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# Covers Uncovered: A History of the "Cover Version," from Bing Crosby to the Flaming Lips

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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**COVERS UNCOVERED: A HISTORY OF THE “COVER VERSION,”  
FROM BING CROSBY TO THE FLAMING LIPS**

**(Thesis Format: Monograph)**

**by**

**Sean Dineley**

**Graduate Program in Popular Music and Culture**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Popular Music and Culture**

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The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada**

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## Abstract

This thesis engages with the “cover version” as it has developed since the mid-1940s. This single term has survived across historical eras “so that it now indiscriminately designates any occasion of rerecording” (Coyle 2002, 134). This thesis views changing cover trends as aspects of broader cultural changes. In order to effectively illustrate the wide scope of practices to which this term has referred, the history of cover versions is separated into three broad periods: pre-rock, rock, and post-rock. This thesis explores the shifting attitudes toward, and motivations for, cover recording across these periods. It argues that it is more useful to read individual cover practices according to their distinct cultural contexts rather than to treat “covering” as a single, fixed musical technique or tradition. Specific covering techniques are differentiated and analyzed based on their apparent degrees of musical *conservation* and *transformation*. The findings of this research are used to question the appropriateness of continuing to use the same term, “cover version,” to co-categorize an historically divergent set of practices. This thesis argues that the history of the “cover version” has been intimately tied to that of rock culture, with the practice experiencing a decline in popularity when rock began to dominate in the 1960s and then a re-emergence when rock began to be residualized in the 1990s.

## Keywords

Cover Version, Standards, Rock Ideologies, Authenticity, Singer-Songwriter, Recording Technology, Post-Rock, Pre-Rock, Experimental Music, *American Idol*

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## Introduction

How I hate to hear cover versions of tunes where the cover is no better than, and frequently only a copy of, the original. The so called progressive bands should remember that originality is the key-note (George Kristovics 1969, 23).

Major firms must keep alert to maintain 'coverage' . . . The major record firms are jumping on the 'trends' initiated by the indie record labels more quickly today than ever before. . . . No sooner does a record start to happen in the r.&b. field than a major label gets out a pop version of the material ("Major Firms," 1954, 11).

It's a nice way to stay busy, you know? . . . [A]nd I do feel like I really bring a lot artistically to these covers. I mean, I sent this record out to a dozen labels, all of which didn't know that these songs were Modest Mouse covers (Mark Kozalek 2006, n.p.).

The quotes above reflect three historically-distinct understandings of what it means to "cover" a song. In 1969, by which time rock culture had become dominant, "cover version" could suggest a practice that was viewed as unacceptably exploitative. Covering was often criticized as artistic theft, as stagnant, as unoriginal, and, therefore, as not really rock. However, fifteen years earlier, in the popular music industry immediately before the arrival of rock, to "cover" meant to engage in a commercially motivated, yet widely accepted, practice. At this time, a "cover version" was, most often, a new recording of a song whose blatant purpose was to compete with another recording of that same song recently released by another label. Before rock's particular ideas of artistic ownership and authenticity emerged, there had simply been no reason to allow a single musician or record label to reap all of the potential profits of a good composition. In recent decades, the definition of "cover version" has changed yet again. With musicians, from mainstream pop to indie rock, now embracing the "cover version" for myriad purposes, the label seems to no longer connote either of the historical viewpoints expressed above, but may represent a wide variety of recordings, attitudes, and practices.

This thesis will explore the idea of the “cover version” as it develops from the 1940s to the present. “Cover version,” or simply “cover,” is a term that, for nearly seventy years, has been used liberally to refer to any recording or performance of a song that was first recorded or performed by another artist.<sup>1</sup> The great variety of recordings and performances that have been historically categorized as cover versions, however, can differ significantly in sound, motivation, and musical or cultural context. As popular music and culture have changed, so has the “cover version” concept, so that the definitions and connotations of this label have become variegated over time. The term “cover version,” thus, contains the contradictions of popular music history. I discuss the issues that arise as a result of these contradictions throughout this thesis.

Michael Coyle has noted the difficulties he experiences as a historian of covers because of the continuing use of this one term for all instances of re-recording:

[My] purpose is unfortunately complicated by the survival of this single term through various historical changes, so that it now indiscriminately designates any occasion of rerecording. Disentangling the various senses of the term teaches much about the changing relations of pop music both to its audience and to the discourses that plot its significance (2002, 134).

This thesis tracks some of these “historical changes.” I argue that it is problematic to simply refer to a “cover” with the assumption that one's reader will understand what is meant by the reference because the term has, throughout popular music's history, referred to instances of racism-driven theft, of respectful recreation, of drastic rearrangement, of parody or ironic statement, as well as to many other practices. The term does not take into account sound shifts, intent, culture, or generation. Coyle summarizes the problem in his proclamation that “the point is, no one in 1954 would have used the word 'cover' to mean what we mean by it

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions to this definition include instances when a song's writer releases a version only after it has already been released by another artist (this would not necessarily be labelled a cover) as well as instances when a musician releases a new, altered version of their own song (this may be considered a cover, as has been argued of Bob Dylan performances of “All Along the Watchtower,” for example).



today” (2002, 136). And yet the term *was used* in 1954 and is still used today. And so, when we read something written in the 1950s, or when we write now about covers from the 1950s, we can never be completely certain about what we are referencing or seeing referenced, in terms of musical and social practices and connotations.

I analyze particular covers based on their apparent degrees of “conservation” and “transformation” throughout this thesis as a means of acknowledging and understanding differences among cover recordings and practices. Cover versions that demonstrate a higher degree of conservation are those that remain more or less sonically faithful to their source material, whether that be sheet music (as was often the case in the first half of the twentieth century) or a prior recording. These covers may subtly change things like tempo and instrumentation, but remain easily recognizable as versions of the designated song. Pat Boone's version of Little Richard's “Tutti Frutti” (1955) is a well known example of this approach to covering, exhibiting only slight changes to lyrics and vocal timbre. Covers that demonstrate more transformation have altered their source material to a much greater degree, with some extremely transformative cover versions becoming difficult to recognize as covers per se. Jimi Hendrix's 1968 recording of Bob Dylan's “All Along the Watchtower” is perhaps the most famous example of this kind of cover version, though I explore covers that exhibit even more dramatic arrangement transformations in chapter 3 of this thesis. By examining the degrees of conservation and transformation in covers throughout this thesis, I argue that cover versions, though all classified using the same phrase, do not constitute any single, fixed musical technique or tradition, but are better read through the lenses of individual historical eras or subcultures.

In order to understand the range of meanings of the “cover version” even in scholarly writing, as well as to better situate my own observations regarding the practice's historical

shifts, I will take a moment here to discuss several published definitions of the term.

Merriam-Webster provides the most basic definition for the term “cover.” A cover is, quite simply, a “recording or performance of a song previously recorded by another performer” (“Cover,” n.p.). This kind of definition, which does not mention genre, culture, era, gender, race nor any other potentially differentiating factor, is used with little alteration by several writers. Pat Leyland, a lawyer and essayist specializing in issues of intellectual property has, for example, described a cover as “a new performance or recording of a composition written and/or previously recorded by another artist” (2007, 62). Musicologist Paolo Prato employs a similar definition based on one drawn from *Rolling Stone* magazine: “the term cover refers to the second version, and all subsequent versions, of a song, performed by either another act than the one that originally recorded it or by anyone except its writer” (2007, 444). Don Cusic simply asserts that “the definition of a 'cover' song is one that has been recorded before” (2010, 174) while Stephen Groce explains that cover bands are those that “perform 'other people's music' which is usually immediately recognizable to their audiences” (1989, 392). The work of these scholars generally deals with single, specific moments in the long, complex history of cover versions. Given this element of historical decontextualization evident in their research, it is unsurprising then that these authors do not scrutinize the term “cover version” itself.

Gabriel Solis's definition of “cover,” however, helps to reveal why it will be useful to more thoroughly analyze this shifting term. Solis writes that “a cover is a new version of a song in which the original version is a recording, and for which musicians and listeners have a particular set of ideas about authenticity, authorship, and the ontological status of both original and cover versions” (2010, 298). While on a most basic level Solis is acknowledging that a “cover” is precisely what the above writers described – a new version

of a song originally performed by another artist – he quite rightly refuses to isolate the seemingly simple practice from its various historical, cultural, and circumstantial contexts. And yet the “particular set of ideas” to which Solis is alluding varies widely from listener to listener and, indeed, from scholar to scholar. Peterson and Berger, for example, describe a cover as “another standard tactic used by the major record companies [to] quickly . . . record and market a version of a fast-selling song recorded by another oligopolist or independent company” (1990, 144). Greg Metcalf asserts that “covering is plagiarism, taking someone else's song and 'making it your own” (2010, 178) while Mark Butler argues that “covers provide an intertextual commentary on another musical work or style” (2003, 1). Entirely different issues are at stake in each of these definitions, with Peterson and Berger concerned with industrial strategy, Metcalf addressing authorship and originality, and Butler taking an historiographical approach. The problem is that while all these definitions use the same term, arguably none of them can be applied equally well to all instances or traditions of covering.

Michael Coyle (2002), Theodore Gracyk (2012/13), Dai Griffiths (2000), Kurt Mosser (2008), Keir Keightley (2003) and Deena Weinstein (1998) have all acknowledged the issues involved with the varied and changing meanings of cover versions and have dealt with these issues in their own creative ways. The first four of these scholars have chosen to assign distinct names to distinct covering practices,<sup>2</sup> while the last two have categorized cover practices more along historical lines, associating changes in practice with generational and (sub)cultural changes.<sup>3</sup> It is this latter approach that I have taken in writing this thesis.

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2 Griffiths, for example, suggests the term “rendition” for versions that remain relatively faithful to the original arrangement and carry connotations of respectful homage. “Transformation,” on the other hand, is suggested for versions that seem to appropriate the original (2000, 52).

3 Both Weinstein (1998) and Keightley (2003) point to four distinct eras of covering. The two suggested timelines, however, do not match up. My own timeline reflects aspects of both scholars' insights, using the headings of pre-rock, rock, and post-rock in order to offer a somewhat simplified perspective. See below in this introduction for a further explanation.

In the interests of concision, my thesis deals largely with the cover as a recorded practice. Though I do, at times, make mention of live performances, it will most often be of those kinds of performances that have a clear and relevant connection to recording practices. In chapter 1, for example, I discuss Stephen Groce's study of local-level cover bands, concentrating on the opinions these musicians hold regarding rock recording artists. In chapter 3 I discuss singing competitions like *American Idol* and *The Voice*, in which “live” cover performances are tightly orchestrated in much the same way as records, which are transmitted to their audiences via the recorded medium of television, and which serve, in many ways, as advertisements for recorded studio versions made available for purchase following the television broadcasts. I do not, to any extent, discuss recording artists' live set lists in this thesis. My discussion of cover practices, furthermore, focuses largely on the rock and pop traditions. The vast majority of scholarly resources currently available on covers pertains to rock and pop, and the term itself is, arguably, used most often in reference to these musical streams. I, furthermore, acknowledge that the cover versions I discuss in this thesis do not represent all trends in covering.<sup>4</sup> I have primarily analyzed the *dominant*,<sup>5</sup> or most widely circulated, cover practices of each musical era or subgenre considered. I also acknowledge that “covering” is not the only practice of musical reinterpretation that has had an important impact on contemporary popular music.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of “rock culture,” or of “rock ideologies,” serves as a central reference point throughout this thesis. In chapter 3, I note Jon Pareles's observation that trends in more recent music demand “that we rethink cherished notions of originality and artistic

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4 See, for example, Mickey Hess's research into a trend toward covering in hip hop (2006).

5 Raymond Williams's classifications of “dominant,” “emergent,” and “residual” cultural elements (1977) will be applied throughout this thesis.

6 See, for example, David Tough's (2010) and Lee Barron's (2010) discussions of remixing, as well as Michael Veal's (2007) and Dick Hebdige's (2005) discussions of dub.

independence” (quoted in Plasketes 1992, 1). The “cherished notions” to which Pareles is referring are the cultural ideologies that came to dominate along with rock music beginning in the 1960s. These “rock ideologies” are weighted heavily toward certain ideas of authenticity. Rock culture, in short, privileged an idea of the popular musician as “artist” rather than “entertainer.” As such, rock culture tends to view cover recording, especially the kind popular in the 1950s, as an exploitative practice motivated by commerce rather than personal artistic expression, and thus inappropriate to rock's broader trajectory.

The history of the expression “cover version” has become intimately tied to the history of rock. Competing recorded versions of popular songs had existed long before this distinctive label first appeared in the late 1940s. Like rock music and culture, the term “cover version” emerged as part of broader changes in the popular music industry growing out of improved recording and broadcast technologies. Shortly after “cover versions” began to be specifically identified as such in trade publications in the 1940s, the rock 'n' roll craze of the 1950s began. This “new” musical genre was founded on, and often characterized by, cover recordings. Its unique sound came about largely as an amalgamation of the sounds of pre-existing genres, and “crossover” covering: rearranging a song that had first been a hit in one genre so that it could be more effectively sold in another market. I discuss Elvis Presley's first single in this light in chapter 1 of this thesis. However, when rock music, rock 'n' roll's apparent successor,<sup>7</sup> began to emerge as a powerful cultural force in the decade following this crossover technique's period of dominance, cover recording became increasingly residual. In rock, a consensus becomes apparent that “singer-songwriters”<sup>8</sup> are superior to non-writing performers. The result is a growing anxiety surrounding cover

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7 See chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion of the “rock” and “rock 'n' roll” genre headings.

8 That is, musicians who predominantly perform songs they write themselves, whether in a solo or band format. Singer-songwriters generally perform lead vocals and are known to their audiences by their (stage) names and faces.

versions, despite the fact that countless rock icons such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones began life performing covers, working in a similar tradition to that of Elvis Presley. It is this rock-inspired (yet temporary) decline of the centrality of the “cover version” that has guided the periodizations I have used to structure this thesis.

The body of this thesis is separated into three chapters, focusing on rock, pre-rock, and post-rock cover practices, respectively. While this thesis seeks to understand popular music culture from a historical perspective, the sequence of chapters is not chronological. Instead, I begin in the middle, as it were, with the practices and meanings assigned to the “cover version” during the peak of rock music’s prominence. Because of rock’s powerful gravitational pull on popular music scholarship, my pre- and post-rock chapters require that I first establish some of the dominant features of the “cover version” during the rock era. It is, furthermore, this gravitational pull that has led me to periodize my pre- and post-rock chapters in the way that I have. These labels do not necessarily denote any fixed historical eras, but simply refer to distinct cover recording trends that were identifiable immediately before rock’s emergence, and immediately after its residualization, respectively. My pre-rock chapter deals with cover versions from the decade roughly spanning the end of the Second World War to the arrival of Elvis Presley and other rock ‘n’ rollers in the mid-1950s. My post-rock chapter focuses on emergent cover trends of approximately the last twenty years, or from the residualization of grunge in the mid-1990s until 2014. My rock chapter, then, covers the years in between, with a specific focus on rock’s foundational decade of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, during which time the aforementioned privileging of the “singer-songwriter” over the non-writer was dominant. It should be acknowledged here that, as with any historical periodization, periodizing the “cover version” and rock music and culture more generally is imprecise and subject to dispute and disagreement. The years

covered in my chapters, thus, may overlap at times, given that the emergence of one trend will often coincide with the residualization of another. I should also note that the cover versions of the peak years of rock 'n' roll in the late 1950s are not analyzed to any great extent in this thesis, as these years have already received ample attention from a number of other scholars.<sup>9</sup>

Though the choice of the end of the Second World War as a date to begin a discussion of cover versions may seem arbitrary, there are several reasons supporting its appropriateness. It was, as I will argue further in my second chapter, during the late 1940s that the term “cover” itself began to circulate widely. Though I recognize the longer history of competing recordings of the same song, this period saw a proliferation and consolidation of the practice, which resulted in the emergence of a term to describe it. The cover practices of this period were the ones to which the term was first applied, but also the ones in place when rock 'n' roll began to emerge, making this a useful place to search for the modern cover's roots. Finally, and most importantly for my arguments, it should be noted that this period has largely been ignored by previous scholars of covers who, instead, have tended to begin with the above-mentioned moment of mid-1950s rock 'n' roll, well after the term “cover version” had begun to circulate widely.

Methodologically, my rock chapter relies primarily on secondary sources, analyzing the research of many of the authors mentioned above. Unlike the cover practices discussed in my second and third chapters, rock covers have already been explored by a significant number of scholars. The wealth of published arguments available on rock covers has enabled me to shape my rock chapter as an analysis of the evaluative use of “cover version” in this literature. As discussed above, rock culture is characterized by particular ideas of

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9 This includes Philip Ennis (1992), Michael Coyle (2002), Ian Inglis (2006), and others.

authenticity and originality. Cover versions, by definition, contain at least one element of apparent unoriginality: the musicians recording them are not the first to have done so. For this reason, and others which I explore in my rock chapter, rock musicians and audiences, quite unlike their pre-rock predecessors, were expected to “think twice” when confronted with cover versions. In light of this added layer of anxiety, I use my rock chapter to hypothesize about which kinds of covers were able to achieve success during rock's peak period of dominance and why.

As research on 1940s cover versions is limited, my pre-rock chapter relies less on secondary source analysis and more on primary research into historical trade publications. The chapter is less about the term “cover version's” evaluative uses or cultural connotations and more about its industrial contexts. Cover recording, after all, began, quite unabashedly, as a commercially exploitative practice in a popular music industry whose goal was to sell *songs* rather than *records*. Much of my pre-rock chapter functions as a history of the emergence of the term “cover version” itself. I discuss post-WWII industrial, cultural, and technological trends in order to paint a picture of the world in which this term arose. A large portion of my pre-rock chapter is dedicated to etymological, or perhaps more appropriately, genealogical, work on “cover version” and its variants, as a label for new recordings of songs previously recorded by other artists.

My third chapter discusses “post-rock” cover versions. It explores those cover trends that have emerged since rock's residualization in the 1990s. The primary methodology of this chapter is an application of social and media theory to specific musical examples. I follow George Plasketes's (1992) and Simon Reynolds's (2011) suggestion that the recent embrace of covering and other forms of cultural and musical “recycling” is symptomatic of the postmodern condition. I supplement their arguments with those of Frederic Jameson in



order to frame post-rock cover trends as “postmodern” responses to rock’s “modernism.” I explore two ongoing cover trends whose practices stand at opposite ends of the spectrum between conservation and transformation. These are “karaoke television,” and indie-experimental cover recording. Karaoke television is a term I use to describe those television programs whose formats rely heavily on the use of cover versions. These include reality talent show-style programs like *American Idol* and *The Voice*, but also scripted series like *Glee* and *American Dreams*. “Indie-experimental” covering, on the other hand, refers to an ongoing trend in more underground music circles in which a significant number of songwriting artists have completed cover version projects. My discussion of post-rock cover versions, in some ways, synthesizes the concerns of the previous two chapters. Questions of the “cover version” as an industrial practice are addressed via the example of karaoke television, while more aesthetic or evaluative concerns are addressed via indie-experimental culture’s renewed interest in covers.

## 1 – Rock and the “Cover Version”

### *I – Periodization and Terminology*

Simon Frith writes that “one aspect of learning to be a rock fan in the 1960s was, in fact, learning to prefer originals to covers. And this was, as I recall, something that did have to be learned: nearly all the records I had bought in the late 1950s had been cover versions” (1996, 70). Frith's memory is testament not only to rock culture's general move away from cover recording, but also to this trend's intimate connection to the development of rock's wider ideologies. It is these themes that I will explore more deeply throughout this chapter. I will, in the process, relate some of the major trends of existing scholarship on rock covers. I will argue that these studies have by and large failed to step away from particular covers or trends to fully theorize on rock's broader relationship with cover recording in general. I will also, at times, point to what has been called rockism and to presentism as potential factors in some of these scholarly oversights. The former refers to a hierarchical evaluation of musics according to rock ideologies, resulting in a blind faith in certain “heroes” of rock and a general dismissal of pop, while the latter refers to a misreading of past events based on present-day standards, attitudes, or values. Throughout this chapter my main task will be to illustrate the predominant characteristics in cover practices and related values during rock's period of dominance, highlighting the ways in which they differ from those of pre- and post-rock times. In doing so, I hope to complicate and problematize the continuing use of the term “cover version” to refer to a range of dissimilar practices and attitudes across several eras.

This chapter will engage repeatedly with a particular periodization of “rock.” Popular music scholars have been in no way consistent in their periodization of rock's cultural dominance. Some writers, such as George Plasketes (2005) and Lee Cooper (2005),

have suggested that the rock “era” is still ongoing, having begun with the explosion of rock 'n' roll in the mid 1950s. Keir Keightley, Elijah Wald, and Mark Butler, however, have been more precise, treating “rock” as a separate entity from “rock 'n' roll.” These writers have placed the start of rock in the second half of the 1960s, with Wald noting that by this time, “there had clearly been a major change in orientation” (2009, 237) and Butler elaborating that “by the late 1960s . . . many rock musicians no longer thought of authenticity in terms of faithfulness to a musical source or a sociological community. Instead, rock aesthetics began to emphasise individual expression” (2003, 2). In regards to when (or if) the rock “era” ended, scholars have pointed to a noticeable ideological shift beginning in the late 1970s, with even Plasketes admitting that around this time, “the postmodern condition and character ruptured rock culture's aesthetic, shifting emphasis away from authenticity” (2005, 152). Lawrence Grossberg's (1986) and David Buxton's (1983) studies suggest that by the 1980s, though elements of rock ideology were still present, they were not as predominant as in previous decades. Noting all of these viewpoints, I will, for the purposes of this thesis, use the “rock” temporal designation to refer largely to the popular musical culture of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. I will, however, also refer to the elements of rock culture evident in the decade preceding and several decades following this period, being careful in these instances not to take the presence of rock ideologies for granted.

Throughout this chapter I will also refer to the “rock” and “rock 'n' roll” genre labels. Theodore Gracyk has argued that rock 'n' roll refers to a specific performance style while rock has broader cultural connotations – it is a mindset and a way of doing things (1996, 6-11). Rock, Gracyk explains, “embraces a host of performance styles, but most have *some* basis in African American popular music, are rooted in song, and paradigmatically exist as *recorded* music” (1996, 7). Rock 'n' roll is one such performance style that qualifies as an

instance of rock because of its roots in R&B, its showcasing of studio techniques, and its dissemination via records. Rock 'n' roll, however, unlike other subcategorizations of rock (soft rock, heavy metal, folk rock, etc.) existed before – and was a precursor to – the widespread recognition of “rock” as a genre categorization. Thus, it will be referenced separately from the rock genre throughout this chapter. Specifically, “rock 'n' roll” will refer to that uptempo, back-beat driven, often 12-bar blues-structured music made popular in the second half of the 1950s by the likes of Elvis Presley and Little Richard. “Rock,” on the other hand, will refer, musically, to the more diversified styles of popular music generally considered to have been derived from the same tradition as rock 'n' roll, but first appearing in the mid-1960s.

### ***II – Rock Stars, Records, and Cover Versions***

The term “cover version” has, perhaps, been most often used in a rock context. Whether the term is used in reference to rock music itself or to any of the diverse mutations of popular music that have emerged since rock's ascent in the 1960s, the “cover version” is seen as a phenomenon of the post-crooner world<sup>10</sup> (with crooners, ironically enough, having made their living performing other people's songs). That covering has become understood as a conceptually distinct phenomenon, unlike earlier musical re-recording practices including “standards,”<sup>11</sup> is not surprising given the oft-told story of rock's beginnings in the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s. Rock 'n' roll music and culture, it is said, were not “created” but rather “compiled” from existing elements of both black and white musical cultures (Garofalo 2008, 6-9). This was accomplished, in significant part, by way of a new approach to covering.

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<sup>10</sup> That is, the pre-rock period, to be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>11</sup> I refer here to a variety of pre-rock song (re-)performance practices not generally categorized as covering, such as those employed by orchestral performers, as well as those of blues and folk musicians. I include also, and perhaps most importantly, the recording of “standards,” a common practice among jazz bands and pop singers throughout the first half of the twentieth century and, arguably, the rock cover's most direct predecessor. These were mainly pop songs written in the Tin Pan Alley and Broadway traditions that audiences widely recognized yet did not generally associate with any particular performer. Standards will be discussed below.

While white performers had been covering black music<sup>12</sup> for decades, for the likes of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and their contemporaries, the preferred technique was no longer to simply “clean up” the music for a white audience (as the racist discourse of the period put it), but rather to embrace various musical influences in their interpretations, taking full advantage of their diverse cultural surroundings. For Presley, this meant a combination of the gospel music he had been hearing and singing since his childhood with both the white country and black rhythm and blues music styles he came to love as a teenager in Memphis. The resultant sound – the speed and melody of country delivered with the strong rhythm of R&B and the raw emotion of gospel – was an early incarnation of what we now call rock 'n' roll. Perhaps the reason the covering technique employed by Presley was able to spawn an entire genre (or at least the highly simplified story of this genre and its lasting cultural effects) was that it could be applied to both R&B (most commonly associated with African Americans) and country (most commonly associated with whites) songs, producing similar sonic results.

