

## **MUSIC S152**

### **THE COVER SONG: REMAKING MUSICAL MEANING**

**Prof. Brian Kane**

#### **Course Description/Goals**

This course is an introduction to (and examination of) central issues in musical meaning that focuses on the phenomenon of the “cover song.” A cover song is performance or recording of a song that was previously recorded or performed by someone else. Cover songs are never just performances pure and simple but rather they are commentaries on previous performances. Thus, they reveal how aspects such as genre, timbre, tempo, arrangement, harmonization, lyrics are not just basic musical concepts but crystallize social and historical relationships. The course will examine the cover song across genres and time. Some course sessions will involve focus on one song over time, other sessions may look at groups of cover songs to address specific musical, social, and historical issues and key concepts in musical meaning. Readings will include musicological histories and commentaries on individual songs as well as philosophical reflections on aspects of musical meaning. Students should leave the course with a better understanding of how music means as well as a broader grasp of musical repertoire.

#### **Workload**

Students will be expected to do weekly reading and listening. Over the course of five week, students will write two responses

The workload for the course comprises a handful of short assignments and projects, distributed across the session. In addition to weekly reading and listening assignments, coursework will include written responses to texts and prompts, collaborative work on a playlist of a famous cover song, a final project that delves into a specific cover song (of your choosing), as well as daily participation and involvement in class discussions.

#### **Course Texts**

- Brian Kane, *Hearing Double: Jazz, Ontology, Auditory Culture*

The course text will be available at the Yale Bookstore, or online. Other readings will be available on the course website.

#### **Sound Recordings**

Recordings will be placed on the course website, as well as on public Spotify playlists. Each week will include a list of recordings to study.

#### **Grading Breakdown**

1 collaborative listening guide	15%
3 short response papers	30%
Final Project	25%
1 playlist (related to the final project)	10%
Participation in class discussion	20%

## **Grading Policy**

Students are expected to complete all assignments on time. Late coursework will be subject to lowered grades. Extensions will be granted only in very extenuating circumstances. Because this course is a lecture, you will be expected to attend class having completed the required reading and listening. Everyone is expected to engage thoughtfully and respectfully with the course materials, your colleagues, and your professor.

## **Statement on Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a core institutional value at Yale. It means, among other things, truth in presentation, diligence and precision in citing works and ideas we have used, and acknowledging our collaborations with others. In view of our commitment to maintaining the highest standards of academic integrity, Yale College prohibits the following forms of behavior: cheating on examinations, problem sets and all other forms of assessment; falsification and/or fabrication of data; plagiarism, that is, the failure to acknowledge ideas, research, or language taken from others; and multiple submission of the same work without obtaining explicit written permission from both instructors before the material is submitted. Students are expected to behave in compliance with the University's policies on academic integrity. For a fuller discussion on avoiding plagiarism, see <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>.

## Course Outline

### Week 1:

#### **Class 1. Introduction, Getting Oriented**

*This class introduces the concept of the cover song to students and touches on some of the themes and ideas that we will revisit over the rest of the session. We will dive into the world of the cover by thinking about three different case studies and how they generate musical meaning:*

1. *Christmas songs (why do these songs need to be sung over and over, what is at stake in remaking them, and why are most of them so awful?).*
2. *Racialized Covers (what were the reasons for—and meanings of—white musicians in the early days of rock ‘n’ roll covering songs associated with black musicians, and what was at stake in doing so?).*
3. *Radical Covers (what do we learn about musical meaning when we think about cover songs that sound radically different than their originals and what motivates a musician to do such a thing?)*
  - *Listening: versions of famous Christmas Songs, such as *White Christmas*, *Jingle Bells*, *The Christmas Song*, et alia; covers of *Hound Dog*, *Twist and Shout*, *Spoonful*, *Little Red Rooster*, et alia; Jimi Hendrix, *All Along the Watchtower*, Johnny Cash, *Personal Jesus*; Richard Cheese, *Baby got Back*; Kathy Berberian, *Ticket to Ride*, et al.*
  - *Reading: Kane, *Hearing Double*.*

#### **Class 2. Musical Works and Musical Performances**

*This class focuses on prominent philosophical theories of musical works, and how they might interpret the phenomenon of the “cover song.” It also looks at the way the cover songs can legitimate new musical instruments by rearranging or reorchestration well-known musical works.*

- *Listening: *Switched-On Bach*, versions of *In the Mood*, *Body and Soul*, *My Funny Valentine*, and *Born to Run*, et al.*
- *Readings: Brian Kane, from *Hearing Double*; Steven Davies, from *Musical Works and Performances*; Lyda Goehr, from *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*; Georgian Born, “Music and the Social.”*

### Week 2:

#### **Class 3. From Standards to Covers**

*This session traces how the American popular music industry—through radio, recordings, sheet music, and live performance—slowly shifted its main commodity from “songs” to “recordings.” This shift, in turn, brought with it changes to the way that listeners consumed music, and what aspects of the music gained and lost importance. We can trace this by looking at popular songs (and their covers) from various eras in American popular music.*

- Listening: versions of the song *Stardust*; Les Paul and Mary Ford covers from the 1950s; versions of the Beatles' *Yesterday* and *Blackbird*; version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*; originals and covers of Laura Nyro.
- Readings: Albin Zak, from *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*; Brian Kane, from *Hearing Double*; Theodor Gracyk, from *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Will Friedwald, from *Stardust Melodies*, Theodor Adorno, from *Current of Music*.
- Coursework: Short response paper #1 due.

