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Judging Covers

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Abstract: Cover versions form a loose but identifiable category of tracks and performances. We distinguish four kinds of covers and argue that they mark important differences in the modes of evaluation which are possible or appropriate for each: mimic covers, which aim merely to echo the canonical track; rendition covers, which change the sound of the canonical track; transformative covers, which diverge so much as to instantiate a distinct, albeit derivative song; and referential covers, which not only instantiate a distinct song, but for which the new song is in part about the original song. In order to allow for the very possibility of transformative and referential covers, we argue that a cover is characterized by relation to a canonical track rather than merely by being a new instance of a song that had been recorded previously.

Common usage distinguishes originals from covers. Roughly, the distinction is this: An original is a recording or performance of a song either by the person who wrote it or by the person for whom it was written. A cover is a later recording or performance by someone else.

We argue for a number of related claims: First, there are different kinds of covers corresponding to different evaluative criteria that are applicable and appropriate to them (§§II-V). Second, a recording or performance counts as a cover relative to a canonical version. So its status as a cover is importantly a situated, historical fact (§IV). Third, a cover may differ from canonical versions in ways which make it an instance of a distinct albeit derivative song (§IV). Fourth, in some cases a cover can take on a novel meaning such that the new, derivative song is *about* the canonical one (§V).

None of our arguments appeal to the precise essence of covers as such. We are not concerned with fundamental metaphysics. Rather, we take covers as they are identified in common usage, and our claims are compatible with different accounts of the underlying ontology.

I. WHAT IS A COVER?

The phrase “cover version” originated in the 1960s to describe a new recording or performance of a song that someone else had already made a hit. A typical dictionary definition identifies a *cover* as “A recording of a song, etc., which has already been recorded by someone else.”²

This definition is too simple and includes cases which one would hesitate to call covers. For example, Patsy Cline’s 1961 recording of ‘Crazy’ is taken as the paradigm version of the song. *Rolling Stone* identifies Cline’s version as the eighty-fifth greatest song of all time.³ Yet the song was written by Willie Nelson, and Cline first encountered

it when she heard Nelson's recorded demo of the song. Merely that it was recorded by someone else, as on the demo selling the song, is not enough to make Cline's track a cover. One could require a published recording, which would exclude Nelson's demo and preserve the intuition that Cline's version is not a cover. But Nelson later recorded his own version of 'Crazy', and it is vexed whether his version counts as a cover or not.

If we were concerned with the semantics or metaphysics of covers as such, we could revise the definition further. By an iterative process of counter-example and monster-barring, our definition would become more cumbersome — but no more enlightening. Our intuitions are probably not strong enough to survive such a vigorous process.

Gabriel Solis argues that covers both define and are defined relative to rock music. He understands rock to be "rock-as-tradition" which groups together "hard rock, punk, hardcore, metal, and so on", and he defines covers in terms of the versioning practices of that tradition.⁴ Such a definition substitutes the shadowy for the obscure, because *rock-as-tradition* is itself nebulous. It is worse perhaps, because 'rock' in this broad sense is not a term of ordinary language. As such, we cannot rely on common usage and intuitions about cases.

We do not hope to provide a precise definition of 'cover'. We are interested primarily in issues of *evaluation* rather than definition, so it suffices that we begin with rough agreement about some performances and recordings which are cover versions. To begin, we take the following to be a prima facie sufficient condition for being a cover: A

version of a song is a cover when it is recorded or performed by an artist or group who did not write and compose the song themselves, and where there is a prior recording which is accepted as canonical or paradigmatic.

Because this is only a sufficient condition, there are some acknowledged *cover versions* which do not fall under it. We return to this point below (§IV).

The condition relies on the notion of a canonical or paradigmatic recording, what Mosser calls the “base” version of the song.⁵ A version’s status as canonical is clearly something which can vary over time. It is not entirely listener-relative, but it is relative to an audience or a community. It is possible for an artist to record a cover version of some song and for their cover to become the canonical version; in later contexts, other versions may be covers of it. (We give examples further on.)

In what follows, we consider only works of popular music with lyrical content. We are neutral on the question of whether *covers* strictly-speaking are only possible in the rock tradition, but we will avoid examples from beyond it.

To reiterate, we are not presuming that *cover* is a sharp metaphysical category. However, we are making some ontological assumptions. We minimally assume distinctions between songs, tracks, and performances.

