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Dylan's Covers

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Dylan's Covers

Looking back on his long career, Bob Dylan has linked his writing with his needs as a performer. "I just wanted a song to sing," he said in 1984; "nobody else was writing what I wanted to sing" (Heylin, *The Recording Sessions*, 1997). Of "Song to Woody," one of only two songs on his debut album written by him, he says, "I did not consider myself a songwriter at all. But I needed to write that. I needed to sing it, so that's why I needed to write it" (Scorsese, *No Direction Home*, 2005). Dylan's originality as a writer makes him an essential artist; his originality as a performer has brought millions of listeners to his thousands of concerts. From either perspective, his performances of his songs are the summits of a career that has drawn and held audiences for almost fifty years. Yet some central characteristics of Dylan's power as an artist, including his originality, emerge more clearly when we view the career from the odd angle of his covers of other writers' songs. (Others' covers of his songs—over twenty-six thousand are known so far—are differently interesting, but not our focus.) People often think of covers as *faute de mieux*: I'm standing here with a guitar in front of an audience and can't think of a song of mine I want to sing, so I'll do this old familiar number. Rather, Dylan chooses to cover particular songs at particular times, and these choices are as telling as the tissue of decisions he makes in composing his own songs—compositions that often incorporate elements gathered from pre-existing sources.

The *OED* traces *cover* in the song sense only to 1966. Its second illustrative quotation (1968) summarizes the usual attitude: "The jackal thinking behind cover versions, which are near copies of original recordings, is predicated on the belief that so much money is showered in the general direction of hit records that *any* performance of the song will collect if sufficiently adjacent." The tendency to dismiss covers as diminished work shows up in Clinton Heylin's notes on Dylan's cover albums: he refers to *Self Portrait* (1970) as "notorious," calls the Dylan of *Down in the Groove* (1988) "a man desperate for

the smallest shard of an idea," and sneers at *Good As I Been to You* (1992). The best Heylin can finally say is that *Good As I Been to You* is "the most coherent of Dylan's five albums of 'covers.'" "Returning to the 'folk process,'" Heylin remarks with evident disdain, "Dylan no longer felt short of 'a song to sing.'"

A similar attitude led many of us to ignore *Self Portrait* when it was released in 1970. It was a bewildering album whose cover (in a different sense) reproduces a self-portrait painted by Dylan, but whose contents are mostly songs written by others. Another reason to dislike the album was its retailing of his own earlier songs in versions that seemed to many to evince contempt for what they had originally valued. This directive to hear differently, rather than to hear again, what we had treasured has been the usual experience of concert audiences in the decades since. (More on this later.) But the chief aversion to *Self Portrait* was that Dylan's fans saw little reason to spend good money on a record by our best songwriter that focused on songs mostly from an era, and a whole style of popular music, that we especially prized him for having helped us leave behind. Wasn't the *self* of Dylan's that we wanted to see portrayed again the one he'd created so spectacularly in *Blonde on Blonde*?

Self Portrait marks the second of three major periods in Dylan's career when he turned his attention primarily to covers. The first was his debut album in 1962, *Bob Dylan*; the third comprised *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*, released consecutively in 1992 and 1993. These moments have baffled audiences for some of the same reasons as his stunning shifts in musical style or genre: his "going electric" in 1965; his turn to country music in *John Wesley Harding* (1967) and *Nashville Skyline* (1968); his gospel albums at the end of the seventies; and so on. Both kinds of surprise challenge our wish to extrapolate the Dylan we can expect from the Dylan we thought we knew. They define the shape of his career: not a linear path, however complicated, but unpredictable play within a startlingly wide field.

