

MUSIC PRODUCTION AND CULTURAL THEORY

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COVER SONGS AND REMIXES IN POPULAR MUSIC

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This paper analyzes some important arguments from the article written by Don Cusic called *In Defense of Cover Songs* where he exposes that an artist that performs cover songs is authentic and professional. The document also introduces the relation between covers and pop culture especially in 1980s decade.

Cover songs are those ones that have been recorded or performed before. Covers have become popular almost since the half of the 20th and 21st century and have had a big impact in society identity, in culture and the way that people receive, accept, and listen to the new music. The tradition of music industry has been based on singers and songwriters image authenticity, which has caused critics and fans to dismiss artists that make cover songs as less legitimate. In the article "*In Defense of Cover Songs*" Don Cusic argues that the singer who sings songs written by others is also a legitimate artist and that cover songs represent a form of artistic interpretation that goes beyond mere "copying." (Cusic, p.171). Major labels usually get interested in artists that write their own songs as it represents an important revenue stream, but a lot of artists are just performers and not songwriters forcing labels to find songs to record. But for business reasons Cusic explains that an artists should write or co-write the songs in his/her album not just for the profit it may represent but also because it "secures" a steady stream of material. Nothing is wrong with covers argues Cusic, "Many times a cover is

a history lesson for a new, young audience who never heard the original". It's very common that new generations listen to old songs for the first time from a cover, performed in a different genre or rhythm. That's how covers invite cultural studies to consider the effect of musical change as it reflects a specific moment for society, identity and politics.

"The greatest compliment a songwriter can receive is for a variety of artists to cover his/her song – it says the song transcends genres and time. It is what every songwriter aspires to with his/her songs."(Cusic, p.176) Songwriting is a time demanding profession and sometimes people underestimate the skills and talent required to write "hits" under pressure. In the other hand, along history great singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddy Arnold, Roy Acuff, John Coltrane and many others have demonstrated that what they have done in music as performers is unique, turning cover songs into hits. They had such great performances that no one never judged them or doubted on their authenticity.

Cover studies and analysis comprehend many aspects related to context and time. According to some actual readings about cover songs there are a lot of discussions that have to be observed with the purpose of clarify and not to confuse the reader and to help the understanding of the popular music itself using some headings and keywords to describe the abstract concepts without the jargon used commonly to talk about some of the characteristics in music covering and adopt others such as performance, rendition, transformation,

appropriation, allusion, reference and sample. A rendition is a straightforward faithful version of the original, carrying with it some of the connotation of performance in classical music, and transformation is a more determined claim on the original, certain times it is called appropriation (Hesmondhalgh, Negus, p. 52).

New artists usually perform cover songs in their live performances to create a smooth connection with audience, to attract their attention and to show some of the artist's influence. A cover played by a new band, might be seen as a measurer, because if people feels that their cover sounds good enough, the band has a promising future. An old practice that musicians have employed through many years is to perform gigs or small concerts covering famous songs. People like to do different activities while they are listening to music that make them feel authentic, or that connect them with specific kind moments in their lives.

Pop music influencing culture and defining identity

Artists in the early 80s had a big influence in the identity of young audiences; many music videos were made and distributed massively thanks to the technology evolution and media broadcasting channels like radio and TV enabling the arrival of the different contents to every home. MTV (Music Television) played a key role on the music videoing trend. In the beginning music videos had small budgets and production values to match, but soon became the most innovative stuff on TV. Some videos like A-Ha's "Take on Me" which stepped between reality and the world of illustration set new standards in special effects and animation. The videos sold records, and record companies began spending money to make them slicker and more stylish. Michael Jackson's 1.5 million video "Thriller" helped to make the album the best seller of all time. ¹

People also had the possibility to have home devices to record multimedia material like VCRs and audio recorders allowing people to re-play media contents the desired times and to see specific frames that have captured magical moments in movies, concerts, documentaries and series. Always the imitation has been part of the learning process. For example, guitar players are always looking to adopt the style of their favorite artists, the ones that make them feel inspired. The same happens with singers that take their idols as models to observe and study the kind of vibrato, breathing technique or phrasing that they would like to incorporate in their singing. This means that