- Lyrics and musical structure, thinly specified, provide the identity conditions for a *song*. Interpretation allows for performances and recordings to be of the same song even if they sound different.⁶

- A track or recording is a complete specification of sounds. A track typically involves elements from several sessions and a great deal of work in the studio, and it is something besides a performance. The track can exist as multiple copies and in different media, but any differences in sound are deficiencies.⁷
- A performance is connected to a dated event. The dated event can only happen once, and a later performance would be a distinct instance of the song.⁸

We do not make any strong assumptions about the fundamental nature of songs, tracks, and performances. One might interpret them in terms of an inflationary ontology according to which songs are universals, recordings are subordinate universals, and performances are particulars. Alternately, one might prefer a deflationary ontology according to which what strictly-speaking exists are sonic events that can stand in the same-song or same-track relation to one another. Or one might treat songs and tracks as historical individuals.⁹ We merely insist on the possibility of reidentifying the same song, and any plausible ontology must allow for such a commonplace activity.

II. MIMIC COVERS

Some covers merely aim to echo the arrangement and interpretation of the canonical version. Call these *mimic covers*. Mosser calls these reduplication covers and suggests that one might deny that they are *covers* at all.¹⁰ This reticence strikes us as odd. For one thing, mimic covers fit the sufficient criterion which we formulated in §I. For

another, bands that play mimic covers exclusively — sometimes called tribute bands — are also commonly called *cover bands*. Mosser himself gives the example of the Dark Star Orchestra, a group that aims to faithfully reproduce performances by the Grateful Dead. Other examples include Fan Halen (a Van Halen cover band), BC/DC (an AC/DC cover band from British Columbia), and the Iron Maidens (an all-female Iron Maiden cover band).

Few fans would opt to see the tribute band all things being equal, but the original band may no longer exist, may not perform locally, and will not be performing all the time. So cover bands provide a surrogate for seeing a live performance by the canonical band. A maximally successful cover band would be acoustically indistinguishable from the canonical band. A striking example is the band British Steel, a Judas Priest cover band. When Rob Halford (the original lead singer of Judas Priest) left the band, Tim “Ripper” Owens (the lead singer of British Steel) was recruited to replace him. Owens was selected precisely because he could sing like Halford.¹¹

What holds for the oeuvre of a cover band also holds for a single mimic cover: The best mimic cover sounds just like the original.

Mimic covers are typically performed live.¹² Since the primary mode of evaluation for mimic covers is fidelity to the original, it is no surprise that studio recordings of mimic covers are rare. A perfectly successful mimic cover track would be indistinguishable from the canonical track. Yet mimic cover tracks are possible. A friend of ours from grad school — an amateur, aspiring recording engineer — recorded his own

versions of several pop tracks. Other friends recorded instruments and voices, and he worked to have the production and effects match the canonical version. For him, success was matching the sound of the original. These recordings were technical exercises. Evaluated as works of art, they were redundant. He intended them merely to be works of craft, demonstrations of and practice for his audio production skills.

Suppose we try to evaluate the mimic cover by some standard other than fidelity to the canonical version — consider, for example, the song or the interpretation instantiated in the mimic cover. Because the aim of the mimic cover is to echo the canonical version, the two are instances of the same song and the same interpretation. Insofar as the mimic cover differs, it is a defect of craft. So, for purposes of evaluating the song or interpretation, listening to the mimic cover is like listening to the canonical version being played back. Failures of the mimic cover are like deficiencies in the playback, and these may hinder our ability to fairly evaluate the song or interpretation. All the same, we are evaluating the canonical version and not the mimic cover.

III. RENDITIONS

Tribute bands perform covers exclusively, but many other performers include one or two covers as part of a set that is otherwise their own original songs. Consider the singer/songwriter Vance Gilbert performing the Jimi Hendrix song “Castles Made of Sand”. Gilbert introduces his own songs with stories about his life, but introduces “Castles Made of Sand” simply by saying that it is time for a little Hendrix. Gilbert plays it on an acoustic guitar, rather than an electric, and sings it with the same voice he uses

for his own compositions.

Gilbert's cover is not a mimic cover. He is not attempting to sound like Hendrix. Although it is clearly an instance of the same song as the canonical version, the performance is not meant to sound like the Hendrix track. While acknowledging the canonical version, Gilbert is playing his own rendition of the song. Call this a *rendition cover*.

