences to encounter it in either way. Attributing complex intentions to artists may be appropriate in some cases, but in other cases it over-intellectualises the whole process. There is also the extra complication of multiple people involved. What if the singer intends the cover to stand alone, but the producer intends for listeners to think of it in relation to the original?

So, we have posed two problems for Impossibility: First, it is possible to evaluate even a saturated allusion cover on its own in what we might call an immediate and non-referential way. Second, it may be unclear or even indeterminate whether a particular cover is a saturated allusion or a pictorial cover, so to use those

categories to mark a kind of appreciation as illegitimate would be too heavy-handed.

Note that these same objections apply to the Mags' claim that referential covers can only be appreciated or understood in relation to the original. So, we think, their identification of two different modes of appreciation for rendition covers applies to referential covers as well.

#### Against Incompleteness

Recall that the claim of Incompleteness is that a cover can only be fully appreciated by considering it in relation to the canonical original of which it is a cover. Whether this is true will depend importantly on how we construe "fully appreciated."

We might understand full appreciation to be complete—i.e., appreciation in all the ways. This would make Incompleteness both trivially true and irrelevant. It would be trivially true because, if you have not yet appreciated the cover in relation to the original, then you have not appreciated it in all the ways yet. And it would be irrelevant because this would be no objection to the Mags' claim that there are different modes of evaluating or appreciating renditions. Their claim is not that there are two ways to fully appreciate a cover, after all, but just that there are two ways of coming at it. This is compatible with (even entails) the proposition that consideration in just one mode is partial. So to understand Incompleteness as something besides a trivial *non sequitur*, we must understand full appreciation in some other sense.

Another way of understanding it is that fuller appreciation would consider the deeper, more significant things. The idea would be this: With a saturated allusion cover or a pictorial cover, one is meant to consider the cover in relation to the original. So, that aspect of the cover is more central and significant than its superficial properties in a way that is effectively essential to a full appreciation.

One problem with this is that knowledge of the original might not actually be more central and significant. Historical factors and references may be important variables for appreciating a work, but sometimes not. There are cases where hearing the original does not add anything of artistic or aesthetic value to your appreciation of the cover, beyond the knowledge that the song is not an original composition. One might think that a trivial addition to your appreciation is still an addition, but that falls back on the sense of "fuller" as more complete.

It may be tempting to object that judging the originality of a cover requires considering how much it differs from the canonical recording. However, assessing the originality of a cover may also require knowing about other recordings, other songs, other musicians—anything that might be a source of inspiration for the cover version. As Gracyk notes in a different context, “Philosophically, once you’ve made the move toward a historically-aware, contextualist understanding of both aesthetic judgment and artistic value, it’s a short step to the idea that any and all aspects of the social context of production and reception might be relevant to the music’s characteristics and value. (I stress ‘might be’ here: any and all might be, but in any given case only some will be).”<sup>27</sup> If one insists that the cover’s connection to the original is somehow the essential lynchpin to appreciating it, then one has reverted to claiming Impossibility. If it is not strictly essential, then facts about the original become just some of the many historical facts that might—or might not—be relevant to appreciating the cover version.

This problem is compounded by the fact that considering the cover in relation to this additional information may undercut appreciating it in other ways. It may simply not be possible (for some listeners, at least) to hold both modes of evaluation in their head at once. So considering a cover in one mode would preclude considering it in the other. This might occur when the quantity of information would change their focus and mood. Reflecting on the beautiful simplicity of a particular instrumental might conflict with having lots of contextual facts in mind. When someone complains that thinking too much about a song ruins their experience of it, we think it would be elitist snobbery to simply deny that they were having the best experience of it anyway.

Moreover, once you experience the original, you may be unable to hear the cover in the same way. If you hear an original’s lyrics into an instrumental cover, you may lose the ability to hear it as just an instrumental.