Elvis Presley's debut single from Sun Records in 1954 contained two cover recordings – one by a black blues artist and the other by a white country singer. The former, Arthur Crudup's “That's All Right,” had originally been recorded as a loosely structured blues shuffle featuring an adventurous rhythm section who had clearly come from a jazz tradition. Presley's version makes significant arrangement changes, moving at a quicker tempo, employing a harder hitting but less complex bassline, removing the drums entirely, and featuring a cleaner, more precise lead guitar part – all of which reflect the influence of

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12 By “black music” and “white music,” terms which will be used throughout this thesis, I refer simply to music written and/or first performed by black people or white people, respectively. Philip Tagg (1989) has pointed out the dangers of using such broad, musicologically meaningless headings to lump together musics that may otherwise be entirely dissimilar. In the context of 1950s America, however, the skin colour of a performer or songwriter *mattered*, and so such musical-racial classifications were commonly employed. It is for this reason that I must, in my role as cultural historian, also note such race-based distinctions.

country music. Perhaps what is more important, however, is what Presley's version retains. Presley maintains the gruff attitude and general message as well as the loose “jam” structure of the original rather than “cleaning up” such “wild,” stereotypically sexual elements as was expected of white artists covering black music at this time. Side B of Presley's debut is a cover of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” originally written and recorded by Bill Monroe, the “Father of Bluegrass.” Presley's version trades in the laid-back waltz rhythm of the original for the same speedy, forward-moving 4/4 rhythm heard on his version of “That's All Right.” Monroe's lazy mandolin, fiddle and banjo are exchanged for aggressive bass and electric guitar playing, while the barely audible acoustic guitar strumming of the original is, in Presley's recording, brought up in volume and down in precision. The most notable change, however, is in the vocal style. Presley, rather than yodelling his way through, sings the song with the same unrestrained attitude he had learned from the likes of Arthur Crudup and other African American performers. The amazing fact about Presley's first single was that the singer had to transform the white-written song far more drastically than he did the black-written one in order to achieve the sound he was aiming for – a truly risky proposition for Jim Crow America.

Presley's tactic in covering was not to recreate an original performance with accuracy and technical proficiency, or to censor or “translate” the song for a more sensitive audience, as were the common covering tactics of the major record labels of the day. Instead, Presley and his co-conspirators at Sun Records started with a particular, or “signature,” sound that they had found and liked and proceeded to reconceive songs from a variety of traditions via that sound. The tactic was to transform the song rather than the singer, making for a much larger potential repertoire. Presley was, through and through, an interpreter of others' works. Though he is given co-writer credits on paper for some of his songs, it is widely agreed that

he had little or nothing to do with writing any of them. Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll, was thus a cover artist. Here is where the story of rock 'n' roll (and rock music more generally), a genre apparently founded on cover recording, starts to get complicated. Often, the story of rock music is told as a natural extension from what Elvis Presley did in Memphis in the mid-1950s. Presley, it is said, paved the way for other, predominantly white, musicians to layer the melodic sensibilities they had learned from their own cultural upbringings (classical, country, and Tin Pan Alley musics) on top of the rhythmic sounds of poor African-Americans, play it at a danceable tempo, turn up the volume and call it rock 'n' roll.<sup>13</sup> Rock, however, did not follow a key aspect of Elvis Presley's formula. As rock became more dominant, cover versions were increasingly viewed by the musicians and fans with some anxiety, and soon were largely avoided in favour of new material written by the performers themselves. This is in large part due to another phenomenon that, perhaps ironically, Elvis Presley helped to usher in. Beginning in the late 1950s there was a shift in the popular music market's focus, from songs to recordings, from compositions to individual interpretations, and from trained musicianship to raw sincerity. In short, a song, via recording, became intimately connected to one particular name, face, and voice, and the rock superstar was soon born.

Prior to the emergence of rock culture, it was common practice for several recordings of the same song by different performers to be released at the same time, often by different record labels. Consumers were not so concerned with who was singing as much as with what was being sung. They would, thus, ask their local record store proprietor for a copy by the name of the song rather than the performer, and may have gone home satisfied with an entirely different recording than the one they had heard on the radio. Cover versions from

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<sup>13</sup> Reebee Garofalo (2008, 120) and Greil Marcus (1997, 120-75) attest to the common acceptance of this story, while such authors as Peter Guralnick (1992) and Philip Ennis (1992, 229-56), are guilty of (re)telling it.

this time period will be discussed further in Chapter 2. With the implementation of improved recording technologies like magnetic tape (brought back from Germany after WWII), Columbia Records' vinyl LP (1948), and RCA's 45 rpm single (1949), as well as the advent of the television as a widespread and viable cultural medium, the general public became better able to familiarize themselves with, and differentiate between, the sounds, looks, and personalities of the musicians appearing on recordings of their favourite songs. The technology provided the potential while unforgettably unique performers like Elvis Presley made the “rock star” a reality.

Greeted with a sudden influx of mass-mediated “stars” (Fabian, Bobby Vee, Bobby Rydell, etc.), some increasingly serious fans of rock 'n' roll started to grow apprehensive about potential imposters given this new focus on individual musicians and singular recordings. The musicians would need to find a way to avoid being labelled as inauthentic if they hoped to sell records and gain a level of respect. The early establishment of rock 'n' roll as a music that could not simply be “learned” or “performed” by just anyone demonstrates one of the roots of rock culture's eventual obsession with authenticity, originality, and authorship, as well as its growing distaste for what had been an essential ingredient to the genre's creation: cover versions. As early as 1955, RCA Victor had announced that it would no longer produce cover records, proclaiming that “the feeling is that total sales would be substantially better if original material were consistently used” and that “by pushing thru an original smash, an individual record can sell many more copies than a successful cover and remain active over a much longer period” (“Pop Policy,” 1955, 13). A year later, *Billboard* reported that “a recent study of the Billboard charts indicates that the indie originals (r.&b. in particular) are no longer low men on the platter poles, while more and more pop covers are being left at the post”, citing “the efforts of certain key jockeys” like “Alan Freed . . . [who]



ultimately created such a demand for rock and roll disks that local pop jocks finally gave in to listener demands and started spinning . . . r.&b. originals” (“Indie Originals,” 1956, 18, 23).

Both Simon Frith and Theodore Gracyk have elaborated upon the implications of rock's status as a music founded on recordings. Gracyk explains the significance of the recording in rock:

Rock is a tradition of popular music whose creation and dissemination centers on recording technology. . . . In rock the musical work is less typically a song than an arrangement of recorded sounds. Rock music is both composed and received in light of musical qualities that are subject to mechanical reproduction but not notational specification (1996, 1).

For Frith, it is not only that the record is important to rock, but that rock is important to the record, appearing as “the climax of . . . a story that began with Edison's phonograph” (1988, 12). Gracyk and Frith agree that, because of their history, rock recordings must be treated as distinct from those of other genres. While all music can be recorded, rock music was arguably the first to be created on record piece by piece, track by track, and to rely on the studio for many of its identifying features. Elvis Presley, for example, recorded before ever playing live, and planned out his musical arrangements in the studio. Until rock, a recording could largely be understood as a snapshot of a particular live performance rather than a song itself. A “work,” then, was understood as a “song” or “composition,” meaning that any recorded performance or “cover” of that song was merely one instance of the work, equal in concept to any other instance of that work (Gracyk 1996, 18). In rock, however, with so much of a song's appeal being found in the sonic characteristics of a particular recording, it is the recording that becomes accepted as the “work,” effectively undermining the legitimacy of cover versions. As Frith notes, record companies were only happy to follow the trend away from cover recording since “huge sales of one title are much more profitable than tidy

sales of lots of titles” (1988, 18). Not having to constantly pay studio musicians to copy the latest hits was simply better business.

To say that rock bands in the 1960s stopped playing covers entirely would, however, be misleading. Cover versions served as a kind of training material for young rock musicians who would often play in a pub cover band as a “rite of passage” just as many still do today. Michael Brocken paints a vivid picture of this culture in his 1996 study of the period the young Beatles spent in the Liverpool covers circuit. Brocken argues that one's level of authenticity as a member of Liverpool's Merseybeat culture in the early 1960s was partly determined by one's knowledge of American rock music. This knowledge was demonstrated by the number and quality of this kind of cover one's band had in its repertoire. At the local level, then, cover versions, if the right kind, could actually make a band come across as *more* authentic. The Beatles were the most popular *cover* band in Liverpool for a long time before getting any attention from the major recording industry. However, when they did score a record deal and cut their first album, all of the Beatlemania-inducing singles initially released in support of it were completely original.<sup>14</sup> This transition from covering to songwriting was not as natural to some as it was to others. Keith Richards recalls that, in the Rolling Stones' early days, “Mick and I at that time, the last thing on our mind was songwriting. . . . It just really had not occurred to us. We just wanted to play the blues, so in a way it was like asking a plumber to become a blacksmith overnight” (Sweeting 2004, 49). Starting to play their own songs was apparently the band's manager Andrew Oldham's idea, who had earlier convinced the Beatles' John Lennon and Paul McCartney to donate one of their as yet unreleased compositions to help the Stones gain a pop audience (2004, 46).

Oldham apparently locked Richards and Jagger in a kitchen, not letting them out until they

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<sup>14</sup> The Beatles' cover of “Twist and Shout,” though appearing on their first album, was not released as a single until a year later, at which time the band's second album had already been released and their popularity was well-established.

produced “As Tears Go By.” The song, perhaps ironically, produced revenue initially via royalties from a Marianne Faithful recording, and only later via the Stones' own rendering.

For Oldham and the Rolling Stones, the true motivation to start playing original compositions was money. Mick Jagger later complained about the state of affairs for non-songwriters:

In the early days of the record industry, you got paid absolutely nothing. . . . The only people who earned money were The Beatles because . . . the only thing they did get was money from songwriting. The people who wrote songs were probably better businesspeople than the people who sang them (quoted in Sweeting 2004, 47-8).

Jagger's comments challenge any idyllic images we may have of the rock star as artistic truth-bearer immune to market motivations. The simple fact was that popular music's consumers had started to care about and formulate particular opinions regarding authenticity. And so, whether or not the bands themselves truly believed in this rhetoric, they had to play the part convincingly if they hoped to sell records. Recording covers was, for the first time, slowly becoming more of a financial risk than recording originals. The Rolling Stones' story, though perhaps less glamorous than that of Elvis Presley or the Beatles, reflects the reality of the record industry as a trend-dependent business. Many of the deeper social trends and market forces that played key roles in the cover version's (temporary) decline as a respected (and lucrative) popular musical product have been explored in detail by Elijah Wald.

### ***III – Covers and the Shift from “Live” to “Dead” Music***

Wald's work in *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* documents a 1950s and '60s cultural shift in which musicians began to be considered something more exceptional than simply working entertainers. This shift was enabled by the technologies discussed above and, as we shall see, was a key ingredient in the contemporaneous shift away from cover

versions in rock. Wald provides us with an important reminder:

We tend to give [recordings] a lot of historical weight because we still have them, but for their first half century they were considered brief, fuzzy snapshots of popular music, not the thing itself. . . . The whole idea of 'live music' did not arrive until well after the dawn of recording, as until then there had been no dead music (2009, 14).

For roughly the first half of the twentieth century, the main way to hear the latest popular hits was by way of live musicians, including playing the music oneself via sheet music (even radio shows primarily featured live musicians rather than recordings at this time). For this reason, when attending a live popular music concert – a dance for example – an audience member expected to hear the songs that they wanted to hear – not only the songs associated with the particular band playing, but all songs that were popular in sheet music and dance circuits in that particular moment. This is what the audience had paid for and, indeed, it was the musicians' job to deliver. For musicians working before the vinyl record and television emerged as viable media for spreading the performer's own particular sound or compositions, it often simply did not make sense to perform works other than the popular hits their audiences wanted to hear, in any genre. In short, interpreting rather than writing was a far more lucrative business move for someone hoping to sustain a career as a musician at this time. Hundreds of different versions of the same composition could be entertaining the United States at any given time via live performance. In a song-based popular music industry, this state of affairs made perfect financial sense. All song versions were equally impermanent and intangible, and so, at least theoretically, had equal potential for profitability. Individualized interpretations or artistic personae were much less a factor than they would become in an industry based on records and television.

For a straightforward picture of the connection between recording technology and changing cover logics in the late 1950s, we can again turn to Wald. The picture looked

something like this:

As long as the pop scene had been driven by live performances, it was assumed that any band would play the current hits and that some people would prefer one band's version, others another, and most would be happy dancing to whoever was on the bandstand. But once pop fans were getting most of their music on records, everyone could listen to the same performance, so there was no reason that it should not be the only performance (2009, 176).

This technological shift went along with an economic one. Musicians who, before the advent of rock 'n' roll, had made a living playing live covers were now presented with a potentially more lucrative option. They were now potentially able to make more money off of sales of records, an increasingly viable medium for music. Several articles in *Billboard* throughout the late 1950s and early '60s attest to the unprecedented growth rate of record sales industry-wide, with a December 1961 issue even bearing witness to a simultaneous increase in musical originality via “unusual” recordings:

Dave Kapp, president of Kapp records feels that 1962 'will be one of the greatest years the record industry has ever known. . . . That which is good in rock and roll is being adopted and adapted into the new recordings and will influence most of the recordings to be made in 1962 and 1963.' Kapp believes that the public is becoming more and more discriminating but that 'the chances for success of 'unusual' recordings are growing everyday' (“Record Manufacturers,” 16).

Writing music rather than covering, it seems, was becoming a better business move for two reasons: first, playing originals meant not needing to share royalties with a song's writer, or to compete for exposure with other bands potentially covering the same song; second, the now “discriminating” rock audience was looking for something “unusual” anyway.

Throughout the several years following the arrival of rock 'n' roll, covering slowed and songwriting surged. *Billboard's* February 21, 1953 Honor Roll of Hits, for example, lists more than one available recording (and in some cases as many as seven) for nine out of the ten songs listed. Ten years later, the February 23, 1963 edition lists two recordings for only two out of the top ten hits, with many of the songs listed being written by the performer

rather than a professional songwriter. By the mid-1950s, songs had become increasingly associated with particular musicians or bands, so much so that some kinds of covers were interpreted as a form of theft. Lavern Baker famously attempted to have copyright laws amended in 1955 in response to a Georgia Gibbs cover of her song “Tweedle Dee,” which had meticulously recreated the original arrangement and used many of the same studio musicians. It had apparently been incidents like this that led to Victor Records announcing that it would (temporarily) no longer produce cover records that same year (Wald 2009, 176-7). Consumers, all the while, were turning more and more toward records as their sources for music listening, further supporting the emergence of the singer-songwriter. Whereas in the age of live music's dominance, the same arrangement of the same song could be floating around for years before everyone had heard it, the increasingly rapid distribution of records to jukeboxes, radio stations, and record shops meant that a song could lose its allure in a matter of weeks, forcing bands to deliver a constant stream of new material.<sup>15</sup>

Bernard Gendron's renovations of some of Theodore Adorno's controversial observations regarding the popular music industry help explain this assembly-line image of rock 'n' roll. Gendron paraphrases Adorno's argument that labour-driven capitalist society creates a “bored” working class of consumers:

Bored consumers need constant stimulation; therefore, the industry creates pseudo-individualized hooks in music and the constant illusion of novelty. . . . But the stimulative power of each record palls very quickly, recreating the condition of boredom it was meant to relieve. The only antidote is the constant production of new recorded sounds (Gendron 1986, 23).

Adorno himself, writing in the 1940s, never in fact refers to recorded sounds in the article in question, but was writing largely about professional Tin Pan Alley-style songwriters whose main medium of production was the musical score. Gendron suggests that while rock fans

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<sup>15</sup> The Beatles, for example, were able to produce six number 1 *Billboard* hits throughout 1964 without a single cover among them.

may indeed be as bored and capricious as Adorno's subjects, their unquenchable thirst for new songs has more to do with genre than with assembly-line production. Hearing a record one likes does not lead one to buy another copy of it, but rather inspires a search for other records that also exhibit those agreeable sonic characteristics of the first – we buy records based on genre (Gendron 1986, 28-9). Simply buying cover records of the initial song would likely also prove unsatisfactory since, in the age of the record's predominance, popular music is most often appreciated based on what it *sounds* like on a particular recording, rather than on its compositional particularities, as written on paper.

#### *IV – Covering as Racial Exploitation*

The growing importance of the rhetoric of authenticity in rock culture contributed to a developing consensus that an authentic rock musician was one who was young, “amateur,” and honest rather than a well-established musical performer. With this in mind, it seems likely that by the mid-1960s, young consumers would have perceived professionally orchestrated cover versions as simply missing the artistic point. This was, of course, not the only disagreement 1960s youth culture had with the preceding generation. The late 1950s and early '60s saw various facets of the civil rights movement gain traction in the United States, with rock 'n' roll, whether negatively or positively, widely considered a “metaphor for [racial] integration” (Altschuler 2003, 48). Changes in cover practices and attitudes toward them can, to some degree, be seen to reflect shifting ideas of equality between races, as well as the general distaste among many youth for practices of their parents' generation that had helped to maintain the system of inequality for so long.<sup>16</sup> The Beatles, again, serve as early examples of this change in mindset, with John Lennon explaining that while in their early

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<sup>16</sup> Altschuler's second chapter provides several anecdotes about young white rock 'n' roll fans' changing attitudes toward African Americans. Harry Weinger of the Platters, for example, remembers white kids inviting the band into their homes, despite the fact that “their fathers looked at us like we were going to steal the goddammed refrigerator” (quoted in Altschuler 2003, 48).

days they, like artists before them, habitually covered black music, “the one thing we always did was to make it known that these were black originals, we loved the music and wanted to spread it in any way we could. . . . It wasn't a rip off. It was a love in” (1971, n.p.). When questioned on the airplane before their first American tour in 1964, the Beatles, perhaps naive about the persisting racial tensions in the United States, had in fact expressed concern that they would not find an audience in the country, since the USA already had all of the (mainly black) musicians who had influenced their sound (Gould 2007, 221). While the Beatles' apparently desegregated mindset may have been a sign of things to come, it could not be taken for granted in the early 1960s, with much of the American record industry having been guided by racist practices throughout the preceding decades. It is also important to note that while bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones may claim to have had more ethical motivations, the result was sometimes the same as it had been in the 1950s. The Stones' 1964 recording of “Time Is on My Side,” which gave the band their first top ten hit in the U.S., was a close imitation of Irma Thomas' version from earlier in the year. Thomas has complained that the Stones “put a big dent in my pocket book,” and that she was for many subsequent years dogged by audience requests for her to “do that Rolling Stones cover” (quoted in Brown 2008, n.p.).

In the 1950s, many American record companies made money by creating “whitened” versions of black recordings, often hindering the chances for the originals to become hits in the lucrative white market. These were covers in a modern sense, referencing the sonic characteristics of a specific recording rather than interpreting a sheet music composition, as was the case with contemporaneous pop standard performers. This practice has been discussed countless times throughout historical analyses of rock music and will be discussed at greater length in chapter 2. Michael Coyle's simple assertion that major record labels of



this period “regularly used American apartheid to exploit black artists” (2002, 135) reveals the general state of affairs in mid-century American society. This racist cover tactic was precisely the kind of cultural practice that went out of favour with the baby boomer generation who, by the 1960s, were becoming key consumers and performers of popular music – specifically rock (Garofalo 2008, 165; Campbell 2013, 191, 199). The systematic social inequality of the period, indeed, was at times even visible when the covering situation was reversed.

In *Interpreting Popular Music*, David Brackett reveals that the effects of social inequality could also be seen when black musicians covered songs initially made popular by white artists. Brackett refers specifically to 1930s and '40s African-American singer Billie Holiday, who, as a woman, was faced with even further challenges gaining respect as a musician. In his examination of “I’ll Be Seeing You,”<sup>17</sup> a song recorded by both Holiday and the white Bing Crosby, Brackett explains the unfortunate reality that the two artists, though recording the same song, did not face the same kinds of audience pre-conceptions and responses. Brackett argues that “Crosby’s recording seems to respond to questions more involved with ‘commerce’: how can a performer control his or her image and project it simultaneously through film, recording, and print media[?]” (2000, 55). Holiday had to concern herself with much more personal questions before being able to consider marketing strategies. Brackett provides an entirely different set of questions for Holiday:

How can a singer incorporate the flexible phrasing and timbral nuances of a jazz soloist and at the same time project lyrics with clarity and dramatic intensity? On a sociological level, how can an African-American woman retain her dignity and display herself as a glamorous icon to an audience, when a large percentage of that audience does not view her as fully human? (2000, 55)

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17 Though this song would later classify as a “standard,” being performed by countless musicians over many years, Crosby’s recording was the breakthrough hit version, while Holiday’s was released just two months later. It is therefore appropriate to include them in a discussion of covers.

Holiday, unlike Crosby, was not a welcome member of the old (white) boys' club that was the pre-rock American popular music industry. She had to continuously work hard to prove herself as a competent and serious musician rather than a novelty act. Black musicians suffered such kinds of added scrutiny to the very end of the pre-rock period (and beyond).

Another black artist, Sam Cooke, who released a series of albums in the late 1950s and early 1960s, has been praised as a skilled songwriter and one of the pioneers of soul music. Most of his highest charting singles were those self-penned tracks still remembered today, which were marketed toward teenagers. LPs, however, were at this time mainly a product for adults, and many of the non-single tracks that filled Cooke's albums were renditions of white-written Tin Pan Alley songs. Though many of these recordings may classify more as “standards” than as “covers,” they nonetheless serve as examples of the challenges placed upon African American interpreters of white music during this period. Music critic Robert Palmer has dismissed these tracks as “filler . . . for which [Cooke] seemed to have little natural affinity,” protesting that “what is lacking in the less successful album tracks is some evident emotional connection between the singer and his material. What isn't lacking – but should be – is overdone orchestrations and chirpy 'pop' vocal choruses, which only made matters worse” (quoted in Burford 2012, 116). Whether the choices of “broadway-style tunes and standards” (2012, 116) on Sam Cooke's albums were made in the hopes of tapping both the adult and teen markets by pleasing parents enough to allow their children to listen to Cooke's perhaps “blacker” originals,<sup>18</sup> or simply because Cooke liked these songs, cannot be said with any real certainty. What is apparent, however, is that the American music industry of the 1950s was run on a set of racial and sexual standards that were significantly challenged in the following decade. Cover versions, both

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<sup>18</sup> I mean “blacker” in the sense that they reflect gospel and rhythm and blues influences, but, most importantly given the context, that they are *black-written*.

those that stole from African Americans and those that African Americans were compelled to perform, had been integral parts of a popular music industry that had largely restricted the highest levels of respect or success to a select (white male) few. That cover recording's period of relative unpopularity began in the civil rights-infused 1960s is, in this light, unsurprising.

### *V – The Scholarly Story So Far*

Though a significant amount of scholarly work has been done on individual rock cover versions, quite little has been done on the rock cover as a broader concept. Arguably, this is because, unlike in the pre-rock popular music industry, there was simply no cohesive culture of covers within rock. As I have argued in this chapter so far, rock bands of the mid-1960s had begun to distance themselves from recording cover versions for a number of reasons. This meant that when rock covers did appear – there are of course several notable examples of cover versions recorded even during the highly self-expressive late 1960s – they stood largely as exceptions not situated within any particular set of conventions or expectations. It is not surprising then that much of the literature that analyzes these covers can also be described in this way: it often deals with individual instances rather than broader cultural trends.

Many scholars of the rock cover have tended to choose a particular cover song, artist, or small group of comparable instances as their subject matter, often sticking to music that they have quite obviously been fans of for some time. They then analyze the merits and shortcomings of the cover in question. The style in which the song is covered in comparison to the song's original version and other cover versions may be considered, along with, perhaps, a brief discussion of influences and what else was generally happening in the cover artist's career at this time and the careers of some of his or her contemporaries. In short,

these scholars employ a kind of music criticism. Articles of this sort are usually guided by a particular bias. They often take the form of either a defence or a critique of the artist for choosing to make such a recording, or else they largely ignore implications cover recording may have had at the historical moment and instead analyze the recordings from a presentist perspective. For many rock(ist) scholars, cover versions are anomalies, often being presented as not quite fitting in with the rest of the picture we have painted of this period. Much of the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to analyzing several of these studies with the aid of the insights of scholars who have taken a more theoretical approach, followed by a discussion of some of my own understandings of rock's conception of the "cover version" and what this has meant for the categorization as a whole.

Andrew G. Davis and Russell Reising's studies of "The Pusher" and "All Along the Watchtower," respectively, are typical examples of the kind of scholarly treatment given to rock cover versions. Davis notes that "The Pusher's" various covers track changing representations of drug culture, demonstrating how "cover songs can express a discursive relationship between different eras" (2010, 112). The author tracks several cover versions of this song that were recorded both during and after the 1960s/70s period of rock dominance, making the argument that with each one a new cultural or generational perspective on the lyrics' subject matter – the use of psychoactive substances – is presented. Davis' observations provide a clever and useful method for pinning down the politics of the various subcultures of the last several decades. They do not, however, contribute significantly to the historical study of the popular music industry. His observations are based on listening to these decades-spanning recordings together in the covers-friendly twenty-first century. Davis fails to note the predominant opinions of cover versions held at the times of each recording's release, and so neglects to consider the effect these opinions may have had on the

recordings' initial receptions.<sup>19</sup>

Reising's study of Jimi Hendrix's cover version of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" follows similar research methods as Davis' article. He tracks the song's changing meaning across eras but always refers to the same cover version, remarking on its seemingly universal relatability. Reising's main focus is an admiration for the fact that Hendrix created, in one recording, what has traditionally required several recordings: the ability for a song to be applied to myriad ends. For Reising, it is Hendrix's raw power and emotion that does the trick, transforming Dylan's lyrics into "the song that embodies the lingering sense of mystery and intensity from an epochal period in American History" (2010, 160). Reising, like Davis, is writing with the aid of hindsight. The fact is, however, "All Along the Watchtower" was the Jimi Hendrix Experience's highest charting single (Reising 2010, 160), and is amazingly, given its appearance at the peak of rock's push for originality, arguably the most well-known cover version of all time. Though the record provides a unique opportunity for studying why rock audiences accepted some select covers and not others, Reising does not address this issue directly. He does not note, for example, that Hendrix's version was actually released as a single a month *before* Dylan's, or that Hendrix was a black musician covering a white song – the inverse of those increasingly disdained crossover covers of the 1950s. Instead, Reising dispels any potential accusations of Hendrix taking the easy, cover artists' way out by granting Hendrix a kind of honorary ownership of Dylan's song. He explains that "Hendrix's cover of Dylan's song has arguable [*sic*] usurped the original. . . . Consider the relationship between other originals and their covers, and it's

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19 This song provides a particularly interesting example of rock cover practices, as even its so-called original version, that released by Steppenwolf in 1968, was in fact a cover of an unreleased Hoyt Axton song. One can only wonder if Steppenwolf's recording would have become so iconic had its audience been aware that it was a cover. Three Dog Night's version of Axton's "Joy to the World" begs similar questions.

hard to imagine anyone actually preferring the cover” (2010, 154).<sup>20</sup> Reising grants Hendrix's version special status among cover versions simply because he, and millions of others, have agreed on how good it is. Reising's attitude, though more reflective of editorialism than academic scholarship, may inadvertently reveal something about this cover version's unlikely success. Perhaps Hendrix's fans in the 1960s were, like Reising, willing to ignore the fact that Hendrix had not written this song because of his undeniably successful *transformation* of it into the rock sound, like Elvis's covers had done. For all of Hendrix's “rawness,” this cover was in fact quite “cooked” in comparison to, say, Georgia Gibbs' conservative rehashing of Lavern Baker's “Tweedle Dee.” So, while Hendrix did not write “All Along the Watchtower,” his recording of it may, to the rock fan, exhibit a kind of “composition,” nonetheless.

