

THE WEEK

WORD ON THE STREET: BEN ZIMMER

'Covers' Are Key Sounds Of Pop Era



THIS WEEK, indie rocker Ryan Adams delivered an unusual release: a full remake of Taylor Swift's "1989," consisting of cover versions of all the songs from her top-selling album. While Mr. Adams takes a musical homage to extreme lengths, the "cover" has been a basic bit of music-industry lingo for nearly 70 years.

As the U.S. emerged from World War II, big-band music gave way to pop songs with a focus on vocalists like Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee. Competition heated up among the major labels to capture the burgeoning audience for pop music, as well as for the newly dubbed fields of "rhythm and blues" and "country and western." The industry magazine *Billboard* ranked records according to record sales, radio airplay and jukebox spins.

The record labels developed a winning strategy: riding on the coattails of another label's hit by rerecording it with their own artists. *Billboard* began re-

Does Elvis's wildly popular 'Hound Dog' count as a cover?

ferred to this practice as "coverage" as early as 1948, the idea being that labels sought to "cover" the consumer market by peddling different versions of a popular tune.

The term "coverage" soon entered *Billboard's* capsule record reviews that attempted to predict which songs would do well on the charts. In 1949, when the Chicago singer and pianist Al Morgan found success on the hit parade with a pop rendition of "Jealous Heart," *Billboard* assessed one of the many knockoffs: "Jeffrey Clay does the solo honors in this good coverage of a current hit."

As the snappy lingo of *Billboard's* record reviewers got even snappier in the early 1950s, they began referring to such remakes as "cover jobs," "cover versions" or simply "covers." And the covers themselves were proliferating—now pop artists were covering R&B and country songs as well, as cultural reappropriations gave birth to rock 'n' roll.

One notable example came in the spring of 1953, when Peacock Records released "Hound Dog," penned by the young songwriting duo of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and sung by Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. As it shot up the R&B charts, "Little" Esther Phillips quickly remade "Hound Dog" for the Federal label. "This is a cover version of the Willie Mae Thornton disk, which has been one of the fastest breaking hits in some years," *Billboard* wrote, adding, "This one will be hard-pressed to compete. It fails to build the same excitement of the original."

Three years later, a new version of the song would build unprecedented excitement, when Elvis Presley released his own rocking "Hound Dog." It would go on to be one of the best-selling singles of all time.

But was Presley's version even a "cover"? In her contribution to the 2010 essay collection "Play It Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music," the sociologist Deena Weinstein argues that one criterion of a "cover" is that listeners know the original, and most Elvis fans were unaware of Thornton's version. It's safe to say, though, that anyone listening to Ryan Adams cover "1989" is quite familiar with Ms. Swift's oeuvre.

MY WEEK: LYNDA OBST



RUTH GIVELY

The Curses of Producing a TV Pilot

I OFTEN SAY that I curse like a Teamster. But this summer, while driving with my favorite actual Teamster, Herbie Lieberz—who, for our eighth TV project together, is getting me safely to the set—I discover that my habitual excuse for dropping an F-bomb is a big fat lie.

I'm in New York to produce an Amazon pilot called "Good Girls Revolt." On this Thursday morning, Herbie is taking me from my Manhattan hotel to our stage in Bethpage, Long Island—in traffic that has no rhyme or reason no matter the hour. I suddenly realize that I'm cursing and Herbie isn't. In fact, I realize, I've never heard him use the F-word.

At dinner that night, I discuss the origins of my dirty mouth with an erudite editor and his philosopher-king husband. This editor, who knows everything about everything, is for some reason deeply steeped in the mores of the movie business. "It's the agents," he postulates. "It's a testosterone cul-

ture—they're aping those tough old Hollywood moguls."

He's right. Rough language is like carrying a club into the ape house. First-generation Hollywood women like me often needed those clubs to protect ourselves in the testosterone-filled rooms to which we were just gaining access.

But Herbie has real testosterone, so he doesn't need a fake club. *Maybe I don't either, I think. Maybe my cursing club is vestigial.*

The next day, I tell Herbie: I will try to stop using the F-word. I'll let you know how I do.

* * *

Today, we have the EPK on set—the Electronic Press Kit, in which everyone is interviewed for publicity (to be used somewhere sometime) as if they're on "The View," except without a moderator.

The fun part: Producers get treated like the stars and have our hair and makeup done by pros—that is, when the stars aren't having their hair and makeup done for the show and their own EPKs, which are the ones that actually get used.

Producers try to plan something for the night we get our hair and makeup done. I spend much of the day trying to make plans for my hair's big night, but since it's late summer, and we're shooting on weekends, and it's Friday, everyone I know is in one Hampton or another.

I retreat to my hotel, order room service and watch baseball. The waiter doesn't notice my great hair and makeup. The Orioles lose. Still I curse not.