Note that many renditions involve a genre switch; e.g., a punk version of a song originally recorded as a bouncy pop track. Hearing a song in a different genre might make one more appreciative of the cover, recognising the brilliance required to refigure the song. But hearing the original might also draw your attention to features of the cover that you would not have noticed if you had listened to it in isolation. Jesse Prinz, paraphrasing Matthew Kieran, suggests that “becoming a punk enthusiast can diminish one’s tolerance for other genres, making them seem

overproduced, tame, or vapid.”<sup>28</sup> And listening to the canonical version of a punk cover might highlight tame, vapid features that survive as traces in the punk version, leaving one with a worse opinion of it than one had before. It is possible that these vapid elements, once heard, cannot be unheard. (The reverse can occur as well. Pat Boone’s 1956 “Tutti Frutti” might have seemed pretty cool until you heard Little Richard’s 1955 original.)

So, we have posed a dilemma for Incompleteness: any understanding of it either collapses into triviality (by requiring all information for complete appreciation), or is tantamount to Impossibility (by making consideration of the original essential to appreciation).

Note that the point is not that thinking of the original must result in having a lower opinion of the cover—although that can happen, the reverse is also possible. Comparing it to the earlier version, one might find a cover to be derivative. Alternately, one might find it to be impressively original. The point is that hearing the original and having it in mind might make one unable to recognise categorical, non-comparative features of the cover. It is not obvious that it is better or deeper to assess the cover along dimensions like originality/derivativeness rather than along dimensions like beauty/ugliness. This means that there is no interpretive obligation to consider a cover in relation to the original (we illustrate this point with some specific examples below).

#### 4. MODES OF EVALUATION, REVISITED

We have argued so far that the Mags are correct in claiming that there are two modes of evaluating renditions. Nevertheless, we differ from their account in one respect and extend it in another.

The difference: As we saw above, the Mags argue that what they call referential covers can only be evaluated in relation to the original. In our terminology, this is the claim of Impossibility for this small class of covers. Our arguments against Impossibility hold for the Mags’ referential covers just as much as for saturated allusion covers and pictorial covers.

The extension: The Mags do not consider the phenomenon of hearing in. Hearing the original in the cover goes beyond taking the cover in light of the fact that it is a cover, as well as beyond the ability to make comparative judgments about features of the cover and the original. Hearing in implicitly informs the active perception of the cover with implicit anticipations which alter the overall perceptual gestalt. With this in mind, considering the cover in relation to the original branches into two different

directions. This yields *two and a half* modes in which we can evaluate a rendition:

1. Consider the cover version without reference to the original.
- 2a. Consider the cover in relation to the original but without hearing in.
- 2b. Consider the cover by hearing the original into it.

The first mode of evaluation is the only one available to someone who does not know that the version is a cover, but it may remain available as one mode of appreciation even for someone familiar with the original.

It is important that some of these may not be interesting or rewarding. None of the modes are always or necessarily more rewarding than the others, and some of the modes may be of little or no interest in certain cases. It depends both on the particularities of the case, on the listener's appreciative interests, and on cognitive facts like their level of musical expertise and their ability to hear in.

Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt," our example from the introduction, can be appreciated in all of the modes. We can listen to Cash singing the song "Ghost Riders in the Sky" and treat it as part of the country music repertoire, without knowing anything about Stan Jones (who wrote it) or having heard Burl Ives's 1949 version (the first released recording). We can do something similar with "Hurt."<sup>29</sup> However, Reznor's song is neither country music nor part of a standard repertoire. There is also value in considering Cash's version in relation to the original.

As a contrasting example, consider again Eric Clapton's cover of Bob Marley and the Wailers' "I Shot the Sheriff." Gracyk counts it as a mere remake rather than as a saturated allusion on the grounds that "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."<sup>30</sup> Clapton is neither trying to sound like Marley (so it is not a mimic), nor referring to Marley (so it is not a saturated allusion or a picture). A 1974 issue of *Billboard* included Clapton's version among its Top Single Picks with no comment on it being a cover, calling the track "a catchy goof of a winner." The staff writers describe it as having "the latino percussiveness and broad outlaw storyline of 'Cisco Kid'" and add that one "reviewer found himself humming it 11 hours straight."<sup>31</sup> This appreciation of the Clapton track without consideration of the

original strikes us as deeply impoverished. What the Billboard reviewers hear as “latino percussiveness” can be heard instead as the residual reggae influence from the original. Even though it can be considered on its own, it is misleading to do so. Clapton’s cover is more profitably considered in relation to the original.

