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Tell Me Why This Isn't a Cover

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ABSTRACT: If some random musicians were to record Taylor Swift's back catalog with painstaking sonic fidelity to the originals, the products would be cover versions. We begin with the question of whether Swift's own re-recordings of her earlier albums should also count as covers. It is tempting to say that Taylor's Versions are just versions, rather than covers, and maybe that is right. Regardless, lessons from the philosophy of cover songs apply. We can ask whether these are better understood as mimics (meant to sound the same) or renditions (meant to sound different). The criteria for what makes a good mimic cover are different than the criteria for a good rendition cover, so the difference here matters for how we should judge Swift's remakes. Covers can also be used to mean something different than the original, so we should ask whether Swift's remakes mean something different than the original tracks. Maybe they do. Some covers not only mean something different than the original but are also about the original. So we ask whether Swift's remakes are referential in that way. This, too, has consequences for how we appreciate and assess them.

In 2021, Taylor Swift released *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version)*. In 2023, she followed these up with *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* and *1989 (Taylor's Version)*. Rereleases of her earlier eponymous album and *Reputation* are, we are told, forthcoming. She does not own the masters to her earlier albums, and the new releases give her versions of the songs from those albums which she does own. Each of the new tracks is titled with the name of the earlier track plus the suffix "(Taylor's Version)," an addition which seems mostly to be about establishing brand identity. Adding to the title makes it easy to tell the new versions from the old ones on streaming services. When referring to the first rerelease, she has called it "Fearless (My Version)."¹

In addition to Taylor's Versions of all the original tracks, there are also tracks which were written at the time of the earlier album but which were—for one reason or another—not previously published. These are labeled as "(From The Vault)." In addition, *Red (Taylor's Version)* features a ten-minute version of

¹ In a speech at the Nashville Songwriter Awards in September 2022.
<https://www.billboard.com/music/country/taylor-swift-nashville-songwriter-awards-full-speech-1235142144/>

“All Too Well,” resulting in the mouthful of a title “All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor’s Version) (From The Vault).” The new tracks mean that the albums as a whole are not just remakes, but our focus here is on Taylor’s Versions rather than the From The Vault tracks.

Are these covers?

If some random musicians were to record Taylor Swift's back catalog with painstaking sonic fidelity to the originals, the products would be cover versions. So, should we say the same about Taylor’s Versions?

One strategy is just to apply the definition of “cover,” which would work fine if the word had a formal or legal definition. It does not.

The term “cover” began to be used in the music industry in the 1940s. It was not a term that people outside the industry used. In 1952, quoting a band leader who described covering a track, a reporter in Chicago felt like he had to add that “cover” is “trade jargon meaning to record a tune that looks like a potential hit on someone else’s label” (Leonard 1952). This has the primary sense of *coverage*. Just as a band might learn contemporary hits to play live when audiences requested them, they might record their own versions of contemporary hits. Yet, it also often meant an attempt to steal sales which might have gone to the original record, possibly displacing it entirely. Covers were sometimes intended to *cover up* or *cover over* the original on record store shelves.

By the late 1960s, the word “cover” had become a term of everyday English. Even though providing precise definitions of everyday terms is usually a mess, one might insist that a version is a cover when there is already a recording by someone else. A typical dictionary definition specifies this. Other random musicians would be making covers because they are not Taylor Swift; so, perhaps Taylor Swift cannot cover her own work precisely because she is the one who made the originals. One might exclaim, “*A musician cannot cover themselves!*”

Why yell in italics about this? The suggestion is that it is not just an incidental fact that musicians don’t cover themselves, but instead that it is true by definition. Some philosophers have objected to the thought that any claims are true by definition, but we can allow that precise domains like mathematics allow for truths of that kind. What is not at all obvious is that the concept of cover is precise enough to yield such a conclusion. In common usage, ordinary people do use the word “cover” to describe works by the same artist as the original. For example, one online database allows the tag *self-cover*, which is more specific

than the general tag *cover*, explaining it as “a special case of cover song where the artist covered their own song.”²

Moreover, the 1950s definition does not mention different musicians but different labels, and Taylor’s Versions have a different owner and are distributed by a different label than the originals. Considering the original use of the term, Taylor’s Versions do seem to qualify as covers. They are intended for *coverage*, because Swift would like to own the master recordings for some version of those songs. And they are intended to *cover up* the originals, because Swift would like her versions to displace the originals in the market. So, they function as covers in both of those senses.