Dai Griffiths readily admits that the kind of analysis he is doing in “Cover Versions and the Sound of Identity in Motion” is based, as well, on retrospective and cross-generational reading. Griffiths asserts that the cover can serve “as a form of public debate, of critique and empowerment . . . offering to us, as listeners in the present forums for debate: how do *you* hear these examples, and why?” (2002, 53). The author is aware that reading older cover recordings from a present-day perspective only reveals one, very particular side of the story. He admits that covers “can alter meaning simply because the historical or cultural context of the performance or its recording changes” (2002, 52), acknowledging that these meanings can be altered “both with respect to their original time and to how we hear them now” (53). In light of the difficulties involved with discerning every possible implication of a cover version, Griffiths consciously chooses lyrics as his subject matter,

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20 Amazingly, Reising is not only referring to Dylan here but to all covers. The author, who conveniently forgets such powerhouse covers as Aretha Franklin's “Respect” and Jeff Buckley's “Hallelujah,” seems truly to represent the archetypal rockist cover hater.

attempting to track how the meaning of words can change depending on the race, sex, or cultural values of the person delivering them. Bryan Ferry's 1973 cover of "It's My Party," for example, becomes easily interpreted as a "gay version" by way of Ferry *not* changing the gender of the lyrics (Griffiths 2002, 54). Like Davis and Reising, Griffith's observations are based on retrospective interpretations of particular songs. It is my intention, instead, to understand the changing meanings of the cover version as a broader concept, as revealed by predominant historical practices rather than present-day readings.

Sheldon Schiffer brings attention to one kind of cover version that was able to maintain an audience throughout rock's period of dominance: those that follow a folk or blues tradition. Schiffer explores both the Bob Dylan (1962) and Led Zeppelin (1975) versions of "In My Time of Dying," a traditional song originally recorded by Blind Willie Johnson in 1927.<sup>21</sup> Schiffer argues that this kind of cover is not about questions of ownership, originality, or the music market. It is instead the enactment of shared culture, with the cover artist as this particular moment's messenger. Schiffer's understanding is as follows:

The cover song performer can function to some degree, like a historian. He inherits a song from the past, namely lyrics and/or music, and with these come an array of signifieds wedded to the collective memory of the past . . . and the embodiment of meaning transforms the performer into a historical object, a text himself, representing the past during the moment of performance. But simultaneously he must decisively interpret that past for consumption to the listener of the present, as he becomes historian and history, subject and object at the same time (2010, 92-3).

Schiffer's insights shed light on the continual success of cover versions of songs in the folk canon even within rock culture. Joan Baez, for example, began recording traditional folk songs in the late 1950s, only a few years after the success of such white pop cover performers as Pat Boone. By the time rock culture had arrived in the 1960s, Pat Boone's

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<sup>21</sup> Schiffer's article erroneously attributes the recording to Blind Willie Dixon.

takes on such songs as “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally,” respectively peaking at #12 and #8 on *Billboard's* Hot 100 in 1956, had become symbols of all that was wrong with the popular music industry at large and with cover versions in particular. Baez, on the other hand, climbed the charts only gradually as the popular music industry changed, but remains a respected artist and iconic image of 1960s musical culture. It can, of course, be debated whether what artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were doing can actually be considered covering, given folk's supposed basis in oral cultural tradition rather than industry or marketing. At the very least it appears that this kind of interpretative practice does not blatantly display many of the aspects of other covering traditions – trend-following, insincerity, racism,<sup>22</sup> etc. – that may have begun to seem so unattractive to the youth of the 1960s.

Adam Sweeting, a veteran writer and editor for several music magazines, proudly wears his rockism on his sleeve. In his 2004 book, *Cover Versions: Singing Other People's Songs*, he laments the growing challenges music fans face in finding music that can be appreciated as authentic (according to rock ideology).<sup>23</sup> Rather than dissecting the issue, however, Sweeting simply reaffirms his faith in rock fans:

When any piece of recorded music can be sampled, stretched, twisted and squeezed into any shape or context, the task of deciding where homage ends and theft begins becomes virtually impossible. But in the end, if you have any musical nerve-endings in your body, you know when you hear the real thing (2004, 19).

While the rock fan's task has become more complicated since the genre's near monopoly in the late 1960s, Sweeting's spirit seems to demonstrate the general attitude and assumptions this culture has held since its inception. Authenticity is not a concrete concept, but rather a

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<sup>22</sup> Many of these recordings do, of course, still involve white musicians playing black songs, as is the case with “In My Time of Dying.” I would argue, however, that racism is not a factor here, given that these new recordings were largely released long after the originals, to a no-longer systematically segregated market, and do not attempt to “clean up” the songs.

<sup>23</sup> See chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of authenticity.



kind of feeling that an audience experiences in response to a particularly convincing or relatable artist. The true rock fan simply “knows” when an artist is authentic – though, as Simon Frith points out, the fan will also provide “proof” for his perceptions based on the music's ability to “understand the genre . . . [or] obey the genre's musicological rules” (1996, 89).

Rock audiences' perceptions of authenticity certainly played a part in the generation's distaste for covers (Frith 1996, 69-71), but they may also help explain many of the cover versions that did manage to break through to the rock period's scrutinizing audiences. The Byrds' 1965 version of Dylan's “Mr. Tambourine Man,” for example, was a big hit, but William Shatner's take on the song three years later was a flop because the audience interpreted the former as a “natural extension” (Tiegel 1965, 10) and the latter as “unbearably hammy” and “useless” (Harris 1992, 31). “Mr. Tambourine Man” was in fact the Byrds' breakthrough single, but one can only wonder how its reception would have differed had the audience been aware that only Roger McGuinn, the band's lead guitarist and vocalist, was permitted by producer Terry Melcher to actually play an instrument on the recording due to the band's amateur skill level (Rogan 1998, 61). Unlike the Monkees a few years later – who the Byrds themselves would chastise in their 1967 “So You Want to be a Rock 'n' Roll Star” (Rogan 1998, 193) – the Byrds' indiscretion went undetected, granting them a free pass.

In 1970, *Billboard* reported that Marvin Schlachter, president of Janus Records, “feels that in today's market a 'cover disk' has become a costly affair and does little more than cause confusion on the disk jockey level . . . a company that comes out with a 'cover record' has to put an extra effort to beat the original” (“Cover Record Waste,” 1970, 4). The article directly quotes Schlachter, who reports that “seldom does a record company pushing a

'cover disk' recoup its investment” (4). Despite reports such as this one, several rock artists who had already satisfactorily proved their creative abilities took the risk of completing album-length cover projects in the early 1970s. This risk, for most, resulted in harsh criticisms and relative sales slumps (see below).

For scholars, these cover efforts are often hard to categorize and understand in light of the artists' other releases. Stuart Lenig's discussion of David Bowie's *Pin Ups* album (1973) is typical of treatments of these cover records. Lenig argues that Bowie released this album of covers in order to establish a connection between generations as well as cultures. He uses his song selection to tell the world where he came from. Bowie's formative years were spent in 1960s British mod culture, the predecessor to the 1970s “glam” that Bowie would pioneer, so it is the music of this era that he chooses to cover. Americans, however, had never experienced mod, so Bowie delivers it to them via *Pin Ups*. It is his way of respectfully passing along the music of bands that had been important to him but had not gained the global attention he thought that they deserved. Lenig also argues that, since the too young Bowie never had the chance to gain any success as a true mod musician himself, he is able to take *Pin Ups* as an opportunity to do just that. Lenig's view of Bowie as cover artist is reminiscent of Schiffer's interpretive historian, although with a touch of added heroism:

He wasn't content with looking back, he also wanted to recreate the past in his new image. . . . For Bowie, the juncture [between mod and glam] was clear, but for others it was a puzzling grafting of glam sensibilities onto the venerable mod movement of the sixties. . . . Bowie had been there and seen the wreckage and felt the need to do something, to say something about the previous sixties British pop (2010, 127-8).

Like John Lennon's *Rock 'n' Roll* (1975) and Bryan Ferry's first two solo albums,<sup>24</sup> Bowie's *Pin Ups* represents a strange point in rock's history in which artists began to cover again,

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<sup>24</sup> *These Foolish Things* (1973), *Another Time, Another Place* (1974).

*despite* dominant audience values or expectations. *Pin Ups* arrived in the middle of one of Bowie's (and much of the rock world's) otherwise most creative, "original" periods but, unlike the original material that bookended its release, it was not received well by critics (Lenig 2010, 130-1). It is perhaps for this reason that rock-loving scholars of today feel the need to come to the defence of this and other similar projects. Now that cover albums have become a common occurrence, it has become routine to make heroes out of artists like Bowie, retrospectively justifying projects that did not make sense to the 1970s rock audience for whom they were created.<sup>25</sup>

Several of *Pin Ups'* similarly out-of-place cousins, such as John Lennon's, Bryan Ferry's, and the Band's cover albums,<sup>26</sup> have received similar retrospective treatments (Lenig 2010; Bailey 2003; Solis 2010). Steve Bailey provides an in-depth take on the early 1970s covers atmosphere:

For the first time in the rock era, artists best known for performing original material made a conscious departure from standard musical practice and presented collections of nonoriginal, often historical material. . . . [Since] the album had achieved critical status as the preeminent form of rock art . . . the release of a cover album had important implications. [Many] seem to represent an attempt at constructing a kind of 'sonic museum,' one offering a privileged view into the influences that shaped the development of the respective musicians. The autobiographical resonance is further evidence of the evolution of dominant aesthetic standards for rock towards a more classically modernist model, one in which influence and evolution, rather than the spontaneity and naïveté associated with a folk tradition, were paramount. . . . The most notable aspect of the trend is that all of the albums mentioned above [excluding Ferry's] tend to present the material in a reverent and reasonably straightforward manner. There are few, if any, drastic alterations to the material, and the performances suggest aesthetic validation, even canonization, rather than critique (2003, 143).<sup>27</sup>

Such recent insights provide compelling re-readings of the early 1970s covers phenomenon,

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25 Stuart Lenig, for example, argues that, upon *Pin Ups'* release in 1973, "no one really really understood Bowie's idea. . . . [Many] dismissed it, and almost no one critically analyzed it as a real aesthetic project" (2010, 131). *Melody Maker* columnist Steve Lake called Todd Rundgren's *Faithful* a "complete waste of time" (26) upon its release in 1976, while Michael Watts complained in 1975 that John Lennon's *Rock 'n' Roll* "communicates little more than John's indulgence in his own trip" (42).

26 *Moondog Matinee* (1973).

27 Here, Bailey seems to blur the lines between modernism and postmodernism, to be discussed further in chapter 3.

but tend to be more useful in understanding where musical culture has moved since this time. Bailey, like the scholars discussed above, completely ignores the original context of these releases. Levon Helm of the Band has confessed that their cover album *Moondog Matinee* was simply “all we could do at the time. We couldn't get along . . . so we couldn't sit down and create no more music” (2002, n.p.). John Lennon, in fact, was barely willing to engage his covers album at all in interviews, instead tending to change the topic to his next project – which in fact did not see light for another five years (1975a). Finally, reviews of Bowie's album featured such phrases as “ridiculously weak” and “faintly embarrassing” (Lenig 2010, 131). None of these cover albums (including also Bob Dylan's *Self Portrait*, Ringo Starr's *Sentimental Journey* and others) are usually categorized as among their authors' most important or memorable works.<sup>28</sup> That they should be given such historical weight by a rock scholar perhaps suggests an act of defence of an artist's otherwise perfectly authentic image – or else, it is evidence that times have changed, as I will further argue in chapter 3.

### ***VI – Cover/Tribute Bands***

After 1975, as a new generation came of age, the landscape of popular music began to change again. With, for example, the punks beginning to spit on rock at about the same time John Lennon's cover album was celebrating it, as well as the growing popularity of disco and non-writing pop singers (Barbara Streisand, Olivia Newton-John, etc.), it became clear that rock ideology could not dictate audience tastes forever. George Plasketes, Dick

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<sup>28</sup> *Pin Ups*, for example, is the only non-RIAA-certified album among Bowie's string of eight releases during his highly successful glam and soul period spanning 1972-76 (Whitburn 2006, 128). Similar relative sales slumps can be seen in regards to the Band's *Moondog Matinee* and Bob Dylan's *Self Portrait* (2006, 71; 317). Ringo Starr did not receive an RIAA sales certification until his third album, *Ringo* (1973), which was his first to rely mainly on newly-written material (2006, 995). Similarly, Bryan Ferry's solo work failed to chart at all until the release of his third album (*Let's Stick Together*, 1976), the first to include a significant amount of self-written material (2006, 356). Finally, John Lennon's *Rock 'n' Roll* had the briefest stay (15 weeks) on the Billboard Top 200 of any of his albums, excluding his Beatles-era avant garde Yoko Ono collaborations (2006, 595).

Hebdige, Sheldon Schiffer and many others have explored these shifts and their effects on cover versions. These themes will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3 of this thesis. Suffice it to say for the moment that, in the mid-to-late-1970s, once the dominant popular music began to be made by musicians more distant from 1960s counterculture, cover recording began to expand and evolve once more.<sup>29</sup>

Some aspects of the rockist attitude toward cover versions have survived beyond rock's formative years, albeit often appearing in strange new forms. Stephen Groce's 1989 study of local-level bands reveals an interesting divide between those who specialize in playing covers and those who primarily play their own material. Most of Groce's subjects from both categories identify themselves as rock fans or rock musicians, with several noting music of the late 1960s and early 1970s as being of particular interest. Groce's interviews with numerous band members lead him to conclude that while most involved with cover projects identify themselves largely as entertainers, those who perform original music tend to consider themselves more as artists, often devaluing the non-artist cover musicians in the process. Motivation is the key differentiation. One interviewee shares his belief that, for cover bands, "the real impulse is just to be on stage . . . to be rich and famous. They are the best paid, you know. It's like congratulating somebody for being mediocre" (1989, 403). Another explains "I just don't see it as that creative. I don't see it as fulfilling to sit back and play something that somebody else has already thought up" (403). An artist, one songwriter attests, "is someone who is trying to write songs that sound like Yes or Rush," whereas pure entertainers, "belong either dead like Elvis Presley or . . . in Las Vegas" (401). These comments reveal a particular conception of originality and its worth, clearly based on a reverence and respect for bands who they perceive as the great artists of rock. Rock

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<sup>29</sup> As Plasketes (2006, 145) and Cooper (2005, 229) have argued, this return of covers first became visible in the form of a wave of tribute albums. This trend will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

ideology was evidently still dominant among many fans in the 1980s, and, of course, can be seen in even more recent contexts. What has changed since the 1960s, however, is that this (now residual) ideology can no longer be taken for granted, with opinions on originality varying more significantly from subculture to subculture or even from fan to fan.

These local musicians' puritanical views, interestingly, are not represented in the histories of the bands they claim to follow. Both Yes and Rush started life as local-level cover bands, and both included selections from their cover repertoire on their first studio releases (Welch 2008, 45). The same is true, in fact, for most early rock bands who would later gain respect as forces of artistic creativity. John Lennon believed that the Beatles' covering years were essential to the later development of their songwriting style (1975b, n.p.). Though later local-level bands would begin to chide Elvis' uncreativity and celebrate Lennon's art, Lennon himself professed that “nothing really affected me until I heard Elvis. If there hadn't been an Elvis, there wouldn't have been the Beatles” (Wayne 2006, 386). These differing opinions on covers and influences show a growing disconnect between later rock practitioners and the mindsets and practices of early rock musicians. For the pioneers of rock, original art was created by learning from the art of one's predecessors. Rock fans' seemingly blind awe, however, has caused them to remember the musicians of this era as isolated musical gods whose creativity could be attributed to nothing other than pure individualistic genius. The result is that, as Groce demonstrates, the cover band and the songwriting band have become conceptually separated and placed in a hierarchy, with the former placed below the latter.

Guy Morrow's 2006 study, “Selling Out or Buying In?”, however, reveals that the views and practices of local rock bands have evolved once more. While original and cover bands have remained largely separate entities, many musicians whose main focus is a

songwriting band choose to also participate in a secondary cover band in order to help fund the other project. As with the Hamburg-era Beatles, these musicians are able to make money from playing covers, while maintaining artistic development with their originals. Their systematic separation of their “covers” and “originals” projects, however, suggest rockist anxieties that were not a factor for the early Beatles. It is perhaps the case that local-level songwriters' hierarchical attitudes toward covering have not significantly changed since Groce's study, but that the audiences and clubs have moved even further toward cover bands, to the point that songwriters simply cannot survive on their original projects' revenues alone.

Rock fans' predominant views regarding cover versions have also manifested themselves strangely in the world of tribute acts. Shane Homan, Jesse Samba Wheeler, and Andy Bennett have all discussed the tendencies of tribute band performers and fans to perceive or describe the project, ironically enough, in terms of authenticity. Homan notes that while, from a traditional rock view of authenticity,<sup>30</sup> “the tribute experience is seemingly worthless [and] can be seen to represent the worst kind of made-to-order popular culture” (2006, 45), many tribute acts are marketed and celebrated based on notions of authenticity. Homan argues that tribute bands' “ability to promise venue managers and fans an 'authentic' reproduction (!) has enabled them to bypass the pub circuits and charge premium fees” (2006, 5). Audiences measure the authenticity of tribute bands, unlike other rock musicians, based on the band's skill at copying.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the reason that even serious rock fans will embrace this anomalous articulation of rock authenticity is that, as Andy Bennett has noted, there has been a kind of tacit agreement made between the audience and tribute act:

The success of the tribute band in achieving this aim is . . . highly dependent upon the willingness of the audience to buy into and go along with the 'trick of illusion' that the tribute band attempts to stage. . . . The primary function of the tribute band is to

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<sup>30</sup> Adorno, with his view of popular music as formula, would perhaps share the rockist's view here.

<sup>31</sup> A similar measure of authenticity can be seen on *American Idol*, to be discussed in Chapter 3.

replicate the object of its tribute as accurately and 'authentically' as possible, [but] it is important that the tribute bands do not overstep the mark in this respect. Tribute bands gain the adulation of the audience through the quality of their portrayal of the tributed act, not through actually claiming to 'be' the artists they tribute (2006, 21, 28).

Tribute bands and audiences are willing to temporarily suspend their views on authenticity and originality by agreeing that what they are doing is a celebration of the original artist rather than a kind of theft. Though tribute bands are certainly the most business-minded cover acts, they can escape the criticisms applied to other cover bands – even, as Jesse Samba Wheeler notes, by tribute bands themselves (2006, 208) – by framing their act in such a way that the audience is able to direct their applause toward the original band, thus removing any potential for guilt.

### ***VII – What is a Rock Cover Version?***

Countless scholars have explored rock's dominant period in the hopes of pinning down the influences, motivations, and meanings that made this a popular culture so distinct from its predecessors. Many of these authors' observations are useful in engaging with rock's dominant cover practices and rock culture's attitudes toward them. Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will discuss the arguments of a number of these authors who I perceive to be particularly helpful in understanding some of the historical and musical themes I have described in this chapter thus far. It is my hope that I will be able to present a thorough picture of what “cover version” means in rock, as distinct from the uses of the term predominant during other musical epochs. I will apply this picture to a broader comment on the potential dangers of continuing to liberally use such unspecific, dated categorizations that grow ever convoluted as the recorded popular music industry ages.

John Sheinbaum's article “Think About What You're Trying to do to Me” provides an effective background to some of the cultural forces behind rockist opinions on cover



versions. He accomplishes this via a comparison between audience perceptions of Aretha Franklin and Beatles recordings of “Eleanor Rigby.” For Sheinbaum, much of what changed in 1960s pop rhetoric had to do with a new belief that rock music could be considered a kind of art, and, in turn, a tendency in the general public to romanticize the musicians involved with this new, world-changing, art. He argues that “of the myriad themes used to construct white rock musicians of the 1960s, such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan as 'artists', the most important is perhaps the assertion of originality in their compositions,” going on to elaborate that “this music is constructed as more than original; rather it is seen as art that transcends the bounds of its social functions and contexts” (2002, 111-12). Sheinbaum explains, however, that for African American musicians of the rock era like Aretha Franklin, no such grand, idealist language was used. Successful black musicians were generally referred to as craftspeople rather than artists. This kind of language, Sheinbaum argues, only served to “reinforce the notion that the music, however fine, is a machinelike commercial product” (2002, 113-14). One effect of such a contrast in general perceptions of white and black musicians at the time was evident in cover practices. For white rock musicians, as we have seen, the expectation was that they were to avoid covers in favour of original “artistic” compositions, but interpreting and adapting others' compositions had always been common in R&B-based music styles and remained so in 1960s soul music. A review of Aretha Franklin's discography will attest to this.

Sheinbaum provides a potential explanation for rock ideology's seeming double standard at this time that is worth relating here. He reasons that young rock fans perceived rock songwriters as a sort of modern manifestation of classical composers. Like classical music, and unlike the pop music that preceded it, later music by bands like the Beatles was “explicitly designed for listening and thinking rather than dancing and romancing” (Robert

Palmer quoted in Sheinbaum 2002, 112). The musicians were thus taken to be part of the “great Western art music tradition” (2002, 113). Black musicians had not been part of such a tradition and were once again excluded, with their skills often being described in popular media in terms of “intuition” or “improvisation” rather than “composition” (2002, 114). Though John Lennon has called the rock-as-art rhetoric “a lot of shit” (quoted in Sheinbaum 2002, 116), it does reveal something about fan expectations during rock's dominant years that almost certainly had an effect on cover production.

Keir Keightley's work on rock's cultural history also provides insights helpful to understanding rock cover practices. Keightley's “Long Play” brings to focus the important move in the popular music market of the 1950s away from the single and toward the LP album. He argues that since the album had initially been primarily marketed as a format for classical music and for adult-oriented pop standards, it “overwhelmingly attracted 'grown up' consumers [standing] in opposition to 'commercial' and 'ephemeral' teen pop” (2004, 380). The connotations of such a divide, however, went beyond age groups. Keightley surmises that “one format (33 $\frac{1}{3}$  LP) and one audience/market segment thus monopolized 'good' music, with a concomitant denigration of the 'opposite' format and audience formation” (2004, 378). If rock music was to become the respected art music its audience envisioned, it would have to transcend the bounds of the 'immature' single – the format upon which the pre-rock cross-racial cover version phenomenon had flourished. The album, Keightley explains, “was more and more seen to be related to the book, assembled in libraries, and respected as a repository of cultural tradition” (2004, 380). Perhaps this cultural preservation is among the reasons that, as Keightley elaborates on in “You Keep Coming Back Like A Song,” much of what was being recorded on adult-oriented LPs were in fact Tin Pan Alley standards – in a sense, cover versions, of a different breed.

As the LP was becoming more popular, rock music was still in its infancy, with its distinct cultural tradition not yet established. The LP, then, was employed as the medium on which this tradition would be written. Keightley's suggestion that "the ruling songs of an era are ultimately but the songs of the ruling generation's youth" (2001b, 32) works as a useful explanation for the cycle in cover versions' popular reception we can witness here. A 1909 recording of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, often referred to as the first example of a record album, preserved a piece that had been written nearly twenty years prior. Tin Pan Alley tunes, although already being written when *Nutcracker Suite* was recorded, became a staple of mid-century LPs, as we have seen. In recent years, as the youth of the 1960s and '70s formed the wealthiest consumer market, cover versions of their music, perhaps ironically, became staples of some of the most lucrative popular music projects, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

Philip Auslander, working through the lens of performance studies, has made several observations regarding rock notions of authenticity that are helpful to gaining an understanding of rock's attitudes toward cover versions. In *Liveness*, Auslander argues that authenticity varies depending on the genre and performer. While the use of synthesized beats may not be considered authentic in rock, it is authentic for dance music. There is nothing intrinsic to sounds that create authenticity, but rather judgements about authenticity are determined by audiences' beliefs, perceptions, and expectations. Artists are expected to be authentic, but only to their own style or history (or what the audience perceives it to be). Auslander cites Simon Frith's confession that Paul Simon's *Graceland* was hard to believe because of the knowledge of Simon's folk past. Such a view of authenticity undermines cover versions, wherein it becomes more difficult for audiences to believe that the performer could possibly be being true to themselves having not written the song. Cover versions that

did become successful during the rock's formative period – Vanilla Fudge's “You Keep Me Hangin' On” (1967) or Joe Cocker's “With a Little Help from My Friends” (1968) – were often those so extravagantly rearranged that the cover artist could be perceived as remaining authentic to his or her own style, rather than to the style of the original artist. The same can be said of Elvis Presley's breakthrough recordings and many modern examples that will be discussed in chapter 3. Auslander, however, makes the important point that the style in question need not reflect anything about the artist's actual everyday personality, but simply must keep in line with the character(s) the artist portrays through his or her music. David Bowie is Auslander's prime example who, apparently, strayed too far from the audience's pre-existing perception of him on his own cover efforts.