Note that a case like this does not undercut our conclusion above about Impossibility. This case is neither referential, allusive, nor pictorial; that is, it is not a member of any of the classes for which Impossibility was supposed to hold.<sup>32</sup> Impossibility is untenable as a universal claim about all covers or about all covers in those classes. Nevertheless, some covers—like this one—are best evaluated in relation to the original version. The reasons for this are specific to the case, rather than following from any general principle.

### Covers of covers

The modes of evaluation proliferate even more when a version is a cover of a cover. In the schematic case, imagine an original recording—call it #1. Another artist records a rendition cover of #1—call that #2. A third artist records another rendition, clearly respecting the arrangement and musical choices in #2—call this second cover #3. In evaluating #3, we can do so by considering it on its own, in relation to #1, in relation to #2, or in relation to both. And the latter modes might be with or without hearing in. In the abstract case, this gives us seven possibilities. Just as for the simpler case of a cover of one original, however, not all the theoretically possible modes of evaluation will be rewarding or worthwhile—and it may be impossible to pursue them all.

Let’s consider several examples.

First, the Mags offer the example of college a cappella groups covering “Bitches Ain’t Shit.” The song was written and originally released in 1992 by Dr. Dre, but a cappella groups more closely follow Ben Folds’s 2005 cover. If we consider an a cappella performance in relation to earlier versions, it is best to do so in relation to both the original and the Folds cover. The lyrics are due to Dr. Dre, but the surprising genre shift is due to Folds. We can easily hear the Ben Folds version in a cappella performances but are far less disposed to hear the Dr. Dre version in them.

Discussing this case, the Mags write that “a cover is typically connected to one canonical version but may be connected to more than one. There is, in every case, a musical-historical relation that relates the cover to a canonical version or versions.”<sup>33</sup> It is understandable to describe both the Dre and Folds versions as canonical,

because contemporary audiences are apt to be familiar with both of them. However, it is also possible for an earlier version which is the target of the cover to not be one that is well-known. The target of the cover may not be canonical, in the sense of being widely recognised, provided the artist recording the cover takes their cue from that earlier version—as our further examples illustrate.

Second, consider Jeff Buckley’s well-known cover of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” Initially at least, Buckley only knew the song from John Cale’s cover of it. Although “Hallelujah” appeared on Cohen’s 1984 album *Various Positions*, his record label was so skeptical of the record’s prospects that they did not release it in the United States. John Cale, having heard the song at a live performance in New York, decided to record it for the 1991 tribute album *I’m Your Fan*. Cohen sent Cale the written lyrics, which included many more verses than Cohen’s recorded version. Cale did not use all the verses he was sent or even all the verses Cohen recorded. Cale settled on five verses, two of which are shared with Cohen’s earlier recording. Buckley’s version replaces the piano part from Cale’s version with guitar, but mostly follows Cale’s lyrics—unsurprisingly, since Buckley had neither heard Cohen’s version nor seen Cohen’s written lyrics.<sup>34</sup> The expressiveness of Buckley’s version is largely due to his vocal stylings. Although the song has been covered by numerous artists, Buckley’s version is perhaps the most well-known. It was commonly performed as a tribute to Buckley after his untimely death, and the website *Second Hand Songs* describes his as the “definitive version” and “more famous than the original.”<sup>35</sup> We might listen to other versions if we want to evaluate the song—and we might find the historical path of the song to be an intriguing tale—but our appreciation of Buckley’s version is neither richer nor more rewarding for hearing the earlier versions.