What was puzzling about *Bob Dylan* was not that there existed any previous Bob Dylan to be displaced. He had just come out of nowhere. On the one hand, Dylan was a folksinger. Like dozens of others in Greenwich Village, he was performing Child ballads and blues with semi-interchangeable lyrics. "We were all hanging out together, and if you were any kind of musician, you couldn't find enough hands to

pick all the pockets that were available," says Dave Van Ronk in his memoir *The Mayor of MacDougal Street* (2005). On the other hand, in ways only partly visible at the time as distinctive, Dylan was inventing himself as a performer (first) and writer (second) on the particular model of Woody Guthrie, a model he embraced with exceptional intensity. "Woody Guthrie—he had a particular sound, and besides that he *said* something to go along with his sound" (*No Direction Home*). Compare Ezra Pound on densely intricate rhymes in Arnaut Daniel: "That again for six strophes WITH the words making sense." Dylan's concentration on a *sound*, before but inextricable from the song's overt lyric intentions, even from his first album begins to distinguish him from the folksingers around him. Eventually it will bring him back to the electric sounds he had embraced before Guthrie led him to acoustic music.

A telling moment in that first period was Dylan's recording of "House of the Rising Sun." *No Direction Home*, Martin Scorsese's wonderful documentary film of Dylan's career up to 1966, makes the story feel like a continuation of a slightly earlier episode of love and theft, Dylan's having borrowed a large number of rare albums without permission to learn songs from them. Bad boy Dylan steals Van Ronk's version of "House of the Rising Sun," recording it before Van Ronk can. What Dylan took was not the song, which had already been recorded a dozen times, but Van Ronk's sophisticated arrangement: some chords in the harmonic sequence that differ from previous versions, and parts of a guitar bass line that follow logically from those revised chords, within the terms of a jazz logic that no one before Van Ronk had applied to the song. The Animals' very popular 1964 "House of the Rising Sun" ("the first folk-rock recording" according to some) was, as Van Ronk plausibly suggests, also made from "the same version": his, which they may have gotten directly from Dylan's 1962 recording (Van Ronk didn't record it until 1964) or indirectly through intermediary performers. This incident shows Dylan closer than he has otherwise come, before and since, to the narrowest definition of what would (four years later) begin to be called a cover version. Such versions tend toward note-for-note duplication of previous recordings; in later decades, they would produce Beatles and Doors cover bands that mastered every inflection and squeak. In *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan says that half the cuts on his first album were "renditions of

songs that Van Ronk did. It's not like I planned that, it just happened. Unconsciously I trusted his stuff more than I did mine." In this view, "House of the Rising Sun" emerges as different only in degree from other songs on the album.

Dylan had located a kind of ganglion in the communal sensibility and pressed on it disconcertingly. At least in retrospect, the indignation at his appropriation of Van Ronk's work marks a passage from the Village community spirit of sharing-but-not-stealing to later discomforts with musical activity apparently antithetical to an esthetic ethos of originality. The emergence of folk music into the world of popular recording meant its inevitable encounter with money on a scale that could constitute temptations. Eventually it would entail the industrial services of copyright attorneys, epic legal contests over sampling, and a music business in which the leasing of rights to other performers can provide a songwriter with far more income than his or her recordings of those same songs. The incident asks us now, as it did then, to sort out how intellectual property rights are and are not pertinent to musical art. Van Ronk stopped performing the song at least partly out of annoyance at being asked to play "Dylan's song," and Dylan in turn suffered the irritation of being asked to play "the Animals' song."

The ownership of "No More Auction Block," a song Dylan was also performing in 1962, raises different and more complicated issues. The song is said to have originated in Canada, where it was sung by blacks who fled there after Britain abolished slavery in 1833. James Baldwin adopted its alternate title, "Many Thousands Gone," for a chapter of *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that begins by reminding us that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story only in his music, which Americans are able to admire "because protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it." Dylan would probably have known at least Paul Robeson's and Odetta's versions; Odetta had performed it in her Carnegie Hall concert, released in 1960. How did a young, white, middle-class Jewish folksinger manage to channel the age-old weariness of a freed black slave? How is it that Dylan had the courage, conviction, or simple nerve to attempt it? His performance of "No More Auction Block" is entirely without what Baldwin calls "protective sentimentality." He didn't include the song on his first album, but he might have. As Michael Gray points out, most of the

songs on *Bob Dylan* are "performed without any gentility" and with a voice that "suggested some black octogenarian singing personal blues at the back of his shack." He had captured the sound that had captivated him, as he would again and again.