¹ http://articles.cnn.com/1998-07-31/entertainment/9807_31_encore.mtv_1_music-videos-

an artist possesses an identity built on a mixture of influences through out life and listeners and new artists receive and absorb that information by means of songs, helping to create their own identity and style, so the cycle repeats with every generation. Also music has the power of not just influence people by what they want to listen but in their way of living. From cover songs to physical look, followers have copied their favorite idols. It means that how an artist behaves, clothes, haircuts, piercings, ideas, drugs consumption problems and many other characteristics shown to the public, can be adopted because he or she legitimates this as authentic. This situation has always occurred but and now it's been reinforced through media channels, influencing young people's culture and identity.

Taking the cover word in this sense lead us to the discussion that an artist identity is a combination of different identities, thereby it is an acceptable behavior to make new versions of representative works in music. Generally people and thus musicians have grown up with different music influences mainly by radio stations and commercial music played over and over throughout their lives. Is the style of famous artists just the mix or combination of many styles that have had a significant meaning in his/her early years? What is clear is that background environment is critical to analyze pop culture and covers of pop culture.

Covers in Musicals and TV

Covers of songs in musicals usually are about artists that have made a big impact on stage and their legacy and their music had forge the identity and the style of the genre itself. This is the case of the new Queen musical in London called “We Will Rock You”, where music of the band is interpreted very accurate, with the same musical instruments, with the same musical arrangements and with great singers that instead of making feel the audience that the songs are just covers, they generate the feeling that it is a tribute with all the details, respecting and honoring the rock culture, and the most important of all, the legacy in the way that each one of the performers are dressed, the show, the lights and the story that leaves a clear message that the real rock culture is actually lost because of a misuse of the genre from new musical movements that just care about the image and not in the sound. In the musical there are cross identity covers where female voices take the lead vocals in some of the songs doing what David Hesmondhalgh calls a “rendition”, meaning a straightforward faithful version of the original. One of the main purposes of the musical is to rescue the culture of live covers that require an extra amount of work and preparation because there is just one opportunity to do a perfect show, thing that for general adds for extra value, as often audiences are expecting faithful versions to sing what they have heard on the record.

Other kind of covers and remaking of things also became common in movies, television series getting all the nostalgia of the public as an attraction power to success. Superheroes from Marvel Comics for example, have been re-invented and re-created to fit the big screen and commercial space to make profit about it. Covers in films behave in a slightly different way thus usually scripts come from novels or comics and directors can split the stories in different parts creating sequences that represent the whole story, often modified to generate huge expectations from public. As a comparison with covers in music, films remakes have been usually backed up by industry, generating trust in audience and a sense of authenticity.

A similarity in music occurs when new artists record new versions of old songs to propel their careers, to start with an already well-known song and try to guarantee a successful beginning like Kelly Osborne on Madonna's "papa don't preach", where she delivers a modern version but the arrangement stays the same. So the question that arises is why some new artists prefer to sing a cover as the first song in their careers? Is it because the artist is not a songwriter? Or it is just because that's the easiest way to try to get into the top charts. Whatever the answer is, we can't forget that music industry is changing and the traditional ways of producing music have changed and hence the way artists are introduced in the market are not the same anymore.

Jingles

A lot of songs have been used to sell products through radio and TV commercials using people's familiarity with songs instrumentals but using different lyrics. The effect that produces a commercial using the music of a hit song is persuasion that attracts the listener to appreciate the product and eventually to buy or consume it. For example, "Pepsi - The Choice of a new generation" commercial campaign was really aggressive, and propelled Pepsi beverage consumption in a marketing battle against Coke in the 1980s decade. Michael Jackson, one of the greatest entertainers of all time, stars in the first two commercials of the campaign. The two spots quickly become "the most eagerly anticipated advertising of all time."²