Third, consider “Hound Dog”: a song canonically associated with Elvis Presley. The original track, recorded by Big Mama Thornton, is about a no-good, cheating man. Where Elvis’s version has the lines “Well, you ain’t never caught a rabbit / And you ain’t no friend of mine”, Thornton’s had “You can wag your tail / But I ain’t gonna feed you no more.” This revision was not original with Elvis, however, but had been made by Frankie Bell and the Bell Boys.<sup>36</sup> Bell used their silly version of the song as the closing number of their Las Vegas act, and that is how Elvis encountered it. It is possible that he never even heard Thornton’s version. Nevertheless, it does not add much appreciation-wise to learn about Bell. Hearing the Bell version into the

Elvis version would not create a richer or more rewarding experience. Considering the Elvis version in relation to the Thornton version does change matters, though. One might think, as one of the co-writers of the original did, that Elvis's version "ruined the song" by turning "a song that had to do with obliterated romance" into "inane" nonsense.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, consider "Killing Me Softly." The lyrics are based on a poem by Lori Lieberman, who recorded and released the song as "Killing Me Softly With His Song" in 1972. Her version was heard by Roberta Flack, who rearranged the song and released a version in 1973. Flack's version became well known and was the canonical version in 1996 when the Fugees released a cover of it. It is plausible to think of the Fugees' cover as picturing Flack's track, because Lauryn Hill recorded thirty separate tracks of harmonies to reflect the background vocals in Flack's version. Few listeners to either Flack's or the Fugees' versions know about the Lieberman original. Although contrast with Lieberman's original may contribute to our appreciation of Flack's cover, it is not relevant to our appreciation of the Fugee's cover of Flack.

#### Implications

In situations like Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt" we considered in the introduction, a listener is familiar with a cover before hearing the original. Once they hear the original, they might appreciate the original in relation to the cover. There is no question of the original referring to the cover or being a picture of it, of course, because the original artist could not possibly have had the cover in mind. Nevertheless, one may hear the cover in the original, and it might be rewarding to do so. We are inclined to think that Jimi Hendrix's cover of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" is such a case. For most of us, Hendrix's cover is significantly more familiar. On hearing the original, the implicit perceptual expectations of hearing in Hendrix's vocal phrasing, harmonic extensions of the chords, and guitar voicings can make the original version almost a bit unsettling. Speaking for ourselves: Although we surely hear the same song in both, we tend to hear the cover in the original, but not vice-versa. Janet Gezari and Charles Hartman write that Dylan "adopted Hendrix's stylistic take on his song, as revealed in many live recordings in the seventies and after. In effect, he covered a cover of his own song..."<sup>38</sup> Much as they see Dylan's later performances as covers of Hendrix, we can better appreciate Dylan's original recording by having Hendrix's cover of it in mind.

One may object that this is more a matter of appreciating the song than of appreciating the original version. The cover reveals that the song has more potential than is realised in Dylan's original version. As Padgett writes, "A great cover only makes a song stronger."<sup>39</sup> Although we often appreciate a song at the same time as we appreciate a particular version, the two issues are conceptually distinct. Our focus here has been on covers, and thus, on the appreciation of versions. Saying more about appreciating songs is beyond the scope of our discussion.