Most people who knew anything about Bob Dylan in 1962 or 1963 knew it from "Blowin' in the Wind," which borrowed its melody from "No More Auction Block." "'Blowin' in the Wind' has always been a spiritual," Dylan says in the liner notes to *Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3*. "I took it off a song called 'No More Auction Block'—that's a spiritual and 'Blowin' in the Wind' sorta follows the same feeling." To be sure, most people didn't hear "Blowin' in the Wind" in New York in 1962 but a year later, when it was covered by both the Chad Mitchell Trio and Peter, Paul, and Mary, whose single sold 320,000 copies in eight days and won Grammys for Best Performance by a Vocal Group and Best Folk Recording. On August 28, 1963, Peter, Paul, and Mary performed "Blowin' in the Wind" (along with Joan Baez and Josh White, a black singer) at the march for jobs and freedom in Washington, DC, while Dylan sang "When the Ship Comes In." When Joan Baez joined him on the stage to sing harmony, she also contributed legitimacy, but only as a much more widely known performer. According to reports, Dick Gregory asked the obvious question at what was the greatest mass mobilization of African-Americans ever seen: "What was a white boy like Bob Dylan there for?" Harry Belafonte told him: Joan and Bob were letting people know that these were universal issues. In the year following Washington, when SNCC invited white students to help register black voters in Mississippi, the message from Bob Moses was consistent with Baldwin's a decade earlier: "don't come to Mississippi to save the Negro. Come only if you understand that his freedom and yours are one."

With "Blowin' in the Wind," Dylan managed to do what he would later do with his gospel albums, *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*, in 1979 and 1980. A number of black artists, including Odetta, have covered "Blowin' in the Wind," just as black artists would release a whole album of Dylan's gospel songs and more than one reggae collection of his songs. Perhaps, as Dave Van Ronk argues, the disparity between black and white musics became a "tempest in a teapot," and the racial distance between Van Ronk and his blues material is less important than the "large time gap" separating him from its original

performers. Dylan's ability to bridge both these chasms is a founding principle of his career.

Can we see a clear line from *Bob Dylan*, which was almost all covers, through *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), an explosively inventive exploration of the library of song forms available in various American traditions? Dylan had absorbed the vocabularies of the musics around him. The most startling aspect of his arrival at the great albums of the sixties by which we still most centrally know him—*Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*—is not the addition of electric instruments, but the development of his lyrics; to account for this we would have to look also to his considerable reading at the time: Rimbaud, Pound and Eliot, Robert Graves, Rousseau, Longfellow, Freud, and so endlessly on. Following this period, after the hiatus associated with his motorcycle accident, *John Wesley Harding* is a new direction resulting less obviously, though still clearly, from the early immersion in American balladry; *Nashville Skyline* bespeaks a different American immersion, as its title suggests. *New Morning* (1970) and *Planet Waves* (1974) are albums less predictable from Dylan's earlier compositions than from the musical preoccupations of which the covers on *Self Portrait* are the public, audible evidence. In general, if Dylan had begun with covers and never done them again, he would have followed a common pattern of apprenticeship. Instead, cover albums punctuate his career and signal turns and returns to familiar and unfamiliar sources for refreshment and reinvention.

Three decades after "Blowin' in the Wind," Dylan recorded "Blood in My Eyes" on *World Gone Wrong* (1993), the second of two albums constituting his third period of covers, the period that so fails to enlist Heylin's enthusiasm. These albums concentrate on African-American folk songs, blues, and popular songs from the first half of the twentieth century—territory later heavily featured in Dylan's ongoing satellite radio show, *Theme Time Radio Hour* (since 2006), a series of rich glimpses into the astonishingly wide and detailed background of American music that he turns out to have carried around with him for a long time. "Blood in My Eyes" is one of two songs on *World Gone Wrong* by the Mississippi Sheiks, a black country-and-blues band active in the thirties, whose best-known song, "Sitting on Top of the World," has been covered by many rock groups (notably Cream) and by Dylan on his previous album, *Good As I Been to You*.

