

Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity (Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Phoebe Snow)

Michael Awkward

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In the world of pop music, imitation is not simply a sincere form of flattery; when singers or bands record the song, or songs, of other artists, they are performing a tribute to the artistry, skill, and vision of those musicians and writers. For example, Jimi Hendrix, Dave Mason, and U2, among others, have recorded their own versions of Bob Dylan's prophetic ode on politics, "All Along the Watchtower." Although the screaming guitars of Hendrix's version are likely even more well-known than the gravelly vocals of the Dylan original, each artist embraces Dylan's song and wrings from it his own particular meaning.

The reasons that artists cover others' songs range from the simple to the complex. Some songs—Linda Ronstadt's version of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" for example—simply honor the beauty and integrity of the original performer. Others, - such as Eric Clapton's covers of Elmore James's songs like "Crossroads," - demonstrate an artist's struggle to craft his own artistic identity.

Michael Awkward, Gayl A. Jones Collegiate Professor of Afro-American Literature and Culture at the University of Michigan, looks at three artists—Aretha Franklin, Al Green, and Phoebe Snow—as case studies of the ways that artists use cover songs to establish their own musical identities.

Awkward believes that "aspects of the singers' selves are communicable in, reflective of, and have the potential to enhance their renderings of others' songs and that covers seem unavoidably to provoke comparisons whose outcome is always potentially in doubt." In exploring these claims, he examines Franklin's *Unforgettable: A Tribute to Dinah Washington* (1964), Green's *Call Me* (1973), and Snow's *Second Childhood* (1976).

His chapters on Green and Snow offer few helpful insights into these artists' use of cover songs. Green's album contains songs that he either composed himself or that he partly composed. Awkward primarily shows the ways in which Green's songs express the singer's attempt to balance his deep religious feelings with his longings for passionate love. The section on Snow, most famous for her song "Poetry Man," also focuses more on her own compositions than her covers of other's songs.

His chapter on Franklin most effectively captures his thesis. On *Unforgettable*, the young Franklin pays tribute to her idol, Dinah Washington, while at the same time offering her own stylings of Washington's songs. Franklin's soaring song stylings not only honor Washington but also elevate Franklin to a position far above Washington; she uses Washington's song to establish her own career, not simply to honor her mentor. In her performances of "Cold, Cold Heart" and "Drinking Again," in particular, Franklin captures the power and vulnerability of the tradition of black female singers, from Billie Holiday to Dinah Washington. More than Green and Snow, Franklin uses cover songs as a platform from which to launch her own career.

Although Awkward's highly academic prose is often filled with jargon, his valuable insights into these three albums encourage listeners to pick them up and listen to them again in light of his examination of them; just what all good music books should do.

HENRY L. CARRIGAN (June 7, 2007)

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