

NO DEPRESSION

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PULLING BACK THE COVERS

How cover songs connect
artists and audiences

by Stacy Chandler

LESLIE RYAN MICHELLAR

Shovels & Rope





ORIGINALLY, “MIDNIGHT Train to Georgia” was a midnight plane to Houston. And it was a woman, not a man, that L.A. proved too much for. The song, written by Jim Weatherly in 1970, was first covered in 1973 by Cissy Houston, who asked for a tweak to the title lyric to steer away from her own last name and to more accurately reflect the world she knew — Georgia, where her family had come from, and trains, which she felt were the more likely mode of transportation for regular folks. She also changed genders in the lyrics, just to make things a little more interesting, according to the book *Cover Me: The Stories Behind the Greatest Cover Songs of All Time*, by Ray Padgett.

Houston’s “Midnight Train” had modest success, but it didn’t become the classic we all know today until Gladys Knight (who originally had passed on Weatherly’s song) put her spin on it later that year.

Sometimes it works like that. A cover version, not the original, is the way a song embeds itself into our lives. Sometimes we don’t even realize it’s a cover.

Other times, the original version is so good that it gets covered over and over again as a tribute, occasionally in ways as inspired as the first, but always with a nod to the person who created it. Think Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” The Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction,” or a

whole bunch of songs by The Beatles or Tom Petty.

If done correctly, a cover song is much more than a rehash. It’s an artist walking in someone else’s shoes for a moment, a way to challenge themselves musically and celebrate (or even introduce) a great work that’s come before it.

“It breathes new life into something,” says Shovels & Rope’s Michael Trent. “It opens up a door for somebody else in their musical journey to go and discover that. Even if they hear the cover first, they can dig back and learn about an artist or find something that may change their life or totally inspire them.”

The Business of Covers

Covers haven’t always been an artistic endeavor. When the term was first coined, just after World War II, it was all business.

Back then, Padgett explains, when people wanted to buy a song they’d heard on the radio, they asked for the song by name, not by artist. They wanted to hear those lyrics and that melody, and they didn’t particularly care who delivered it. So when one label had a radio hit (Padgett’s book uses as an example a 1949 ditty called “Why Don’t You Haul Off and Love Me?” recorded for King Records by Wayne Raney), other labels would rush out their own versions — as close to the original as possible — to get in on the sales.

“Now if you’re doing a cover, you’re supposed to bring something of yourself to it, you’re supposed to change it, or else why else are you doing it?” Padgett says. “Whereas then the definition was, ‘Don’t bring anything of yourself to it. Try to imitate it exactly on whatever your record label is so that people will buy your version versus the one they heard on the radio.’ It’s basically trying to cheat people.”

Another factor in the making of covers at midcentury was race. As Padgett points out in *Cover Me*, when a hit charted on the “race records” chart, it had no chance of

being played on white radio stations unless a version was recorded by a white artist. And after “Why Don’t You Haul Off and Love Me?” made waves on white charts, it was covered by R&B singer and saxophonist Bull Moose Jackson and made a similar splash in the “race” market.

With the rise of TV in the 1950s, people started paying more attention to the artists behind their favorite songs, and covers moved toward how we think of them today. These days, nearly every band has a cover or two in its repertoire — if not on recordings, then on live set lists or as something fun (and potentially attention-getting) on YouTube and social media. But not every attempt succeeds. Some covers hew too close to the original, or some bend the source so far that it’s painful. Some songs have been covered to death (or so it seems, until someone does it just right), and others didn’t need resurrecting in the first place.

For Padgett, whose book is an extension of the “Cover Me” blog he’s run for 11 years, the recipe for a successful cover is pretty simple: You just have to make the song your own somehow.

“Every time I think I come up with some sort of rule, I find a band that breaks it that does a good cover,” he says. But just playing an old song by someone else without adding anything to it is a waste of time and energy, Padgett says. He cites as a prime example Weezer’s recent chart-topping rendition of Toto’s “Africa,” which came as the result of a lighthearted Twitter challenge gone viral.

“It’s everything I dislike about covers,” says Padgett — adding that it pains him to say it, because he loves Weezer; they were the first concert he ever attended. “It sounds like them trying as hard as possible to sound like Toto. They don’t entirely succeed, but they get close enough that it’s pretty boring. Worse than boring, it’s inessential. In the era of streaming, you can listen to Toto doing ‘Africa’ any moment you want, so if Weezer is not going to change it, then why bother?”

Successes and Failures

Any worthwhile cover involves a lot of passion and a lot of hard work. Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent of Shovels & Rope know that well. In addition to several albums of original songs, they’ve released two *Busted Jukebox* albums so far — all covers that enlist other musicians into the creative process.

“We’re kind of always thinking about that: How can we make this song that we love, how could we totally turn it on its head? And who of our peers, of our friends, could help us do that?” Trent says. “It’s a creative challenge in a way, to see what we can get away with and see how far we can take something.”