* * *

Herbie has befriended the doormen at my hotel, with whom he gossips until I'm ready to leave for the set. He arrives at 5:30 a.m. from his home in Bethpage (to beat the morning traffic), therefore performing a quadruple commute (home-

hotel-stage-hotel-home, repeat) every day.

Today is Wednesday—our "Monday" after our absurd Monday-Tuesday weekend. Weekends are very low-status for me at the hotel, I've learned, because in New York, you are your transportation. When Herbie is on, everyone smiles at me and thinks I am a deal. On my day off, I walk or take a cab to Pilates, and the doormen are bereft.

I don't know what Brad or Clint do, but on my drives with Herbie, I sit shotgun, sometimes with my legs on the dashboard, sipping coffee he has picked up at Sant Ambroeus. We discuss philosophy, sports and our kids—but most of all, Herbie gives me advice about the day. There is nothing about the show he doesn't hear about.

* * *

It is our third-to-last day, and all is going well with our difficult final scenes. We emerge from our producers' trailer after lunch to see an ambulance outside the stage door—never good. Was an actor hurt? A crew member? I rush to talk to our medic.

"What's up with the ambulance?" I ask.

"An extra had a mental breakdown on set," she answers as a woman is carried away.

Huh? This is a new one. We have a lot of "background," as we call the extras.

"What happened?" I ask.

"She was convinced that three producers on set were trying to mind-manipulate her into sexual slavery," the medic replies.

I look at my two producing partners.

"Are you [expletive] kidding me?" I exclaim.

And with that, I've failed myself. Worse, I've failed Herbie.

Ms. Obst has produced films and TV shows including "Interstellar," "Sleepless in Seattle," "Contact" and TV Land's "Hot in Cleveland." Her most recent book is "Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business" (Simon & Schuster).

PHOTO OF THE WEEK



LUCAS COCH/ EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

Struck by Lighting
A visitor photographed a light installation at a Tuesday preview of the 2015 NightFest festival in Canberra, Australia.

+ For more images: WSJ.com/Photos

Answers to News Quiz on C13: 1.A, 2.C, 3.B, 4.B, 5.A, 6.A, 7.D, 8.A, 9.C

R&D: DANIEL AKST

The Diagnosis of a Papal Gesture

FOR PHYSICIANS, the gesture used by some popes to confer a blessing, with the hand raised but the last two fingers curled inward, looks a lot like the deformity called *main-en-griffe*, or clawhand—a sign of nerve damage.

Dr. Bennett Futterman, a professor of anatomy at New York Institute of Technology's College of Osteopathic Medicine, was long puzzled by the similarity. How, he wondered, did popes start using this peculiar gesture?

Now, in time for Pope Francis' visit to the U.S., Dr. Futterman has published a paper arguing that the gesture goes all the way back to St. Peter. He believes that Peter used it not for theological reasons but because he suffered from nerve damage, perhaps as a result of leprosy, and that subsequent popes emulated his gesture, turn-

ing it into an enduring tradition.

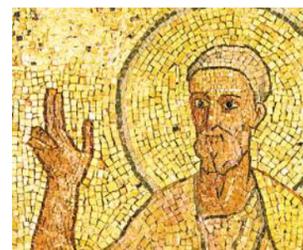
Some papal historians are dubious, arguing that there is no proof that Peter used the benediction gesture, which might have arisen later from the desire to bolster papal authority by differentiating a pope's blessings from those of lesser clerics. But Dr. Futterman, a former orthopedic surgeon, points to a variety of ancient depictions of Peter using the gesture (all made, admittedly, one or more centuries after Peter's death).

Some of the images, says Dr. Futterman, show the last two fingers flexed even when Peter's hand was at rest. The paper cites a fresco of Jesus and his disciples at Rome's Catacombs of St. Domitilla that shows Peter's hand, in contrast to all the others', in the benediction position even though he isn't blessing anything. The unnat-

ural curling of the fingers is a strong sign of neuropathy, Dr. Futterman says.

So which nerve was the culprit? Dr. Futterman suggests that it was the ulnar nerve, which runs through the arm. Damage to it causes involuntary curling of the last two fingers.

Dr. Futterman speculates that



BYZANTINE MOSAIC of St. Peter, circa 700 AD, Vatican City

Peter, drawing on a Jewish tradition that was probably familiar to him, might have been trying to emulate the gesture used for ritual blessings by Israelite priests (a gesture later made famous by the actor Leonard Nimoy as the Vulcan salute, with the words "live long and prosper," in "Star Trek"). Because of his ulnar damage, Dr. Futterman says, Peter wouldn't have been able to split his four fingers into the traditional V shape.

Dr. Futterman notes that the clawhand gesture was used by some of Peter's successors, at least judging by religious art and photographs of later pontiffs. But he's not aware of Francis having used the gesture since becoming pope.

Analysis of the Papal Benediction Sign: The Ulnar Neuropathy of St. Peter, Bennett Futterman, Clinical Anatomy (June 28)