"Blood in My Eyes" tells a story in which a man "feeling blue" is cheered by seeing a "good-looking girl"; he gives her money for a "date" and, when she puts him off, demands his money back. With one exception, Dylan keeps his lyrics about as close to the original as he usually does when he performs his own songs. For example, the Sheiks' "I'm gonna tell you somethin', gon' tell you the fact" becomes Dylan's "I tell you something, tell you the facts," where a personal and immediate instance ("the fact") veers toward proverbial authority: he can speak to "the facts" of the whole experience in which he and she are engaged. This shift is concordant with his shortening of the original title, "I've Got Blood in My Eyes for You," which has the paradoxical effect of generalizing and enlarging it. The origin of the phrase, which combines the predatory and the helplessly, autonomically lustful, is obscure. In *Chronicles*, Dylan uses it to describe his friend Ray Gooch: "He had blood in his eyes, the face of a man who could do no wrong." If these clauses are related, it is because the standard of right and wrong is not the socially conventional one; a man who "could do no wrong" is a man whose passion is its own warrant. This conviction pervades the song and underlies Dylan's engagement by it.

Dylan's one major change to the Sheiks' lyrics is his omission of their last stanza, given by one online transcriber as "It ain't no need a-gettin' roustin' yo jaws / Ya ain't gonna get none of my Santa Claus." Dylan may have felt its wit was obscured by time, or simply that this stanza uneconomically extended a narrative already essentially complete. Or its tone—the monstrous view of her in "roustin' yo jaws," such a descent from her earlier "smile"—clashed with the romance of desire which so far hasn't been compromised by her being a woman "that money will buy." The Sheiks' recording, at a quick-walk 130 beats per minute, is jaunty and self-possessed in its raunchiness. Dylan's performance, a stroll more than a third slower at eighty beats per minute, has the sound of a sultry and unrelenting seduction in which carressiveness and coarseness are evenly balanced.

Black American music wasn't the only kind Dylan was prepared to transform. On *Modern Times* (2006), he recorded "When the Deal Goes Down," whose similarity to Bing Crosby's radio theme song "Where the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day" was quickly noted, along with other borrowings, quotations, and adaptations on the album. (Dylan's title echoes the Mississippi Sheiks' "Honey Babe

Let the Deal Go Down," a dissimilar song which nevertheless sounds uncannily like one Dylan might have written.) Eyolf Østrem, the magus of dylanchords.info, engages the question of how much Dylan's song sounds like Crosby's:

Not much, actually..Although the song structure and the chords are identical, the phrasing, the melody line, and the pace in Dylan's version are all very different from Crosby's slow, insinuating crooning. It is indeed "a song based on the melody" from "Where the Blue of the Night" rather than "Where the Blue of the Night" with new lyrics.

Østrem's description of the structure, chords, and melody is misleading in some respects. Dylan takes Crosby's whole-song structure (AABA) and turns it into a stanza by repeating it four times, so that the sheer number of words in the two songs differs by a factor of four or five. (The same is true of "Blowin' in the Wind" versus "No More Auction Block.") The lyrics of Crosby's last A section duplicate his first, whereas Dylan's repetition is limited to the line that ends every stanza: "I'll be with you when the deal goes down." Crosby's repetition emphasizes the song's closure; Dylan's suggests a continuity that could extend to additional stanzas. Dylan also leaves out Crosby's introductory verse (a song-form convention derived from musical theater, which uses the verse's more static musical style to effect a transition from dialogue to song). Dylan's chords are pretty much the same, but he simplifies the melody's relation to them; while Crosby's voice rises and falls in crooning sweeps that emphasize the strong color notes implicit in some chords (for example the minor iv on "day" at the end of Crosby's title line), Dylan's melody is almost strictly diatonic and sticks close to the basic notes of the chords. The accompanying instruments are left to supply the harmonic richness.

Østrem is right that Dylan's performance transforms the song through details of phrasing; where Crosby holds the end-of-phrase notes, for example, Dylan leaves silences. But it's the tone of Dylan's lyrics that distances his song farthest from Crosby's. (Crosby wrote his lyrics, though Fred Ahlert and Roy Turk composed the music.) Crosby's tone is nostalgic melancholy. His verse—"Why must I live in dreams / Of the days I used to know? / Why can't I find / Real peace of mind / And go back to the long ago?"—establishes his topic area,

