

The ethics of cover songs

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ABSTRACT: Although philosophers of art have addressed metaphysical and aesthetic questions relating to cover songs, there are also ethical questions. This paper asks: What obligations do musicians playing or recording covers have to the artists who recorded the original versions? We argue that there are a variety of factors (financial, reputational, and artistic) that covering artists should be sensitive to when deciding when and how to cover the work of another artist. Moreover, we argue that these considerations gesture at a more general pro tanto obligation: Covering artists ought to respect the wishes of the artist that they are covering. In response to would-be counterexamples, we argue that a cover which violates the wishes of the original artist might be a good thing to record (all things considered) but that it wrongs the original artist (at least a little bit).

On a late night talk show in 2011, Prince commented, “I don't mind fans singing the songs. My problem is when the industry covers the music. See, covering music means that your version doesn't exist anymore. A lot of times people think I'm doing a Sinead O'Connor song and a Chaka Kahn song, when in fact I wrote those songs.” It is easy to think that Prince is just bitter or confused. As Ray Padgett writes, “A cover song doesn't mean, as Prince put it, that the original artist's ‘version doesn't exist anymore.’ Instead, a great cover adds to the song in a number of ways” (Padgett 2017, p. 2). More charitably, Prince's complaint can be understood as being about how audiences think of the song. When a cover takes off, listeners encountering the song do not learn about his version but instead associate the song with someone else. That

outcome is bad, he suggests, not because audiences appreciate it less than they would otherwise but instead because he is wronged by it. Whether he actually is wronged by covers is an ethical question.

In the small but growing literature in the philosophy of covers, most discussions have focussed either on questions of aesthetic appreciation (e.g., what makes for a good cover?) or questions of metaphysics (e.g., what is the relation between a cover and the original?).¹ Some philosophers have discussed the ethics of singing in ways that can be applied to cover songs.² Yet there has been little attention to the ethical consideration which arises only for cover songs—specifically, what obligations do musicians performing or recording a cover have to the artist who recorded the canonical version?

Those obligations, we suggest, reveal the ethical dimension of Prince’s complaint.

Some preliminary asides

Before turning to our central question, it will help to characterize *covers*. Although some definitions have been offered in the literature, they face the usual fate of philosophical definitions—namely, there are possible counterexamples which depend on contentious intuitions. Fortunately, our task here does not require that we settle whether edge cases are or are not really covers. It will suffice to have a characterization of typical covers, “a *prima facie* sufficient condition” like the one offered by Magnus et al.: “A version of a song is a cover when it is recorded or performed by an artist or a group who did not write and compose the song themselves and where there is a prior recording which is accepted as canonical or paradigmatic” (2013, p. 362).

Note that this condition differentiates between a *version* and a *song*. A version is a performance or recording which is made by specific musicians and sounds a particular way. A song can be performed or recorded multiple times, by the same or different musicians. Different

¹ See *inter alia* Gracyk (2012/3), Kania (2006;2020), Magnus et al. (2013), Magnus (2022), Mosser (2008), Rings (2013).

² Bicknell (2009;2015) and Smuts (2013), whom we discuss in the next section.

versions of the song may sound the same, although most will sound at least somewhat different from one another.

We are interested in the ethical status of making covers, whether it is morally good or bad to make them. We will not directly address the question of aesthetic moralism— that is, the relation between ethical status and artistic value.

One way in which ethical concerns might arise for cover songs is when the content of the song itself is immoral. Aaron Smuts discusses the related issue of singing along to immoral songs written from a first-person perspective (Smuts 2013). Smuts' extended example is singing along to Geto Boys' "Mind of a Lunatic" (a song which recounts, from the first-person perspective, rape, murder, and necrophilia). He writes that it involves a "mode of engagement where audiences visualize the content they describe from the first person" (p. 123). Smuts contends that engaging with immoral art in this way is unethical because it encourages "the enjoyment of evil" (p. 121). If singing along with a song like "Mind of a Lunatic" is bad because it involves inhabiting this unrepentant first-person perspective of doing evil, then covering "Mind of a Lunatic" could be equally bad— supposing that the singer takes up the same first-person perspective. The extent to which Smuts' concerns about the ethics of singing along carry over to the ethics of covering will depend on the extent to which a covering artist is delighting in the lyrics of the original. Smuts' argument turns on the claim that the wrong of delighting in imagining oneself doing evil is an intrinsic wrong. If it applies to some cover versions, then, it shows that making those covers is intrinsically wrong. Note, however, that this concern might arise equally for original songs that invite imaginative engagement of the problematic kind.