Both the song selections and the musician pairings across *Busted Jukebox*’s two volumes are packed with surprises — Faith No More’s “Epic,” Lou Reed’s “Perfect Day,” The Hollies’ “The Air That I Breathe.”

The band doesn’t limit itself to any particular genres or time periods, and they don’t believe any track to be untouchable.

“People are really sensitive about Beatles covers,” Hearst says. “People are precious and funny about what’s allowed.” But, she points out, both Rufus Wainwright and Fiona Apple have covered “Across the Universe” to gorgeous, groundbreaking effect.

“I don’t think anything should be off limits; I don’t think there should be rules,” Trent offers. “Because people are also learning. The Beatles started out playing other people’s songs, and same with The Rolling Stones. That’s how artists learn their craft. Those songs coming out of that band ... just made a sound that kind of changed the world. So I think people should stay open.”

That said, some songs, no matter how much a band loves them, just don’t work out as covers — at least by that band.

Hearst was inspired to try “Lakes of Pontchartrain” after hearing a version recorded in 2000 by Canadian folk trio

The Be Good Tanyas.

"For the life of us, we've never been able to really do it right, we've never been able to capture a good tempo, and we've certainly never been able to change it in a way that beats The Be Good Tanyas' way," she says.

"Not even beats it," Trent adds. "We've never gotten through it and been like 'Oh yeah, I'm feeling that,' or 'That made me feel something.'"

But, of course, they've covered plenty of songs successfully, and they learn something from every attempt, Hearst says.

"You're probably subconsciously going, 'I want to do something like this in my next song,'" she muses. "I think it's just good for the growth."

The Element of Surprise

Onstage at his annual Under the Covers show at Cambridge, Massachusetts' Club Passim in 2017, singer-songwriter Mark Erelli started playing the intro to a song he hadn't yet named.

It kicked off with a simple midtempo blues riff, then shifted into more of an electric rock feel, building into... something, Erelli took his time, leaning into the guitar work for nearly half a minute before finally snarling the first line: "Please, baby, can't you see, my mind's a burning hell..."

By the soaring chorus of "I'm the Only One" (originally by Melissa Etheridge), the crowd was hollering along with him.

"At least through the groove and like maybe the first line, it's just bluesy kind of sounding, and people did not know what was happening, what it was," Erelli recalls. "And that moment where it starts to dawn

on them is so fun just to see. I think having the element of discovery that happens throughout the performance can be really fun to have in a cover."

The Under the Covers shows, which started with Erelli, Lori McKenna, and Jake Armerding and now include Rose Cousins and Zachariah Hickman, have become a December tradition for Boston area roots music fans, the set lists a closely guarded secret. In 2018, after 13 years of Under the Covers shows, Erelli recorded some favorite covers for an album called *Mixtape*, complete with Maxell cassette-inspired design — and handwritten song titles and marker doodles by Erelli himself.

"At their heart, cover songs for me are about celebrating the music you love. There's nothing that gives me more joy than turning people on to new music. I've always loved that, ever since I was a kid," Erelli says. "They also show a little bit of your musical DNA. It's not just like, 'Here's a song I love,' it gives you a chance to demonstrate why you love it in its performance and execution."

While *Mixtape*'s songs span decades and genres, two from 1984 stand out as especially bold — and well-executed — choices. Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer" gets a slow, spooky vibe that brings out the longing and desolation that were right there in the lyrics all along, and Phil Collins' "Against All Odds (Take a Look at Me Now)," with the synth and drums replaced by simple guitar arpeggios, gentle strings and piano, and a new rhythmic pattern, becomes confessional and beautiful as the heartbreak comes front and center.

"That's what cover songs can do," Erelli says. "Cover songs really give you a

lens on what it is that comprises a song. It's not just the words and the melody and the chords. It's the production as well." Strip away the dated effects, and "underneath all that stuff is oftentimes, or at least sometimes, a great song."