Rock-era audiences, it seems, were primarily invested in musicians who looked to the future, creating ever new original artistic statements even when they decided to cover – a kind of rock modernism, to be further discussed in Chapter 3. As Michael Coyle argues, however, this was not always what motivated the musicians themselves. For Coyle, when rock bands covered R&B or early rock 'n' roll music in the early 1960s and again a decade later, it was to “pay it homage” (2002, 147), and was a “time-honored way of asserting credentials” (143). This is perhaps why, for the majority of examples of rock cover versions – those not generally perceived as striking achievements – the goal was not to completely rearrange the song. Referring to the Beatles' first album, Coyle writes that “in all of these covers, allowing for changes in gender, the Beatles strove to duplicate the originals” just as the hit-hijackers of the 1950s had done (2002, 149).<sup>32</sup> Unlike the earlier cases, however, the rock covers did not refer to songs currently on the charts and so did not threaten the originals' success. Coyle concludes that “their purpose was not, then, to make an artistic

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<sup>32</sup> While both Beatles covers and 1950s hijacked hits do, in fact, often change more than just gender, the arrangements generally remain such that they clearly reference (or “duplicate”) a specific previous recording.

statement, any more than it was to cut in on hot chart-action. . . . And so their covers worked not to reinvent the individual songs but to alter the relation of their originals to their audience” (2002, 149). So while these kinds of covers did not continue to achieve mass audience appreciation throughout the rock's dominant period, it is perhaps because of them that audiences became able to better understand and, in turn, idolize rock bands' original work. This, at least, seems to have been part of the logic in their production. The current *Idol* phenomenon, which will be explored in chapter 3 of this thesis, may represent a modern continuation of this technique, wherein competitors sing covers in order to demonstrate their styles and skill sets to the audience in the hopes that they will purchase their original releases later on. The “dues paying” that once occurred in local pubs has, it seems, been transferred to the television set.

As I noted in the introduction of this thesis, Michael Coyle himself has complained that covers scholarship is “complicated by the survival of this single term through various historical changes, so that it now indiscriminately designates any occasion of rerecording” (2002, 134). One method to help clarify, if only to a certain degree, what is meant by “cover version” throughout different epochs of popular music is to test the practices of each with the same scale. I believe that, as with much of the history of late-twentieth-century popular music, the progression of definitions of the “cover version” is intimately linked to evolving ideas and representations of originality, authorship, and authenticity.<sup>33</sup> A given era or subculture's cover practices, in their tendency toward either conservation or transformation

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33 As Michel Foucault has demonstrated, the function of the “author” has been in flux for centuries (1969). Providing an author's name was once all that was required to validate an argument, but now written/composed works must be tested against accepted bodies of knowledge. The author designation has become more difficult to obtain, but, with copyright laws, has financial perks. This shift is visible in the popular music industry. As Elijah Wald noted, before rock, bands proved themselves based on their ability to capture audiences or accompany dancing. In rock, bands must be granted author status in order to have success (2009). Cover practices have, perhaps, evolved according to changes in the author function, and so may serve as effective indicators for such broader shifting cultural stances.

of the original song, may indicate that era or subculture's place in this evolution.<sup>34</sup> To conclude this chapter, I will make a few broad observations regarding the degrees of conservation and transformation showcased by rock covers.

Rock cover recordings from the 1960s/70s, for the most part, tend toward the conservation end of the spectrum. The covers that appear on many rock bands' early albums, as well as those released during the cover boomlet of the early 1970s, largely resemble their sources in arrangement and general sonic character. The Rolling Stones' 1964 version of Chuck Berry's "Carol," for example, is basically a straight remake of the 1959 original, save for a slightly quicker tempo. The same can be said of the Band's 1973 version of Fats Domino's "I'm Ready" (1959), the main difference here being the presence of a slightly larger group of backing musicians. Though pre-rock cover versions, to be discussed in the next chapter, were largely conservative in their interpretations as well, they differed in motivation. Rock covers were generally recorded long after the original recordings had left the charts and so were not attempts to hijack potential fame or revenue from them. Rather, it seems, these songs were either covered because they were the songs that the band loved and that were mainstays of their live sets, or else they were covered as a later nostalgic homage to the band's influences. In either case, the covers seem to tell audiences something about the band's own music – where it was heading or where it had come from. While most rock covers tended toward conservation, it is important to note that those that were most successful on the charts were the few that *transformed* their source material in a more radical way. The Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man," Jimi Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower," and Joe Cocker's "With a Little Help from My Friends," for example, remain potent symbols of the rock era, while most of the more common, less adventurous covers did not make the

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<sup>34</sup> Such distinct approaches by artists to their predecessors have been explored in detail by T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, with Eliot on the side of conservation, and Bloom, transformation.

charts and have been largely forgotten.

“Cover version,” as a rock concept, thus represents a practice in flux. No longer satisfied with the racially and commercially exploitative purpose covers had initially served, rock fans and musicians, starting in the early 1960s, seemed to no longer have a clearly defined use for the practice of recording covers, even as they retained use of the expression. In pre-rock and post-rock contexts, as I will discuss later, cover versions have been associated with more clearly defined goals, but, during rock's dominant period, covers often appeared in unexpected places, frequently garnering unfavourable audience responses. Those covers that were accepted reflect a direction in which the practice has continued to move among rock musicians since the 1970s.<sup>35</sup> “Cover version,” in rock, refers to a practice that is risky, given the audience's frequent demand for originality. The relative unpopularity of releases like the Band's *Moondog Matinee* is evidence of the practice's hazards. The rock cover often points to a kind of contemplation or remembrance on the part of the artist, whether that be in terms of the actual arrangement of the cover or the context in which the cover appears (testing the waters and citing influences on a first album, perhaps, or engaging in a nostalgic concept album like Bowie's or Lennon's). I intend, throughout the remainder of this thesis, to argue that “cover version,” though always the same term, does not consistently refer to these same cultural ideas and practices when used in reference to other epochs of popular music.

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35 See my discussion of indie-experimental cover trends in Chapter 3

## 2 – Cover Versions Before Rock

### *I – Social Normalization After World War II*

The Second World War and its immediate aftermath represent a moment of transition in the social history of the United States. Anna G. Creadick has pointed to the popularity of the slang expression “SNAFU” during and after the war as an indicator for this culture of sudden disturbance and change. Creadick argues that “SNAFU,” standing for “Situation Normal: All Fucked Up,” suggested that “normality’ was something the war itself had destroyed” (2010, 1). The “normal” everyday situation for those involved in the war effort was something that would have, at any other time, been considered entirely abnormal. Beyond the obviously chaotic situation for those actually fighting in the front lines, however, there was also instability for those who stayed home. Philip Ennis points out that during World War II, many Americans were uprooted from their previous lives, both physically and psychologically:

[WWII] touched every aspect of American life, creating for most people an unprecedented break in their lives. All cultural resources were challenged to provide new meanings appropriate to the change, meanings set within familiar frameworks. . . . The movement of people was unquestioningly the most pervasive and important fact of the war years. It was the greatest mass migration the country had ever seen. Over fifteen million civilians crossed county lines in pursuit of jobs or family. The crowding, the scarcities, the uncertainty, and, above all, the disruption of the familiar placed a heavy burden on the expressive culture the migrants brought with them or found in strange locales (1992, 121).

It is perhaps unsurprising that, following such a difficult period of upheaval, Americans would attempt to revert to a state of hyper-normality. Creadick argues that “the embrace of normality was a post-traumatic response to World War II . . . normality functioned to soothe wartime and emergent Cold War anxieties through the construction of a new ‘ideal for which to strive’” (2010, 2).

Creadick's major focus is on normality as a psychological state, which was widely



promoted in post-war propaganda as well as periodicals. She contends that “much of the rhetoric and imagery of postwar culture was coercive – telling Americans how to be men, how to be women, how to be parents, how to be sexual, how to be political, how to dress, what to buy, where to live, how to seem: normal” (2010, 5). Beyond the personal, however, this movement toward constructed normality was also manifested in other elements of post-war American society. Robert Bennett's work on post-war New York City is telling in this regard. He argues that “architects and urban planners radically reconstructed post-WWII New York City using spatial practices that were deliberately designed to homogenize, organize, and police the city's complex heterogeneity” (2003, 10). Bennett demonstrates that, at least in the critical eyes of the bohemians that did manage to exist in post-war America, this urban planning was successful in its cultural homogenization. He summarizes mid-century folk singer Malvina Reynold's take on post-war suburbia, as offered in her song, “Little Boxes”:

Using the same repetitive, banal images to represent both suburban architecture's monotonous spatial aesthetics on the one hand, and suburban subjects' cultural homogeneity on the other, [“Little Boxes”] demonstrates how architectural and urban spaces reflect the socio-political ideologies of the material cultures that produce them. . . . [It associates] suburban architecture with such 'square' values as social conformity, emotional sobriety, cultural homogeneity, and political complacency. . . . [Little Boxes] demonstrates how suburban spaces helped shape post-WWII America's dominant cultural consensus (2003, 3-4).

This culture of “repetition” and “banality” serves as an appropriate backdrop for many of the themes found in the post-war popular music industry's products and practices, which will be explored throughout this chapter. Along with much of the rest of American society during and after WWII, the popular music industry experienced a period of major transition. And it is perhaps the case that with such sudden and shocking changes as draft-induced orchestra disbandment, the American Federation of Musicians strike, and the arrival of magnetic tape,

pop musicians and audiences were also ready to return to a sense of comfort and “normality.” The popularity of musical homogeneity and nostalgia, in the forms of cover versions and standards, may indeed be testament to this mindset.

The story, of course, is not as simple as this. Both Bennett and Ennis have demonstrated that, despite the “normalization” of many aspects of American urban life after the Second World War, early signs of the individualism that would be predominantly associated with beat, rock, and urban folk cultures in the following decades could also be seen at this time. In addition to Malvina Reynolds, Bennett also touches on the artistic works of Pete Seeger, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others. Despite the conservatism of their surroundings, these artists all wrote critically of the banality of post-war suburbia, and are all recognized as progressive figures in pop culture. It should be noted, however, that, with the exception, perhaps, of Pete Seeger, all of these artists came to prominence some time after the immediate post-war years. What is notable, though, is that all of these figures were already well into their adulthoods by the time their initial works appeared, meaning that they had consciously lived through the transitional post-war years and so, perhaps, were reacting against their conservatism.

Ennis has found other WWII-era seeds for later cultural changes that are more directly related to the popular music industry. The breakup of orchestras mentioned above meant for the more frequent appearance of smaller bands and solo acts (1992, 122). This, of course, was the direction that the popular music industry would move more seriously in the 1950s with the growing popularity of rhythm & blues, folk, and, eventually, rock 'n' roll musics. The American Federation of Musicians strikes, which will be analyzed further later in this chapter, kept most musicians from recording, but had no such jurisdiction over vocalists. This meant for an increased focus on music that showcased singers, or “front

men,” rather than orchestras (Ennis 1992, 124). Again, this tactic would be widely adopted by the popular music industry in the rock era. Finally, Ennis points to the emergence of the “teenager” during the war, as a distinct cultural group and, in turn, pop music market. These unruly people were those who were too young to go to war and, perhaps, whose parents had gone overseas (1992, 122). This market would, once again, later become imperative to the development of rock culture.

WWII and its immediate aftermath represent a transitional period in American history during which popular culture was being pulled in two opposing directions. While those in positions of power encouraged a culture of calm and “normality,” the effects of new technologies and subcultures could not be ignored entirely. Ennis points to *Billboard's* 1945 introduction of the “Honor Roll of Hits” column as evidence of such a binary culture. While previous systems had judged only songs – tallying up information from any number of (cover) records for each – the “Honor Roll” presented side-by-side charts with one listing songs and the other listing specific recordings of those songs (1992, 127-8). This system represented a compromise between the older culture of songs and the incoming culture of records, which, by the 1960s, would take over completely.

It is with the knowledge of WWII and the post-war years' transitional nature, and cultural struggles between conservatism and progressivism, that I move forward with my study of the era's popular music industry and its predominant cover practices. An in-depth look at these early days of cover versions is something that has not been undertaken to any great extent by previous scholars. I believe, however, such research to be crucial to truly understanding how the “cover version,” both the term and concept, has evolved throughout the last seventy years. The remainder of this chapter will survey the cultural, industrial, and musical aspects of the post-WWII, pre-rock 'n' roll cover version. Before delving too deeply

into pre-rock cover practices, however, I will take a brief foray into the history of the word itself. Very little genealogical work has thus far been done regarding the term “cover version” or its various forms, and while I do not claim my own efforts to be exhaustive, my hope is that I will be able to provide enough historical insight so as to help put the term and practice's later history into better perspective.

### *II – Why “Cover Version”?*

When given thought, the word “cover” itself may seem an odd contender for mainstream usage given that so many more fitting terms – rendition, copy, tribute, interpretation, etc. – were used alongside it around the time of its earliest appearances. Nevertheless, the historical record seems to suggest that variations on the term “cover” caught on throughout music media to describe these sorts of songs over a span of about five years, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. The post-World War II economic boom meant increased free time and disposable income for many Westerners. This sparked major expansions in the entertainment industry that would soon pave the way for modern radio and television as well as rock 'n' roll (Ennis 1992, 132). It is not surprising that much of the popular music terminology taken for granted today was forged in this period.<sup>36</sup> With only fleeting early definitions available, one can only attempt to reconstruct the reasons for the seemingly overnight success the term “cover version.” My own investigation of mid-century popular magazines, newspaper articles, and trade publications has led me to conclude that this term was born largely in the context of industry and economics rather than in the realm of musical expression. “Cover version's” earliest incarnations reveal a trade language shared by newspapers, radio, television, and record companies, who all had the same goal in mind: spread their message (or product) to as many consumers as possible.

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<sup>36</sup> “Hipster,” “indie,” and “disk jockey,” for example, all began appearing in trade publications in the mid-1940s.

The actual practice of “covering” artistic material predated the word. Tributes, parodies, and (re)interpretations have, of course, long existed in one form or another. With the introduction of mass mediated popular arts in the early twentieth century, however, such practices needed to be referred to and differentiated with some consistency. The historical record of this period, however, shows a lack of linguistic consensus, with writers being free to experiment with any number of terms to express the same basic ideas. A December 1915 *New York Times* article refers to the growing popularity of new “interpretations” of classical music (Aldrich, X7). In September 1920 *Billboard* reported on Mel Klee and Jimmy Lucas, two popular vaudeville performers who scored hits with very different “topical versions” of the same song, “You’re the Only Girl that Made Me Cry” (“Melody Mart,” 28). “Version” seems to have been a popular choice at this time for reviews of live stage shows, with many similar articles being found. In 1935, the *Washington Post* described Freddie Rich’s Orchestra’s performance of Ferde Grofe’s “Life of Knute Rockne” as a “special arrangement” (“On the Air,” 5), while Lily Pons’ recording<sup>37</sup> of Mozart’s “Je le Sais” was a “rendition” (“Wagemaar Plays,” SS4). By September 1943, the *Chicago Tribune* had brought “edition” into the mix, used to refer to the publishing of “modern” interpretations of the “classics” (Goldberg, C3). Many of these early examples refer to well established musical traditions. With changing technologies and the increasing success of popular music as a viable business beyond sheet music and stage shows, however, the general anatomy of the surrounding conversation was soon to change.

Michael Coyle is perhaps the only scholar that has attempted any historicization of the term “cover” itself. In an easily overlooked endnote to his article entitled “Hijacked Hits

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37 All of these other early examples refer to live performances or sheet music. “Rendition,” however, does not appear to have been a categorization reserved for recorded versions. The root “to render,” for example, can mean to “represent” or “to produce a copy or version of,” as in creating a recording, but it can also mean “to give a performance of” (“Render,” n.p.).

and Antic Authenticity,” Coyle relates his conclusions on the history of the term:

The term 'cover' seems initially to have entered record industry parlance from the studios of Jack Kapp's Decca Records. Between 1943 and 1949, Decca routinely made sixteen-inch lacquer safety discs of all the wax masters from which it made metal parts. These lacquer safety discs were known as 'covers' (2002, 154).

Coyle's time frame is correct but the connection he makes is, arguably, misguided. The author points to a single source for his proof: the liner notes to a 1993 MCA compilation of Bing Crosby recordings. The source itself, however, makes no connection with “cover versions” in the sense that is at question in both Coyle's and my own research. It simply reads: “between late 1943 and 1949, Decca simultaneously cut most of its sessions on 16” acetate lacquer safety discs ('covers' in Decca parlance)” (Mckae and Lasker, 67).<sup>38</sup> While this is certainly an interesting use for the word as well as a creative attempt by Coyle, my own perhaps more in-depth research has led me to different conclusions regarding the history of the term. The connection between the lacquer “cover” and the practice of recording “cover versions” is unclear, and I have been unable to find any instances of the word being used in this sense in trade media of the 1940s. I have, however, found numerous instances (and forms) of the word “cover” being used in contexts more directly relatable to subsequent understandings of the cover version phenomenon. It is these avenues that I have followed in my own search for “cover version's” etymological beginnings.

The use of “cover” in the late 1940s to refer to new versions of previously performed songs was almost certainly crafted from the term “coverage” – a word that had become common in promotional statements made by the ever expanding mass media industries beginning in the early 1940s.<sup>39</sup> A 1945 article in the *Los Angeles Times* boasts of the newspaper's efforts to ensure the “fullest possible coverage of news and features” despite the

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<sup>38</sup> This “cover” seems to reflect the idea of protection, as in “cover me” or “insurance coverage,” whereas my own research, as will be demonstrated, is rooted in the word's history in journalism, as in “news coverage.”

<sup>39</sup> See Keir Keightley's comments on “covering' the market” (2003).

wartime paper shortage being experienced by the country (“A Statement,” 1). Good coverage over a wide range of topics meant greater, more diverse readership, and indeed more copies sold. Like newspapers, radio and eventually television networks were making similar claims about their coverage. It was in 1945 as well that the first applications of the term to the popular record industry arose. In December of that year, *Billboard* published a major announcement that it would be replacing its “Plug Index” with statistician Dr. John Gray Peatman's “Audience Coverage Index” for the evaluation of songs on its weekly popularity charts. This method would not simply judge songs based on the number of times they were played on the radio, but would also take into account stations' listenerships in order to more accurately determine how large an audience a song was achieving (“Music: Peatman,” 16).

The implementation of the “Peatman Audience Coverage Index” suggests record companies were placing new value on “covering” a wide audience with a wide range of content, just as the *L.A. Times* and other newspapers had been doing. The use of this index also, quite simply, kept the word “coverage” fresh in the industry's mind, appearing in the fine print of *Billboard's* charts every week. In early 1946, only a few weeks after the first appearance of Peatman's index, *Billboard* ran an article in which Cosmo Records proclaims that they had increased the capacity of record pressing plants from coast to coast in order to provide better “coverage in Southern California and New York areas” (Carlton, 28). In October of that year, *Billboard* printed an open letter from an armed forces disk jockey asking record companies for pre-releases in order to provide his listeners with “complete coverage of popular music” (Robins, 42). If a radio station was to keep its listeners from changing the channel, it needed to be able to offer all of the current hits rather than just a select few. The same logic can be seen in pre-rock record companies' business models. Not

unlike this DJ, record companies needed to provide complete coverage of popular hits in order to ensure that their customers had no reason to buy anything from other labels. It is for this reason that the standard practice at this time was for record companies to release their own versions of hits only days after the original company's recording first hit the airwaves – after all, any good business would strive to “cover” all profitable grounds (in this case songs), and provide “coverage” to as large a group of potential customers as possible.

The earliest instance that I have found of a form of the term “cover” being used in more or less the sense that it is understood today comes in the February 7, 1948 edition of *Billboard* magazine. The article regards a BMI-licensed song called “Fool that I am” that had “benefited from ample disk coverage in the past few months,” enticing an ASCAP-affiliated publishing firm to acquire selling rights (Carlton, 20). A parenthetical list of six (cover) versions available is provided to demonstrate this “disk coverage,” complete with singers' names and the labels to which they are signed. The connection with more widespread uses of “coverage” can be seen clearly here. This song is benefiting from the media coverage it is receiving, except rather than newspaper coverage, it is disk coverage. In this instance, the disk, rather than the newspaper, is the communicative medium, and the musician is the journalist. Each musician (or journalist) adds their own outlook to the piece (or news story). At this time, mass distribution of a single recording or publication was relatively slow, and so, by “covering” songs just as many different newspapers will cover the same story, record companies could speed up the communicative process and each benefit from different markets.

This usage of the term “coverage” caught on relatively quickly,<sup>40</sup> but disagreement

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40 For other instances of the term “coverage,” see *Billboard's* reviews of the Ames Brothers-Mary Osborne Trio's “Far Away Places” (“Record Reviews,” Jan. 1949, A45), Danny Kaye's “The Thing” (“Record Reviews,” Dec. 1950, 66), and Georgia Gibbs's “Good Morning, Mister Echo” (“Record Reviews,” Jun. 1951, 35).



over which derivation of the word was best lingered for several years. While “coverage” itself remained popular, “cover job,” “cover effort,” and simply “cover” all appeared in *Billboard* record reviews (“Music,” Oct. 1950; “Music,” Nov. 1952; “Record Reviews,” Nov. 1951, respectively). In April 1952, “cover version,” the most widely accepted long form of the term today, first appeared in *Billboard*. A review of Dolly Dawn's “You're Not Worth My Tears” reads: “an above-average cover version of the currently active ditty” (“Music,” 56).<sup>41</sup> While casual usage like this suggests that “cover” was becoming a widely accepted musical term, a look at a less specialized media source reveals that at this point, the term was likely reserved for members of an in-the-know “scene,” and had perhaps not yet broken into everyday lexicon. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* a few weeks following the Dolly Dawn review quotes Ray Anthony using the term “cover,”<sup>42</sup> but the reporter feels the need to qualify the word with a parenthetical definition: “trade jargon meaning to record a tune that looks like a potential hit on someone else's label” (Leonard 1952, A4). The term would remain elusive in non-specialist media for quite some time. It is mysteriously absent from the liner notes of early Beatles albums featuring so many songs by other artists, and did not appear in the *N.Y. Times* until 1970 (Heckman, D22), or the *L.A. Times* until 1972 (Hilburn, W68). While one can only guess as to the reason for this gap, it likely has to do with many of the rock-era themes I explored in the previous chapter. By the mid-1960s, with the term being associated with dated and perhaps ethically questionable marketing models, and with covers themselves decreasing in frequency and popularity, it is possible that the word simply was not used very often during this period. As some rock musicians returned to covering in the early 1970s, so too did the word return to popular media, having

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41 As if to etch the “cover version-coverage” connection in stone, the review of Dawn's “Be Anything (But Be Mine)” immediately below “Tears” reads: “more good coverage here – and the same comment.”

42 When asked about a particular song, Anthony responds: “I remember it well . . . because we hurried to 'cover' it” (quoted in Leonard 1952, A4).

by then found a new contextual home.

### ***III – Covering in a Song-Based Popular Music Industry***

Recording covers was a very common and lucrative practice in pre-rock popular music, drawing little, if any, criticism. Without rock's widespread rhetoric of authenticity, pre-rock cover versions did not seem to pose any moral, cultural, or philosophical problems for pop audiences. The practice was so common and unremarkable that, as demonstrated above, it survived for decades without a distinctive name. Before the 1950s covers were simply recordings of songs, no different in concept from any other recordings of the same song available to be heard on the radio or purchased at record stores. Reflecting on his consistently successful career in the music business in 1953, Bing Crosby speaks in terms that are arguably antithetical to later rock standards:

[Jack Kapp] selected things for me a cut above ordinary popular songs, although of course I sang those, too. In fact, Jack saw to it that I achieved a musical variety very few other recording artists – with my limitations – were able to. I sang hillbillies and blues, ballads and Victor Herbert, traditional songs and patriotic songs, light opera, and even an opera aria or two. Jack wouldn't let me get typed. He kept me spread out (22).

Crosby's career, like those of many of his contemporaries, was based on singing the hits of the day, no matter who had sung them first. Crosby, the biggest pop star before rock, was in many respects a career cover artist. And although he also sang songs that had been written specifically for him, Crosby made no attempt to be true to any personal style or artistic vision, as he explains above. Instead, he did his best to follow trends, singing any kind of song that might be popular at a given time, and, with his fame, inspiring others to cover those same songs. While in later musical cultures such a tactic might get a musician a gig at the local pub, in the 1940s it was the road to a successful and professional career. Cover versions were perceived differently in pre-rock contexts than they would be in rock and post-

rock because the major technological and cultural shifts that led to rock had yet to occur. In the next several pages I will employ historical and cultural analyses of the popular music industry of the late 1940s and early 1950s in the hopes of presenting a clearer picture of the “pre-rock cover version” and the reasons for its emergence as such.

Perhaps the most fundamental thing to understand when talking about the pre-rock popular music industry is that the creators and consumers of music during this period understood the “song” and the “recording” as two separate concepts. Changes in technologies, and their subsequent (albeit slow) effect on musical culture were at the foundation of this shift. Ejjjah Wald points out that “until recording, music did not exist without someone playing it, and as a result music listening was necessarily social. . . . [This] is typical of how pretty much everyone first heard music, pretty much everywhere in the world, until well into the twentieth century” (2009, 13-14). By the 1940s, recording technology had of course already existed for more than half a century, but the changes in musical practices and understandings it was bringing were slow to take root. Wald argues that “for much of that time, records remained relatively unimportant” and that, with their poor sound quality, “no one could have imagined a time when amateur performers would be complimented by being told that they sound 'just like a record'” (2009, 14). Recordings were not so much songs as they were technological advertisements for songs (released to ensure market “coverage”). In this sense, a song itself could only be fully appreciated via sheet music. Wald notes that while both John Philip Sousa and Pete Seeger were successful recording artists in the first half of the twentieth century, these men “dreamed of a country full of amateurs making music for one another. . . . For both men, the most important thing was getting instruments into everyone’s hands and encouraging them to make music” (2009, 15). The preferred use for recording then – especially before modern copyright laws – was

not to attain personal fame by establishing ownership, but to promote a *communal* culture of popular music. The idea was that, since recordings allowed songs to be heard by everyone, more listeners would be inspired to purchase sheet music and play along. Recording technologies, at this time, could actually serve to *promote* covering. Sousa, however, quickly became critical of records upon noticing their early cultural effects. He complained that they inspired only laziness, making it unnecessary for audiences to learn instruments themselves (Wald 2009, 16). Because of his low opinion of the medium, Sousa apparently left most of the conducting to his assistants when it came time to record (Wald 2009, 14).