In discussing ethical considerations raised by singing, Jeanette Bicknell addresses obligations that the singer has to the audience (2009; 2015, ch. 7). She specifically addresses the choices involved in singing a song that the audience already knows, where some audience members will feel a special connection to the song. Such performances are sometimes considered covers, when there is an earlier recording of the song that the audience considers canonical. Bicknell understands the responsibilities of the singer in terms of *moral deference*, a category she adapts from Laurence Thomas (1992-93). When a song is important to an audience, a singer should be sensitive to this. She explains, "At the heart of moral deference is thinking about

others — their struggles, their experience in an unjust society” (2015, p. 90). This may be reflected in the musician’s “choices regarding which version of the song to sing, which verses are sung and which are omitted, which verses begin and end the song, the accompanying instrumentation, and overall attitude” (2015, p. 87). Performing or recording a cover involves all the choices that Bicknell lists and more. Note that concern for the audience may arise for original songs, where the topic or lyrics engage with issues that the audience is morally invested in. Bicknell herself gives the example of the Sex Pistol’s “God Save the Queen” which uses a few phrases from the British anthem but is not a cover (2015, p. 82).

With these preliminaries aside, we now turn to concerns which are especially about covers: What is owed to the original artist?

Covers and credit

A musician recording a song often hopes for both notoriety and financial gain. When someone covers their recording, they can lose out on both. The cover can steal sales which would have gone to their version. This is often seen to be the *raison d'être* of the cover— as when Sandy Brown writes, “The jackal thinking behind cover versions, which are near copies of original recordings, is predicated on the belief that so much money is showered in the direction of hit records that *any* performance of the song will collect if sufficiently adjacent” (Brown 1968). Covers can take sales and plays away from the original, effectively hijacking a hit (Coyle 2002). In 1975, Dionne Warwick complained that her recordings were sniped by covers in the UK. British singers would publish cover versions before her versions were released there. Although she also recorded covers, she pointed out that hers were released only after the original had left the charts. She said, “It's true that I've cut a lot of songs which other people did first but I always waited until the originals had had their chance. I had a hit with ‘I'll Never Fall In Love Again’, but I had refused to record it until Ella Fitzgerald's original had died” (St. Pierre 1975). Warwick’s view about what is fair expresses a moral claim— that recording artists have a duty to not crowd original recordings out of the market with covers.

Consider Lori Lieberman's 1972 release of "Killing Me Softly." Roberta Flack heard Lieberman's version, recorded the song in her own style, and had a huge hit with it. However, it is not clear that "Killing Me Softly" would have been a wildly successful song if Flack had not recorded her version. Flack's version, rather than being a near copy, was substantially revamped. Lieberman's simpler, softer version is just not as interesting. If that is right, then Flack covering Lieberman's record did not result in Lieberman making any less money or getting any less exposure than she would have gotten otherwise— she would be pretty much forgotten in either case. Note that the writers of "Killing Me Softly", Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel, benefited greatly from Flack's cover as well as from the later cover by the Fugees. They earned royalties from Flack's version just as well as from Lieberman's. Although the lyrics were based on a poem Lieberman wrote, she was not given songwriting credit. If she had, she would have made money from the success of Flack's cover— regardless of whether audiences knew about her version or not.³

There is a further problem that legal protection only applies to the song itself, not to the arrangement. When Bob Dylan recorded "House of the Rising Sun" for his debut album in 1961, he used Doug Van Ronk's arrangement without permission. As Greg Metcalf writes, "Once Dylan's record came out, Van Ronk... had to stop performing it because... audiences insisted that he was copying Dylan's song" (p. 178). Van Ronk had no legal ground to complain because the song was in the public domain.

These financial considerations do not address Prince's concern. When Sinéad O'Connor had a hit with his song "Nothing Compares 2 U", he earned royalties. His concern is about notoriety and credit rather than about money. The website Secondhand Songs marks O'Connor's version with the tags *Definitive version*, *Hit song*, and *More famous than the original*. So, although Prince continued to perform the song, he did so in a context where the song was associated more with O'Connor than with him. To return to the example of "House of the Rising Sun": When the Animals released their more successful version in 1964, "Dylan had to stop playing the song because he was accused of plagiarizing them" (Metcalf 2010, p. 179).

³ For details, see Padgett 2017.

When and how a musician makes their cover version can affect the way that audiences understand it. Insofar as they create circumstances under which their contribution overshadows earlier musician's legitimate contributions to the song, they have done something wrong. The line between stealing and responsible covering is giving credit.