To try and sort this out, let’s consider two thought experiments. The first, we think, is a plausible conjecture: In twenty years, the existence of the earlier versions will just be a bit of trivia. Taylor’s Versions will be the default versions of these songs. This seems to be how Swift intends for it to go. Before the release of *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, she commented, “I think that the version that we’re putting out tonight is gonna be... the new... standard version... of what this song is, because it is the original form.”³ And this seems to be how it is going. In November 2021, iHeartMedia announced that all of their radio stations would replace the original tracks with Taylor’s Versions as the latter became available. An executive at iHeart commented, “Whenever Taylor re-records a new track, we immediately replace the old versions” (Willman 2021). In the end, we suspect that the originals will just be odd variants—like tracks by an American band that has alternate versions on the Japanese release or a movie that has a different cut on the laser disc.

These analogies suggest, perhaps, that Taylor’s Versions are not covers but default versions. A cover, after all, counts as a cover because of its relation to a canonical earlier version. In the plausible conjecture, Taylor’s Versions will be canonical in twenty years. However, there are covers—versions that everybody agrees count as covers—which have eclipsed their originals. Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” for example, was a cover of Otis Redding’s song by the same name. Yet, many listeners today do not know about Redding’s original. R.E.M.’s “Superman” was a cover of an obscure original by a forgotten band called the Clique. The ability to overshadow an earlier recording might even be taken to be a defining feature of covers, because they can *cover up* the original. So, the plausible conjecture suggests that Taylor’s Versions are covers without decisively establishing that they are.

The second thought experiment is this: Suppose Taylor Swift were able to acquire ownership of her early albums, the ones she has not re-recorded yet.

² VocaDB: <https://vocadb.net/T/391/self-cover>

³ Interview with Jimmy Fallon (2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kr4JO9591c>

Suppose that the cost was not too high and that none of the money would go to people she finds especially objectionable. She probably would not go on to re-record those other albums. She might rerelease them in new editions with the addition of some From The Vault tracks, but she would simply include the original recordings rather than making Taylor's Versions of the original tracks. If that is right, then Taylor's Versions are not merely new versions recorded in the usual way. Their function is precisely the commercial function that early covers had: publishing coverage and covering over the originals.

One might reply that these commercial functions are no longer typical of covers. In recent decades, covers have often been tributes that called attention to the original. Listeners might go back and listen to old recordings when they hear a new cover. Nevertheless, there still are some covers which compete with and displace originals. So, this second scenario also suggests that maybe Taylor's Versions are covers after all.

Nevertheless, the various functions of "cover" talk pull in different directions. We do not see any way to decisively settle whether Taylor's Versions are covers or not.⁴ The word cover will not bear this much weight. So, let's take a step back and consider some lessons from the philosophy of cover songs. There are insights and distinctions which we can apply to Taylor's Versions regardless of whether they count as covers in a strict sense or not.

Among covers, it is important to distinguish *mimic covers* (which are intended to sound the same as the original) from *rendition covers* (which are not intended to sound the same). Note that the difference is not whether the cover actually does sound the same or not. A poor mimic cover might sound different because the musicians who played it simply lacked the skill to do better, and a straight rendition cover might sound fairly similar to the original. The difference lies instead in the intention with which they are made and the relevant appreciative standards.

In addition to sounding different than the original, a cover can *mean* something different than what the original means. Some covers not only mean something different but also have a meaning that is *about* the canonical original. (A much-discussed example is Sid Vicious' cover of "My Way." The canonical version of the song is by Frank Sinatra, and Vicious' version mocks both the original version and Sinatra himself.⁵)

With that framework in mind, we can ask: Are Taylor's Versions mimics or renditions? Do Taylor's Versions mean something different than the tracks that they remake? Are Taylor's Versions about the original tracks?

⁴ On the difficulties in defining "cover," see Magnus 2022, ch. 1.

⁵ See all the cited works by Magnus et al.