Jonathan Sterne's work on early recording technologies provides useful insights into audience perceptions of recorded sounds before the 1950s. His ideas about sound fidelity are especially relevant to my discussion of cover versions:

Within a philosophy of mediation, sound fidelity offers a kind of gold standard: it is the measure of sound-reproduction technologies' product against a fictitious external reality. From this perspective, the technology enabling the reproduction of sound thus mediates because it conditions the possibility of reproduction, but, ideally, it is supposed to be a 'vanishing' mediator— rendering the relation as transparent, as if it were not there. Inasmuch as its mediation can be detected, there is a loss of fidelity or a loss of being between original and copy. In this philosophy of mediation, copies are debasements of the originals. . . . Without the technology of reproduction, the copies do not exist, but, then, neither would the originals. . . . 'Original' sounds are as much a product of the medium as are copies (2002, 218-19).

What is striking about Sterne's remarks is his meaning of “originals” and “copies.” The writer is not referring to “original recorded versions” versus later “cover versions” of songs, but rather to instances of live sound versus recordings of those instances. Without the recordings, however, neither concept – original nor copy – would exist; there would only be music. And without the rhetoric of original/copy, neither could we talk about covers.

Sterne's argument suggests that for popular music consumers of an era before the record became “the central institution of popular music culture” during the 1950s (Keightley 2001b,

25), there was no such thing as an “original” recording. Instead, all recordings were copies of what we now call “live” music – simply “music,” before the existence of sound recording. It is perhaps unsurprising then that re-recordings were so common and unquestioned in the pre-rock popular music industry, given that, for most audiences at this time, *no* recorded versions of pop songs, including the so-called originals, could be considered pieces of art.

Keir Keightley has discussed the state of the popular music industry at mid century in some detail, pointing to tensions caused by an imminent shift to the conceptual and financial predominance of the record. He argues that the industry's shift in focus from songs to records was not a quiet affair but was, in fact, fought against bitterly by many of pop's major players. Keightley's research reveals that this was, for the most part, a battle of generations:

[In regards to] the established Tin Pan Alley player's antipathy toward the teen-oriented hit parade of the immediate postwar years[,] their true enemies were those songwriters, performers, and producers who were consolidating the growth of a culture of the record, by conceiving of records as records (rather than as documents of a live performance of a song, as had been the case for the first half of the twentieth century). . . . At mid-century the conflict between the old Tin Pan Alley and the new rock 'n' roll involved, among other things, a disagreement over which would occupy the center of popular music culture: the song or the record (2001b, 25).

Keightley points out that this cultural battle had begun by the end of WWII with the emergence of a significant youth-oriented market niche in an industry that had traditionally been characterized by adult performers and consumers of so-called serious music. It would be another ten years, however, before industry practices would begin to seriously reflect this youth market. For the time being, traditional pop phenomena such as the cover version and the standard remained firmly in place as revenue producers. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that *Billboard* continued to publish the “Honor Roll of Hits” until the late 1950s. This was a popularity chart that ranked songs rather than recordings, tallying up the sales of any number of available recorded versions into a consolidated total for each composition

(Keightley 2001b, 26).

The prevalence of cover versions in the pre-rock period was not only a result of a lingering cultural tradition of live music. Available technologies as well as social and business trends may also have had direct impacts on the practice's popularity in the 1940s. Until well into the 1950s, the 78 rpm shellac record remained the standard pop medium for many record companies, consumers, and radio disk jockeys (“Namm Convention,” 1952, 37; “Stations,” 1954, 54; “78 RPM,” 1955, 1). Keightley points out that these shellac disks were “fragile” unlike their replacement, the “allegedly unbreakable and eternal vinyl LP record . . . [that] greatly enhanced the ideas of permanence and immortality associated with recorded music” (2001b, 29). The idea of a musical “permanence” being brought by the vinyl record suggests that the shellac record – as well as the pop music it contained – was associated with a kind of “impermanence.” Though a shellac recording certainly could be enjoyed for longer than a live performance, these disks were simply not engineered well enough to last forever, nor to fully represent the music imprinted on them. Their sound quality was poor and deteriorated quickly, they were available only in mono, and the disks themselves were easily broken. The concept of pop music as art or of the pop musician as artist, quite simply, could not have emerged on a medium with such limitations.

Before the widespread adoption of more advanced recording and listening technologies in the mid-1950s, pop music remained nearly as transient a concept as it had ever been, with musicians serving merely as the messengers of the moment. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the simultaneous appearance and success of multiple artists' recordings of a given song was typical during the pre-rock years. There was no conceptual “original” save for the song itself, as written on paper. Tim Anderson's *Making Easy Listening* (2006) provides a useful glimpse into the rhetoric of the pre-rock pop music

industry, in which songs were most often treated as exploitable commodities rather than as works of art. He explains that, even as technologies began to change, “the music industry continued to base its success on the maximum exploitation of its properties” and so “through rereleasing numerous versions of the properties therein . . . the songwriters, publishers, and record companies [could] collect earnings long after a composition's initial release” (2006, 86). Cover versions, then, were not only released by competing record labels, but multiple versions were often released on the same label in the attempt to distribute a single composition to diverse markets (2006, 87). A truly successful product was one that sold well in multiple versions, speaking to the appeal of the composition rather than the performer (88).

Though such an industrial, unsentimental take on popular music may now seem a foreign concept to many, it is worth noting that while the lingering effects of rock culture continue to artificially segregate music from business, “cover practices” have always thrived in other commercial industries. A grocery shopper, for example, may enter a store with the idea of purchasing a bottle of root beer and leave satisfied with any number of brands, likely unaware of or indifferent to which is the “original” root beer. Just as multiple beverage companies may find success from virtually the same recipe, so too, in an age before the onset of rock culture, could multiple musicians respectfully interpret the same song. But just as these drink makers do not claim to own the concept of “root beer” or to provide its sole true instantiation,<sup>43</sup> neither did the pop recording artists of the 1940s think in such terms. Indeed, if a pre-rock performer wanted to claim any kind of “ownership” of a pop song, making a scratchy, breakable record of it would have seemed an odd way to accomplish this.

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<sup>43</sup> Claims of ownership/authenticity have, of course, often been a part of Coca-Cola's marketing campaigns. With the continuing success of such cover artists as Pepsi and RC, however, it seems that beverage consumers have not responded to this rhetoric to the degree that rock fans have.

One major characteristic of the pre-rock music industry that contributed to the predominance of cover recording was the preeminence of the career songwriter. Until rock culture began to emerge in the 1950s, the pop music industry remained largely reflective of the Tin Pan Alley division of labour in which songwriters and performers were separate entities, each paid to complete different tasks on the figurative pop assembly line. While musicians who wrote their own songs certainly existed before rock (Merle Travis, T-Bone Walker, etc.), they were most often represented on *Billboard's* secondary charts for “race” and “hillbilly” music.<sup>44</sup> Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, three of the biggest true *pop* stars of the 1940s, virtually never wrote songs. This resulted in a certain amount of power and respect for those professional songwriters who did provide the hits. Alec Wilder, himself a pre-rock composer, attests to this fact in his historical survey, *American Popular Song* (1972). Wilder’s reflections on songs before 1950 are based entirely on sheet music, disregarding recordings as biased distractions, by way of which, as editor James T. Maher suggests, “a song is made to sound better than it really is<sup>45</sup> (an aural trap into which we are all quite willingly seduced)” (xxvi). With so much emphasis on the song and so little on whose performance of it was recorded first, pre-rock songwriters became cover-enablers of a sort, free to actively solicit and profit from a multitude of recorded versions (Cooper 2010, 44). Keightley has pointed out that many Tin Pan Alley songwriters actively wrote with the goal of attracting diverse performers and audiences, employing such tools as gender-neutral lyrics (2001b, 10). This transitional period between Tin Pan Alley and rock 'n' roll was no doubt a lucrative one for these composers, able to benefit from both strong sheet music and

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44 Various titles as “Rhythm & Blues” and “Country & Western” over the years.

45 In the philosophical debate over what or where a song actually “is,” Maher believes it is in the notation, whereas rock ideology places it in the recording. Understanding this distinction is key to appreciating rock’s conception of the “cover version.”



record industries,<sup>46</sup> but without yet having to worry about tailoring their songs to particular artists or genres. Countless pop stars today, of course, still rely heavily on career songwriters. The persistence of rock culture's tendency to associate songs with particular performers has, however, meant that these songwriters can no longer presume that they will benefit from cover versions, but rather may write with a particular performer in mind – as is the case with Max Martin, perhaps the most successful of contemporary pop songwriters (Martin 2000, n.p.).

“Covering” is not the only musical re-recording practice to have important roots in the 1940s. It was also during this pre-rock period that the recording of “standards” became a popular practice among artists and fans. As Keightley points out, the term “standard” itself, like “cover version,” seems to have come into common usage in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I will take a moment here to discuss some of the history and characteristics of the standard in relation to the pre-rock cover in order to better elucidate this cultural era in which musical recycling was so welcome.

Both standards and covers involve recording or performing music that was written, and has already been performed, by others. The difference is that, while cover versions plunder the present, standards plunder the past.<sup>47</sup> Recording standards in the pre-rock years involved revisiting songs from years or even generations gone by – songs which often had already been recorded by numerous other musicians across time without ever losing popularity. Covers at this time were also re-recordings of popular songs, but these songs were recently written, current hits whose long-term success had not yet been tested; many

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<sup>46</sup> *Billboard* reported strong sheet music sales alongside record sales as late as the early 1950s (“Music Hits Highest Peaks,” 951, 11; “Pop Sheet Music Sales Rise,” 1952, 20).

<sup>47</sup> I am here borrowing Ian Inglis's (2005) terminology, who himself draws inspiration from Deena Weinstein (1998) on this matter. Where Inglis and Weinstein, however, are referring to early covers as plunderers of the present and later covers as plunderers of the past, I refer instead to standards as the past plunderers. I will further explore the idea that current cover practices tend to be more akin to the performance of standards in Chapter 3.

standards, of course, began life as cover-inspiring pop hits. Keightley's work on the 1940s popular music industry has revealed a "segmentation of audiences by age and the role of the standard song in that process" (2001b, 8). Referencing a 1953 *Variety* interview with Nat King Cole, Keightley summarizes the professional performer's logic at this time: "In a large theater or ballroom, Hit Parade pop songs of the moment are required to satisfy a teenage audience, whereas entertaining an alcohol-drinking, adult nightclub audience calls for standards" (2001b, 8). While this generational divide may be taken as an early sign of developing rock logics, the important thing to note for this era is that both adult and teen markets were defined by performances and recordings of non-performer-composed material. The most successful pop musician was both a standard performer and a cover artist. Some of the roots for this culture can, perhaps, be seen in a few events that occurred during the mid-1940s: the American Federation of Musicians strikes and the Second World War.

The American Federation of Musicians – the union of which most professional musicians-for-hire were a part – staged two recording strikes in the 1940s (1942-44 and 1948). These strikes were largely motivated by the (inevitable) shift toward the use of records (without royalty payments) rather than live musicians on radio shows and in juke joints. Recording companies' coping techniques relied heavily on repetition and anonymity – two key ingredients to a song-based music industry. Tim Anderson, who has written detailed historical analyses of both strikes, points out that during these periods record companies got into the habit of reissuing old recordings, but also releasing new recordings of old songs (2006, 36). In the three months before the strike took effect, studios had rushed to create a stockpile, but with only so many quality new compositions available, they were forced to review "their catalogues for popular songs old enough to have been forgotten by the general public so they could be revived" (2006, 36-7). These studios, it turned out, did

not need to fool the public since the trend – the recording of “standards” – became a huge hit. *Variety* reported in 1948 that “the American public is becoming old-song happy . . . proponents of the big revival theory figure that the trend will increase in momentum as the recording companies release portions of their present stockpile” (“Public Continues,” 1). The article goes on to explain that the new surge in recordings of older songs had sparked sales of corresponding sheet music that could not have inspired such renewed interest on their own (44). Performer anonymity, the other key ingredient to the successful marketing of multiple versions of the same song, was easily achieved during the musicians' strikes through the fact that many recording studios resorted to employing local-level, non-unionized musicians (“Chi Indie Diskers,” 1947, 48). This practice no doubt served to put even further emphasis on the song rather than the particular performer or recorded version, supporting the success of both covers and standards.

American popular musical tastes' shift toward the past were also influenced by WWII and its aftermath. Keightley has elaborated on the postwar shift toward “easy listening” music in some detail. He notes the growing popularity of “familiar, nostalgic, old-time tunes” and arrangements that are “easily recognized versions of well-known compositions” (2008, 315). Unlike the personalized improvisations of the jazz and swing bands that had been popular before the war, postwar easy listening “privileges the audience and its desire for familiarity” (2008, 316). One reason for such a shift toward the recycling of old songs is offered by a 1947 *New York Times* article that reads:

Popular music has come around full circle and is now, in effect, back somewhere in the Twenties. Has some nation-wide emotional tide set in since the war? . . . This is how the record executives explain the change: Popular music must reflect the mood of the people. During the war the public worked at accelerated pace and craved excitement. . . . With peace came a sudden change in America's pulsebeat. The new national mood, greatly influenced by returning veterans, called for quiet forms of relaxation (Schumach, SM20).

David Brackett has made similar observations regarding the nostalgia-inducing effect that the war had on the popular music industry. His work on competing 1944 versions of “I’ll Be Seeing You” demonstrates that, like standards, covers could also provide calm to a war-weary nation.<sup>48</sup> Brackett explains the theme of “I’ll Be Seeing You”:

It belongs to a type of song about generalized loss that was common and popular during World War II. This type of song differed from earlier Tin Pan Alley songs of loss and separation, in that rejection is not the cause for the separation of the characters in the song's lyrics; this allowed listeners who were separated from their families to identify with the song's sentiments (2000, 50).

Listeners apparently did value the widespread rehearsal of such sentiments as the song inspired several concurrently successful cover versions including those by Bing Crosby, Billie Holiday, and Frank Sinatra.

As generational divisions and the popularity of alternative genres like gospel and urban folk became more apparent in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the popular music industry's landscape began to change. Recording cover versions, however, remained a popular and important practice, albeit with some changes. In 1950, the indie record label Supreme filed a lawsuit against Decca for releasing an Evelyn Knight recording of “A Little Bird Told Me.” The record seemed to directly recreate their own version of the song featuring Paula Watson, released a few weeks prior, but to lesser success. Ruling in favour of the defendant, judge Leon Yankwich made it clear that America was not quite ready to extend property rights from writer to arranger (or from sheet music to recording), nor to let go of the imitative cover version (Zak 2010, 144). Albin Zak provides a detailed description of the era's logic:

The entire apparatus of song plugging existed to sell songs – to performers who

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<sup>48</sup> Though “I’ll Be Seeing You” is now classified as a “standard,” it first hit the charts with a Hildegard recording in late 1943. Within three months, *Billboard* had given nods to at least three other versions. This song should not be confused with the Frances Langford song of the same name that had been a hit a few years prior.

might showcase them, to retailers who might stock them, and ultimately to a public that bought them for its own music-making pleasure. In this system records were latecomers and were widely viewed as promotional items. Any copyright owner whose song was recorded received a small return on record sales, but the real payoff was the sheet sales the record could help generate. . . . Copyright law reflected the cultural primacy of written texts, which, for music, accorded with the established principle that a work's enduring identity was preserved in its written form. . . . The other elements represented on a record – arrangement and performance – were not recognized as integral components of the original artwork (2010, 146-7).

In addition to his allegiance to existing laws, however, judge Yankwich also quite blatantly favoured the Decca version – a “popular” treatment of the “race or blues and rhythm” original (Yankwich quoted in Zak 2010, 145). Zak quotes Yankwich's (official, yet implicitly racialized) assertion that Decca created “a much better product” that was “full, meaty, polished” and featured a “more precise, complex and better organized orchestral background, the fuller harmonization of the responses, the clearer intonation and expression, and the more musical entrances” but that Supreme's arrangement was “of a type which would occur to any arranger” (2010, 145). Unfortunately for Supreme, Yankwich seems to have paid more attention to performance than to arrangement, judging based on the skill of the musicians heard on each record rather than on whether or not the same rhythm, harmony, or orchestration were being used. His preference, however, reflects the coming popularity of a new kind of cover: the crossover.

Crossover covers, or “hijacked hits” as Michael Coyle calls them, were common in the 1950s, and were the last major cover practice to predominate before the ascent of rock culture. The practice involved taking a song that had initially gained success in one market (R&B, Country & Western, or Popular) and adapting it in such a way as to acquire sales in a different market. Though this kind of covering occurred across all three musical streams, perhaps the most common (and bemoaned by later generations) manifestation involved (white) pop artists covering (black) R&B artists. This often led to the “hijacking” of much

of the original artists' potential revenue. As I have, in the previous chapter, already touched on many of the later events and attitudes surrounding these covers and their demise, I will here provide only a brief review of their early history and motivations.

B. Lee Cooper argues that, beyond any role racism may have had in 1950s cover practices, what really was happening was taste diversification.<sup>49</sup> He explains that the practice of recording covers, common throughout the early twentieth century, “continued at mid-century, but featured a far more diverse group of composers and performers. More importantly, songs of the '50s were drawn from previously segregated musical genres” (2010, 43) and that “slowly but surely, the record listening public moved from traditional pop toward a much richer musical stream of more diverse sounds” (2010, 45). Taking full advantage of every aspect of an audience's tastes via cover recordings was simply good business. Albin Zak argues that “songs traveled more readily among the streams than records because they carried with them fewer specific style markings. Their surfaces could easily be tailored to any market,” (2010, 114) explaining that, “the reasons for the multiple cuts were systemic in the industry, encouraged by copyright law, performance rights practices, and marketing strategies” (2010, 115). Finally, Zak observes the crossover phenomenon's place in the long history of cover versions, noting that “the practice was simply an extension of what occurred routinely within markets” (2010, 115). Tastes, it seems, were indeed diversifying, but the crossover's role in this process serves to highlight ongoing ethical issues and problematic economic relations between markets and genres.

The reason for this shift toward diversified tastes and inter-market covering seems to have, at least in part, been a result of the growing generational divide discussed above. Both

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<sup>49</sup> Racism's presence and damaging effects, of course, should not be ignored. Langston Hughes's 1955 article, “Highway Robbery Across the Color Line in Rhythm and Blues,” provides one telling narrative of black musicians' plight. He ends his reflection in defeat, observing that “he makes the money, we make the basic music. What to do about it? Who knows?” (105).

Zak and Philip Ennis have cited the crossover success of songs like “Sh-Boom” and “Goodnight Sweetheart Goodnight” as evidence of an adolescent market. The liberalization of youth tastes was also acknowledged by contemporary media, with *Billboard* offering the following report in April 1954:

Teen-agers have spearheaded the current swing to r.&b. and are largely responsible for keeping its sales mounting. The teen-age tide has swept down the old barriers which kept this music restricted to a segment of the population. . . . The appeal of r.&b. disks to more than just a limited market is also shown in the records made by pop artist and repertoire men of burgeoning r.&b. hits (Rolontz and Friedman, 1, 24).

Recording cover versions had, in the immediate postwar years, already proved to be a successful tactic for record companies to exploit a musical composition's full commercial potential. Now, in the early 1950s, full exploitation required adapting R&B songs to an increasingly interested youth market. While this may be taken as an early step toward the amalgamation of diverse genres into rock music and culture, it should be noted that rock culture's deification of the artist and record had not yet taken hold. Ian Inglis' discussion of Embassy Records provides evidence of this (2005). This label, along with numerous others, maintained success throughout the 1950s by way of performer anonymity, which had earlier helped larger companies survive the AFM strikes of the 1940s. Embassy turned a profit by selling cheaply produced “duplication” cover records to “young customers” exhibiting typical “consumer behaviour of the mid 1950s [which] had reflected the view of a largely uninformed public that the song was more important than the singer” (2005, 165-66). This market was, in fact, so unconcerned with the artist that Embassy regularly pressed different performers and genres onto the same disk (2005, 165).

In addition to cross-generic pollination, improved studio technologies and techniques are often cited as early catalysts of rock. It should again be noted, however, that as with audiences' increased appreciation for more diverse genres, the influx of production

“gimmicks” in the 1950s did not immediately undermine the popularity of cover versions. Tim Anderson explains that by 1952, unorthodox studio manipulations had become common enough for some veteran publishers and performers to express worry regarding their ability to compete in this strange new market (2006, xvi). He further explains that in this same year *Billboard* began publishing a sales chart based on records rather than songs (2006, xvii). Nevertheless, throughout these early years of production experimentation, long-established pop singers continued to cover, going so far as to reproduce studio gimmicks when called for. Frankie Laine, Bing Crosby, Tennessee Ernie Ford, and Vaughn Monroe, for example, all released recordings of “Mule Train” in 1949 featuring the same whip-crack sound effects. Similarly, “Good Morning, Mr. Echo” (1951) inspired at least five similar-sounding versions despite the fact that the original “featured several types of electronic manipulation . . . [that] had something of an inhuman quality, giving the track a sort of sci-fi feel befitting its novelty status” (Zak 2010, 156-7). With an increasingly open-minded audience and technologically sophisticated industry, however, songs were soon able to become crossover hits via single recordings, eliminating the need for such covers (see chapter 1). For the time being, however, the “cover version” was to remain a common, lucrative business practice.

#### ***IV – Some Sonic Observations***

Though economic and cultural histories are helpful in determining the frequency of and motivations for cover versions, one must go directly to the recordings in order to understand what the practice meant for musicians and audiences. In the case of the rock cover version discussed in the previous chapter, scholars have tended to engage with records directly, eliminating the need for my own such analyses. For the pre-rock cover, however, the available literature is less focused, leaving room for some of my own observations.<sup>50</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 3 for similar observations regarding post-rock cover versions.



remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to an exploration of specific pre-rock recordings. The sonic characteristics of three recordings for each of three popular songs from the late 1940s and early 1950s will be briefly analyzed in order to help demonstrate what it meant to “cover” in the pre-rock popular music industry. The chapter will then conclude as did the last, with a few comments on the pre-rock cover version as a distinct practice representative of the culture in which it existed.

“Sioux City Sue” was first released on record in July of 1945, performed by its composer, Dick Thomas, for National Records.<sup>51</sup> The song, in typical pre-rock form, inspired several cover recordings over the course of the next year. I will consider two of those covers here: The Hoosier Hot Shots' in January 1946 and Bing Crosby's two months later, both for Decca. These three records serve not only to reveal competition between record labels, but, given that two of the versions were released by Decca, they also exhibit the practice of a single label attempting to exploit a song's commercial potential across different markets.

The original recording of “Sioux City Sue,” marketed as a “cowboy release” (“Advertisement,” 1945, 24), features a dixieland-style arrangement with accordion, trumpet, and clarinet as the most prominent instruments. The song is given a bouncing feel by way of a quick tempo and a bassline consisting of alternating root and fifth notes on the first and third beats of each measure. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of this recording is Dick Thomas's yodelling during the choruses, clearly geared toward a country & western audience and not replicated in either other version considered here. The Hoosier Hot Shots' cover, while only making subtle changes, evokes a very different musical culture than the original. Clarinet is still prominent, but it is backed by piano and tuba and features playful

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<sup>51</sup> This “Sioux City Sue” is not to be confused with Lew Pollack and Mort Greene's earlier soundtrack tune of the same name.

improvisations. The tempo is very slightly slower than Thomas's version and the bassline is more adventurous, softening the bounce-feel of the original. Perhaps most notably, the Hoosier Hot Shots' vocals are entirely different than those of Dick Thomas. Primarily instrumentalists, the Hot Shots recite the melody straight, removing much of the emotion and personality heard in the original. The last chorus is sung by the band together in unison, adding a sing-a-long feel and an element of exuberant amateurism. Overall, the song has a more communal, vaudevillian feel than the “cowboy” original. Bing Crosby's version has, perhaps, the most drastically different sound. The recording is similar in instrumentation to both other versions, featuring clarinet, trumpet, and piano. Crosby's is, however, the only of the three versions to feature a drum kit. This, combined with a jazz-influenced bassline, serves to eliminate the bounce-feel and implant a smooth swing. Finally, Crosby's unmistakable baritone voice floats over the band, at times supported by a chorus of professionally trained backing vocalists. This version evokes the swing tradition and was undoubtedly crafted to attract a mainstream, adult-pop audience.

“Baby, It's Cold Outside,” though now generally associated with Christmas, was not initially marketed as such, becoming a hit in the spring and summer of 1949.<sup>52</sup> The first hit recording appeared in late April, featuring Dinah Shore and Buddy Clark for Columbia Records. As with “Sioux City Sue” I will consider two other versions here: Margaret Whiting and Johnny Mercer's for Capitol Records in May, and Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan's for Decca a few weeks later.

