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Cover Me: Introducing the Instant Tribute



Kevork Djansezian/Associated Press

The White Stripes

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PAYING a visit to a French radio station earlier this month, Conor Oberst, the earnest balladeer beloved of soulful girls and music critics, favored his audience with a few live songs. In fine pop music tradition, he focused on tracks from his new release "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," which he was there to promote. But in an equally recognizable gesture, he also played a cover, a tribute to a musician he admired. Within a week, his version was posted on several music Web sites, where fans who recognized the sweetly nostalgic original could download it.

But nostalgia isn't what it used to be. The song he covered wasn't some well-polished chestnut from the annals of recording history. It was "Mushaboom," by the Canadian-born singer Leslie Feist, from her album "Let It Die," which hasn't even been around long enough to establish much of a presence of its own. Yet it's already inspiring variations on a theme.

For decades, rock bands have acknowledged their influences by reinterpreting the old guys' songs. It was a kind of Oedipal tribute: honor thy forebears by reinventing them, as, for example, Devo did in 1978 with its spasmodic update of the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," from 1965.

Our post-postmodern era of mash-ups, music blogs, file sharing and near-instantaneous distribution, however, has given rise to a new phenomenon: a certain species of indie bands is covering their peers' brand-new songs - in those first heady days of release when the songs seem to be playing in every cafe and club, or even earlier, before

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they've made an impression at all. So acts like the Shins and Iron and Wine cover the Postal Service, who cover (and are covered by) the Flaming Lips, who cover the White Stripes, all on songs that were released within months of one another. In the process they bolster their careers, and deflate a bit of the preciousness from a genre that tends toward somber introspection.

The real-time cover has some history, not all of it pretty. In the early days of rock 'n' roll, some white bands covered black artists whose records couldn't get airplay - a white performer's version was said to "cover" any chance of success for the original release. Some songwriters were compensated (Little Richard famously called Pat Boone "the man who made me a millionaire"), but more often they were ignored while white artists got famous off their songs. As rock matured and race barriers broke down, covers became less loaded. In 1967, Jimi Hendrix opened a concert with a cover of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" just three days after the record came out. As Wayne Coyne, the eccentric leader of the Flaming Lips, imagines it, "It's like he's thinking, 'These are cool songs, I just want to play them!'"



Giulio Marcocchi/Getty Images

Wayne Coyne of the Flaming Lips, whose version of "Seven Nation Army" by the White Stripes is now on a compilation CD.

What's different today is the instant gratification: a week after a cover is played, it's being passed around the Web, via file-sharing networks like LimeWire or cheeky music blogs like Fluxblog or Stereogum. Frequently, these are unlicensed live versions on which neither band makes money.

The lack of licensing might not sit well with lawyers, but a lot of musicians seem to think it's just fine. "I'm so excited that these songs have been thrown all over the Internet," says Babydaddy, bassist and co-songwriter for the Grammy-nominated glam-disco sensation the Scissor Sisters. "Bands will record versions of other people's songs and they don't want to go through the process of clearing things and the Internet is the perfect way to release them."

The Scissor Sisters recorded a version of Franz Ferdinand's edgy guitar-driven hit "Take Me Out" for BBC Radio 1 last summer. The group's cabaret-style cover, which sounds as if the original had been blended with a healthy shot of Elton John and then poured through a cocktail shaker, was released online, then as a B-side, with Franz Ferdinand's blessing. "We run into the Franz Ferdinand guys all the time," Babydaddy said, "and the last word was that they were really happy with it."

The Flaming Lips' version of the White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army," another instant cover that had a long life on the Internet, was released this month on a various-artists compilation CD, as part of the "Late Night Tales" series available on azulishop.com.

The electronic duo the Postal Service went one better: "Such Great Heights" an EP of new songs it released in 2003, included covers of those songs by two other bands. It even included the Shins' countrified version of "We Will Become Silhouettes," a Postal Service song that the Postal Service itself didn't get around to releasing, in its original form, until a month later. By that time, die-hard fans had already gotten used to the tribute version, imbuing the song itself with an almost instant history.

And because all three bands are on the Sub Pop label, the whole thing worked as a handy bit of in-house cross-marketing, introducing one band's music to another band's fans. "It almost seems like a huge percentage of the audience is there because of the cover we did," says the Shins' frontman, James Mercer, about recent live shows. "People yell that out so much."

Iron and Wine's cover of the title track strips down the ebullient head-bobbing original and transforms it into a moody whispered secret. That version made it onto the Grammy-winning soundtrack for the film "Garden State," which brought it a much wider audience than it would otherwise have had.

These days, when the Postal Service performs the song live, it's hard to say who's interpreting whom. "It's a very strange turn of events," says Ben Gibbard, the singer-lyricist half of the Postal Service. He is no stranger to strangeness: he lives in Seattle; the other member of the duo, Jimmy Tamborello, lives in Los Angeles; the two communicate, of course, via the United States Postal Service.

"I don't know if postmodern is necessarily the word," Mr. Gibbard added, "but it's a strange occurrence when I write a song with a guy who I barely know who lives 1,200 miles from me and then we get a guy in Miami to do a cover of it, and then I in turn am covering the version of the song that he covered."

More often it's a local affair. In the crowded Williamsburg, Brooklyn, music scene, for example, that kind of hall-of-mirrors effect arose early: in 2002, the repetitive noise-rockers Oneida and the art-punk trio the Liars each covered one of the other band's songs on a split EP titled "Atheists, Reconsider." Brian Chase, the drummer of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs (another Williamsburg band), calls the result his "favorite example of bands covering each other's stuff." In 2003, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, for their part, released a bombastic, funky cover of a Liars song ("Mr. You're on Fire, Mr.").

TV on the Radio, winner of the 2004 Shortlist Music Prize, which recognizes up-and-coming indie bands, stitched itself into this hipster daisy chain last autumn by turning the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' ballad "Modern Romance" (released a year earlier) into a layered, rhythmic dirge. "We chose it because it's a really good song," says the band's vocalist, Tunde Adebimpe. "It's pretty much just saying: 'You know that song you wrote? I love it. I was singing it all day yesterday, but like this. Please don't sue me.'"

At worst, a few have grumbled - like Mr. Chase, who didn't think so highly of a Yeah Yeah Yeahs "tribute" album that was recently released. "Some of the MP3's are pretty dreadful," he says. And some purists whine that it's all just a cry for attention. To which Babydaddy of the Scissor Sisters has a ready response: "Of course it was an attention scheme," he says of the Franz Ferdinand cover. "We went on the radio to play and promote our album. That's the whole idea!"

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