Mimics and renditions

Of course, Taylor's Versions do not sound *exactly* the same as the original tracks. Some differences are inevitable. Calling them new versions would be untenable if the digital masters were bit-for-bit identical. Even allowing that there must be some difference, though, they might sound so similar as to make no aesthetic difference. Some of Taylor's Versions, it seems to us, are that similar to the originals. When they are put together with the originals, cross-fading back and forth, the product sounds like one unified track rather than two tracks stitched together.⁶

Some other tracks have different decisions in production and mix. Some have different stylistic choices and sound noticeably different. For example, "Girl at Home" (from *Red*) has guitar in the original replaced with synthesizers in Taylor's Version. This shifts it to being clearly a pop track, rather than something that can be heard as country.

Unsurprisingly, different listeners disagree on the details. Diehard fans, who are more familiar with the original versions, are more likely to notice differences between the originals and Taylor's Versions. For example, Taylor's Version of "All Too Well" (the one with just the original verses, not the 10 Minute Version) sounds rather like the original to us. The differences are subtle, and we do not prefer one over the other. But a fan comments online, "When it comes to 'All Too Well' i cant choose between old or new. The old one sounds so pure, raw and it felt many stories about a woman who's heart just got brokened yesterday."⁷

Regardless, a great deal of effort was spent on the recording and production to make sure all the parts were there and the timing was the same. Professional musicians who would not play those tunes in precisely the same way under ordinary circumstances nevertheless did so for Taylor's Versions. The overwhelming work here was to duplicate. If a tribute band had versions that sounded this much like the originals, they would be highly successful mimics.

Moreover, as we noted above, the difference between a mimic and a rendition is not whether a version *actually* sounds the same as the original or not. Rather, what matters is the intention. After the release of *Red (Taylor's Version)*, Swift contrasted her approach with Taylor's Versions with her approach to the From The Vault tracks. She said, "I think recording it... was going back and trying to create as authentic a replica of the originals as I possibly could. With songs on the original album, I wanted them to sound exactly alike. Then with the

⁶ For example, "Love Story" from *Fearless*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osLG1XnYkbQ>

⁷ Grammar and spelling as given. Comment on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geK8WKHNMXo>

Vault tracks, I wanted to be as creative as I possibly could. These are songs that no one's heard before, so I wanted them to be the best version.”⁸

Swift's word choice here is telling. To think of Taylor's Versions as *replicas* is to think of them as mimics. A replica of a sculpture is best if it is indistinguishable from the original. Every difference is a demerit. It may have the word “replica” embossed on the bottom, of course, but that is a concession to practicality rather than an aesthetic addition. A mimic cover is like a replica in this respect.

Furthermore, recall the second thought experiment from the previous section: If Swift were able to acquire ownership of her remaining albums on terms she found agreeable, would she give up the project of re-recording them? We think she would. What she wants, ultimately, is to own her music. She has taken the unusual step of making faithful copies precisely because she does not own the earlier versions. If she did own them, then she would have no need for Taylor's Versions. This function makes them seem like mimics rather than renditions.

How do Taylor's Versions fare, if we take them to be mimics? Although a mimic cover need not—and typically will not—sound exactly like the original, more resemblance to the original is always better than less resemblance. So, if we take Taylor's Versions to be mimics, they are good but not perfect. Moreover, a mimic cover usually has no artistic significance beyond that of the original. Instead, it is an exercise of skill and craft. Taylor's Versions are impressive, but only in the way an excellent replica of an awesome statue would be impressive.

Because of the great care taken with Taylor's Versions, the small differences from the originals are likely to have been deliberate—for example, the synths in “Girl at Home.” The clearest and most consistent difference is in Swift's singing. She has made little attempt to emulate her earlier vocal quality. She sounds like the same person, yes, but older. On Taylor's Versions, she sings like a fully mature woman who is looking back at her painful heart-broken time from years ago. So, perhaps these self-conscious differences are enough to make it not count as a mimic after all.

In an interview promoting *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, Swift said, “I really did want this to be very true to what I initially thought of and what I'd initially written. But better. Obviously.”⁹ In describing it this way, she suggests that the aim was not to make Taylor's Versions match the original tracks but instead to make them match her original conceptions of the songs. Perhaps the original records fell short of her original vision, and the new versions better realize what she had intended all along. Understanding them in this way treats Taylor's Versions as renditions.