Rendition covers, unlike mimic covers, are often recorded tracks. Such recordings are not redundant in the same way that recorded mimic covers are, because the covering artist or band has made different interpretive choices. For example, the Swedish rock band The Cardigans has covered a number of songs by the heavy metal band Black Sabbath. The Cardigans' cover of "Iron Man" tells the same story using the same words as Black Sabbath's canonical version. Yet one could hardly mistake one version for the other. The emotional content is different — one might find the faster, louder canonical version to be more threatening and the Cardigans' softer cover to be more sad. If we treated the *song* as thickly-specified, this difference would make the Cardigans' "Iron Man" a different (although derivative) song than the original. Following Andrew Kania, we take rock songs to be thinly-specified: Different interpretive choices are compatible with tracks or performances being of the same song. This allows us to acknowledge the straightforward sense in which the Cardigans recorded a Black Sabbath song.¹³

Songs being thinly-specified allows not just for some musical differences but also for some changes to the lyrics. For example, on the 1993 album *Across the Borderline*,

Willie Nelson sings a cover of Paul Simon's "Graceland". There is a line in the song which Simon sings "There is a girl in New York City, who calls herself the human trampoline"; Nelson sings it as "a girl in Austin, Texas". The change from NYC to Austin fits Simon's narrative while fitting better with Nelson's idiom. So Nelson is playing the same song as Simon even though he has changed some of the lyrics. Note that this flexibility is not limitless, even if the limits are vague. If Nelson had substituted a different destination for the title attraction, then he would not have been singing "Graceland".¹⁴

These examples illustrate that rendition covers often involve a change in musical genre. Yet they need not. The Bangles' 1980s cover of Simon and Garfunkel's 1960s "Hazy Shade of Winter", for example, is a rock song played as a rock song. Yet it is not just a mimic cover. Tracy Hoff of the Bangles recounts that, "When I heard that song, I thought, that's so perfect for The Bangles."¹⁵ They began playing it in concert, and their arrangement and interpretation made it sound like a Bangles song. Both metaphorically and literally, they played it in their own voice. The Bangles' studio track of the song, recorded for a movie soundtrack, became a hit.

We should not evaluate rendition covers by their sonic fidelity to the canonical version. Insofar as we have the canonical version in mind, we attend primarily to the ways that the rendition cover departs from it. We *compare* a mimic cover to the canonical version, but we *contrast* a rendition cover with it. A rendition cover (when considered in relation to the original) is successful in this way insofar as it departs from the canonical

version in artistically interesting or virtuous ways, a failure to the extent that it departs in artistically uninteresting or defective ways, and *prima facie* worthwhile only to the extent that it departs at all.

This mode of evaluation, which focuses on respects in which the cover diverges from the canonical version, is especially important for assessing creativity and for assigning credit. The Cardigans' cover of "Iron Man" is a *tour de force* because it is shockingly different than the Black Sabbath version, and the band deserves credit for imagining it. Contrast recent *a cappella* versions of Dr. Dre's "Bitches Ain't Shit", including ones performed by college *a capella* groups at Eastern Michigan University and UC Berkeley.¹⁶ The song originally appeared on Dre's 1992 album *The Chronic*, but Ben Folds had a hit with a cover of it in 2005. Folds' cover is a piano and voice arrangement that transforms Dre's rap into a serenade, and he has sometimes performed it *a cappella*. The various vocal groups who have performed it follow Folds' arrangement. The groups deserve credit for a successful performance and perhaps for arranging several voices, but credit for the surprising genre shift goes to Folds.¹⁷

Musicians may choose to perform or record a cover as a way of acknowledging the canonical version. As numerous authors note, a cover may "show an important influence on the artist."¹⁸ Mosser gives this example: "Talking Heads' cover of Al Green's 'Take Me to the River' ... tells ... the Talking Heads' audience that the band has listened not just to Al Green, but more likely than not to a good bit of Rhythm and Blues; while not part of that tradition, its references to it help establish its musical bona fides

and emphasize the importance of those sources.”¹⁹ However, one should not take this point too far. A fan who knows nothing of Al Green learns nothing about the Talking Heads’ musical tastes. Rather, the song is just one they perform but did not write. Even a fan who knows about Al Green will not be able to infer much from the cover. Perhaps the Talking Heads heard this one R&B song and decided to cover it, as the Bangles did with “Hazy Shade of Winter”. Perhaps they only covered the song because their producer recommended it. Insofar as the cover points to influences on the band, it does so in combination with other facts.²⁰ These associations are relevant to an assessment of the band, perhaps. We may even consider them when assessing the cover as a historically situated work.

Further context beyond just knowing about the canonical version is required to assign credit and assess the creativity of a rendition cover. It may also be important to consider the cover in contrast with other covers of the same song, to other songs in the oeuvre, or to other songs by contemporary artists. Indeed, a new song can fail to be original if it is utterly typical of its genre. A performance of such a dud, although not a cover, would be stultifying and banal. A cover may fail to be original for similar reasons, even while differing markedly from the canonical track which it covers. Assessing novelty and creativity requires considering context, and what a performance or track covers is part of a cover’s context.