There is a further wrinkle that an earlier artist may be unfairly represented without being entirely forgotten. Consider a specific example: Ryan Adams' 2015 album *1989* consisted of covers of all the songs from Taylor Swift's 2014 album of the same name. Writing "as a longtime fan of Adams", Ian Crouch writes of Adams' album, "Something in his state of mind and musical sensibility listened to the romantic exuberance of a young woman's pop album and heard his own melancholy. He responded with music that is both personal and generous" (Crouch 2015). Another review asks rhetorically whether Adams' is "revealing depth and nuance in the songs that get lost in the choreography-cognizant productions of Swift's versions, perhaps even giving her a master class in lyrical interpretation" (Beviglia 2015). Crouch toys with the idea that Adams does the songs better, asking whether they "might sound to some ears more authentic, raw, or genuine—suddenly more his than hers" (Crouch 2015). However, audiences will not start thinking of "Shake It Off" as an Adams song. Swift was reportedly happy with Adams covering her work, and as a songwriter stands to make money. So the concern here is not about credit. Rather, it is with the gendered opposition between the pop superficiality of a young woman and the indie-rock sincerity of an older man. Anna Leszkiewicz puts the point this way, "Even with the intention of celebrating her, Ryan Adams has made it possible for dozens of music journalists to mansplain Swift's own album to her" (Leszkiewicz 2015).⁴ Even if the artist behind the cover means well, there may be see some wrong in artists contributing to a process whereby misogynistic music critics use indie cover songs to reinforce their dismissal of female artists and fans— especially if that is an entirely foreseeable outcome.⁵ Even if it is not obligatory to preface covers with some kind of statement in support of the artistry responsible for the original version, it might be better to do so.

⁴ See also Harris 2017.

⁵ One might worry about a similar enabling effect for racist music critics when white musicians perform or record acoustic covers of rap songs. Regarding such cases, see Hess 2005 and Hein 2020.

So we think that concerns about profit, credit, and critical reception raise ethical concerns. In the next section, we propose a general ethical principle which might be taken to underlie them.

Wishes of the original artists

Beyond just a fair distribution of credit, there may be ethical issues about what an artist may or ought to do in their cover version. After all, a cover version can vary drastically (both musically and lyrically) from the canonical version. Both our earlier concerns about fair credit and these possible broader concerns could be captured by a kind of musical deference—that a musician performing or recording a cover has a *pro tanto* duty to respect wishes of the artist they are covering. To be clear, we are not saying that this duty is overwhelmingly strong. As we will see when we consider some examples, it is often permissible *all things considered* to record a cover that contravenes the earlier musician's wishes. Nevertheless, we suggest that it is a (possibly small) ethical defect if it does so.

We find it intuitively plausible that musicians recording or performing covers have this duty. One argument in support of that intuition stems from the consequences that a cover can have for the original artist in money, credit, and reputation. An irresponsible cover can harm the original artist, and one ought not harm others. (The duty to not harm others has the same *pro tanto* force.) A second argument treats it as reflecting the kind of moral deference which Bicknell adapts from Thomas. Just as a singer should be morally sensitive to the concerns of their audience, they should also be sensitive to the artist who recorded the earlier version. A third argument is an inference to the best explanation: There being such a duty makes the most sense of musical practices and musicians' concerns, both those discussed above and others which we will turn to in a moment. Of course, this argument only establishes the duty within musical traditions which have *covers* as part of their versioning practices. By contrast, a jazz performance of a standard is not considered a cover, even if there is a famous, canonical recording of the standard. Rap and folk music have their own attitudes toward remakes.⁶ Nevertheless, it is an

⁶ For further reading on versioning practices in hip-hop and authorship in folk traditions, see Rose 1989.

overstatement to say as Deena Weinstein does that covers “are peculiar to rock music” (Weinstein 1998, p. 138). There are also covers in pop music and country. Where there are covers, we suggest, there is the corresponding duty.