The initial recording by Shore and Clark is the most lighthearted of the three and was indeed described by *Billboard* as a “novelty dinking” (“Record Possibilities,” 1949, 39). The tempo is quick and the track features sound effects and several brief interludes of playful

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<sup>52</sup> This song was written by Frank Loesser in 1944 but not introduced to a large-scale audience until 1949. Loesser had kept the song for personal uses until finally selling it to MGM in 1948 (S. Loesser 2000, 79-80).

conversation. The recording, nevertheless, has a professional sound, featuring a full orchestral backing and moments of vocal harmonization. This version, though perhaps a “novelty,” seems nonetheless to be aimed at a sophisticated, adult audience. Whiting and Mercer's cover of this song has a much more laid back feel. The tempo is slowed significantly and most of the novelty elements heard in the earlier recording have been removed – although Mercer does let out a humorous sob in the second verse. A professional orchestra is again featured, but with a jazzier sound, placing piano and clarinet in the foreground. Both recordings suggest affluence, but whereas the earlier recording evokes a theatre or ballroom setting, Whiting and Mercer's interpretation would be more at home in a nightclub. These two records seem to represent two record companies competing to tap the same market, albeit with different approaches. The final recording, featuring Fitzgerald and Jordan, has an entirely different character from both previous versions. The tempo is quicker than Whiting and Mercer's version but slower than that of Shore and Clark. The vocals have a more emotional and less recitative character than those of the earlier records. Most distinctive, however, is the sound of the band. Unlike the full orchestras of the previous records, the only instruments here are bass, piano, and a small horn section of perhaps two or three players. Only the bass and piano are audible for all but the introduction and conclusion. Finally, unlike in the other recordings, this band at times strays away from the seven-tone major scale by hitting blue notes, with a notable flatted-sixth in the introductory theme. This record was most certainly an attempt to sell a pop song to a rhythm & blues market.

“I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” is the final pre-rock song I will consider. This song, written by Tommie Connor, was first introduced to audiences by thirteen-year-old Jimmy Boyd for Columbia Records in November 1952. I will also consider Molly Bee's

version for Capitol as well as Spike Jones's version for RCA Victor, both released within days of the original. This song, which will be revisited in chapter 3 in the form of a 2012 experimental cover version, provides a particularly useful lens through which to glimpse the differentiation of cover practices across time.

Jimmy Boyd's version of "Mommy" is very much a country & western recording. A slow, bouncing rhythm is employed, with a strummed acoustic guitar providing the main instrumental backing. Steel guitar and banjo can also be heard throughout the track, and Boyd himself sings with a Southern twang. The presence of bells, professionally executed backing harmonies, and overall clean production, however, suggest that this was a major label's attempt to appeal to a country & western audience rather than the output of an independent country label. Molly Bee's cover version has an entirely different sonic character. Its tempo is quicker and it does not feature any of the bluegrass instruments heard on the first record. Accordion is the main instrument here, with sleigh bells, drums, bass, and other orchestral embellishments throughout. Finally, the vocals are sung in a pop fashion without twang, and, despite the lyrics, are adult in character. This record was likely an attempt to market an otherwise childish novelty song to an older, more musically sophisticated audience. The final recording, by Spike Jones, is clearly intended for yet another market. Jones was a musical satirist and this record is characteristic of his style. The tempo is comically slow and the instrumental arrangement is scarce so as to draw full attention to the voice. The vocals are delivered in a ridiculous falsetto that seems to poke fun at the Jimmy Boyd version. Highly exaggerated giggles are added to complete the joke. This cover does not take itself seriously and, instead of seeking a musically mature audience like the Molly Bee version, it aims to appeal to comedy fans.

As argued in the previous chapter, the predominant covering practices of a given era

are likely related to that era's dominant views of authenticity, originality and authorship. Cover practices become windows into those views when they are analyzed based on their tendency toward either conservation or transformation of a song's original recording, as compared to practices of other eras. In the previous chapter, I noted that rock cover versions often tended toward conservation, but argued that this conservation could be understood as respectful homage rather than commercial competition in a song-based market. I also suggested that the most successful cover records of the rock period were those few that did tend toward transformation. An altogether different system is found in pre-rock cover practices. At a time before recording technology and television had progressed so far as to be respected as key mediums for individual artistic statements, ideas of authenticity and originality played little part in record appreciation. As in rock, pre-rock cover versions were highly conservative in terms of melody and harmony. Despite all of the differences between versions that I outlined above, it is important to note that none of these recordings stray very far from the sheet music. They are all unmistakably recordings of the song advertised. Without having to worry about rock's accusations of artistic theft, it simply did not make sense for pre-rock cover artists to make significant changes to the melody or harmony of songs that had already proven successful in other recordings. Where pre-rock covers were transformative, however, was in arrangement. Things like tempo, instrumentation, and timbre were changed frequently from recording to recording of the same song in order to adapt a single composition for different genres. Genre transformation, indeed, seems to be the predominant goal of the pre-rock cover version. This was an economically-motivated tactic to compete with other record labels for a share of a song's potential profits by promoting the song to an untapped market.

“Cover version” as a pre-rock concept, unlike its less clearly defined cousin of the

rock era, represents a long-standing commercial manoeuvre whose success, even as it involved sound recordings, was tied to a strong sheet music market as well an audience more concerned with songs than singers. The popular music industry has now been defined almost entirely by recordings and particular performers for at least half a century, making pre-rock cover practices difficult to comprehend for most music fans today. This cultural and industrial shift begs the question to which I continue to return in this thesis: what are the implications of continuing to use one term, “cover version,” to refer to quite distinct historical practices? I argued that during rock's dominance, the “cover version” represented something of a risk, but in a pre-rock context, “cover version” seems to represent just the opposite. Re-recording a song that had already proven its popularity was a relatively safe way to generate sales, and perhaps have one's name mentioned in trade magazines like *Billboard*. Recording a new, untested song or writing one's own was, on the other hand, a risk that some were seemingly reluctant or unwilling to take. This pre-rock understanding and use of the “cover version” no longer predominates in the rock era. But as I will argue in the next chapter, even rock culture's definitions of the concept have not managed to endure, since cover practices have shifted yet again in recent years.

### 3 – The Post-Rock “Cover Version”

#### *I – What has Changed Since Rock?*

In this chapter I will explore two recent trends in song re-recording that differ both from the cover practices of previous generations as well from each other. I will first analyze a commercially thriving phenomenon that I will label “karaoke television,”<sup>53</sup> referring to such covers-dependent programs as *American Idol*, *Glee*, and *The Voice*. I will then offer a more in-depth discussion of a recent tendency among alternative or indie musicians – those whose music and fans are not generally associated with the commercial mainstream – to record cover versions that are construed as experimental in nature. By experimental, I do not necessarily refer to the “weird” or avant garde, but simply to those covers which actually change or “experiment” with the original recording’s identifying melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic structures, often resulting in a version only barely reminiscent of the original song. Before delving into these trends, however, I will attempt to better situate these post-rock-period changes by summarizing some of the scholarly observations and arguments available regarding post-rock covers, as well as the phenomena of post-rock and postmodernism more generally.

Since 2000, at least eight full-album cover versions<sup>54</sup> of Pink Floyd’s modernist opus *The Dark Side of the Moon* have been released by alternative artists, each demonstrating varying degrees of transformation. With recent liberal reinterpretations of The Beach Boys’ *Smiley Smile*, The Beatles’ *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*,<sup>55</sup> and other supposedly

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53 Simon Reynolds has referred to these kinds of shows as “jukebox TV” (2011), reminiscent of “jukebox musicals”: film and stage musicals centered around preexisting popular songs rather than original scores. My use of the word “karaoke,” however, highlights the fact that these jukebox tunes are not being performed by the original artists but by amateurs.

54 The Squirrels (2000), Easy Star All Stars (2003; 2010), Billy Sherwood (2006), The Voices (2006), Dream Theater (2006), The Flaming Lips feat. Stardeath and White Dwarfs (2009), Mary Fahl (2011).

55 *Portland Smiles* (2013) featuring various Portland-based indie artists, and the Flaming Lips’ *With a Little Help From My Friends* (forthcoming, Oct. 2014), respectively.

untouchable works, post-rock musicians and fans have continually demonstrated that they have few reservations about covering. As rock culture's dominance over the popular music industry slowly lessened over the course of the twenty years following the 1970s, the often questionable practice of cover recording once again became commonplace and lucrative for a range of artists, including those generically categorized as rock. To follow Raymond Williams's (1977) terminology, the return of cover songs was just one symptom of a broader *residualisation* of once *dominant* rock logics regarding concepts like artistry, ownership, authenticity, and originality. The “singer-songwriter” had been an *emergent* aspect of early 1960s rock, coming into *dominance* in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the superstardom of such artists as Elton John. In post-rock times, however, it has become *residual*, opening the door once more for the return to prominence of cover versions.

This chapter will explore some of the diverse directions cover recording has taken during these recent decades. For the purposes of this chapter, the “post-rock” periodization – as opposed to the “post-rock” genre categorization to be discussed below – will refer to approximately the last twenty years (the period in popular music that has spanned the years from the end of the grunge movement in the mid-1990s up to the present). Particular emphasis, however, will be given to the last ten years, which have seen developments in cover recording that have not yet been explored by scholars. Attitudes, practices, and sounds associated with a post-rock aesthetic had, of course, been in development since at least the late 1970s punk movement, and continued to evolve throughout the 1980s in hip-hop, electronica, post-punk and other diverse genres. This period and its cover practices have been explored in some detail by prominent covers scholar George Plasketes. I will provide a brief overview of Plasketes's observations below, along with a consideration of selected late-rock/early post-rock cover recordings that have already received scholarly attention. I will



illustrate the transitional nature of this period in rock (and cover) history. While an ambivalence toward the rock views of originality and artistry became evident with the new sounds and practices of various genres throughout the 1980s, traditional rock acts like U2, Bruce Springsteen, and Prince continued to be among the biggest commercial successes of the period.

Following the early 1990s, during which time Plasketes completed his initial covers research and rock culture's latest embodiment had been provided by grunge, the popular music industry's reduced investment in traditional rock logics became more apparent. Musical “recycling” in various forms flourished in these years within virtually all streams of popular music, from the major commercial mainstream to the indie underground. Even in those moments where it seemed that rock might reclaim its dominant position in pop culture – the Britpop of the late 1990s, for example, or the garage rock revival of the 2000s – the music was rock in sound but not in philosophy. These movements sought to participate in or recreate the sounds of rock's past (Reynolds 2011, 245) rather than to creatively push the music to new boundaries as the original garage rockers and British invaders of the 1960s had (apparently) been doing.<sup>56</sup> This kind of discontinuity with traditional rock logics is nowhere more apparent than in recent trends in the use and significance of cover versions. In this chapter, I will argue that post-rock cover practices differ importantly from their pre-rock and rock cousins discussed in the previous two chapters. I will once again work toward an argument that cover recordings, though all categorized under the same heading, do not constitute any single or coherent cultural tradition, but tend to say more about individual eras or subcultures.

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<sup>56</sup> This, once again, can be read as an issue of conservation versus transformation, with these post-rock-era rock bands nostalgically conserving the sounds and styles of a bygone era in much the same way as karaoke television and pre-rock crooners, to be discussed further below.

George Plasketes published “Like a Version: Cover Songs and the Tribute Trend in Popular Music” in 1992. In this article, he looks back at the preceding decade and makes note of a revitalization of cover recording as a lucrative part of the popular music industry. Plasketes serves as an invaluable early witness to many of the themes I will discuss throughout this chapter, so I will reproduce his observations here at some length. Placing the return of the cover version within a broader trend of cultural recycling, Plasketes refers to the 1980s as the “Re Decade,” embracing a moniker first suggested by television critic Tom Shales in 1986 (Plasketes 1992, 4). He makes the following observations:

During the 1980s and 1990s . . . music was undergoing a qualitative change, and the lines between creativity and imitation, borrowing and artistic larceny, grew increasingly blurred. . . . Several . . . musical forms provided a noticeable 'backward spin' that largely characterized the industry, its product, and market into the 1990s. The two commercially dominant pop styles – rap and sampling – recycled old and new tunes into primary musical sources. For collectors it was the 'Best of' times . . . [with] a wave of boxed set retrospectives and reissues. The marketplace was also 'running for covers' as a steady flow of multi-artist tribute records revisited, reinterpreted, and re-examined a significant cross section of musical periods, styles, genres, and artists and their catalogs of work (1992, 1).

Such a shift in practice was undoubtedly surprising for many, given the “cherished notions of originality and artistic independence” that dominated the rock's period of dominance (Jon Pareles quoted in Plasketes 1992, 1). In an attempt to better understand and situate the cover version's return, Plasketes suggests a connection to postmodernism:

The recent proliferation of cover and tribute recordings is culturally characteristic of the repetition mode of postmodern times – retrieving, repeating, rewinding, and resurrecting virtually everything into an exhaustive cycle of retreads. . . . As a by-product of the Re Decade, song recycling joined other entertainment re-forms – reel remakes, video rentals, record reissues, recontextualization in film colorization, and instant replay in sports (1992, 4).

Finally, Plasketes quotes Brenda Johnson-Grau's argument that “rather than being defined as a particular style or tempo or instrumentation or even subject matter, rock and roll now operates as a form [of] incorporation or pastiche” (1992, 4).

Plasketes admits that while covering and other forms of musical “recycling” became trendy throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the phenomenon seemed to be remaining peripheral for the time being (in 1992). He notes that more present-focused developments like “MTV, metal, Madonna, and Michael Jackson marked much of the decade” (1992, 1). Plasketes suggests that the kinds of covering that were becoming most popular in the 1980s were comedic parodies and tribute albums – niche products with little effect on the goings-on of other pop streams. He notes the popularity of “Weird Al” Yankovich and other “absurd novelty” cover compilations but suggests that they were largely understood as collectibles rather than major popular music releases (1992, 7-8). The author discusses the influx of tribute albums in a weary tone. He suggests that the releases of tribute albums for bands like The Rutles, Sonny Bono, and Shonen Knife signalled a fad that had been taken beyond its natural lifespan:

[Such releases] indicated that the tribute trend was reaching a saturation level . . . [and] further illustrated the cover/tribute glut. . . . They also reinforced what was becoming a common “Who’s Next?” response to the collections. . . . While many artists were clearly worthy of having praises sung to them, the selection in other cases appeared rather arbitrary, with no standards or criteria for who merits a record of recognition. As a result, some of the “honor” which initially accompanied the tribute concept became tarnished, and the product watered down as companies engaged in tribute one-upmanship. Unfortunately, the genre gravitated toward a musical embodiment of the Warholian fifteen minutes of fame, only in this case, closer to 45 minutes (1992, 5).

The tribute craze has, in fact, extended far beyond the forty-five minutes Plasketes reflected on in 1992. While the traditional tribute album format has, perhaps, been used less frequently in recent years, its spirit has carried on and influence expanded in the forms of karaoke television and YouTube cover performances.

Plasketes revisited his observations regarding cover versions in the first two chapters of his 2010 anthology, *Play it Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music*. He picks up where he

had previously left off, arguing that “by the mid-1990s, cover compilations and multi-artist tribute records . . . transcended trendy and became established as a viable subgenre. . . . Ten years after, tributaries continue to flow and cover variations abound” (2010, 1). The author cites several examples that will be discussed later in this chapter, including *American Idol* and Yo La Tengo's annual all-covers radio performance. Such ongoing developments in musical recycling lead Plasketes to exchange his earlier “Re Decade” classification with the more far-reaching “Cover Age,” including the 25 years prior to his time of writing (2010, 12). He argues convincingly that “re’ was not a trend that faded with other Big 80s phenomena. . . . By the end of the millennium, nostalgia was well rooted as a permanent state of mind, soul, spirit and lifestyle” (2010, 13). Plasketes suggests several reasons for such a backward-looking emphasis, including baby boomer nostalgia and classic rock mythologies, industry profit motivations, and new technologies capable of better preserving and reproducing the past. He argues that the general shift toward vintage fashions, remade movies, and sports replays created a culture more receptive to new versions of older songs – a practice that, I have argued, had been received with some anxiety throughout rock's period of dominance. Recent social and technological developments have, however, enabled a generation more aware of cultural history,<sup>57</sup> which has played a role in, among other things, shifting cover logics. The result has been astounding numbers of big-hit covers throughout the 2000s,<sup>58</sup> and an estimated 150 to 200 cover/tribute album releases annually (Plasketes 2010, 17).

Simon Reynolds offers his own take on the recent wave of “re” culture in his 2011 book, *Retromania*. While Plasketes's work is more revealing of the cover trend found in the

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57 Albeit, a mediated, advertisement-funded version of such cultural history. See Derek Kompare's *Rerun Nation* (2005) for a discussion of how television reruns shape the way we understand recent cultural pasts.

58 See Plasketes (2010) pages 15-17 for an extensive listing of memorable covers of the mid-2000s.

world of the major label record industry (including karaoke television, as I will argue), Reynolds largely focuses on indie rock, wherein another stream of post-rock cover recording is found. For Reynolds, one major cause of these musicians' turn to the past has been the record – an ironic suggestion given the role the record initially played in swaying the popular music industry *away* from covers:

Pop's impact was dependent on records. Its qualities of newness and the way it penetrated deep into everyday life came about through records being played on the radio or being bought from stores by masses of people all within the same approximate time span. . . . But records created a kind of feedback loop: there was now the possibility of getting stuck on a particular record or performer. Eventually, after pop built up enough history, it became possible to fixate on an earlier period you preferred to your own pop time (2011, 35).<sup>59</sup>

Reynolds demonstrates this effect with a quote from Ariel Pink, in which the indie retro-rocker admits that “when people like sixties music, they live there for ever. . . . They look at the pictures and they feel like they can actually live there. For my generation, we weren't even there . . . so we really live 'there'. We have no concept of time” (2011, 35).<sup>60</sup> Reynolds's work suggests that the indie stream of post-rock cover recording may reflect a mindset of virtual participation rather than revisitation or honouring of influences. These musicians want to engage with the songs and sounds of yesterday not in order to adapt them to the present, but as a means of adapting themselves to the past. They do not consider themselves to be retrospective novelty acts, but instead simply unfortunate for having not lived at a time when their preferred musical genre was considered cutting edge or rebellious. For the likes of Ariel Pink, rock's sound is ultimately more important than its context or cultural effects. The experimental cover recordings to be discussed later in this chapter, however, reveal that

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<sup>59</sup> The shifting function of the record is, perhaps, reflective of a broader shift toward a so-called post-broadcast era. Now that it has become increasingly possible for audiences to learn about popular music via diverse media other than commercial radio or television, new music's ability to “penetrate deep into everyday life” has arguably decreased. Individual record buyers may be as likely to learn about and purchase an album from the 1960s as from 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Ariel Pink's 2012 recording of Donnie and Joe Emerson's “Baby” (1979) serves as an example of a cover that transcends temporal bounds, sharing the arrangement, instrumentation, and lo-fi production values of the original.

such devotion to the sounds of prior eras is not necessarily shared by all indie cover producers.

Like Plasketes, Reynolds argues that recent popular music's embrace of the "re" grew out of other social and technological developments. The author suggests that the emergence of the concept of "heritage" along with the widespread adoption of practices of "commemoration, documentation and preservation" in the 1970s were among the earliest signs of pop culture's emergent preoccupation with the past (2011, 58). Reynolds refers specifically to "the trends for restoring old urban centres and for creating museum villages where people in period costume practise traditional crafts, . . . the rise of documentaries and history programmes on TV; and the frequency of commemorative articles or special magazine issues" (2011, 58) along with other cases of "musealisation" (Hermann Lubbe quoted in Reynolds 2011, 58). With the help of new technologies like the VCR, and more recently the Internet and cellular phone camera, "the archival mindset [was] no longer confined within the institution of the museum but [began] seeping out to infect every zone of culture and everyday life" (2011, 58). Just as these technologies have made it easier for everyday people to learn about and (perhaps more accurately) remember historical events, so too have they enabled audiences to more fully experience, and perhaps recreate, the music of generations gone by.

It may be the case that the return of cover recording has largely been a result of the simple availability of coverable material. In rock's peak years, old music was, for the most part, only accessible through chance finds at second-hand shops. The emergence of period-based radio programming and, more recently, YouTube and other Internet music depositories have, however, enabled music lovers (and creators) to listen to "virtually anything that's ever been recorded, free of charge, and . . . bone up on all the history and context of the music

through Wikipedia” (Reynolds 2011, 94). Perhaps Reynolds's most notable observation, however, is that “the Internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near . . . old yet now” (2011, 122). The temporal and stylistic variety of music that can be found on YouTube is now reflected in our CD and MP3 collections as well as our iPod playlists. Our entire perception of musical eras, genres, and subcultures is shaken as we “shuffle” our way through generations. The result has been that it does not come as a surprise when the Flaming Lips release a cover of a twenty-five-year-old Madonna song that sounds equal parts Spaceman 3 and Kraftwerk, pulled together by a vocal performance reminiscent of Leo Sayer.<sup>61</sup>

Reynolds also follows Plasketes's assertion that much of the recycling that has been seen in the pop cultural industry in recent years is symptomatic of a postmodern society. Drawing on Andreas Huyssen, Reynolds describes the seismic cultural shift that occurred over the course of the twentieth century:

For the greater part of the last century, modernism and modernisation were the watchwords: the emphasis was on harking forward, an intent focus on everything in the present that seemed to represent ‘tomorrow’s world today’. That changed, gradually but with increasing momentum from the early seventies, towards a preoccupation with the residues of the past in the present, a massive cultural shift that encompassed the rise of the nostalgia industry with its retro fashions and revivals, postmodernism’s pastiche and renovation of historical styles (2011, 57).

With, for example, the popularity of movie soundtracks like *Across the Universe* (2007), consisting entirely of Beatles covers, and blues rock revivalist<sup>62</sup> bands like the Black Keys, nostalgic elements seem evident enough in many recent streams of popular music. In order to better understand the forces behind such a shift, however, as well as to better comprehend

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61 I am referring specifically to The Flaming Lips' (feat. Stardeath and White Dwarfs) 2009 take on Madonna's 1984 single, “Borderline.”

62 Like their garage-revivalist predecessors, these blues rockers strive to participate in a historical moment. Both trends are in fact revivals of revivals, with new manifestations of both garage and blues rock having already experienced popularity in the 1980s.

the connection between modernism/postmodernism and rock/post-rock, we must turn to cultural theorist Fredric Jameson.

### ***II – Questions of Modernism and Postmodernism***

Jameson suggests that the key to understanding what was so “modern” about the modernism of the early twentieth century lies in an appreciation of the manner in which this movement was initially received. Modernist art, literature, architecture, and ideas were largely rejected by the Victorian bourgeoisie who dominated at the time of the movement's ascent because their “forms and ethos [were] received as being variously ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral, subversive, and generally 'antisocial'” (1991, 4). In other words, modernist techniques were perceived as being too brazen and unprecedented; they were simply too *modern*. But this shockingly unfettered push to the future was precisely the point. Modernism's disquieting effect was, however, not to last:

A mutation in the sphere of culture has rendered such attitudes archaic. Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather "realistic," and this is the result of a canonization and academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally that can be traced to the late 1950s (1991, 4).

The fact that we now live in an era in which modern art can no longer fulfil the boundary-pushing purpose for which it first attracted attention means that we have entered a state of *postmodernism*.

Jameson argues that generations of the postmodern era, from the latter portion of the twentieth century to the present, “now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics” (1991, 4). They have indeed become apathetic toward the entire modernist cause, given that even postmodernism's “own offensive features -- . . . which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism -- no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest



complacency but have themselves become institutionalized” (Jameson 1991, 4). Jameson argues that the result has been a postmodernist “effacement . . . of the older (essentially high modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” and, in turn, a fascination with “this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film” (1991, 2). Jeffrey Sconce made similar observations in 1995, describing subcultural fandom for bad film, or “paracinema,” which “presents a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the 'refined' sensibility of the parent taste culture” (376). While such ironic celebrations of bad arts (for their badness) have been apparent since at least the 1980s, the phenomenon has only expanded in the Internet age. In 2008, a few sarcastic reviews of “Three Wolf Moon,” a kitschy T-shirt design for sale on Amazon.com, sparked a sales increase of 2300% (Emery 2009, n.p.), inspiring the New Hampshire Division of Economic Development to declare the product as their “official T-shirt” (“State Hopes,” 2010, n.p.). Likewise, notoriously bad music and film releases of previous generations – the Shaggs' *Philosophy of the World* album (1969) and the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club* film (1978), for example – have been resuscitated by YouTube, receiving thousands of views.

Some of these authors' observations regarding modernism and postmodernism can be directly applied to the dichotomy between rock and post-rock cover practices. The rock movement of the 1960s and early 1970s seems, in major part, to have indeed embodied Simon Reynolds's “tomorrow's world today” modernism (2011, 57). Record producers like Phil Spector and Joe Meek began pushing the bounds of what could be achieved in a studio, with the latter even favouring music with futuristic outer space themes. Rock musicians also participated in the wave of innovation, making use of unconventional instruments like sitars

and synthesizers, developing the concept album format, and writing music that moved far beyond traditional 12-bar blues and AABA pop song forms. The rock era's modernist ethos is perhaps best captured in the “progressive rock” categorization, which emerged in the late 1960s in reference to both a subgenre and a radio format.<sup>63</sup> A July 1968 *Billboard* article helps to demonstrate the progressive mentality, declaring that “no oldie should ever be played on a progressive rock station unless it fits the sound and says something of value, such as 'White Rabbit' by the Jefferson Airplane” (“Progressive Rock Play,” 16). Barely a year after its release, “White Rabbit” was already considered an “oldie” by rock-era journalists and radio disc jockeys. The article goes on to sum up progressive rock radio's criteria by reporting that “all records on a progressive rock station should say something either in message (lyrical content) or, music (the record should be so advanced in musical concept that it demands to be played)” (16). Such rock-modernist sentiments are also observable in the period's dominant attitudes toward covers, which were discussed more fully in Chapter 1.

Cover records largely fell out of favour during the rock's formative years, as audiences and bands preferred to invest in newly penned material. In 1968, National Association of Record Merchandisers executive director Jules Malamud described the changing state of the record industry, asserting that “creativity will be the key . . . the future of our business depends upon it . . . newcomers bring freshness and creativity, upon which the future depends” (quoted in “Recording Industry,” 1968, NARM4). Such a creative push to the future is reflected in the sheer volume of successful pop records containing original

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<sup>63</sup> The name most often referred to the radio format in American trade press until the mid-1970s, while, during the same period, British press nearly always used the term to refer to the genre. It should be noted that these American radio stations did not necessarily play what would later be categorized under the “progressive rock” genre heading, but simply rock bands who were not geared toward Top 40 singles, but instead to album tracks – which, of course, was especially true of bands in the emerging progressive rock genre.

material released during the rock era.<sup>64</sup> As noted in chapter 1, by 1970, *Billboard* had reported Janus Records president Marvin Schlacter's observation that, “seldom does a record company pushing a 'cover disk' recoup its investment” (“Cover Record Waste,” 1970, 4). Many of those covers that did manage to gain success in the rock era were those that were highly transformative of the original recordings, thus staying true to a modernist aesthetic (The Byrds' “Mr. Tambourine Man”; Vanilla Fudge's “You Keep Me Hangin' On”).