Selling Songs and Images

"Songs are commodities; they are products of composers/ lyricists and they gain life through performance, they achieve more acclaim with cover recording. Repetition of a song is a sign of artist interest and audience appreciation". B Lee Cooper. (Plasketes, p.43)

Music industry and the way that music is sold has changed during the last decades and now we are dealing with an image era, where how the performers look on stage or in a music video is a very relevant factor for audience acceptance while the complexity of arrangements is going

² <http://www.pepsiusa.com/faqs.php?section=highlights>

backwards in quality for some genres. A good point to discuss in this essay would be that though a cover is something that should praise the composer of a song, what is the limit between a cover that honors a song and one that decrease its value? Let's take as an example Michael Jackson's "Beat It". This song has been covered many times since it was released and covers go from a more heavy metal style like the one made by Yngwie Malmsteen published in 2009, to pop rock as versioned by *Fall Out Boy* one year before. Ynwie Malsteen is a virtuoso guitar player from 80's and Fall Out Boy is a relatively new band conformed in 2001 thus the contexts are totally different and the judgment if those versions add value to the original varies depending on the context and background of the listener. Though the original song established a huge precedent in the history of pop music it might be difficult for a cover to last in time shadowed by the original hit if no extra value or innovation is added.

Many artists have covered the music or sampled a song just changing the lyrics and melody. "There is a difference between cover records and cover songs, although that distinction often gets buried by the fact that the recording industry-not sheet music-dominates the music business". This sentence means that cover a record comprehends to re – record the original arrangement of the song with detail. "A cover song allows new interpretations, new voices, and new audiences to rediscover it. A great musician can add to this song, enhance it, and give it a new life. So can a great singer." That is the case of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" that is an R&B/soul song written by

Nickolas Ashford & Valerie Simpson in 1966 for the Tamla Motown label. Recorded by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell. The lyrics of this song tells about a love between a couple that are not together, but they say there is nothing that can pull apart one from the other. Amy Winehouse, an English artist made a cover where she composed or "reinvented" the melody and lyrics. Her fresh and different interpretation gave a new life to the song having a great impact on UK singles chart. The meaning and the context of the song was radically changed, and this new version brought a broken relationship story, where she is reflecting that she knows that that she has a not corresponded love, but she doesn't care because she feels attached to him. The video of the first version draws the conservative romance image of 60s of a couple singing in the street. The second one shows a deteriorated Amy Winehouse image by drugs making her way through a crowd that could be interpreted as a raw picture of society eccentricities and degeneration. Context is totally opposed and despite the judgments of how bad she looks in her video, she has a unique style, and authenticity and appropriation of the song that makes public forget that it is a covered version of a classic hit.

Music Beyond the boundaries of race

Historical Context, race, sexuality and cross genre covers

During the 1950's there was a cultural transition, a broadening of American pop music, country songs, rhythm 'n' blues gained attention and rock 'n' roll emerged.

Elvis Presley played an important roll in the ideological transformation about cover songs. He appropriated and publicly identified himself with black music. With his dance culture, more overt sexuality, and with his covers helped to generate an ideological shift in America to accept its blackness making possible for black musicians to perform before white audiences and play their songs on white radio stations. Nowadays is common that white artists perform black music and black artists perform white music.

Cross language covers also are each time more used around the world. There are famous songs that have been covered in different languages. For example Grover Washington Jr. "Just the two of us" which was released in the album "Bout Love" in 1979 and reached number two on the Billboard Hot 100 was covered by two Latin artists, *Jose Jose* in 1981 as a pop ballad format, and then by *Rey de la paz* in Salsa rhythm. Though these two versions of the original basically changed genre and language we observe that both are appropriations and despite of what *Dai Griffiths* says that "one of the most important given limits on *coverability* of a song is language", we can appreciate that with time, covers from English to other languages have shown those limits are small and usually lyrics are modified to fit the music however

English still keeps its hegemony as a norm and covers from different languages to English are not usually made. "Solo tu y yo" the Spanish translation of "Just the two of us" has been very successful in the Latin market and because of the lack of knowledge from people about foreign artists, many could think that it is actually the original version. Will Smith also covered "Just the two of us" in 1998 when he decided to dedicate it to his son. It took a more pop sound in the chorus and the lyrics of the verses where changed for a rap, evidencing how despite the context was modified; the structure of the song remains the same. Another example is "Shape of my heart" composed by British singer /songwriter Sting was transformed into a new song called "Rise & fall" which contains the famous guitar arpeggio but the lyrics are totally different.