According to Michael Rings, the chief appeal of genre-shifted renditions is that they can surprise us by treating familiar material in an unfamiliar way.²¹ “My proposal,”

Rings writes, “is that much of the pleasure in listening to these covers comes from following a familiar song’s progress through an unfamiliar (relative to the song) stylistic landscape: *how will this next passage sound within the conventions of this new genre?*”²² Of course, when one evaluates a genre-shifted cover in relation to the canonical version, one can attend to how the song sounds in its new setting. However, it does not follow that this is the only or even necessarily the predominant interest of such covers. First, one can only sincerely wonder how the rendition will go the first time that one hears it. On subsequent listenings, one remembers how it went. If anticipation and surprise were the primary appeal of genre-shifted rendition covers, then they should stop being interesting after one had heard them enough to be familiar with them – but many, like the Cardigans’ Black Sabbath covers, do not. Second, there is a way in which rendition covers can be aesthetically interesting when there is no change in genre. Surely at least some genre-shifted renditions are rewarding in *that* way, rather than in virtue of the genre shift itself.

In contrast with evaluating it in relation to the canonical version, there is alternate mode of evaluation we can take with a rendition cover: considering it on its own merits. We can assess the song and the interpretation of the song which are instantiated in the cover, without considering whether it is the performer or someone else who wrote the song and made the interpretive choices. Kania points to the possibility of such evaluation when he writes that, “although a band may take just one version of a song as their target, knowledge of this does not seem relevant to critical assessment of their track.”²³ This can clearly diverge from the first mode of evaluation. To offer a schematic case, imagine a

tedious song written by singer/songwriter A who makes an artless recording, awkwardly fumbling through the song while playing guitar. Later, group B competently arranges it for a full band and skillfully performs a rendition cover. In the first mode of evaluation, we can judge the cover to be an artistic success. B has departed from A's original in a rewarding way. In the second mode of evaluation, we can judge the cover to be a failure. The resulting performance might still be tedious because the song itself is just that bad.²⁴

Regardless of how we describe the difference, there are clearly these two different modes of evaluation that can be employed with rendition covers: the former considers it relative to the canonical version, the latter does not.

IV. TRANSFORMATIVE COVERS

One might think that mimic covers and rendition covers would exhaust the possibilities: covers intended to sound like the canonical track and those intended to sound different, respectively. We argue that this is not so, that there are further important distinctions to be drawn.

Consider the case of Aretha Franklin's classic "Respect", a hit in 1967. Many listeners think of it as Franklin's song. Yet it is a cover of a 1965 Otis Redding hit of the same name. Common usage recognizes Franklin's track as a cover. For example, *The Telegraph* ranks it as the fifth greatest cover ever recorded, and *Rolling Stone* ranks it as the fifth greatest song of all time, calling it the "definitive cover,"²⁵ Nevertheless, Franklin's 'Respect' is not merely a rendition of Otis Redding's song. Her version adds

lyrics absent from the original: spelling out the word “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”, the change from “give me my proper respect” to “give me my propers”, adding the line “Take care TCB” (meaning, take care of business), adding the line and backup vocal “Sock it to me”, and so on. Beyond these additions, Franklin also changed some of the original lyrics. Where Redding sang, “All I’m asking is for a little respect when I come home”, Franklin sang, “All I’m asking is for a little respect when *you* get home.” This transforms Redding’s ultimatum to a housebound woman into a demand for consideration, one which might be made between equals. The *Rolling Stone* article describes this as the difference between “a brawny march” and “calling an end to the exhaustion and sacrifice of a raw deal.” These differences go well beyond the change to a few chord progressions or the substitution of a few inconsequential words. This is not merely a difference in musical style or idiom, but a significant difference in content. So Franklin’s track is best understood as instantiating a distinct (though derivative) song from Redding’s, even treating his composition as a thinly specified rock song.

Understood in this way, Franklin’s “Respect” will not count as a *cover* according to the criterion we offered in §I. That was only offered as a *sufficient* condition, however. We can add this alternate sufficient condition: A track (or performance) is a cover when it is of a song which is sufficiently derivative of a song which the artist or group did not write themselves, and where there is a recording of the original song which is accepted as canonical or paradigmatic. Call a cover which satisfies this alternate condition a *transformative cover*.