In the post-rock popular music industry, Reynolds's “tomorrow's world today” modernism has been flipped on its head. Recent trends in cover practices have instead largely embodied an ethos of *postmodernism*. These covers continue to exemplify the aforementioned post-rock tide of cultural recycling. Unlike in the modernist-tinged rock years, cover versions have, in recent decades, once again become both commonplace and profitable. The two recent streams of covering considered in this chapter – indie experimental and “karaoke television” – reflect these postmodern mentalities. Karaoke television's covers have tended to involve rock-era songs with little or no rearrangement, presented in such a way as to honour the original artists (*Idol* theme nights on the Beatles and *Glee* special guest stars such as Meat Loaf, for example). These covers, in short, tend toward conservation rather than transformation. The recent indie cover trend, however, has frequently demonstrated a transformative approach, though still often using rock-era music as its raw material. Mark Kozalek's 2001 album *What's Next to the Moon*, a collection of dramatically re-arranged, lo-fi acoustic versions of early AC/DC compositions, serves as one example of such experimental cover recording.

Though dramatically different in character, both of these cover trends reflect aspects

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64 I mean original in both senses: that the music was newly penned by the performers themselves, and also that the music broke with traditional pop recording and songwriting techniques.

of a postmodern condition.<sup>65</sup> Andreas Huyssen argues that in the postmodern world, modernist movements such as “the avantgarde – embodiment of anti-tradition – has itself become tradition, but, moreover, . . . its inventions and its imagination have become integral even to Western culture's most official manifestations” (1986, 161). Karaoke television's cover practices, with virtually note-for-note reproductions of such modernist-rock productions as “River Deep – Mountain High” and “Eleanor Rigby,”<sup>66</sup> participate in and encourage the postmodern condition by reinforcing twentieth-century modernism's current status as honoured tradition. Rather than pushing against the standards set by the past (as rock modernists would), these cover performers stand in awe of the past's artistic achievements, striving only to achieve some small level of comparability with those artists who already perfected rock in a bygone era. Indie-experimental cover practices, on the other hand, suggest a more deliberate postmodernism. Fully aware of postmodern society's fixation on yesterday's achievements in popular music, and the resultant failure of many of popular music's current attempts to shock, these artists abandon the modernist cause and instead participate in what Tony Mitchell calls “a postmodern refusal to make sense” (1989, 278). Some may demonstrate a “reliance on feedback and noise as a performance component that has subversive connotations and . . . conveys a postmodern revolt against meaning” (1989, 278). The result has been that when these artists cover it is more akin to postmodern pastiche than to either homage or parody – “a neutral practice of such mimicry” or “a kind of blank irony” (Jameson 1991, 17). These cover artists seem to actively disregard songs' original contexts or any potential taboos against their reinterpretation and

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65 An alternate reading may view karaoke television and indie-experimental musics in terms of romantic versus modernist authenticities (see Keightley 2001a) rather than postmodernism. With, however, karaoke television's embrace of a codified system of production, and indie's apathy toward progress, I maintain that uniquely postmodern philosophies are at work.

66 *Glee* (season 2, 2010) and *American Idol* (season 12, 2013), respectively.

record them in any way they see fit. The aforementioned stream of variously transformed *Dark Side of the Moon* cover albums is one embodiment of this trend.

### ***III – Karaoke Television***

*American Idol*, the foremost example of karaoke-television cover practices, debuted in 2002 as an American adaptation of the British *Pop Idol*. The show enjoyed eight consecutive seasons as the United States' most-watched prime-time television program (2004-2011) and continues to air top-ten ranking seasons into 2014 (Rowe 2011, n.p.; Andreeva 2012, n.p.; Bibel 2013, n.p.; Kondolojy 2014, n.p.).<sup>67</sup> The show, which has helped spawn similarly successful franchises in dozens of other countries, serves as a symbol of the full-scale return of the “cover version” to prominence in the popular music industry during the post-rock period, in terms of market saturation and profitability. *Idol* is a televised singing competition that relies almost entirely on the performance of cover versions – a vast percentage of which are of songs written in the dominant years of rock. In the age of music piracy and declining album sales, the *Idol* franchise – and, by extension, cover versions – has been able to bring in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue annually (Wyatt 2009, n.p.). *American Idol* is only the most famous example of a larger karaoke television phenomenon that has flourished in the 2000s and beyond. Shows such as *Glee*, *The Voice*, *American Dreams*, and the short-lived but aptly named *Cover Wars* (2001) may also be included in the list of recent shows (both reality and scripted) that have been centered around performances of old songs by new artists. *Idol*, however, has so far received the most scholarly attention. I will summarize some of these authors' arguments here, supplementing them with a few of my own observations regarding specific covers performed on *Glee* and *The Voice*.

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<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that, despite still bringing in millions of viewers each week and remaining FOX's best performing show, *American Idol*'s ratings have been on a steady decline throughout its thirteenth season (“American Idol,” 2014, n.p.).

Katherine Meizel discusses *American Idol's* penchant for old songs at length in her 2011 book *Idolized*. Meizel argues that “the emphasis on older music is about more than accessibility and licensing fees” (2011, 58). She notes that Michael Orland, the show's pianist, arranger, and associate musical director, “partially attributes the prevalence of music from the 1970s and 1980s to producer preference” (2011, 58) since they “know all that music the best” (Orland quoted in Meizel 2011, 58). *Idol* audiences are likely more familiar with older music as well, given that the show's average viewer age has steadily risen from early-thirties to early-fifties in recent years (Kaufman 2014, n.p.). Meizel explains, however, that Orland goes so far as to suggest that “the show may contribute to the perpetuation of interest in these older songs” (2011, 58). The author herself, however, argues that while *Idol* may have had an impact on the expansion of pop's backward-looking trend, the show did not create this trend. Rather, she argues, it has been one part of “a larger flare of pop nostalgia” (2011, 58). Meizel seems to recognize karaoke television's place in the postmodern condition discussed above. Simon Reynolds himself has argued that television shows like *Idol* and *Glee* “fold rock and soul back into the non-threatening tradition of showbiz/light entertainment/variety” (2011, 11) of which the likes of Bing Crosby were a part. So, while postmodern society still appreciates modernist-era rock music, it no longer participates in the cultural movement that inspired the music's initial development. The result, at least in the case of karaoke television, has been that rock music becomes, quite simply, great pop songwriting, no different in concept than any other great pop songwriting – and equally as open to codification, live performance, and reinterpretation.<sup>68</sup> The cover practices employed on these television programs, so distinct from rock's modernist ambitions, are in fact reflective of pre-rock cover trends, despite the drastic shift in repertoire.

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68 As opposed to a kind of untouchable art, as rock(ist) ideology would have it.

Matt Stahl has also established connections between *Idol* and the pop music industry of the pre-rock era. Stahl argues that *American Idol* “participates in a long-standing tradition of amateur music on television that has brought a discourse of opportunity to mass audiences since the 1940s. . . . It is about about producing professionals for and in an established entertainment industry” (2013, 42). *Idol* does not share rock's cover logics because it is working in an entirely different popular music tradition in which success is about practiced professionalism in a long-established craft. Stahl quotes Murray Forman's assertion that, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, television, most notably in the form of amateur talent contests, presented a “new apparatus of opportunity” for aspiring musicians, serving as “a portal to success on a larger scale in the entertainment industry” (2013, 42). Current shows like *Idol*, however, have been somewhat complicated by the lingering effects of rock ideologies on the pop music market. In the pre-rock years, successful contestants could aspire to careers that reflected the format of the competition – they could find real-world success as cover artists. Pat Boone's massively successful career as a cover artist, for example, was in part sparked by appearances on *The Original Amateur Hour* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* in the early 1950s. *American Idol* winners, on the other hand, have generally released albums comprised of new songs written specifically for them (Meizel 2011, 62). Katherine Meizel likens the period of cover performances to a kind of rite of passage or pop apprenticeship, arguing that “on their way to this independence” of performing originals, the contestants “must undergo an onstage training course in canonic literature in order to understand their place in music history as it can be imagined on *American Idol*” (2011, 62). The fact that these performers are even expected to ultimately move into such a state of “independence” seems to have more to do with rock culture's lingering rhetoric of authenticity than any demonstrated skills in writing or performing new

material.

Matt Stahl, Katherine Meizel, and Christopher E. Bell have all explored *American Idol's* paradoxical relationship with authenticity – a concept that had been a key ingredient to rock's veneration of the singer-songwriter over the interpreter. Stahl relates *New York Times* critic Caryn James's complaint that “the music and arrangements [on *American Idol*] are trite, full of wannabe Whitney Houston and Stevie Wonder wails. Originality is a losing strategy” (2013, 46). Stahl goes on to point out a second aspect of what may be perceived as blatant inauthenticity showcased on *Idol*: “the show makes visible a whole process of production that would otherwise be obscured: a highly rationalized process of selection, construction, and marketing” (2013, 46). He argues that, despite all this, “it is exactly authenticity that was and remains a primary theme in *Idol* narratives, and a concern for finalists and fans” (2013, 46). Katherine Meizel argues that the frequent use of vocal melisma is one pattern that demonstrates *Idol's* particular brand of authenticity (2011, 64). Singers showcase individuality and creativity not by writing their own songs, nor by drastically rearranging existing songs, but instead by adding (often extravagant) vocal embellishments to otherwise faithful covers. This kind of creativity is itself subject to a strict set of rules. Contestants who add just the right amount of ornamentation are frequently praised by the judges for making the song their own, while those who add too much may be derided for clouding the song's original melody (Meizel 2011, 64-5). For Meizel, *Idol's* standards for authenticity represent a “mediation of individual identity in reality television” (2011, 65). They showcase a shift in basis from (rock) authorship to (pop) performance.

Christopher E. Bell has argued that while *Idol* contestants are rewarded for their “originality,” it is a “constructed version of originality” (2009, 267). Performances of “covers of covers” are praised for being original. In season five, for example, Chris



Daughtry was applauded for “making the song his own” when, on Stevie Wonder night, he decided to perform the Red Hot Chili Peppers arrangement of “Higher Ground” rather than Wonder's original (Bell 2009, 210). When *Idol* judges talk about originality, what they really mean is that a competitor is original *within* the contexts of the competition, yet still appropriately generic and marketable. Those who are truly original are criticized for not fitting in. Bell argues that “authenticity in the *Idol* world appears to be inextricably linked to commerciality” (2009, 209). He identifies four criteria of *Idol* authenticity. First, an authentic competitor must “know who s/he is” and “inhabit a very specific genre” (2009, 209). An authentic competitor must also sound unlike anybody else in the competition (210). Third, an authentic competitor must be able to give “the producers and the public insight as to the future commodity features of the product s/he will become” (212). Essentially, given the commercial nature of the show, this means that the contestant must have a fleshed out performance style and be able to convince the producers and public that this style (or perhaps business model) is worth investing in. Bell's final factor in determining an *Idol* contestant's level of authenticity has to do with personality (213). On *American Idol* episodes, as much time is spent on contestants' character development as on their singing. Audiences get to know about contestants' hometowns, families, and everyday lives via pre-taped segments that air in between performances. Some voting fans may in fact glean their sense of a contestant's authenticity from these segments rather than from anything to do with music. The fact that contestants primarily perform covers seems to have no bearing on *Idol* audiences' judgements of authenticity. None of Bell's criteria for *Idol* authenticity have anything to do with contestants writing their own music, performing material that has been newly written for them, or even demonstrating some personal connection with the cover songs they do perform.

Bell goes so far as to suggest that, far from being a singing competition, “*Idol* is an image competition in which singing plays a role, but it could be debated that the role singing plays is not even central but peripheral” (2009, 208). He further demonstrates *Idol*'s complex relationship with authenticity using the example of Sarah Goldberg, a prototypical “crazy’ auditioner” who, in season 6, openly admitted to the judges that she could not sing, declaring that she wanted to be the first American Idol to have never sung before:

[Goldberg] represents the direct by-product of a machine that is designed to turn people into things to be bought and sold, where actual authenticity is eventually punished while the appearance of authenticity earns high praise and judges demand currency and relevancy while simultaneously exhibiting a remarkable lack of knowledge of contemporary recording artists. Goldberg is labeled as “crazy” for recognizing she is an active participant in what Baudrillard calls “the Simulacra” – and for openly stating that it hardly matters if she can sing; the American Idol could be anyone, anywhere, because s/he is going to be made into the program’s version of *celebrity* eventually anyway (Bell 2009, 288).

While the words “authentic” and “authenticity” frequently come up in judges' comments on *American Idol*,<sup>69</sup> much of the criteria so essential to rock culture's take(s) on this concept often seem to have no bearing on *Idol* contestants' success.<sup>70</sup> *Idol* transplants the language of rock onto a platform that is rooted in a pre-rock cultural tradition. The result has been that, on *American Idol* and numerous other post-rock-period television programs, karaoke-style, cookie-cutter covering of music associated with rock culture is now routinely celebrated for its “authenticity” rather than likened to the (apparently) tasteless derivations of Pat Boone.

Of the karaoke television programs, *Glee* provides perhaps the most perfect example

69 See chapters 5 and 6 of Bell's dissertation for numerous examples.

70 Keir Keightley describes various facets of rock authenticity in “Reconsidering Rock”. He argues that in rock, “authentic” musicians are, among other things, those “uncorrupted by commerce, trendiness, [and] derivativeness,” while inauthentic musicians display signs of “over-commercialisation” and “manipulation” and have perhaps been compromised “through the intervention of forces that are interpreted to be somehow anti-individualistic” such as “studio musicians, assembly-line songwriting, [and] multi-national record conglomerates” (5.37; 41). Keightley points out that rock culture is also “highly suspicious” of non-writing musicians (5.42-3). While rock authenticity comes in various forms, Keightley argues that in all cases “*some* form of authenticity is required to distinguish rock from the corruption of the mainstream” (5.48). *Idol* seems, by these standards, to be fundamentally based in the inauthentic. Contestants compete by reinventing themselves according to the critiques of industry magnates, hoping to win a chance to record an album comprised of assembly-line pop songs backed by studio musicians. Contestants' offstage character developments seem, indeed, to be the key source for *Idol*'s emotions-based authenticity.

of conservative covering. Unlike *American Idol*, *The Voice*, and other series that follow the “live” protocols of the talent show format, *Glee* airs covers that have been pre-recorded. *Glee*'s covers have been perfected via studio-production techniques, with many recreating the originals so precisely that they could quite plausibly fool a passive listener, if not for the vocals. The show has spent a lot of time on Beatles covers, with the fifth season – ongoing at the time of writing – kicking off with a two-episode tribute to these canonical rock artists (and the release of a coinciding soundtrack cover album). The season 3 cover of “In My Life” is so exact that it tempts one to ponder whether Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, Starr, and Martin had gotten together one last time to back the show's cast. In this truly karaoke-style rendering, not only are the guitar, bass, drum, and piano parts reproduced perfectly vis-a-vis the 1965 recording, but the tempo, timbre and placement of instruments on the stereo spectrum are virtually indistinguishable from the original as well.

While *Glee* has most often concentrated on the Beatles' most accessible, straightforward pop songs, they have also been willing and able to codify and reproduce the band's more obviously modernist material. The show has offered cover versions of “Hello Goodbye” and “All You Need Is Love,”<sup>71</sup> both from *Magical Mystery Tour*, the Beatles' most psychedelic album. All of the original instrumental elements of “Hello Goodbye” are once again present in the cover, and both versions are exactly the same length. The original's unpolished jam feel, however, is lost in the *Glee* version, which employs a more precise drumbeat, overpowers the instruments with a choir of voices, and replaces Paul McCartney's unconstrained yelps with professionally executed *Idol*-style vocal melisma. In the case of “All You Need is Love,” the liberally shifting time signature of the original is maintained but

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71 These particular records display rock modernism through their employment of orchestral textures alongside psychedelic guitar tones and drum grooves, their foregoing of AABA song form in favour of repetitive jams and unexpected coda sections, and, especially in the case of “All You Need is Love,” liberally shifting rhythms and “hippy” lyrical themes.

is once again strictly regulated by a more rigid drum beat. The original instrumentation, as well as guitar solo, are all present, but again downplayed in importance by the addition of a resounding, meticulously practiced vocal choir. The loose, noisy fadeout jam of the original is codified into a catchy climax by *Glee* with the lyrics changed from “she love you” to “he loves you” in order to better fit the storyline of the show.<sup>72</sup>

*The Voice*, following a similar format to *Idol* but with the added elements of teams and celebrity coaches, has also continually showcased the post-rock period's conservative cover practices. Perhaps this program's most striking example is a cover of Queen's “Bohemian Rhapsody” performed by a group of five contestants on a season 5 episode in December 2013. This version provides a remarkable reproduction of the original's instrumental and vocal parts as well as rhythmic and tonal qualities. This is despite the fact that the original took weeks to record (Cunningham 1995, n.p.), contained some 180 overdubs (Hodkinson 2004, 192), and remains respected as one of rock's most elaborate studio productions. Queen themselves never performed “Rhapsody's” introductory vocals or orchestral interlude live; these sections were simply too complex to pull off. The contestants (and production team) of *The Voice*, however, pull off both sections quite convincingly. What *The Voice* does change is the length of the song, shortening it by almost two-and-a-half minutes. Rather than simply skipping sections, though, the arrangers have methodically “trimmed the fat” off the original. By deleting the occasional vocal line or guitar embellishment but maintaining the song's broader movements, the arrangers enable the audience to believe that they are still getting the whole thing. This cover technique, thus, transforms music that was originally conceived as (modernist) groundbreaking cohesive art

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72 For a contrasting example, see the Flaming Lips' experimental 2013 cover of “All You Need is Love.” See also Sonic Youth's “Cicccone Youth” project which yielded “The Whitey Album” (1988), featuring two noisy Madonna covers and a cover of Robert Palmer's “Addicted to Love.”

into simply pop.

#### ***IV – Indie-Experimental Cover Trends***

In order to contextualize contemporary indie-experimental cover practices, it will be useful to distinguish between two usages of “post-rock,” one referring to a historical time period and one referring to a musical genre. Thus far I have been using the term “post-rock” solely in an epochal sense, encompassing the last few decades of popular music, during which time the mainstream became less dominated by rock music and ideology than it had been previously. “Post-rock,” however, also refers to a musical subgenre that emerged in the early 1990s, at approximately the beginning of this post-rock time period. Several of the post-rock(-era) indie experimental artists I refer to here may also be categorized as post-rock in the stylistic sense of the term.

Simon Reynolds is credited with coining this genre title while he was working as a music critic in the early 1990s. In a 1994 column in *The Wire*, Reynolds writes that “post-rock means using rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes, using guitars as facilitators of timbres and textures rather than riffs and powerchords” (n.p.). He goes on to explain that such musicians are often also unafraid of augmenting these rock instruments with computer generated sounds. Stressing post-rock's place outside stylistic practices and attitudes of traditional rock culture, Reynolds notes that “most of the British post-rock groups . . . explicitly define themselves against Grunge, which was [a rockist's] dream come true: the fusion of punk and Metal into an all-American nouveau hard rock” (n.p.) – perhaps the swan song of rock's period of dominance, as discussed above. Guitarists in the post-rock genre, Reynolds explains, are inspired not by the likes of Jimmy Page or Brian May but by natural sounds “such as waterfalls,” or else by electronic music like Kraftwerk (n.p.). Reynolds, writing about a particular scene in the early 1990s, refers mostly to post-rock that is largely

electronic in instrumentation, but the genre has encompassed several trends. More broadly speaking, the “post-rock” stylistic categorization most often refers to instrumental music, or else to the instrumental aspects of music that does feature vocals. Post-rock also frequently features the “slow burn” technique: the music favours gradual dynamic build to melodic or harmonic change (as opposed to, for example, the wavelike dynamics and AABA structure of a prototypical grunge song).<sup>73</sup>

For both Simon Reynolds and experimental music scholar Bill Martin, Brian Eno stands as the godfather of the post-rock genre and its experimental departures from the “rock process” (Reynolds 1994, n.p.). Though Eno's most celebrated period of musical output occurred some fifteen years prior to the emergence of post-rock proper, he championed a similar artistic approach. Reynolds explains that, as with later post-rock, Eno's “approaches to soundscaping involve using musicians as a sort of palette of textures” (n.p.). Eno's music showcased an “elevation of timbre/texture/chromatics over riffs and rhythm sections [and] the desire to create a 'fictional psycho-acoustic space' rather than groove and thrust.” Eno, in short, was “more interested in painting pictures” than in creating “records as a document of a rock band playing on stage” (Eno quoted in Reynolds, 1994, n.p.).<sup>74</sup> It is precisely such soundscape painting that can be heard in many examples of recent indie-experimental cover recordings. Bill Martin argues that Eno's importance to the post-rock genre has something to do with his questionable status as a “musician.” The author writes that Eno “readily embraces the label 'non-musician’” (2002, 103) and that he does not “think the craft of music is relevant to the art of music” (Eno quoted in Martin 2002, 104). For Martin, it is precisely

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73 If These Trees Could Talk, Russian Circles, and This Will Destroy You are examples of bands that have more recently been labelled “post-rock.”

74 As discussed in chapter 1, one of the unique characteristics of rock has, since its inception, been its penchant for using cutting edge studio production techniques to craft songs *as* records fragment by fragment. Where Eno stands apart from this tradition is in his bypassing of the rock sound and instrumentation, often relying solely on the studio as his instrument.

this non-musical, and more specifically non-rock, approach to music that distinguishes both Eno and the post-rock genre from other popular music traditions. Martin contends that Eno and experimental post-rockers have “no shortage of craft, it's just that this craft does not lie in the areas of either notation or skill with traditional or rock musical instruments” (2002, 104).

Martin outlines a “normalization” that occurred in the popular music industry in the 1970s, in some ways similar to that which had occurred after that Second World War, as discussed in the previous chapter. While, in 1960s, rock music and culture had emerged in opposition to pop's traditionalism, by the 1970s rock itself was normalized as the dominant tradition. It had, in a sense, shifted in focus from transformation to conservation. Martin argues that, beginning in the 1970s, the popular music industry undertook four “normalizing responses” to the experimental and unpredictable aspects of rock that had emerged in the 1960s (2002, 107). The first was the promotion of “AOR” – what Martin defines as “adult-oriented rock” but what is conventionally known as “album-oriented rock.” He argues that “the idea here was to say that, yes, rock music has matured, and that means setting aside whatever rebellious impulses you had coming out of the sixties,” pinpointing Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* as a prototypical example of the subgenre (2002, 107-8). Martin's second shift is tied to his claim that, “toward the end of the seventies, record companies stopped funding musical experimentation” since “adventurous music is by its nature unpredictable, and capitalism, especially in the form of capitalist corporations, seeks to plan its ventures” (2002, 108). The author next notes the emergence of “oldies” and “classic rock” radio station formats, which seemed to purge rock of its experimental history, with the former concentrating on “silly stuff” and the latter on “schlock-rock bands such as Journey or Foreigner” (2002, 109). Finally, Martin argues that niche marketing strategies softened the

prominence and effect of rock experimentation. Rock was factionalized by “the more juvenile and insipid stuff” being “promoted more universally” while less formulaic rock was promoted only to particular scenes and age-groups (2002, 110). The result, Martin argues, has been a loss of “the sense that rock music has a trajectory, a dialectic, a dynamic – that it can develop and grow and go in new directions” (2002, 110). In the words of Jean-François Lyotard, we are now seeing a postmodern “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984, xxiv) of progress in popular music.

Music of post-rock times emerged in reaction to a rock music and culture that had been steadily systematized since the 1970s. This reaction has taken at least two distinct forms. The mainstream record industry, as showcased on karaoke television, has simply carried on within this standardized rock business model, impressively demonstrating its effectiveness well into the twenty-first century. For indie-experimental musicians – those of the post-rock *genre* – the reaction has been, in part, to look away from rock. Martin argues that while “most avant rock today still has one foot in this [rock] period . . . there would be nothing avant-garde about more recent experimental rock if it did not also have one foot somewhere else, and it is this attempt to go beyond the classic period that makes this music 'post-rock'” (2002, 111) – and indeed postmodern, with Martin seeming to categorize rock alongside Frederic Jameson's modernist “dead classics.” Such a post-rock turn away from rock's established creative processes and musical hierarchies can be glimpsed through various examples of contemporary experimental cover recordings, and it is to these that I will now turn.

In 2009, veteran “fearless freaks” The Flaming Lips collaborated with Stardeath and White Dwarfs – an equally psychedelic ensemble led by the nephew of Lips' frontman Wayne Coyne – to produce a track-by-track cover album of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of*



*the Moon*.<sup>75</sup> The Lips, having formed in the mid-1980s, before the emergence of the post-rock genre, have roots in post-punk and noise rock. They also, unlike most other musicians currently recording experimental cover versions, are signed to a major record label, Warner.<sup>76</sup> The band has nonetheless been able to remain a relevant force in the contemporary experimental rock scene because they have never adhered to one particular sound or tradition, with each Flaming Lips release different from the last. The Lips' *Dark Side* recordings, though perhaps not quite as dramatically transformative as my other examples below, exhibit significant arrangement modifications, and the album serves as one of the better-known examples of the indie-experimental cover trend.