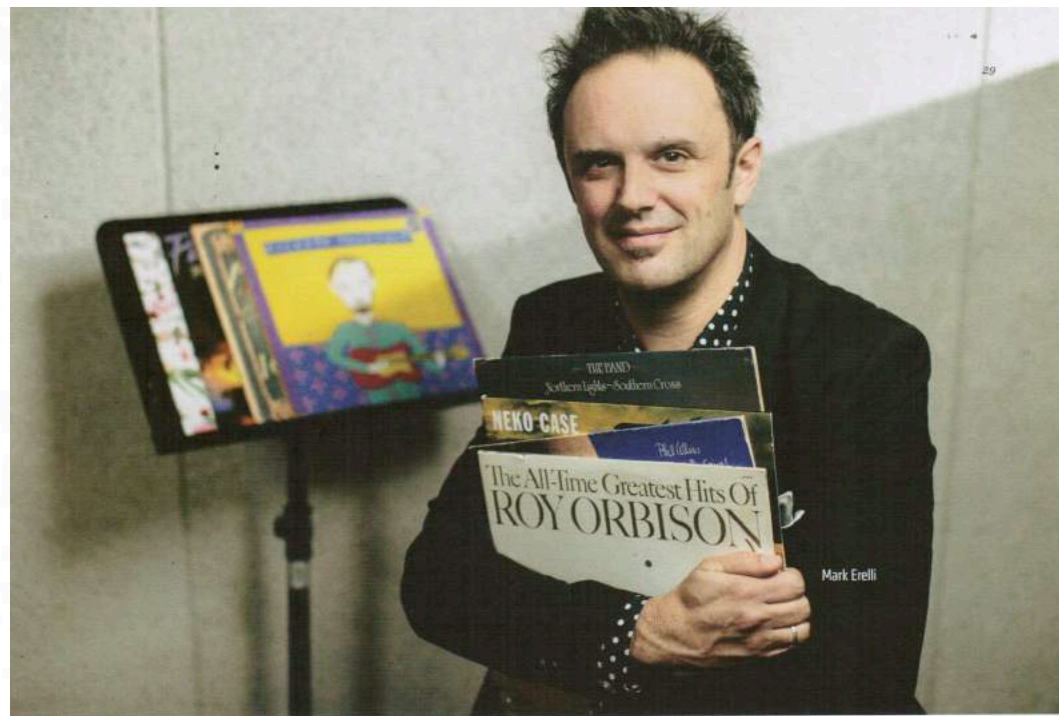
Getting inside a song someone else perfected is a valuable learning opportunity, Erelli says, both for technical lessons and for something more.

"For me it's not just like a fun thing that you do," he explains. "If I want to sing something, I have plenty I can sing of mine that comes from my heart. If I want to cover something, I'm making it mine, for however long it lasts. ... I'm singing that song, and in my mind, in my heart, for that three or four minutes, that is my song that I came up with."

He continues: "I think of it as being in service to the song. How deep is this song? How deep can you dive into this song and find your own territory within it? If it's not a very deep song, it's not a very interesting cover. And there are plenty of non-interesting covers out there. For me, I really want to get down in there as far as I can go and find as much out about it as I can."

What he finds out, often, is as much about himself as it is about the source material.

"I definitely learn a lot when I cover a song," he says. "I learn a lot about the song and the artist that wrote it, and also myself in terms of how much ground can I cover? Can I pull off a Dolly Parton song? Can I pull off a Roy Orbison song? Can I pull off a Solomon Burke song? There's only one way to find out, so you just gotta kind of dive in there and see what it's made out of, and that's often really illuminating. And I take that stuff back to



Mark Erelli

my own songs.

"When you're covering something, you get to try on somebody else's glasses for a while, and you see things really differently. And it's freeing. You can be a different character than you might normally feel like you're able to be in your own songs, and you can make musical choices that maybe you think, 'Well, people wouldn't expect that of me, it might be a little jarring or what have you.' But it just really kind of blows the doors off the hinges and all the sudden there's all this extra musical and lyrical and poetic territory that you may not have known just working on your own."

Sincerity and Satisfaction

Fast or slow, traditional or avant-garde, out-of-character or a perfect fit, cover songs are, at their best, sincere.

"I don't cover any songs I don't like," Erelli says. "Or I don't cover any songs purely as a joke. ... Even if I'm doing something that ostensibly seems like a joke, it's maybe pushing me in a direction musically that I didn't think I could go or

maybe people didn't expect of me."

As a listener, Shovels & Rope's Hearst appreciates when an artist really gets inside a song they're covering, "as opposed to an ironic cover."

"I really like it when they're singing somebody else's songs, and you can tell they really feel it, and you're like, 'Oh man, they really love this song,'" she says, citing Cat Power's cover of Rihanna's 2012 hit ballad "Stay," originally by Justin Parker and Mikky Ekko. (Cat Power/Chan Marshall herself has a long, celebrated history with cover songs; she has released two whole albums of them, and has featured at least one on most of her other albums.)

While the source material for cover songs has to be strong in the first place, it's what artists bring to their interpretations that makes them magical. They can pluck a song out of the past and make it relevant to the present without changing a word. They can blow the dust off a forgotten gem and show it to the world. They can also bring new meaning to a song we all thought we understood fully.

To that last point, Hearst brings up

Otis Redding's 1965 cover of The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." (Which has also been covered, notably, by Devo and Cat Power.)

"His heart is totally in it. And his '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' is different than the Stones' one because you can hear in his voice he's talking about 'I can't get no satisfaction for being a black man in America and my struggle,' and you can hear it in the improvisation, as in, 'We're saying don't give up, don't stand down, keep going forward, I got to, got to, get some satisfaction.' It makes me think, 'Oh man, he's talking about it's totally different from, like, 'I can't get like any ego satisfaction,' which is where I think the Stones were coming from, with their experience."

Trent notes that Redding himself had a song forever changed by the cover artist's interpretation. When Aretha Franklin covered Redding's "Respect," Trent points out, it was imbued with a whole new meaning for a whole new audience: "[A song] can totally change what it means depending on whose mouth it's coming out of." ■