Note that many of the earlier musician’s wishes will be specifically about their own version, and there is no obligation to follow those wishes. To take an easy example, if the original songwriter intends to play their song on an heirloom guitar that they happen to own, there is no obligation for other artists to also play it on an heirloom guitar. More broadly, orchestration choices are usually about the musician’s own version rather than binding for the song in general. For example, on his original 1984 album version of “Hallelujah”, Leonard Cohen has a band and back-up singers. In his 1991 cover, John Cale sings while playing piano. In his 1994 cover, Jeff Buckley sings and plays guitar. Replacing the band with piano or guitar—or singing solo rather than with back-up singers—does not go against Cohen’s wishes. There is nothing about the song as such which calls for a band. Similarly, a cover can change specific words without running afoul of the earlier musician’s wishes. As Theodore Gracyk points out, songwriters often have “open-ended intentions” such that “elements of a lyric that seem to refer to concrete things and situations are merely exemplary.” As such, “specific places, objects, and people... function as placeholders for ideas more than as references to the individuals they mention” (2001, p. 66). For example, Don Henley’s track “Boys of Summer” has the line “Out on the road today / I saw a Deadhead sticker on a Cadillac.” In their cover of the song, the Ataris change the line to “a Black Flag sticker.” This has the same core meaning. Although Henley’s line recounts an experience he had, it is about a fan of counterculture music selling out rather than being about the Grateful Dead in particular.

The question of which of the earlier musician’s wishes are relevant is close to the murky question of what makes a version authentic, a matter which we do not hope to resolve. Instead, we offer two tests for which of the earlier musician’s wishes are ethically relevant. First, the wishes which are ethically relevant are those that concern core features of the song or version. Which features count as core will depend on the genre, but in rock, pop, and mainstream country music (where covers proliferate) orchestration is not a core feature. Second, we can consider a

counterfactual— if the original artist would object to some other version having a particular feature, then it is wrong (to that extent) to make a version with that feature.

Consider the example of Johnny Cash covering John Prine’s song “Sam Stone.” The song is about a drug-addicted veteran, and the chorus ends with the line, “And Jesus Christ died for nothing, I suppose.” Prine considered the line to be the heart of the song, but Cash felt it was a line he could not sing. After some discussion with Prine, Cash settled on the alternate line, “Daddy must have hurt a lot back then, I suppose.” Prine comments that he allowed it because it was Johnny Cash and that he would not have changed it for anyone else (Freeman 2017). Regarding the first condition: The line is clearly not a placeholder, and its weight is precisely why Cash felt uncomfortable about singing it. Regarding the second: Cash expected, correctly, that Prine would not wish him to change it. So he was right to ask permission, and if Prine had not given permission then Cash would have been wrong (to that extent) to perform his cover version.

Contrast the case of the Pogue’s “Fairytale of New York.” The original version has Kirsty MacColl singing lines which begin with “You scumbag, you maggot / You cheap, lousy...” and which end with a rhyming slur. In a cover for BBC Radio’s Live Lounge in 2017 with Ed Sheeran, Anne-Marie substitutes “blaggard” for the slur.⁷ In a 2020 YouTube cover, Vance Joy sings “You’re cheap and I’ve had it.”⁸ Although the use of the slur in the original is meant to capture something about the character in the song, it is not core to the meaning of the song. Most of the characterization is accomplished by other lines. Moreover, the musicians themselves were not committed to the slur. MacColl performed the song with alternate lyrics. The publisher used that performance to make a radio edit of the song. When a commentator complained about the change, the Pogues (through their official Twitter account) just lobbed epithets at the commentator (Malt 2020). By both criteria, then, there was no wrong in Anne-Marie or Joy changing the line.⁹

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOBvRs4btvE>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV50LXvP1cA>

⁹ Chris Thile and guests avoid the slur by dropping the whole verse. Although in general covering artists are not required to sing every verse from the original, this omission allows a possible reading of the song in which the

If we are right about this moral principle, how far does the obligation extend? In discussing a singer's responsibilities to the audience, Bicknell notes that there are many possible audiences who may be invested in a song. It is impossible to be sensitive to the struggles of everyone and the implications for everybody. As such, the obligation is somewhat indefinite.¹⁰ Bicknell writes, "As a matter of practical fact, given constraints of time and psychological stress, it would be impossible to develop moral sensitivity to every individual and group who deserves it. Yet it is incumbent upon us to develop moral sensitivities to some individuals and groups, inasmuch as we desire to be treated with moral sensitivity ourselves" (Bicknell 2015, p. 85).¹¹

One way to understand the duty we have been discussing is as an obligation of moral deference to the original musician. Yet one might think that this sensitivity is different than the one Bicknell discusses. There are indefinitely many possible audiences for a cover, but there is a definite group of musicians who recorded the canonical track. However, it may be unclear which of those musicians ought to be seen as responsible for the work. Even when there is someone credited with songwriting and someone's name on the album cover, musical decisions will also often be made by band members, session musicians, and producers. As Gracyk notes, "rock recordings frustrate the expectation that each work features *an* artist's intentions" (2001, p. 94). Even when we can say who made which contributions, it can be unclear how to aggregate their intentions and wishes.

