

Classics and beyond

The cover version has come a long way since Elvis and the Stones, writes **ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN**. In these days of tribute albums, reinterpreting someone else's song has become an art form in itself



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Joni Mitchell should have seen it coming, and maybe she did. When she recorded an orchestral version of *Both Sides Now* two years ago, several people asked her how she got Judy Collins to let her have the song.

The joke, of course, is that Mitchell wrote it, though it was Collins who made it a hit in 1967. And one of the reasons Mitchell could laugh, as she did while recounting the story in Toronto last week, is that her "cover" of her own song won a Grammy.

The function of the cover in popular music has changed a lot since the sixties, mainly because there are now so many other ways to hit the jackpot using someone else's stuff. Anybody with a sampler and a record collection can borrow and recycle tidbits or whole segments of songs familiar or long forgotten.

Cover versions no longer launch careers, as they did for Elvis, the Beatles and many others (Leonard Cohen's career, however, was effectively relaunched in the mid-eighties by cover albums of his songs by Jennifer Warnes and others). These days, even the most plain-vanilla rock bands give top priority to their own songs, and the cult of the singer-songwriter is stronger than ever.

This continued devotion to original material, and the postmodern temper of the times, has paradoxically given new life to the art and practice of the cover. Most pop artists who do other people's music aren't trying for a more definitive or more profitable version (or, as in jazz, for a new moment in the ongoing life cycle of a "standard" tune). They're looking for an angle that introduces tension between the song and the singer, or between the music and the present situation.

A cover can be a strategic act of homage, like that paid by the all-star performers on *Timeless*, a new album that pointedly distances the music of Hank Williams from anything to do with the current Nashville version of country music. Or it can be a scathing annotation, as in Tori Amos's recent cover of the Lennon-McCartney song *Happiness Is a Warm Gun*, recast as an ironic commentary on the loose gun-ownership laws that may have helped John Lennon meet his violent end.

This fall, a clutch of star-heavy albums has confirmed the altered state and continued health of the cover. Aside from the Williams disc, there are new tribute albums to Nick Lowe, Ian Dury and Townes Van Zandt, and a pair of recent discs by Amos and Emm Gryner of "girl versions" of songs written and performed by men, including such macho strutters as Ozzy Osbourne and Eminem.

The cover is a concept of the recording age. Its first and most explosive phase came in the fifties, and was the direct result of the unofficial colour bar that prevented black R&B stars from breaking through to the white market.

"If I could find a white man with the black sound and the black attitude, I could make a billion dollars," producer Sam Phillips is reported to have said. In 1954, Phillips recorded Elvis Presley's first commercial single, a rocking cover of *That's All Right* by Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup, whose hard-scrabble blues had entranced Elvis ever since he was old enough to listen to black radio stations.

Elvis quickly became a bigger star than Crudup ever could be. In 1956, Presley did his famous cover of the Leiber and Stoller blues *Hound Dog*, completely eclipsing Big Mama Thornton, who had made the song a hit among blacks three years earlier.

From then on, the black and blue cover was an itch that rock musicians loved to scratch (guitarist Jeff Beck was still at it earlier this year, when he released a blistering version of Muddy Waters's *Rollin' and Tumblin'*).

Blues and R&B covers brought the Beatles and the Rolling Stones into the music business, though both bands quickly realized that the only way to break from the pack of

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like-minded British rockers was to write their own stuff.

In commercial terms, the big cover hits of the fifties and sixties were like scavenger birds, swooping down to grab the meat that others were unable to carry off. An original approach was not necessary, to the extent that when the raunchy gospel-R&B singer Hank Ballard first heard Chubby Checker's monstrously successful cover of his 1958 tune *The Twist*, he thought he was hearing his own recording.

Both Checker and Ballard were black, a signal that the race-based cover was a volatile commodity (Checker's career was invented by American Bandstand's white host Dick Clark, who found him a more wholesome figure than Ballard). Joe Cocker's cover of the Beatles' *With a Little Help from My Friends* bent the concept further, giving a gospel-based black sound to a cheerily four-square song written by whites. Soul singer Otis Redding completed the circle by covering the Stones' *Satisfaction*.

A lot of great covers, and many more that sank without a trace, came and still come out of the ordinary learning process of pop and rock musicians.

Most learn to play and sing by reproducing tunes and riffs from their favourite records.

"You wouldn't believe how many covers I know," Moby confided, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, during the Toronto stop on last summer's Area:One tour.

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The prime of the cover artist

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To illustrate, he dispatched Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Free Bird* and the James Bond theme, both of which are pretty remote from his own rave-based aesthetic. Phish went even further during its Halloween concerts of the late nineties, which featured performances of entire albums the band had worshipped and studied during adolescence.

Luther Wright and the Wrongs did something similar on disc recently, by reconfiguring Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* for bluegrass band. Wright's *Rebuild the Wall*, like Moby's covers or the soft-soul version of *Proud Mary* heard on the latest tour by Destiny's Child, thrive on an acute displacement from the original. So does Little Richard's campy cover of *I Feel Pretty*, from a 1996 disc devoted to music from *West Side Story*.

The sex-change cover is becoming a regular item on tribute albums, and not-so-reverent performances of music by other people. *Brand New Boots and Panties*, a remake of a classic Ian Dury album from 1977, features performances of the guy-centric songs *Wake Up and Make Love to Me* and *If I Was with a Woman*, by Sinead O'Connor and Catatonia's Cerys Matthews respectively. Both give a sharp twist to the originals through being voiced by women, who are each more able to express nuanced desire than the deadpan Dury was.