"The practice of cover recording can be viewed as aesthetic robbery. An original artist may lose sales revenue because a second or a third performer elects to release the same song during the same period" (Plasketes, p.44)

The idea that an artist's authenticity depends on his songwriting capabilities in my opinion is obsolete and analyzing the historical context we can easily find that it is not completely true. The shape of the cover songs has been dictated according to the situations where they have been made. Clearly the segregation situation in North America in the mid 1950s didn't allow Little Richard to show all his capabilities as a songwriter and performer artists but covers of his songs made by Pat Boone and Elvis Presley later gave him the importance and relevance he deserved. Black artists like Little Richard, Ray

Charles, and Michael Jackson to name a few of them opened the doors to all black talented musicians and acts that were not possible some decades ago. Today, race and genre wall that prevailed for many years in music have almost vanished and the most important thing to sign an artist or to be supported by major labels is how much your music can sell to public. Profit is what matters and artists have to be more competent today and ideally to have skills as performer, singer and songwriter.

Of course everything has not been progress in the way people make covers due to the profit search of some producers and artists that have made variations to songs that clearly are not minded to build an artist career or a business profile and instead of that they have made obvious that they just wanted to sell a song and make some money without caring about the critics or what the song was supposed to transmit. That situation generates a dilemma to real audience and fans that are familiar to the “original version”. Fans might feel offended for what it is considered a misrepresentation of a “classic” but in my opinion that makes part of the continuously changing context.

Covers, past and future

Covers are directly related to history and socio – cultural changes. “The cover song entertains and educates the subject of the present”. This assumption shows the signification of the cover song through history and how it is possible to link the present and memories of that past (When available).

“My Way,” has been covered so many times across so many generations, that perhaps it has lost most of its original meaning in the cultural consciousness, and hence its value as history is more representative of its reference to covers and their historical moments, than to any experience of original meaning and performance.

With globalization, Internet and new technologies a song that has been recorded, produced and mixed can be shared in few minutes. Even live original and cover performances can be uploaded to YouTube where anyone around the world could see. YouTube has become very popular that even new artists are using it as the main platform to commercialize their songs and to let people judge and say what they think about it before doing an official release. Also some small labels have offered contracts to new artist if they get a certain number of “likes” in their videos, meaning that if they don’t have the enough quantity of positive votes to their songs, no deal is celebrated. Also with the explosion of YouTube, other music players have appeared to let people upload material in “massive” social networks like Soundcloud, MySpace and Facebook. This kind of media sharing has made more common the covers culture because each person has its own profile and a list of friends that can comment what they think about. Lastly, with the HD video era most artists have their own and cover songs pre recorded in their profiles to share it with talent seekers or labels. This is evidence that we are now seeing the biggest explosion of covers fueled by technology and media sharing platforms, that allow artists to perform radio hits to show their talent, and encouraging audiences and talent seekers to compare with already uploaded versions.

Conclusions

A cover song is one of the most important results derived from the production of popular music because its meaning depends on context and reception as much as on musical signification.

In the twentieth century a lot of important facts happened that changed completely the perception of covers and authentic in songs. Race and genre boundaries to produce and perform music have disappeared in the Music Industry.

Imitation makes part of our lives and so the covers play a fundamental part in the process and progress of the performed and recorded music.

Covers have crossed the music limits and nowadays we can find covers in films, musicals and Television series.

For songwriters it is a privilege to have their songs covered, because that represents interest, and demonstrates that the song is time and genre proof.

Covers reflect the political, cultural and identity changes of society.

YouTube and media sharing platforms have promoted in a non-directed way the cover songs culture.

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