We mean “derivative” in a non-critical, genetic sense, rather than as a synonym for banal. How derivative a song must be in order to be ‘sufficiently derivative’ is admittedly vague, but common usage suffices to draw a rough boundary. Franklin’s “Respect” is sufficiently derivative of Redding’s, and common usage identifies it as a cover. Weird Al Yankovic’s “Yoda” is not sufficiently derivative of the Kink’s “Lola” — the two share no lyrics at all — and common usage identifies it as a parody rather than a cover. There may be some unclear boundary cases, but the rough distinction will be clear enough for the cases we consider in this paper. (Recall that our primary interest is evaluative. Vagueness would be a greater worry if our project were metaphysical.)

Andrew Kania gives an account according to which a cover must be an instance of the very same song as the canonical track. Moreover, on his account, the object of a cover (*what is covered* by it) is the singular song rather than the original track. So Kania would reject the very possibility of a transformative cover.

Kania’s case depends partly on his choices of examples. He provides a lengthy discussion the Pet Shop Boys’ cover of Elvis Presley’s “Always on My Mind”. The cover was deliberately arranged so as to be different than the Elvis track. For example, the chord progressions are more complex. Kania uses the case to illustrate the importance of the *track* as an object of aesthetic attention; the deliberate effort not to sound like Elvis shows what “the Pet Shop Boys want their track to be measured against... Elvis’s recording of the song, rather than the thin song itself.”²⁶ The connection between Elvis’ version and the cover is especially salient because the cover was recorded as part of a

tribute to Elvis, and the connection is strong enough that Kania does not even mention the pre-Elvis hit recording of the song (by Brenda Lee). Kania maintains (correctly, we think) that the Pet Shop Boys' cover is an instance of the same song which is instantiated by Elvis' track. Yet he concludes from this (wrongly) that a cover must *always* instantiate the very same song as the prior version and so, further, that the object of the cover is just the song and not the prior version at all.

Since the Pet Shop Boys' track is the same song as the Elvis track but is intended to sound different, it is a rendition cover. As such, there are two possible modes of evaluation. Engaging in what we identified as the first mode of evaluation, *The Telegraph* eulogizes that the Pet Shop Boys' version "elevated Elvis's tender elegy... into a monumental explosion of high pop camp" and lauds it as one of the best covers ever recorded.²⁷ This mode of evaluation requires identifying the track not merely as a cover of "Always on My Mind" but as a cover of the Elvis track. So we think it makes more sense to say (as we did above) that the object of the cover is a prior track rather than merely the song. Kania argues against such a move on the grounds that "rock audiences seem to group covers with respect to the song they are intended to manifest, rather than simply by the track(s) taken as the immediate object of the covering intention."²⁸ Yet he offers no reason to think this is so, and actual usage suggests the opposite.

Returning to the example of Franklin's "Respect", Kania's account would force us to say either that the Franklin track is not a cover (in opposition to common usage) or that she sings precisely the same song that Redding composed (in opposition to common

sense). The case of “Respect” poses what he calls the *striking cover paradox*, a problem he imagines only in the abstract.²⁹ Kania might accept the second horn of the dilemma here and say that Franklin really did just sing the same song that Redding wrote, admitting just that she sang it in an original way. Such insistence would strike us as implausible. All of the memorable, quotable bits of Franklin’s “Respect” are absent from the Redding version: the spelled out “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”, “my propers”, and “sock it to me” — but also “Find out what it means to me”! As we argued above, the different lyrics make a significant difference to the meaning. Redding and Franklin both sing about respect, but they say importantly different things about it.

The case of Franklin’s “Respect” illustrates how *cover* is a history-relative and audience-relative notion. Her version quickly became the canonical version of the song. Although a derivative work, it is much richer than the original. It resonates with struggles for equality and civil rights in ways that Redding’s original simply cannot. When Franklin recorded the song, she was covering Redding. We could imagine – as a thought experiment – an artist today hearing only the Redding version and recording a cover of it, but such a scenario is unlikely.³⁰ Anyone performing or recording “Respect” now is covering the Aretha Franklin version. This shift is captured best by thinking of a cover as *being of* a canonical track, rather than merely indexing a cover to a song.