Even where the wishes of the original musicians are well-defined, there are real constraints of time and stress which limit how much a covering artist will know about them. In some cases, it may be fairly obvious— for example, Johnny Cash reached out to John Prine because it was clear to him that changing that line would go against Prine's wishes. In other cases, it may be less clear— just from listening to the song, it is not obvious how invested the Pogues were in the specific lyrics of "Fairytale of New York." When the wishes of the original

couple might find a happy ending— a major change in the meaning of the song. It is less clear that there is no wrong in such a drastic change. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxvV7Qhj_QU

¹⁰ It is an *imperfect duty* in the technical sense, one which can only be pursued in some instances or to some extent. Even though one ought to cultivate moral sensitivity to the needs others, it will never be to all others or all their needs.

¹¹ The last part of this passage from Bicknell suggests that moral deference (and our application of it) could be given a broadly-Kantian defense in terms of reciprocity. We will not develop that suggestion further here.

musicians are clear and known, someone who would cover a song ought to weigh those wishes in their decisions about if and how to cover. However, it seems to us that when the wishes of the original musicians are unclear or unknown, someone who wants to cover a song is under no obligation to investigate and figure out what the wishes might be.

Ethics and Respect

We have claimed that a musician making a cover has a *pro tanto* duty to respect wishes of the original artist, but there are potential counterexamples. A strong candidate is Aretha Franklin's 1967 cover of Otis Redding's "Respect." Her cover substantially transforms both the lyrics and music of the song. Magnus et al. write that Franklin's cover "transforms Redding's ultimatum to a housebound woman into a demand for consideration, one which might be made between equals" (2013, p. 365).¹² Victoria Malawey provides an extensive discussion of the differences and concludes, "Franklin re-authors 'Respect' to such an extent that ownership transfers from songwriter Redding to Franklin" (2014, p. 205). These changes went beyond anything Redding might have intended. At the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, he described "Respect" as "a song that a girl took away from me."

Franklin's cover clearly violated Redding's wishes. So, by our principle, she violated an ethical duty in making it. Franklin's version is brilliant, though, and nobody— besides Redding— would say that she ought not have made it. So one might offer Franklin's "Respect" as a counterexample to the principle we have proposed. We offer two replies. First, Franklin's lyrics are not just different than Redding's. Rather, the woman in Franklin's version is readily seen as the one being addressed in Redding's version, and her lyrics are a reply to him. This makes Franklin's "Respect" an *answer song* rather than just a typical cover version. Answer songs use the same or similar music but substitute lyrics in answer to the original. They are usually given related but distinct titles, as when Ginger Davis and the Snaps released "I'm No

¹² Magnus et al. argue that the differences are sufficient to make Franklin's "Respect" a different song than Redding's. For a different view, see Kania 2020 (p. 242).

Run Around” as an answer to Dion’s “Runaround Sue.”¹³ Although it is not a tremendous transgression, part of the novelty of “I’m No Run Around” is that it subverts the narrative of Dion’s original. Because Franklin’s “Respect” is an answer song, its defiance puts it in dialogue with Redding’s version rather than just effacing it. Second, giving voice to the oppressed woman is punching up. The situation would seem very different if Franklin’s version had been written first and a man had recorded a cover in which he told her to give him his proper respect. More than just representing the oppressed in her version, Franklin can be heard as singing out against oppression in general. Her version can be seen as an anthem of autonomy in a way that Redding’s could not. The fact that it is a change for the better means that she was morally justified in recording her version, all things considered. That is compatible with the claim that she did a small wrong to Redding by doing so.

As we see it, Franklin recording her cover was all things considered right, although it was wrong in respect of hijacking Redding’s song from him. One might disagree and think instead that her right action could not have some wrong aspects to it. We could allow this by amending our suggestion and saying instead that a musician performing or recording a cover has a *prima facie* duty to respect wishes of the original artist. The difference is that a *pro tanto* duty determines rightness or wrongness *in that respect*, but a *prima facie* duty holds only typically. When other considerations make violating the wishes of the original artist justified (all things considered) then the *prima facie* duty would not apply at all. We think that such an amendment would be a mistake, though. In the case of Franklin, it seems to us that she wronged Redding to an extent.