a past blurred by fondness and sentimentally longed for. His chorus modulates to an equally happy idyll situated in the present or future (she "waits for me") but made hollow by the counterfactual "If only I could see her / Oh how happy I would be." The "you" in Dylan's song is present, not absent. His relation to her is not would-be satisfaction, but a promise of steadfastness: "I'll be with you when the deal goes down." Though Dylan's song *sounds* nostalgic—the slow waltz and its rich chords more or less guarantee that—his lyrics concentrate on a timeless present. For the introverted personal terms of Crosby's lament, he substitutes a universal condition: "We all wear the same thorny crown." As that line also suggests, Dylan has raised the emotional stakes far above the comfortable melancholy Crosby's audience enjoyed. Listeners who have recognized Dylan's debt in this song to Henry Timrod, the poet laureate of the Confederacy, will hear how he jettisons Timrod's historical, as much as Crosby's personal, nostalgia. He presses heavily not so much on what has been lost as on eternal inevitabilities: sooner or later, the deal will go down. Lines like "the moon is bright, and it shines by night" are redundant logically, but not in feeling.

Modern Times, the album containing "When the Deal Goes Down," is the centerpiece of the trilogy that makes up Dylan's latest work. Released in 2006, it was his first number-one-selling album in the U.S. since *Desire* (1976) and made him the oldest singer ever to have an album at the top of the *Billboard* charts. The special edition included four videos, of which the most important is Dylan's brilliant performance of "Blood in My Eyes" in a new medium (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5pOh1FLb2g>). His revisiting of his own cover of the Mississippi Sheiks' song and his reinvention of Bing Crosby's theme song, beyond demonstrating again Dylan's enthusiasm for nearly opposite poles of American music, make the *Modern Times* package an especially intense self-portrait.

The other videos are worth talking about for a moment. Two of them are films of Dylan and his band performing "Love Sick" and "Cold Irons Bound," songs released nine years earlier on *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan's first double studio album since *Self Portrait* and the album that marked his comeback for many fans and earned him a Grammy for Best Album of the Year. A third is a music video created by Curtis Hanson, the director of *Wonder Boys* (2000), for which Dylan wrote

the theme song "Things Have Changed." In the music video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQDeYzUkXOU>), Dylan joins the film's actors and, in the most engaging scenes, is made interchangeable with Michael Douglas, who lip-synchs Dylan's lyrics better than Dylan does. This shouldn't be surprising. In some of Dylan's music videos, the lip-synching is difficult to ignore because he doesn't do it very well. It's as if he can't *ever* perform a song in the same way twice. Van Ronk, who has written well about his own difficulty in lip-synching, points out that in order to do it a singer has to memorize the way he "happened to sing" a song on a particular day and repeat that performance. ("I can imagine nothing more boring.") Michael Douglas lip-synchs better than Dylan because as an actor he's done a better job of memorizing the way Dylan happened to sing "Things Have Changed" on the day he recorded it. Perhaps Dylan (or Columbia) is merely collecting loose video material in order to create a CD that can be sold at a higher price. But all four videos invite us to appreciate Dylan as a physical performer of his songs (or, in the case of "Blood in My Eyes," someone else's song).

In the video of "Blood in My Eyes," the only one of the four shot in black and white, Dylan sits in a cafe that looks out on the Camden Lock and lip-synchs the words. In the narrative we most readily supply, Dylan (the Dylan on screen) is murmuring to himself the words of a song he is remembering. He's dressed in a checked shirt, a long jacket, jeans, shiny boots, a top hat, and leather gloves. He has a good-sized broly with a curved handle that he uses like a cane. The scene shifts back and forth between the solitary Dylan figure drinking gin (or vodka) in the cafe and a differently solitary Dylan figure who walks the London streets, mostly silent, occasionally talking with the people he meets (though we only see his lips move), and only once, very briefly, mouthing the words to the song. In this narrative, Dylan (on screen) acts like a free consciousness, registering the streets as if on behalf of the camera that registers him. There is no live sound at all. This is a silent film with musical accompaniment, like films of an earlier era.

