

The dynamics that determine cover versions in recorded western music

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Summary

This paper attempted to understand which songs, artists and genres of music were most covered (and who did the most covering). The research built a database of recorded music throughout the 20th century. The paper was able to identify The Beatles as the most covered group, followed by the jazz composer Duke Ellington and then the singer Bing Crosby. ‘When jazz bands and vocal singers dominated the music scene, the covering of songs was more frequent because they would compete in the performance of popular hits’. The changing story of covers through the 20th century is a transition away from a shared and much-played repertoire of standards and a pivot in the 1960s towards a much smaller pantheon of pop and rock stars whose works come to dominate the catalogue.

The data for this study was a database of more than 106,000 artists and 855,000 cover versions

The data was extracted from the websites SecondHandSongs and Allmusic. The former was used to provide details of songs, covers and covering/covered artists; the latter to furnish the database with details about the artist’s discography and genre. The data ranges in time from the 1900s to the 2010s.

Artists tended to cover songs from within their genre and in their own language

There are other interesting dynamics at work in the artists who cover (and are covered). Some are influential across a range of other genres and some act as funnels for a diverse set of genres into their own. Artists like Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Bob Dylan and The Beatles are covered far more frequently than they cover, which suggests that they ‘are bridges that influence later performers from a broad range of spheres’. By contrast, recording artists like Acker Bilk, James Last and Ray Conniff are promiscuous cover artists and produce many popular hits based on other people’s compositions. They are therefore ‘bridges that are influenced by classical artists from different fields’.

Keywords

popular **music** **jazz** **listening**

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