Canadian Emm Gryner's *Girl Versions* disc is an entire album of sex-changed covers, in which songs by Ozzy Osbourne, Def Leppard and others are converted into soft folkie ballads with grand piano. You get the feeling that for Gryner, "girl version" is the musical equivalent of "chick flick" — as if rock's harder values don't apply to women.

Tori Amos's *Strange Little Girls*, another album of songs by guys, takes a tougher route. Her keening, gutsy version of *Heart of Gold* is much more desperate than Neil Young's original, as though Amos were trapped in a horrific roundelay of desire. She also does an anticover of Eminem's '97 *Bonnie and Clyde* that describes the rapper's murder fantasy in the voice of the female victim. It's no longer a manifestation of male rage, but a critique, in Eminem's own words, of where such rage is taking society.

The greatest anticover may be Sid Vicious's screaming version of *My Way*, recorded at the dawn of the Thatcher era. The doomed Sex Pistol strips away the complacent self-regard of Frank Sinatra's hit version, and pummels us with the news that *doing things "my way"* is the most insistent demand of adolescents and anarchists.

But most artists contemplating a cover these days come to praise, not to bury. *Timeless*, the handsome Hank Williams tribute that includes performances by Bob Dylan, Beck, Keith Richards and Lucinda Williams, burnishes the legend while subtly reconfiguring it to conform to the needs of the present. Several of the performances are done in a style that Williams would have considered hopelessly old-fashioned — even Sheryl Crow and Mark Knopfler (Dire Straits)

hide their rock personas in favour of sounds derived from old blues and country waltzes.

Those sounds are very au courant just now, after the surprising success of the old-timey soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The roots revival, and the alt-country reaction against the likes of Garth and Shania, needed a godfather, and Williams was more than eligible.

Of course, it's always possible that someone who likes Beck but has never heard a Hank Williams song will pick up the disc and discover what he or she has been missing. The idea of that prospect underlies most tribute discs to people whose names are less famous than the people revisiting their stuff, or whose lives ended before their music should have.

Ian Dury, who died of cancer last year, was the unlikely of British rock stars whose *New Boots and Panties!* stirred punk, disco and the traditions of the English music hall into a Cockney stew that sold over a million copies. The recent *Brand New Boots and Panties* is a true rescue effort, featuring Dury's band the Blockheads and guests such as Paul McCartney and Robbie Williams.

Townes Van Zandt, who also died in his 50s, provided raw-boned hits for Willie Nelson and Guy Clark without ever reaching the charts himself. *Poet*, a new tribute album that features Steve Earle, Nelson, Lucinda Williams and the Cowboy Junkies, does everything it can to keep out of the way of some great songs by a man described by Williams as "too cool to be forgotten."

The tribute album also exists in remix form, though remix albums are almost always a means of maximizing revenue from a recent success. They're much closer in intent to the scavenger covers of the fifties and sixties.

Hip-hop's reuse-and-recycle mentality comes closest to the notion of cover as a new performance in songs such as Shaggy's *Angel*, a rapped-and-sung number that adapts an altered chorus from the sixties hit *Angel of the Morning*, and Lauryn Hill's *Superstar*, which does the same thing with the chorus from the Doors' hit *Light My Fire*. Ultimately, what separates remixes and most sample-based music from covers is that element of performance as the predominant activity. As long as people still play guitars and sing, we'll have cover versions of songs that were just waiting to be reborn in a new form.

They had it covered

Some seminal moments in cover version history:

SONG	COVER ARTIST	ORIGINAL ARTIST	
Twist and Shout	The Beatles	Isley Brothers	Recorded as last-minute filler for the lads' first LP, it remains their raunchiest two minutes.
Mr. Tambourine Man	The Byrds	Bob Dylan	McGuinn and Co. did lots of brilliant Dylan covers; this, from 1965, was the first.
Lump	Aztec Camera	Van Halen	Roddy Frame finds the world weariness in the lyrics and the Velvet Underground lift in the melody.
Ticket to Ride	The Carpenters	The Beatles	This always should have been sung by a woman, and no one sings it better than Karen Carpenter.
Police and Thieves	The Clash	Junior Murvin	Punk's first, and most influential, flirtation with reggae.
If You Go Away	Scott Walker	Jacques Brel	Walker's velvet croon transforms the Belgian bard's ballad.
Black Magic Woman	Carlos Santana	Fleetwood Mac	Santana's signature tune fits him so well, most people think he wrote it.
Ripple	Jane's Addiction	Grateful Dead	An affectionate, uptempo reworking of an American Zen Buddhist classic.
Wild Horses	Flying Burrito Brothers	Rolling Stones	Gram Parsons nails the pathos and avoids the mannered approach that mars Mick's version.
Take Me to the River	Talking Heads	Al Green	David Byrne's paranoid inflection adds a new dimension to a soul classic.
Crazy	Patsy Cline	Willie Nelson	The greatest country voice applied to one of the greatest writers — a match made in Nashville heaven.
Famous Blue Raincoat	Jennifer Warnes	Leonard Cohen	L.C.'s former backing singer morphs into the finest interpreter of his work.
All Along the Watchtower	Jimi Hendrix	Bob Dylan	Dylan was so impressed by Hendrix's take on his song, he had another go at it himself.
With a Little Help from My Friends	Joe Cocker	The Beatles	Cocker made the jaunty original into one of the most cathartic Beatles covers ever.
Rollin' and Tumblin'	Jeff Beck	Muddy Waters	Beck's recent version, with vocalist Imogen Heap, transforms this bluesy from the near side of damnation into a heart-thumping march to the soul's killing ground.