Kania resists the idea that covers “only occur paired one-to-one with originals.”³¹ We allow that the relation may not be one-to-one, but only because the relation between a cover and canonical versions can be more complicated. Because present audiences know

about both Dr. Dre and Ben Folds, an *a cappella* performance of “Bitches Ain’t Shit” might sensibly be called a cover of Dr. Dre’s original track or of Ben Folds’ cover track. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude from this that covers are not connected to canonical versions at all; it is better to conclude that a cover is typically connected to one canonical version but may be connected to more than one. There is, in every case, a musical-historical relation which relates the cover to a canonical version or versions.³²

Returning to the question of evaluation: There are two modes for evaluating transformative covers, just as there are for rendition covers. The first considers the cover in relation to the canonical version, and the second considers it regardless of that relation. In the first mode, contrasting Franklin’s version with Redding’s, we find Franklin’s cover to be a deeper and more powerful track — even a deeper and more powerful song — than Redding’s original. In the second mode, considering Franklin’s ‘Respect’ without the explicit contrast, we evaluate it without mentioning Redding’s version at all. Many people who hear the song only engage in the second mode of evaluation, a consequence of the fact that her track has become canonical.

V. REFERENTIAL COVERS

Consider the Meatmen’s cover of the The Smiths’ “How Soon is Now?” This is clearly not a mimic cover, because there is a genre switch from 80s alternative rock to punk. Moreover, there is a subtle change to the lyrics. Morrissey, lead singer of The Smiths, sings each chorus as “I am human, and I need to be loved.” Tesco Vee of the Meatmen echoes this in the first chorus, but changes it to “I am inhuman, and I need to be

fucked” and “...I need to be killed” in the second and third choruses. One might initially think that these are innocent changes to the lyrics. Just as Willie Nelson can sing about a girl from “Austin, Texas” and still be singing Paul Simon’s song “Graceland”, one might say that the trio “loved/fucked/killed” is an interpretive substitution. Yet the change here is importantly different. “Graceland” is about life “tumbling in turmoil”, and that is a diagnosis which might be offered by a girl in Texas as easily as by one in New York. “How Soon is Now?” is a plaintive cry for the oppressively shy, and being loved, fucked, or killed are radically different prescriptions for such a condition. So we must see the Meatmen’s cover as at least transformative. There is still a further complication, however. The Smiths are (described uncharitably) a mopey band, and Morrissey (by his own declaration) celibate. Whereas we are invited to understand the “I” in The Smiths’ version of the song as Morrissey or someone like him, the tone of the Meatmen’s cover does not invite us to understand it as being about Tesco Vee. Rather, the “I” in the cover is most readily understood as mockingly about Morrissey himself. It is the mopey and asexual Morrissey who the cover suggests needs to be fucked, killed, or both. The Meatmen’s cover is not merely a distinct, derivative song. It is one which is partly *about* the canonical track and the man who sings it. Its semantic content partly refers to The Smiths’ track.

Call a cover of this kind a *referential cover*: one which instantiates a suitably derivative song (so counts as a cover by the condition from §IV) but such that the new song is *about* the original song or the canonical version.

For referential covers, the second mode of evaluation collapses. The second mode of evaluation would consider the Meatmen's track on its own, rather than in contrast with the track that it covers. In order to make this evaluation, however, we need to understand what the lyrics are about. If our interpretation is correct, then the lyrics in the track are partly *about* the track that it covers. So The Smith's version necessarily enters into the evaluation. Failing to consider it would be a bit like trying to understand Neil Young's "Ohio" without knowing that "Four dead in Ohio" refers to the shootings at Kent State. The Meatmen sing an original song titled "Morrissey Must Die", and understanding it clearly requires knowing who Morrissey is. Although the cover of "How Soon is Now?" does not mention Morrissey or The Smiths explicitly, it is similarly about them. So, for the Meatmen's cover, any mode of evaluation ultimately requires considering the cover's relation to the canonical track. This will be true for any referential cover: Any evaluation requires reference to the canonical version.

Consider also The Screemers' 1970s cover of Sonny and Cher's "The Beat Goes On." It could hardly be mistaken for Sonny and Cher's so-very-1960s version. The music and lyrics are considerably refigured. The Screemers' version is harsher and more confrontational. Sonny and Cher sing that "Charleston was once the rage", but The Screemers substitute "Anarchy". Where Sonny and Cher sing that "Grandmas sit in chairs and reminisce", The Screemers sing "Pop stars sit in chairs and reminisce. Kids today are right to make a fist!" And, after a line about cars becoming faster, The Screemers add that "*Sounds* are moving faster, faster...!" The song which The Screemers sing condemns slow, schmaltzy musicians like Sonny and Cher — it is *about* them. It is also a cover of a

song by Sonny and Cher. So, we suggest, it qualifies as a referential cover.