- 1 This paper was fully collaborative and would not have been possible without contributions from all the coauthors. They are listed in some semblance of alphabetical order. Thanks to Oz McClamrock, Evan Malone, and an anonymous referee for their helpful input.
- 2 Both as quoted in Ray Padgett, *Cover Me: The Stories Behind the Greatest Cover Songs of All Time* (New York: Sterling, 2017), 207. Padgett provides an extensive discussion of Cash's cover.
- 3 A cover is often called a "cover song," as in the subtitle of Padgett, *Cover Me*, but it is the version rather than the song itself that is a cover.
- 4 Since the earlier paper was written by only some of the current authors – and because we no longer agree with everything in it – we refer to them in the third person. Cristyn Magnus, P.D. Magnus, and Christy Mag Uidhir, "Judging Covers," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 361-370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12034>
- 5 Andrew Kania, *The Philosophy of Western Music: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 238. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315210629>
- 6 The Mags contend that a referential cover is an instance of a different (albeit related) song than the original. Kania contests this point, suggesting that we can understand the changes not as "covers that instance different songs from their originals, but rather [as] *different interpretive strategies* a given rendition cover takes toward the song it instances" (243, emphasis in original). We are interested in issues of evaluation rather than ontology, so the reader is welcome to see referential covers as instances of different songs (as the Mags suggest) or as renditions which mean something importantly different than the original (as Kania suggests).
- 7 Theodore Gracyk, "Covers and Communicative Intentions," *The Journal of Music and Meaning* 11 (2012/3): 22-46. <https://jmm11.musicandmeaning.net>
- 8 Gracyk, "Covers," 38, emphasis in original.
- 9 Gracyk, "Covers," 41.
- 10 Kania, *The Philosophy of Western Music*, 239-240.
- 11 For further discussion, see P.D. Magnus, "Kind of Borrowed, Kind of Blue," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 179-185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12272>. A further example of mimic covers that are also allusions is provided by the A-side of Todd Rundgren's 1976 album *Faithful*, which includes six mimic covers of well-known songs from the 1960s. See Gracyk, "Covers," 34 fn. 17.
- 12 Kania, *The Philosophy of Western Music*, 239, emphasis in original.
- 13 Magnus et al., "Judging Covers," 367-8.
- 14 Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316286777>
- 15 Jason P. Leddington, "Sonic Pictures," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpab037>, emphasis in original.
- 16 Leddington, "Sonic Pictures."
- 17 Kania, *The Philosophy of Western Music*, 239 cited above and 243.
- 18 Leddington, "Sonic Pictures."
- 19 George Plasketes, ed., *Play it Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), 6.
- 20 This reply could be provided for allusive and referential covers if they make a large enough difference to the experience that the version-as-reference is a distinct phenomenal object from the version alone. Although we do not think that holds generally, we leave it to the reader to consult their own experience.
- 21 Gracyk, "Covers," 25. Kania similarly takes the matter to hang on the artist's intention. He writes that whether a cover is a saturated allusion "depends on the intentions of a given track's creator" (Kania, *The Philosophy of Western Music*, 240). Note, though, that it was not all just added improvisation. Vicious sang roughly the same lyrics in multiple performances of the song.
- 22 Gracyk, "Covers," 27.
- 23 Magnus et al., "Judging Covers," 368.
- 24 Nadav Appel, "Pat Boone's last laugh: Cover versions and the performance of knowledge," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 4 (July 2018): 448-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917692901>
- 25 Ray Padgett, *I'm Your Fan: The Songs of Leonard Cohen* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 77. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501355097>
- 26 One might reply that social convention and background assumptions can establish the appropriateness of hearing in, regardless of Hatfield's own intentions. However, the practice of recording tribute albums does not support such assumptions. Although some tribute albums are intended for listeners who are familiar with the original versions and so can hear them into the covers, others are intended for a new audience that is unfamiliar with the classic songs.
- 27 Theodore Gracyk, "The Philosophy of Jazz, Popular Music and Art," interview by Richard Marshall, 2021, <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/the-philosophy-of-jazz-popular-music-and-art>.
- 28 Matthew Kieran, "Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 3 (July 2008). <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayn021>. Jesse Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 9 (September 2014): 589.
- 29 Guitarist Mick Harvey comments about Cash (and Nina Simone): "They only ever wrote one or two songs per album of their own. They were always doing other people's work. Nobody ever talks about them doing a cover version." (quoted in Padgett 2020, p. 67).
- 30 Gracyk, "Covers," 27.
- 31 *Billboard*, June 29, 1974, 78.
- 32 Clapton's cover is one of Gracyk's specimen examples of a remake which is not a saturated allusion, and so, on his analysis, it may be considered without regard to Marley's original.
- 33 Magnus et al., "Judging Covers," 367.
- 34 For details of the story, see Alan Light, *The Holy or the Broken* (New York: Atria Books, 2012) and Padgett, *I'm Your Fan*.

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- 35 <https://secondhandsongs.com/work/1108/versions>,  
Accessed August 13, 2021.
- 36 Padgett, *Cover Me*, 15.
- 37 Jerry Leiber, quoted in Padgett, *Cover Me*, 23.
- 38 Janet Gezari and Charles Hartman, "Dylan's Covers,"  
*Southwest Review* 95, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010):  
165.
- 39 Padgett, *Cover Me*, 9.