In reaction to the Flaming Lips' announcement of an upcoming *Dark Side* cover album, one music blogger admitted “I think it sounds like a pretty good idea . . . it's just hard for me to understand why they want to do an album pretty much no one on the planet could make better” (Sully 2009, n.p.). So, while such cover projects may baffle the indie community, they do not cause outrage. The point of post-rock covers never has been to “better” the originals. In karaoke television, as we have seen, covers serve simply to acknowledge and further enjoy the greatness of the original song, or else provide decontextualized vehicles for vocal virtuosity. Experimental cover versions, on the other hand, often seem to have little to do with the originals at all. Wayne Coyne explains the

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75 The two bands joined forces again in 2012, bringing a selection of other experimental groups aboard as well, to recreate another modernist rock opus, King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*, and once again in 2013 for a cover of The Stone Roses' self-titled debut album.

76 The band was signed before the indie record label boom that has been ongoing since the 1990s. Given that the band has only had one hit single in its thirty-year career (“She Don't Use Jelly”, 1993), and it was released some three years after their initial signing, they are indeed relics of a time when major record labels were more willing and capable of taking risks. Unlikely signings such as these apparently had something to do with the surprise success of Nirvana (Beta 2013, n.p.). Lips multi-instrumentalist Steven Drozd explains that “our relationship with Warner Brothers is, they don't give us a whole lot of money to make our record, but then they don't expect us to sell a million records. They say make the record you want” (quoted in Gokhman 2013, n.p.). The group's recent string of highly experimental releases were in fact recorded during a brief unsigned period, after their initial contract with Warner expired in 2010. Wayne Coyne explains that they took the opportunity to try “things that you would not be able to do . . . with a giant corporation like Warner Brothers having to answer for it” (2012, n.p.).

band's creative process for covering *Dark Side* in the following way:

We purposely played it as kind of a punk-rock group would have played it. . . . We didn't know if it would even work, really, but you just sort of say 'Let's try this or that'. . . . You capture a little of the energy and the feel and don't worry about all the little nuances, which I think to me was in direct contrast to the way Pink Floyd made *Dark Side Of The Moon*. . . . I think our approach was saying, 'Well, they did that. Let's do something different.' We kind of just threw ourselves into it, hoping it didn't suck too bad (2010, n.p.).

This unpolished, punk-rock aesthetic can indeed be heard throughout the cover album, presenting an entirely different emotional spectrum than the Pink Floyd original (and perhaps suggesting that “I hate Pink Floyd” is no longer a requisite punk-rock mantra).

The Lips' version of *Dark Side's* opening track, “Speak to Me/Breathe,” turns Pink Floyd's laid-back dream-piece into an aggressive disco-punk freakout. For much of the song, the harmonic progression – originally a two-chord ostinato played by a clean electric guitar – has been simplified to a single chord, implied only by a repetitive distorted bassline. The original recording's characteristic slide-guitar counter-melody now comes in the form of an improvisational electric guitar part swathed in distortion and feedback. The second track, “On the Run,” which had originally served as a groundbreaking display of the capabilities of synthesizers, is transformed into a groovy guitar-based jam, expanding on the disco feel introduced in the first track. While synthesizers can still be heard, they have been relegated to the status of background noise rather than melody – perhaps a showcase of the “soundscaping” so characteristic of Brian Eno and the post-rock genre. The third cover track, “Time,” is melodically fairly consistent with the Pink Floyd original but, again in punk rock fashion, it is shorter and forgoes the guitar solo section. The Lips, however, still manage to surprise during the “Breathe (Reprise)” section of the song, when their own disco-punk version of the album-opener reemerges in place of Pink Floyd's serene original arrangement. “The Great Gig in the Sky,” the last track I will consider here, begins in a

melancholic mood similar to that of the original, featuring only a clean electric guitar and synthesized keyboard. This recording, however, soon gives way to an onslaught of noise, with electropunk rocker Peaches performing the signature vocal solo through a cloud of distortion and reverb. Black Flag's Henry Rollins can be heard reciting the spoken word segments on this and several other tracks on the cover album. Rollins was apparently chosen in part because he claimed never to have heard the original *Dark Side* album. Wayne Coyne asserts: "That made it all the better. You know, we weren't trying to do some important homage to Pink Floyd. They don't need it. We were simply saying, 'Fuck, let's just do our version of this thing . . .'" (2010, n.p.).

In 2006 Tortoise and Bonnie 'Prince' Billy teamed up to release *The Brave and the Bold*, an album of covers of songs from a variety of genres and time periods. Tortoise, recording since 1993, was among the early bands that Simon Reynolds labelled "post-rock."<sup>77</sup> Bonnie 'Prince' Billy is one of several aliases of lo-fi folk singer Will Oldham, who has also recorded since the early 1990s, working with various post-rock musicians over the years. *The Brave and the Bold* is of particular interest to my research into post-rock-era cover practices because it contains interpretations that alter not only aspects of rhythm and harmony, but also melody. The result is a set of recordings that, if not for titles and lyrics, would be perhaps unrecognizable as covers.<sup>78</sup> Covers of Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road" and Elton John's "Daniel" are especially revealing of this kind of transformation.

The most significant change to "Thunder Road" is that it has been transposed from its

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77 Reynolds had initially used the term largely in reference to a British trend, writing about Tortoise as one of the very earliest American examples (1996).

78 It should be noted that, while not every critic liked the album, none that I have found took issue with the fact that these songwriters had chosen to record covers, nor that these covers liberally altered canonical rock songs. Michael J. Kramer, nevertheless, makes sure to distance the bands from the brand of covering with which earlier rock culture took issue: "Bonnie 'Prince' Billy and Tortoise are no bar band cranking out covers for the tourists. *The Brave and the Bold* is a melding of the minds, a comic-book collision of musical forces whose mutant powers turn mere simulation into disturbing mimetic magic" (2006, n.p.).

original, uplifting, major key to a dreary minor. As a result of this, the melody too has been drastically changed, with Oldham choosing to contain the vocals within a much narrower tonal range than the original. The cover version creates an eerie atmosphere by way of a dramatically slowed tempo and the presence of a theremin-esque synthesizer tone in place of the original harmonica and saxophone. The counter-melody this instrument plays is also different from what is heard in the Springsteen original. The “Daniel” cover showcases related kinds of transformations. The melody, though certainly altered, is more recognizable than in “Thunder Road.” The chord progression, however, has again been changed (and in this case, simplified) significantly. Whereas in Elton John's version the verse comprises seven distinct chords, Tortoise and Bonnie 'Prince' Billy have reduced it to a I-IV-V progression, centred around a persistent C chord. The chord progression used in the chorus is closer to the original but it is once again simplified, with the last line skipping John's (more musically jarring) inclusion of an A7 chord on the lyric “in the face of the sky,” and resolving instead directly on a C. The tempo has once again been slowed, and the original's uplifting organ counter-melody has been exchanged for a (highly processed) single, repeating guitar tone. The entire recording seems to have been produced in such a way as to sound distant and somewhat distorted. The result, once again, is an eerie record that evokes, even as it transforms, a classic.

Vancouver experimental musician Crystal Dorval, also known as White Poppy, released *Whiteout* in 2012. The album is a collection of Christmas classics performed by a selection of experimental, noise, and electronic artists, including Dorval herself. Dorval fits Simon Reynolds' description of post-rock perfectly. She has cited both Brian Eno and the natural world as major inspirations (2013a; 2013b, n.p.), claiming, “I am not really weighed down by too much traditional theory and I don't really pay attention to rules or anything. I

think it's definitely important to me to do things that I feel are unique to me" (2013b). The recordings on *Whiteout* display varying degrees of transformation, with each musician employing his or her own interpretive approaches. While in some cases, relatively straight recitals of the original melodies can be heard beneath thick layers of digital processing, other covers are so liberal in interpretation that they at times seem to be connected to the original compositions by title alone.

Prophecy Sun's cover of "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" on *Whiteout* is of particular relevance, given that this composition has already been discussed in the context of pre-rock cover practices in chapter 2. The version heard here, however, is not at all reminiscent of any of the three versions discussed so far. Prophecy Sun's arrangement is in no particular key, replacing the original chord progression with an ostinato of two synthesized dissonant tones that lasts for the entire five-plus minutes of the recording. The vocal melody has been entirely changed, now presented as a kind of ominous chant that perhaps suggests a slow descent into insanity. The lyrics have been trimmed down to two repeating lines that seem to struggle and pull at each other in a foreboding call-and-response. Virgin Blood and Emotional's recording of "Blue Christmas" can be described in a similar way, once again featuring highly processed and repeating vocal and synthesizer lines to create more of a soundscape than a melody. Thin Gaze's "Silent Night" (stylized as "...! Night") establishes the only connection to its title in the last twenty seconds of the recording, during which time a brief excerpt of the original melody becomes audible. Waters' "We Three Kings," and Drogue and Ellen Kibble's "O Come O Come Emmanuel" may contain some of the originals' lyrical and melodic elements, but, through thick fogs of digital delays and reverbs, it is difficult to say for certain. S. Gailey establishes no musical or lyrical connections with the raw material at all, with his version of "White Christmas" simply

amounting to two minutes of foggy dissonance, in the spirit of Brian Eno.

There have been numerous other instances of experimental covering in the contemporary indie music scene. I will take a moment here to briefly touch on a few more examples. Iron and Wine and Gary Jules both scored hits in 2003 with acoustic transformations of electropop songs – The Postal Service's “Such Great Heights” and Tears for Fears' “Mad World,” respectively. Since that time, such cover collections have been released as Less than Jake's *TV/EP* in 2010 (transforming TV theme songs and jingles into ska-punk), Adem's *Takes* in 2008 ('90s alternative converted to folk-pop), and Múm's *Sing Along to Songs You Don't Know* in 2009 (new pop songs containing elements of old pop songs). Indie rock band Yo La Tengo and online entertainment newspaper *The A.V. Club* both hold annual cover song events, though these largely involve spontaneous live performances, making song rearrangements less drastic. In a similar vein, Beck (Hansen) initiated a series of recorded informal album re-creations throughout 2009 and 2010, calling the project “Record Club.”

Lo-fi folk singer Mark Kozalek (a.k.a. Red House Painters, a.k.a. Sun Kil Moon) has recorded collections of cover songs at various points throughout his twenty-plus year career. His 2001 LP *What's Next to the Moon*, mentioned above, is a collection of Bon Scott-era AC/DC songs that have been dramatically rearranged for acoustic guitar and voice. Kozalek confesses that his intention with this record was to show audiences a different side of himself: “It was just my way of singing some shallow songs about girls and one-night stands. It's like, 'Hey, I want to sing about that shit, too!’” (2006, n.p.). In 2013 he released *Like Rats*, including acoustic covers of a variety of artists, from Genesis to Bruno Mars. Kozalek explains that this album “was just a collection of random songs and the point was to show people that Dayglo and Sonny and Cher and Danzig could all be in the same room

together and make sense” (2013). Such a desire to “make sense” out of diverse sources is perhaps not reflective of the noise/post-rock genre. Yet by consciously ignoring (and perhaps invalidating) rock culture's system of hierarchies, Kozalek's *Like Rats* serves as another enactment of the postmodern ethos.<sup>79</sup>

### *V – Post-Rock Covers as “Standards”*

Cover recordings have, as in the pre-rock period, again become prominent in the last twenty years. Unlike in previous generations, however, the motivations, practices, and statuses associated with post-rock covers are varied and, therefore, difficult to reduce to any one, fixed set of rules. In this chapter I have attempted to outline the scope of musical traditions the term “cover” is applied to within even a single generation by focusing on two extremes in contemporary cover practices: the conservative cover stylings of karaoke television and the more transformative ones seen in indie-experimental music. In the conclusions of each of the previous chapters, I provided provisional definitions for the term “cover” based on the degrees of conservation versus transformation reflected in dominant cover practices of the musical period in question. Given the variety of successful cover practices employed in post-rock years, with some tending toward conservation and others toward transformation, this spectral classification will not provide a single, all-encompassing definition here.<sup>80</sup> One way to gain a fresh perspective on the drastically different approaches to covering seen in the two genres discussed here may be to briefly reconsider another term: the “standard.”

The two cover practices discussed in this chapter may both be said, in some ways, to

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<sup>79</sup> Kozalek has also recorded an album of Modest Mouse covers (2005), mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, in addition to numerous single-song covers included on other, predominantly original albums.

<sup>80</sup> Though both conservative and transformative cover practices were also displayed in rock's dominant years, it was, for the most part, the transformative ones that gained critical and market success during this period. In more recent years, both kinds of covering (and surely other kinds as well) have been able to find success within particular market niches.

return to or reflect older traditions involved with the performance of standards. Karaoke television seems to carry on in the tradition of the “pop standard,” whereas indie-experimental cover artists employ techniques more generally associated with the “jazz standard.” In chapter 2 I suggested that, historically, “standards” plundered music's past while “covers” plundered the present. The term standard has, however, been frozen in time, still being used largely to refer to the same pre-rock songs it always has, designating a repertoire more than a practice. The result has been that, in post-rock years, the term “cover version” has been called upon not only to refer to new versions of recent songs, but to refer to song versions that, in generations gone by, would have undoubtedly been understood as standards. This likely has something to do with the lingering effects of rock culture and its “forever young” mentality. The fact, however, is that songs written by the Beatles and their contemporaries are now half a century old, can spark a collective cultural memory, and have been re-recorded and performed thousands of times (and likely more). A better definition of the “pop standard” than this is difficult to imagine. In 2001, Keir Keightley pondered, “if the ruling songs of an era are ultimately but the songs of the ruling generation’s youth, perhaps we might now begin to think about the popular music of the baby boom as itself entailing a set of new standards” (2001b, 32). In 2003, he suggested the term “rock standard” to account for “the growing frequency with which classic rock songs are regularly covered by artists as diverse as Michael Bolton and Pearl Jam” (617). The “rock” qualifier, however, seems hardly necessary in recent years, with karaoke television's cover practices in many ways virtually indistinguishable from those of the pre-rock popular music industry.

Contemporary indie-experimental artists make standards out of rock songs as well, interpreting songs in a way that is perhaps reminiscent of another pre-rock phenomenon: the jazz standard. In his article, “Gil Evans: The Art of Musical Transformation,” jazz professor



Scott Reeves explains that jazz arrangers treat standards as an opportunity to compose rather than cover – a different take on authorship than has been seen in the pop world. A new version of a standard need not resemble its predecessor, but rather may include new melodies, rhythms, and instruments. This, in part, is because “in the jazz tradition, the distinction between improviser and composer is often blurred. . . . Improvisation may be viewed as a spontaneously created composition” (Reeves 2002, 1). And yet, oftentimes, these musicians are improvising their “compositions” on top of already composed standards, perhaps not unlike what is heard in the highly transformative experimental cover recordings discussed above. Reeves goes on to paint a strangely familiar picture of mid-century Canadian jazz pianist Gil Evans, explaining that he had a “penchant for transforming classical repertoire” (2002, 4), made “judicious use of dissonance” (2), was known for his “employment of instruments not normally found in large jazz ensembles” (4), “explored the use of electronic instruments and synthesizers” (9), and “occasionally Evans employ[ed] unusual instrumental textures to convey nonmusical images” (9). Though I do not necessarily propose to make equivalent the musical skills, sonic characteristics or cultural traditions of jazz musicians and musicians of the post-rock genre, similarities in aesthetic can clearly be seen here. Post-rock-genre musicians experiment with instruments and technologies and employ dissonance and sonic textures in order to transform another kind of classical repertoire: the music of the rock era. In the process these musicians seem often to “compose” as much as “recite” or “interpret.”

The status of the “cover version” in the post-rock period reflects the fact that rock is no longer a force threatening cultural change but rather embodies a broadly shared cultural tradition. As indie composer Sufjan Stevens declares, “rock and roll is a museum piece” (quoted in Reynolds 2011, 10). Post-rock musical movements have reacted to rock's

heritage status in a number of ways. As I have argued throughout this chapter, these reactions are embodied in the cover recording practices demonstrated within these movements. For karaoke television, the trend has been to simply participate in and enjoy the museum, covering rock's artifacts in such a way so as to celebrate the originals, and perhaps make them more accessible to a younger public, as was seen with *The Voice's* take on Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." For indie-experimental cover artists, the trend has been to take advantage of the rock repertoire's emancipation from its original context in order to transform this music into something different: to "make it new," again. In both streams, however, the postmodern condition can be detected, and it is postmodernism that continues to ensure that George Plasketes's "Cover Age" carries on unhindered.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored various incarnations of the “cover version” across the past seventy years. I have considered numerous practices, uses, perceptions, and definitions that have been associated with this label in order to reveal its shifting nature. In doing so I have also pointed to the complications brought forth by the continuing use of this single term – “cover version,” and its various forms – to refer to a musically, culturally, economically, and perhaps morally diverse set of recording practices. In this task I have followed Sheldon Schiffer, Michael Coyle, and Kurt Mosser, who have all expressed some degree of concern over the term's divergent connotations. Mosser has argued that “the very term 'cover song' is systematically ambiguous; to use it without indicating that ambiguity conceals issues that are fundamental to any analysis or evaluation of a given cover song, and of that cover and its relationship to the song it is said to cover” (2008, n.p.). The numerous cover trends that I have discussed throughout this thesis attest to this ambiguity, and indeed suggest that ever new trends in cover recording will continue to emerge.

In writing this thesis, I have furthermore aimed to use the evolution of cover practices as a way to analyze broader cultural, musical, and economic changes. As noted earlier in this thesis, Andrew G. Davis has argued that covers present “unique opportunities for detailing the potential of a song to become recontextualized within the progression of historical circumstance and cultural development” and that “by removing a song from the original context, of its authorship and placing it in a different social/historical milieu, cover songs can express a discursive relationship between different eras” (2010, 112). Whereas Davis was considering how individual songs can change according to cultural developments, my own research has concentrated on how the “cover version” concept itself – practices, motivations, uses, etc. – evolves alongside other ongoing social developments. Sheldon

Schiffer argues that “the function of the cover song (as we might think of it now) changed as the economy of music changed, and as that economy adapted to the ideological shifts of the societies that played the covers” (2010, 80). It is for this reason that, as I have argued throughout this thesis, popular musical eras, genres, and subcultures may be identified based, in part, on the appearance of particular kinds of cover practices (or lack thereof). My task, admittedly, was perhaps overly ambitious and there is much work still to be done on various moments in the history of cover recording. In this thesis, I have separated the history of cover versions into three periods: “rock,” “pre-rock,” and “post-rock.” I have dedicated a chapter to each of these periods, analyzing some of the more prominent trends in cover versions to have dominated during each.

My first chapter focused on “rock” cover practices. My major concern was with the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, but I also considered the elements of rock culture apparent in cover practices that immediately preceded and followed this period. I began my discussion of these years by grappling with the distinctions between the “rock” and “rock 'n' roll” genre categorizations, pointing to the different cover practices embraced by each. Rock ideology has traditionally been sceptical of cover recording and other practices that may be perceived as unoriginal, contrived, or *inauthentic*. I have argued, however, that despite the eventual dominance of the singer-songwriter within rock culture, rock 'n' roll, rock's first manifestation, was based largely on covers. These covers were, however, for the most part different in character from those of previous popular musical genres, exhibiting adaptation, fusion, and interpretation rather than market-driven rehash. Elvis's first single, for example, contains a (white-written) bluegrass cover and a (black-written) blues cover, with the result being two recordings that sound more like each other than they do their respective originals.

Though there have been several cover recordings that have served important

functions in rock history – The Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965) and Joe Cocker's "With a Little Help from My Friends" (1968), for example – rock's period of dominance was, for the large part, characterized by a turn away from non-artist written music and a celebration of (a particular perception of) musical innovation and originality. During rock's high modernist period in the late 1960s, new concepts such as the "concept album" and "psychedelic" or "progressive rock" invigorated the popular music industry, leaving little room for cover recording. By 1970, industry officials were reporting the financial risks now involved in cover recording. Many of the covers that did gain attention in this period were those that were highly transformative of the source material, including the two mentioned above, Jimi Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower" (1968), and Vanilla Fudge's "You Keep Me Hangin' On" (1967), among others. These records were perhaps better able to gain the respect of rock audiences than other covers because their transformative interpretations could be seen as a kind of composition – as in the case of jazz improvisation – rather than imitation. A final rock cover trend I discussed was a series of album-length cover projects released by a number of innovative rock songwriters in the early-to-mid 1970s. I argued in my first chapter, however, that these projects were largely commercial disappointments, with audiences and critics vastly preferring these artists' original material.

My second chapter focused on "pre-rock" cover versions, from approximately the end of WWII to the beginning of rock 'n' roll. It began with a historical discussion of the term "cover version" itself. My findings on this matter differ from those offered by Michael Coyle, who has argued that the term references a kind of safety disk used in Decca's pressing process in the 1940s. An analysis of scholarly journals, trade magazines, and newspapers led me to conclude that this term emerged in the second half of the 1940s, having its basis in the idea of "news coverage" and the broader strategy of "covering all bases." Just as various

newspapers will “cover” the same story to appeal to different readers and thus compete with each other for customers, so too would different record companies compete for listeners by “covering” the same song, perhaps adapting it for different markets or genres. Similarly, in order to maximize sales, a competitive record company would strive to “cover all their bases” – they would record versions of most of the popular hits of the day. This early definition of the term meshes with the dominant cover practices of the pre-rock popular music industry. Cover recordings, I argued in chapter 2, were a commonplace, respected, and lucrative phenomenon throughout the pre-rock years.

Most of the biggest pre-rock pop stars were not songwriters. Significant pre-rock performers such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Ella Fitzgerald sustained highly successful recording careers based on interpreting others' music – sometimes music that had been written specifically for them, but often cover versions in the truest sense. Cover versions flooded the *Billboard* charts throughout the pre-rock years, with multiple recordings available for virtually every hit song of the era. I argued in chapter 2 that rock culture's focus on individual performers – characters with names, faces, and personalities – came largely as a result of the increasing viability of new technologies such as television, vinyl records, and magnetic-tape recording studios. In the immediate pre-rock years, these technologies were still emergent, and so a song-based industry still dominated. Consumers purchased recordings based on genre, or perhaps convenience or availability, having less concern for who sang the song first. I argued that, perhaps because of a broader cultural conservatism, pre-rock cover versions were also often conservative in their interpretations. What they did routinely transform, however, was genre. Record companies could “cover” all of a song's market potential by offering multiple versions tailored to fans of different genres.

The third chapter of this thesis analyzed the cover trends of the “post-rock” period, spanning approximately the last twenty years. As was the case with rock, my study of post-rock cover versions also required consideration of emergent cultural trends in the decades preceding this periodization. Covers, most often in the form of tribute albums, became very popular in the 1980s. Traditional songwriting rock acts like U2, however, still dominated the sales charts. It was not until after the moment of grunge in the early 1990s that certain rock ideologies – the preeminence of the singer-songwriter in particular – became less powerful in the commercial mainstream. One result of this shift has been the major success of a phenomenon that I label “karaoke television,” including television programs like *American Idol*, *Glee*, and *The Voice*, which revolve around cover versions. I argued in chapter 3 that these series, though based heavily on emulation, codification, and other un-rock approaches, nonetheless rely on a rock repertoire and use the language of rock. Contestants on *Idol*, for example, are routinely judged based on their *authenticity*, despite the fact that *Idol*-authenticity seems in many ways to perfectly embody rock's view of inauthenticity. This suggests that while certain features of rock, such as the centrality of the singer-songwriter, have become residual in the post-rock years, the popular music industry still retains aspects of rock culture. I argued that karaoke television may also embody a kind of postmodernism in contrast to rock's modernism, commemorating and codifying that which initially shocked and sought to push into the future.

In chapter 3, I also discussed a second trend in post-rock cover recording: the indie-experimental cover. In the indie segment of the post-rock popular music industry, the singer-songwriter function still dominates. Cover versions have, nevertheless, appeared in significant numbers of indie releases in recent years. I contended in chapter 3 that many of these covers may be construed as experimental in nature. I provided several examples of

cover versions that modify, or “experiment” with, the basic song's key identifying elements: they transform not only genre and instrumentation, but also harmony, rhythm, and even melody. I argued that many of these post-rock-period indie musicians may also be categorized under the “post-rock” genre heading, described by Simon Reynolds as “using rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes” (1994, n.p.). Finally, I suggested that, as with karaoke television, indie-experimental cover practices demonstrate a kind of postmodernism. Rather than systematically reiterating rock songs' initially modernist meanings, however, these cover artists may be said to participate in a “postmodern refusal to make sense” (Mitchell 1989, 278), often seeming to ignore songs' original contexts entirely.

The final argument I made in this thesis was that recent rearticulations of the term “cover version” may be better understood by reconsidering another re-recording phenomenon: the “standard.” I followed Keightley's idea of the “rock standard” (2003), arguing that many of the cover practices in the post-rock commercial mainstream are virtually indistinguishable from the “pop standard” concept rooted in the pre-rock period, with repertoire being the key difference. Indie-experimental cover practices, likewise, seem to be reminiscent of the “jazz standard.” Like jazz improvisers, post-rock indie cover artists may demonstrate as much “composition” as “interpretation” or “recitation” in their re-recordings. In both cases, songwriting is no longer privileged as the foundation of artistic originality or authenticity.

In writing this thesis, I have realized that considerations of the “standard,” including the “cover version's” relationship to it, is perhaps the area of research most demanding further scholarly attention in order to further elucidate many of the issues explored here. The jazz standard, in particular, has not yet been explored to a satisfactory degree, with much of the currently available research focusing on the musical merits of particular



performers or performances rather than broader cultural or commercial trends. Research on covers would, additionally, benefit from further exegesis of the contradictions that are sometimes apparent between covers ideologies held by rock audiences and critics and the actual histories, opinions, and actions of rock musicians. As discussed in chapter 1, local-level original bands often deride their covers-playing counterparts as mere “entertainers” like Elvis, while simultaneously praising bands like Yes and Rush (Groce 1989). The reality, however, is that both Yes and Rush, like many rock bands, began life playing (and even recording) cover versions. And John Lennon, whom any rock fan would praise as an invaluable member of the rock songwriting nobility, has said that the influence of Elvis, along with years of performing covers, were integral factors in the development of the Beatles.

These unanswered questions and others are, however, best saved for another project. It has been my hope in writing this thesis that I have been able to in some way contribute to a clearer understanding of the ever-fluctuating reality of the “cover version.”

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