Mosser provides an extended discussion of Sid Vicious' 1978 cover of "My Way."³³ The song was written for Frank Sinatra by Paul Anka in the late 1960s, and Sinatra's version is canonical. In the final verse, Sinatra claims to be a man true to himself who "say[s] the words he truly feels", but Vicious' inquires after a "prat" who "wears hats" and "cannot say the things he truly feels." So it is plausible to think that the considerably changed lyrics in Vicious' cover are in part a comment on Sinatra in the same way that The Meatmen's "How Soon is Now?" is a comment on Morrissey and The Screemers' "The Beat Goes On" is a comment on Sonny and Cher. Properly evaluating it requires keeping the original in view.

Not all punk covers are referential covers. Shane MacGowan's cover of "My Way", like many, reflects the Vicious cover musically but uses the lyrics from the Sinatra version — making it a rendition cover rather than a referential cover. Punk bands like the Ramones and Green Day have recorded numerous rendition covers of tracks that were not originally punk. In all, we suspect that referential covers are fairly rare.

VI. EVALUATION AND ONTOLOGY

In the preceding sections, we distinguished mimic covers, rendition covers, transformative covers, and referential covers. One may wonder whether this takes in all of the possibilities.

Mosser distinguishes several different types of covers and arranges them on a

continuum depending on how much the cover resembles the base version.³⁴ He puts reduplication covers (our *mimic covers*) at one end of the continuum, because they resemble the base version as much as possible and are the least original. He puts send ups (something like our *referential covers*) at the other end of the continuum, because they sound the least like the base version. He places renditions somewhere in the middle.

We argue, however, that the types of covers cannot be sorted simply by how much the cover resembles the canonical track. First, a poorly executed mimic cover might diverge dramatically from the canonical version. This does not suspend its status as mimic cover. Quite the contrary, the divergence is a defect just because of the evaluative criterion appropriate for mimic covers. Second, we can imagine a referential cover that sounds very much like the canonical track. Suppose that the musical structure is preserved, but that careful word substitutions are made so as to subvert the entire meaning of the song.

More importantly, the categories that we have identified differentiate covers along two separate axes. There are two questions to ask: Is the cover an instance of the same song? Does evaluation necessarily involve reference to the canonical version? The possible answers create a two by two matrix, each cell corresponding to one type of cover:

	Evaluation requires considering the canonical version.	There is a mode of evaluation which does not require considering the canonical version.
The cover instantiates the same song as canonical track.	Mimic cover	Rendition cover
The cover instantiates a distinct, albeit derivative song from canonical track.	Referential cover	Transformative cover

Insofar as the two questions have clear, binary answers, the four types exhaust the possibilities. You might worry, however, that there are cases in which the questions do not have well-defined, yes-or-no answers. Perhaps you disagree with our categorization of one of the examples that we have discussed and worry that there is no fact about the covers themselves which will settle the disagreement. Here we reiterate that our primary concern is with evaluation rather than with metaphysics. There may well be covers which are not determinately of one kind rather than another. Even in such cases, we suggest, attending to the relevant considerations facilitates evaluation. For example, to worry over whether The Screamers' cover of "The Beat Goes On" is a transformative cover rather than a referential cover, one would need to consider the extent to which it is possible to understand it apart from the contrast with Sonny and Cher's track. To worry that it might just be a rendition cover, one would need to argue that it is the same song and so about the same thing that the original was about (change and progress, perhaps) rather than a

different song which subverts and is, in part, about the original. Even if these matters cannot be determinately resolved, these are rewarding reflections when the cover is a work of art worth reflecting on.

ENDNOTES

¹ Each author contributed arguments and examples, and the ultimate form of the paper was only possible because of interaction between authors. They are listed in some semblance of alphabetical order.

² This is from the Oxford English Dictionary. The OED gives specimen uses of the phrase “cover version” going back to the 1960s. Don Cusic writes similarly, “The definition of a ‘cover’ song is one that has been recorded before”; “In defense of cover songs”, *Popular Music and Society*, 28(2):171–177, March 2005, p. 174.

³ “The 500 greatest songs of all time”, *Rolling Stone*, December 9 2004, issue 963.

⁴ Gabriel Solis, “I did it my way: Rock and the logic of covers.” *Popular Music and Society*, 33(3):297–318, July 2010, p. 301.

⁵ Kurt Mosser, “ ‘Cover songs’: Ambiguity, multivalence, polysemy.” *Popular Musicology Online*, 2, 2008. <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/mosser.html>.

⁶ Although the song is thinly specified, it is not so thin that *anything* could count as a performance or recording of the song. Franklin Bruno argues (and we agree) that rock songs have enough content that they can be objects of aesthetic evaluation over and above evaluation of tracks and performances; see Bruno, “A Case for Song: Against an (Exclusively) Recording-Centered Ontology of Rock”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71(1): 65-74.