Dylan stole his title *Modern Times* from Charlie Chaplin's 1936 silent, black-and-white film whose setting is, though differently, modern times. There's a big nod to Chaplin in Dylan's video: his odd and old-fashioned costume, including the cane; the silent black-and-white

images of his wandering through city streets; the girls (young and old) who are drawn to him and capture his attention. Dylan even juggles a little. Joan Baez presciently called him "the original vagabond" in her 1975 song "Diamonds and Rust," but *flâneur* is even apter to Dylan's performance here, as it is also to the closing song of *Modern Times*: "Ain't talkin' / just walkin'." The continuity—Dylan wears a similar top hat in photos from around 1965—is pointed by the contrast. The Dylan in the video is an aging *roué*.

In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire defines the *flâneur* as an artist whose imagination registers the passing moment—an ephemeral, contingent reality represented in Dylan's video by the boots on display in front of a shop, the clothes people are wearing, the parked cars, the posters on the wall when he emerges onto the street at the beginning and again at the end, when one of them alerts us to "Global Chaos"—along with all the suggestions of eternity the moment contains. More *flâneur* than dandy, because the song ensures that we see this figure as ravaged by erotic longing. He is at one with the crowd and set apart. People stop him and ask for his autograph, which he gives them, but people also fail to notice him, despite his costume (and the camera crew that must be accompanying him). All this while, Dylan is singing to a *you* no more visible in the video—and no less—than Johanna in a streetful of Louises.

We've been discussing recordings because they are ready to the analyst's hand. But Dylan's most copious artistic product by far has been his gargantuan sequence of concerts. Walter Ong observes that people in genuinely oral cultures know and remember a great deal but don't "study." Music, like oral epic poetry, comes to life first of all in performance. Dylan in concert is *doing Dylan*, covering his own material. In part this results from practical necessity: the thousandth time one sings a song in public (as Dylan has done with at least six of his songs, a dozen others not far behind), some modicum of self-consciousness has to have been generated. This is what makes many long-sustained concert careers difficult for those who sustain them and depressing for some who observe them. In Dylan's tour in the summer of 2009, John Mellencamp opened for him with a set that traded off the popularity of his work of thirty years ago, nostalgically recollecting the old performances even as his patter between songs stressed his band's continuing vitality.

For Dylan, however, the nightly and yearly act of covering his own songs is a way of remaking himself as well. His countless reperformances of his own songs have the same creative relation to the originals as his covers have to theirs. While the set list from the Pawtucket, Rhode Island, concert on July 21, 2009, included old standards such as "Like a Rolling Stone," it also ranged widely throughout Dylan's enormous catalog. "Jolene" and "The Levee's Gonna Break" are from his most recent albums; "Cat's in the Well" is from *Under the Red Sky* (1990); "This Wheel's on Fire" was released on *The Basement Tapes* (1975), recorded in 1967. "Masters of War" is from Dylan's first album of original songs, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963), and "It Ain't Me, Babe" is from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). In this concert, those two earliest songs and the 1965 "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" were impossible to recognize until he began to sing the words. The feel of the music had been completely transformed. In his delivery of the lyrics, Dylan turned these songs into songs that might have appeared on *Modern Times* or *Together Through Life* (2009).

We begin to perceive a continuum within the apparently simple idea of covering a song. It is a continuum in all the dimensions of a song: melody, harmony, tempo and rhythm, vocal style, lyrics. At one corner of the field we would find the phenomenon of the cover band, a cohort dedicated to the exact reproduction of recordings—"jackal thinking"—with a small but reliable commercial niche because audiences crave both repetition and the presentness of performance without the threats of a dynamic present. Variations along any of the dimensions of song produce more distant covers. At the opposite corner of the field would lie the completely original song, if we could conceive of music that displayed no indebtedness to any earlier music. Though "Blood in My Eyes" is clearly a cover of the Mississippi Sheiks, while "When the Deal Goes Down" is a new song modeled on or utilizing several components of Bing Crosby's, these two of Dylan's recordings begin to map the middle of that continuum. Our identification of "Blood in My Eyes" as a cover and "When the Deal Goes Down" as something different is due to the far greater similarity of Dylan's lyrics to those of "I've Got Blood in My Eyes for You." Yet as we have seen, he alters the Sheiks' lyrics too, not much but in ways calculated to support his reconception of the song's tone and purpose and befitting the more important musical alterations he makes.