⁸ Interview with Access Hollywood (2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQEvgkfu5Dk>

⁹ Interview with People (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAnbsUz1fOs>

Unlike a mimic, a rendition cover can be appreciated in two different modes. First, it can be appreciated in relation to the original. A rendition can be good or bad both because of the ways it differs from the original and also because of the ways it does not differ. The changes that are made reflect artistic choices, but there are also artistic choices in not changing other features. Second, a rendition cover can be appreciated on its own, without consideration of the original. One can listen to it and respond to how it sounds, considered just as an instance of the song in question.

If we were to understand Taylor's Versions as renditions, then, we would need to consider them in both modes.

First: Considering them in relation to the originals, they fail to live up to the potential of new versions. They seem boring and pointless as additional artifacts, alongside the originals. Even a straight rendition requires small touches and twists in order to be anything more than uninspired repetition. If we do not take them to be mimics, then it is a bad thing that they sound like sonic replicas. There is something suspect about a rendition that is too easy to mistake for a mimic. (Recall again the second thought experiment, which suggests that she would stop making Taylor's Versions if there were not the issue of ownership at stake.)

Although the new versions match the originals remarkably well, Taylor's Versions *could* have sounded even more like the originals if that is what she had wanted. Perhaps she intended for there to be just enough difference that a discerning listener could tell the difference between the two, so that a fan could tell whether they were hearing the objectionable old version or the commendable new version. If that were so, then the differences would not serve any artistic purpose at all. Instead, they would serve as a kind of musical watermark—differences that would slip below the attention of a casual listener, but provide a mark of authenticity for anyone who knew to listen for it.

Second: Considered on their own, Taylor's Versions seem fine. However, this is only because they sound more-or-less the same as the originals. The charms one would find listening to Taylor's Versions without considering the originals are basically the same charms one would find listening to the originals without considering Taylor's Versions. This is not usually the case with renditions—at least, not with good ones.

Contrast the tracks from Ryan Adams' *1989*, a song-for-song remake of Swift's *1989*. Ian Crouch of the *New Yorker* writes that "Adams took songs that, due to their popularity, belong to the world, and made them his own." It is certainly an album of renditions. Adams transmogrifies bouncy pop into his particular flavor of alt-Americana. He intends his tracks to sound very different from Swift's originals, and nobody would mistake one for the other. Crouch, an

avowed fan of Adams, suggests that Adams' album is "more earnest and, in its way, sincere and sentimental than the original." Most critics discuss the tracks on Adams' album in explicit contrast with Swift's, sticking to the first mode of evaluation. Yet, critics also draw other contrasts; a common point is to consider "Welcome to New York" (from *1989*) and Adams' earlier song "New York, New York" as rival anthems for New York City. And critics—some of them at least—also listen to Adams' tracks for the features they have by themselves. Crouch, in a critical moment, writes of one track that Adams' singing is "flat and a bit rushed, as if he had memorized the words in a language he doesn't speak" (2015). Kyle Coroneos makes the charge more sharply, suggesting that Adams' album "sounds like a dirge; like a low, monotone groan... or like the color grey interpreted into music by players purposely told to not put any life into the effort" (2015). Here they consider Adams' covers in the second mode, for what they can offer musically apart from the comparison with Swift's original tracks. If Adams' tracks are good renditions, it would be because the alchemy of converting pop to indie is an interesting transformation or because the result is intrinsically gold. Conversely, if neither obtains, then they are bad renditions. Regardless, it is easier to know how to assess them than it is with Taylor's Versions.

A further dimension of covers is that they can mean something different than the original. We turn to this in the next section.

What it means when she sings

A common motivation in recording a rendition cover is to capture a particular feature or aspect of the original, discerned or selected by the artist recording the cover. As Bonnie Fraser of the band Stand Atlantic comments, "I think at the end of the day a cover is supposed to bring two worlds together."¹⁰ This is precluded for Taylor's Versions in the obvious sense that the original and the new version are both recorded by Taylor Swift, but also in the deeper sense that she is not bringing a substantially different musical approach to the new versions. However, one might still ask whether there is a different approach or point-of-view in Taylor's Versions. Do they give us any new insight? Do they mean something different than the originals?