Moreover, nullifying the duty when the cover is all things considered justified would make certain acts of punk defiance impossible. Consider Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious covering “My Way”.¹⁴ The song was written by Paul Anka for Frank Sinatra.¹⁵ Vicious’ performance in the cover has been the subject of much discussion. As Leonard Cohen quips, “the certainty, the

¹³ For a history of answer songs in the period, see Cooper 1988. Malawey 2014 suggests that Franklin’s “Respect” can be seen as an answer song (p. 196).

¹⁴ The cover is much discussed. See, inter alia, Mosser 2008 and Magnus et al. 2013.

¹⁵ Anka actually wrote new lyrics for the French song “Comme d’habitude”, abandoning Claude François’ French lyrics but keeping Jacques Revaux’s melody. Those details are irrelevant to the point here.

self-congratulation, the daily heroism of Sinatra's version is completely exploded by this desperate, mad, humorous voice” (Snow 1988). Anka says that, although he likes many other covers of “My Way”, he was “somewhat destabilised by the Sex Pistols' version” (McCormick 2007). So the cover goes against Anka’s wishes for the song and probably Sinatra’s as well. On our principle, recording the cover was (in this respect and to some degree) ethically wrong. Doyle Greene calls covers like this *anti-covers*— ‘anti’ in the sense of ‘against’— because the new version of the song is directed against both the canonical version and the person who performed it (Greene 2014). On our view, anti-covers are (to a degree) wrong. On the alternative view, the overall justifiability of an anti-cover would make it not wrong (even in that respect). However, Vicious meant to be transgressive with his cover. To retract the principle because his cover would violate it would frustrate his very intentions to be a rule-violating punk. The other punk anti-covers that Greene discusses are similarly meant to violate norms. One of those norms is the one expressed in our principle.

Duty to whom?

Prince complains that someone covering his song made his version not exist anymore. As a matter of metaphysics, that is obviously false. It might instead be read as a concern about credit— both social and financial. Covering artists have a responsibility to give credit where it is due. We then suggested that this can be understood in terms of a more general duty, that a covering artist ought to respect the relevant wishes of the original artist. This duty is not necessarily all that strong, and it can be outweighed by other considerations. Nevertheless, violating it wrongs the original artist (at least a little).

With that duty in mind, there is a further twist to Prince’s complaint. The characterization of a cover version which we took from Magnus et al. describes it as being in relation to “a prior recording which is accepted as canonical or paradigmatic.” A highly successful cover can come to be taken by audiences as the canonical or paradigmatic version of the song. As Prince laments, audiences came to think of “Nothing Compares 2 U” as a Sinéad O’Connor song rather than as a Prince song. Someone covering “Nothing Compares 2 U” might then think of themselves as

covering O'Connor. If this were to happen, then their duty to respect the wishes of the earlier artist would require that they consider what O'Connor would want. The normative future of the song would no longer be determined by Prince's wishes alone. O'Connor would have some role in shaping the norms for new versions of the song, while Prince thinks of it as just being his song.

One might say that Prince's worries ultimately misfire, because on-line covers of "Nothing Compares 2 U" now all seem to be labelled as being covers of Prince. Regardless, other artists are less lucky. Covers of "Killing Me Softly" are variously labelled as being covers of Roberta Flack, the Fugees, or both. The Fugees respected Flack's version in numerous respects, including having singer Lauryn Hill record dozens of vocal parts to capture the harmonies of Flack's version.¹⁶ One could, in principle, record a cover of Lori Lieberman's original. Nobody does, and few are even aware of Lieberman's version. That means that the duty for covering artists is to respect Flack's or the Fugees's wishes. Lieberman not only does not get credit, but loses her normative role in the future of the song.

Conclusion

We began by considering ways in which a cover version can deprive the original artist of credit which they are due, both in the sense of acknowledgement and in the sense of profit. This can be understood in relation to a broader duty to respect the original musician's wishes for the song. The original artist is wronged (at least to that extent) when a cover is made which violates their wishes. The wrong is amplified when the cover becomes more popular than the original: Future musicians will take their guidance from the cover rather than from the earlier version, so those future musicians come to consider the wishes of the artist who made the cover in addition to or perhaps instead of the wishes of the artist who made the original.

Of course, we are not claiming that Prince had all that in mind when complaining about covers on *Lopez Tonight*. However, it is more plausible that he was gesturing toward

¹⁶ One YouTube version is just labeled as being a Lauryn Hill cover.

considerations like these than that he was making the daft claim that covers literally annihilated his originals.

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