Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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I'm New Here: The Trouble With Covers

If contemporary covers risk attrition, or the loss of potency, there are still examples of amplification, of powering up. Johnny Cash did it with Nine Inch Nails’ “Hurt,” dialing bathos to pathos. Every singer wants to make it her own, just as every listener makes it her own — again, the listener commands and informs the singer, a ritual enacted at the end of every rock show, when the hits are called out by the audience. Post-Cash, Gil Scott-Heron amplified an already affective version, making Smog’s “I’m New Here” sing truer. Homage and interpretation, Scott-Heron’s cover reveals the aspiration of Bill Callahan’s (convincing) pretensions. Also distinguishing itself from the “Hurt”/“Hurt” dialectic, Scott-Heron’s version of “I’m New Here” leaves open the option/desire of hearing the “original” again, even while casting quotes around it. Which is to say

83 Surely the cover is a 20th-century notion of an old practice, and the genius of that practice is latent in the contemporary cover. In the folk lyric (or floating lyric) tradition described by Greil Marcus and Luc Sante, two songs with the same title may carry divergent or wholly different lyrics, just as distinct songs with different titles may share (and recirculate, and recontextualize) recognizable phrases. As long as there have been singers with audiences of any size, there have likely been songs that served as calling cards. From our 21st-century perspective, songs have specific origins and writers, and to sing another person’s song is to cover it (or steal it). We’d like to suggest that songs are made of wind and breath, and just as lyrics still float in that wind, the wind passes through the singer’s breath.

84 on Cash’s American IV: The Man Comes Around (2002), part of a six-session covers clinic on song stealing; the song originally appeared at the end of Nine Inch Nails’ The Downward Spiral (1994)

85 The singer deflects the call by substituting a cover for the hit.

86 Originally, the song appeared on Smog’s final album, 2005’s A River Ain’t Too Much to Love (subsequently, Bill Callahan recorded under his name); Scott-Heron made it the title track of his “comeback” album from 2010 (he had not made a studio album in 15 years, and his previous album followed a 12-year hiatus). No matter how far wrong you’ve gone / You can always turn around /.../ And you may come full circle and be new here again, Scott-Heron sang with an authority Callahan cannot muster, despite how his (Callahan’s) version sounds.

87 Bill Callahan’s cover of the Smog version, “performed at the benefit Letters to Santa, Second City, Chicago, December 15, 2010,” according to the You-
there is a difference between making it your own and stealing it, as there are different modes of stealing it. Both Cash and Scott-Heron steal it, but in the latter case, the stolen object is, magically, still in its original position, if not its original state.

Tube video posted December 19, 2010, turns around on itself, a reflection of and on a reflection, an eye reflecting itself in a clogged sing (sic). The song is no longer his, but he remembers it well. It’s still in his set (better for the wear) as of a June 26, 2016 performance early in a three-day, six-show run at Baby’s All Right in Brooklyn, NY, where he appears to be covering Scott-Heron covering Smog, in tribute to Scott-Heron.