Taylor's Versions on the remake of *Red* feature a woman in her thirties telling about her affairs as a 21 year old. However, that kind of perspective is often the case for older songwriters. Even as they develop new material, fans still want to hear the classics. So, years later, the singer performs or even records lyrics that are written from the point of view of their younger self. The emotional

¹⁰ "Behind Stand Atlantic's Like A Version 'Righteous' (Interview)" (2020): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CrtLf-BC5k>

content may be different in the remake, but it is still the same song and—typically, at least—has more or less the same meaning as the original track.

When Swift sings, she is performing in the persona of the woman in the song. The persona was closer to her actual self when the songs were newer and she was younger, but there has always been pretense involved. Just as she can sing in the persona of a woman who murders her friend's husband (in the song "No Body, No Crime," from *Evermore*), she can sing in the persona of a 21 year old.

Yet, perhaps it is more complicated than this. Recording Taylor's Versions is an act of defiance, rebuking her old label and the people who own the originals. If this is part of the artistic content of Taylor's Version, rather than merely its commercial context, then she is not singing in the persona of a 21 year old in Taylor's Version of *Red*—or, at least, she is not merely doing that. Instead, she is also expressing a defiance that is absent from the original. To appreciate the new versions, a listener ought to understand them as a protest against her treatment by her old production company. Understood in this way, Taylor's Versions would be *about* the originals in a way that the originals are not about themselves. In short, they would be *referential*.¹¹

If Taylor's Versions are referential in this way, listeners would need to know about the originals in order to understand the new versions. It is plausible even to think that listeners would need to compare the new versions to the originals. The fullest appreciation would require listening to the two, side by side. The discerning listener would still seek out the originals, for the sake of comparison, which would yield profits for the owners of the original. This would undermine Swift's plan that Taylor's Versions should displace the originals. So, taking Taylor's Versions to be referential in this way makes their artistic success incompatible with Swift's commercial goals. That would be a tragic Catch 22.¹²

Whether or not Taylor's Versions are referential depends, at least in part, on Swift's intentions. And certainly she does not intend to tragically frustrate her own intentions. So (we think) the best interpretation is that Taylor's Versions are not referential after all. The relation to the originals is a commercial and historical one, rather than one of artistic content. We would not lose anything aesthetically if her plan succeeds and the originals fall into obscurity. Knowing the original

¹¹ The label here echoes our discussion of *referential covers*.

¹² The editor points out that a long-time fan might already own the originals and that a new fan might illegally download them, so that the owners of the originals would make no money. However, this would mean that the true audience for Taylor's Versions is just old fans and pirates— a contortion that we find implausible.

would become trivia, like knowing about foreign bootleg versions of those tracks.¹³

So, should we listen to Taylor's Versions?

We have not taken a definite stand on the question of whether Taylor's Versions are covers or not. The word "cover" is not precise enough to carry that kind of weight. What we have claimed is that they are *like* covers in important respects, more so than the usual case when an aging artist simply records or performs new versions of their earlier hits. Regardless of whether we call them covers or not, distinctions from the philosophy of covers help us think about what is going on here. Taylor's Versions (most of them, anyway) are best understood as mimics. In singing them, Swift is occupying the same persona that she occupied in the original. Even if she is singing in defiance of her old label, she is not singing *about* that defiance.

There is an adjacent question with more practical upshot: If you are going to listen to Swift's albums, should you listen to Taylor's Versions or the originals? The decision is a commercial and symbolic choice rather than a matter of aesthetic or artistic taste. If you are listening to the radio, the choice will be made for you.

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¹³ Ley Cray reaches a different conclusion in their contribution to this volume. While we agree that Swift's project of re-recording is an act of defiance, we do not see how that defiance becomes part of the artistic content of the tracks themselves.

Willman, Chris. (2021) "iHeart Promises to Only Play Taylor Swift's New Versions of Her Songs, Once They're Out" *Yahoo!Entertainment*, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/iheart-promises-only-play-taylor-000228785.html>