⁷ See Andrew Kania, “Making tracks: The ontology of rock music”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64(4):401–414, Autumn 2006.

⁸ Although the event happens only once, perhaps the performance *qua* object of aesthetic consideration can be repeated. This complication does not matter for our purposes here, but see Christy Mag Uidhir, “Recordings as Performances”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 47(3): 298-314, July 2007, and P.D. Magnus, “Mag Uidhir on Performance”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48(3): 338-345, July 2008.

⁹ See Guy Rohrbaugh, “Artworks as historical individuals”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 11(2):177–205, August 2003, and P.D. Magnus “Historical individuals like *Anas platyrhynchos* and ‘Classical Gas’” in *Art and Abstract Objects*, Christy Mag Uidhir ed., Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹⁰ Mosser, “‘Cover songs’: Ambiguity, multivalence, polysemy.”

¹¹ The story was the inspiration for the 2001 film *Rock Star*.

¹² The performance of a mimic cover *qua* performance will probably sound somewhat different than the canonical track. The performance is played in realtime and the track was built up in the studio. However, this complication is not especially about covers. It arises just as much when a band performs their own songs which are better known from recordings.

¹³ Kania, “Making tracks”. We differ with Kania on the related point of whether the objected covered is the song or the canonical track; see §IV below.

¹⁴ In later sections, we consider examples where lyrical changes do make for a different song.

¹⁵ “Story of the song: Hazy shade of winter, The Bangles (1987)”, *The Independent*, November 26 2010.

¹⁶ You Tube hosts numerous examples; e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzgil5kJBe0> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVEl8AbMy5c>

¹⁷ It would not be too pedantic to say that the groups are covering Fold’s cover rather than covering Dre’s track directly. See §IV below.

¹⁸ Cusic, “In defense of cover songs”, p. 174. Rings focuses exclusively on covers of this kind. He calls them *allusive covers*: ones which make *saturated allusions* to the canonical version, making “an indirect reference to [the original] version simply by performing the song in question.” Michael Rings, “Doing It Their Way”, p. 57.

¹⁹ Mosser, “‘Cover songs’: Ambiguity, multivalence, polysemy.”

²⁰ Rings writes, “Knowing that her cover version stands to be heard by a wide variety of listeners for whom a given genre may signify a host of different things, the covering artist may thereby choose to welcome a broad range of associations regarding the genres in play in her resetting.” (Rings, “Doing is their way”, p. 62.) More generally, we should not suppose that an artist performing a cover has anything deep or specific in mind. Perhaps she performs a cover merely because it is something that contemporary artists do sometimes.

²¹ Michael Rings, “Doing It Their Way: Rock Covers, Genre, and Appreciation”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71(1): 55-63.

²² Michael Rings, “Doing It Their Way”, p. 60.

²³ Kania, “Making Tracks”, p. 411.

²⁴ One might say that the former evaluates B’s performance *qua* cover and the latter evaluates it *qua* song-instance. This risks slicing the ontology of events too finely, however, because both are evaluations of the rendition cover.

²⁵ “They did it their way. The Telegraph’s music critics select the 50 best cover versions ever recorded.” *The Telegraph*, November 20 2004. “The 500 greatest songs of all time”, *Rolling Stone*.

²⁶ Kania, “Making Tracks”, p. 410.

²⁷ “They did it their way”, *The Telegraph*.

²⁸ Kania, “Making Tracks”, p. 411.

²⁹ Kania poses the paradox in this way: Imagine a series of tracks A through Z, such that B is a cover of A, C is a cover of B, and so on. Imagine further that C follows B mostly in the respects in which it differs from A, D follows C mostly in the respects in which it differs from B, and so on. So there is no musical or lyrical trace of A left by the time we reach Z. On his account, B covers the song instantiated by A rather than the track A, C covers the song instantiated by B, and so on. It follows (along with the transitivity of identity) that Z and A instantiate the same song despite sounding nothing at all alike. His reply is that the chain must break somewhere. Applying that answer here would throw him onto the first horn of the dilemma.

³⁰ Even if someone were to record a cover of Redding's version for a tribute album, they would surely at least have heard Franklin's.

³¹ Kania, "Making Tracks", p. 411.

³² To be clear, we agree with much of Kania's account: that rock songs are thinly-specified and that tracks are often the proper object of aesthetic attention. We disagree just about covers: on the question of whether covers are indexed to songs or to canonical versions, and on the possibility of what we call transformative covers.

³³ Mosser, "'Cover songs': Ambiguity, multivalence, polysemy", §II.c.

³⁴ Mosser, "'Cover songs': Ambiguity, multivalence, polysemy."