#### **Class 4. Anthems**

*This session reflects on the nature of anthems. Anthems are group songs intended to be sung repeatedly to bind a community together and/or commemorate an occasion. Anthems are participatory sonic monuments, aimed at melding individuals into a mass. But what about the Star-Spangled Banner? Notoriously difficult to sing, the American National Anthem has undergone constant reinterpretation over the years, each time reflecting larger national issues. Moreover, the virtuosic performances that we have come to expect have shifted our national anthem from a participatory group song to a display of individuality and talent. Lift Every Voice and Sing, which has become the unofficial "black national anthem" since its adoption by the NAACP, has led a different life in the American public sphere. By comparing these two anthems, this session focuses on issues of group and individual, absorption and theatricality, and the politics of patriotism and nationalism.*

- Listening: versions of the Star-Spangled Banner by Jimi Hendrix, Whitney Houston, Marvin Gaye, the US Army Band, Lee Greenwood, and others; versions of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by The Manhattan Harmony Four, Ray Charles, Beyoncé, Be Be Winans, et al.
- Readings: Ginger Dellenbaugh, "Oh Say Can You Sing?"; Mark Clague, from *Oh Say Can You Hear? A Cultural Biography of the "Star-Spangled Banner"*; Farrah Jasmine Griffin, "When Melindy Sings"

#### **Week 3:**

#### **Class 5. Rhapsody in Blue: from modern music to music for airports**

*Moving from songs to larger "works," this session traces how George Gershwin's jazz age composition, Rhapsody in Blue went from middlebrow experiment to symphonic hall warhorse, to a jingle for United Airlines, and Hollywood soundtrack staple.*

*NOTE: This class will also include time for students to do group work on their collaborative listening guides.*

- Readings: Ryan Bañagale, from *Arranging Gershwin*
- Listening: *Rhapsody in Blue*, various versions (Paul Whiteman, Grofé arrangement for orchestra, et alia)
- Coursework: Short response paper #2 due.

## **Class 6. Hawai'i -- Island of Dreams**

*Hawai'ian music has experienced two "crazes" in America, first in the 1920s—think of the ukelele!—and again during and after WWII as American expanded its power into the Pacific, and Hawai'ian statehood and air travel made Hawai'i a tourist destination. We can trace the changing image of Hawai'i in the American imagination by studying two songs associated with it. The first, Aloha Oe, written by Queen Lili 'uokalani—deposed in a coup by American plantation owners—is a farewell song with a message that has been constantly transformed by context, arrangement, and performance; My Little Grass Shack, written for the mainland American marketplace, has surprising staying power—and has come to be interpreted in ways that can both reflect island critiques of the mainland as well as mainland fantasies of unencumbered Hawai'ian paradises.*

- Listening: versions of *Aloha Oe* by Nani Alapai, Bing Crosby, Elvis Presley, Alfred Apaka, Johnny Cash, and others; versions of *My Little Grass Shack* by Noelani Hawaiian Orchestra, Paul Whiteman, The King Sisters, Charles Kaipo, and others.
- Reading: Amy K. Stillman, "Beyond the Coloniality of Authenticity," "Hula Hits, Local Music and Local Charts: Some Dynamics of Popular Hawaiian Music." and chapters from *The Sacred Hula*

### **Week 4:**

## **Class 7. Radical Covers**

*This class revisits a case study introduced in Class # 1, the radical cover. We will look at a handful of radical covers to think about the role that musical genre, timbre, arrangement, and gender play in the construction of musical meaning. We will also think about what are the conditions under which a cover might surpass the category of the cover altogether to become a work of its own?*

- Listening: *This Nearly Was Mine*, from the Original Cast Recording of *South Pacific* and from *The World of Cecil Taylor*; Ornette Coleman, *Embraceable You*, from *The Shape of Jazz to Come*; various performances of Jeanne Lee and Ran Blake; the oeuvre of Richard Cheese; various gender swap covers.
- Reading: Kane, from *Hearing Double*
- Coursework: Collaborative Playlist due.

## **Class 8. Is a Sample also a Cover?**

*Is a sample a tiny cover? Or is the category of the cover the wrong way to think about samples? This session looks at the referential politics of sampling, to think about issues of allusion, borrowing, appropriation, homage, and citation.*

- Listening: Hindewhu performances by the Ba-Benzélé Pygmies; Herbie Hancock, *Watermelon Man* from *Headhunters*; Madonna, *Sanctuary* from *Bedtime Stories*, and many

other uses of the hindewhu sample; selected top samples on websites: *Second Hand Music* and *Who Sampled?*

- Readings: Trisha Rose, from *Black Noise*; Steven Feld, “Pygmy Pop”; Will Chang, from *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*
- Coursework: Short response paper #3 due.

### **Week 5:**

#### **Class 9 and 10: Student Presentations**

These classes will be used for students to present on their final projects and for group discussion, peer critique, and suggestions for further work.

- Coursework: Final Project and playlist will be due after the end of week 5.