Dave Van Ronk's approach to the idea of covers is consistent with the one we have been outlining. What he calls "the new song movement," the nascent institution of the singer-songwriter, took over "the folk scene."

I recently heard a friend say of someone who, like myself, is best known for interpreting material written by others, "Oh, she only does 'covers!'" I had a sudden vision of a CD titled *Pavarotti Covers Puccini*. Suffice it to say, Louis Armstrong did not do "covers" nor did Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Edith Piaf, or Aretha Franklin. While none of these people were primarily songwriters, their interpretations were a hell of a lot more original than a lot of the "original" songs being written on the current scene.

This perspective usefully places Dylan (and others) in the tradition of jazz and popular song. As Van Ronk also shrewdly remarks, "blues is different. Blues is like a kielbasa . . . you don't sing a whole blues, you just cut off a section."

Van Ronk's Pavarotti example reminds us that we don't use *cover* to name what performers do to compositions, but something they do to prior performances. (Pavarotti could have covered Caruso's performance of Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*. But not all subsequent performances are covers of preceding ones. We would have to hear Pavarotti as conscious of Caruso's particular interpretations.) The case of Louis Armstrong is more ambiguous. When he and Earl Hines recorded their duet "Weather Bird" in 1928, their conviction that they were making something original in the studio is confirmed by Armstrong's filing its written melody for copyright a few days later—though he had copyrighted the similar "Weather Bird Rag," recorded with King Oliver five years earlier. His hit recording of "Hello Dolly" in 1964, on the other hand, was certainly a cover of the tune from that year's show of the same name, and it's relevant that audiences immediately recognized his source and were meant to. Somewhere between these extremes, his great 1930 recording of "Sweethearts on Parade" has completely eclipsed Carmen Lombardo's original hit (number one for three weeks in 1928). "Blood in My Eyes" does the opposite, bringing the Sheiks' original recording back into view for Dylan's much wider audience. Our awareness that a performance is covering a prior performance is part of its being a cover.

If composers don't get covered, but performed, the same is true of poets, the other sort of text-producing artist that makes up the songwriter as music and lyrics make up the song. The closest poems come to cover is parody. If the Nobel Prize for which Dylan has been repeatedly mentioned ever goes to him, it will be for his lyrics, not his performances. The prize is not given to artists whose work can either cover or be covered. It preserves as if in amber a dichotomy between the high arts of textual composition and the popular arts of performance, an opposition eroded over the past century by advances in recording technology, among other things.

The idea of covers is singularly well illuminated by Dylan's career, and this light in turn reveals contours of his career not otherwise so evident. If we imagine a "metric of cover-ness," we can apply it equally well to his performances of his own and of others' songs, and to more complicated cases like that of "All Along the Watchtower." Dylan wrote and recorded that song as part of the folk/country project of *John Wesley Harding*, though it has as odd a relation to the album's ostensible musical milieu as anything on it. Jimi Hendrix covered it just weeks later, reconceiving it as a rock song and producing one of the touchstones among rock recordings. Dylan, who knows the value of a transformative cover as well as anyone, adopted Hendrix's stylistic take on his song, as revealed in many live recordings in the seventies and after. In effect, he covered a cover of his own song, and that story continues, since his rock-oriented performance has evolved over the decades as his bands have evolved and as his vocal style has narrowed in pitch-range and grown ever more terse in tone and delivery. Attending a concert and hearing "All Along the Watchtower," we must either take it as a painfully constricted, even dismissive, reference to the song the album gave us in 1967 or hear in it a compendium of all the history, Dylan's own and others', musical and other, between then and now, or as much of that history as we can know.

In a recent interview, Dylan comments on the difference between singing or performing and acting: "We shouldn't confuse singers and performers with actors. The more you act, the further you get away from the truth" (Flanagan, 2009). Michael Douglas's task in the video of "Things Have Changed" is to be true to Dylan, and his skill in lip-synching signals his success. Dylan's task is to be true to the song as it thrives in immediate performance, and his halfhearted lip-synching

signals this commitment. It's a commitment that has shaped his career. "Most of the other performers tried to put themselves across" in the Greenwich Village folk days, as he recalls in *Chronicles*. "With me, it was about putting the song across."

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