

Toward a musical division of labor

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So few classical composers play an instrument at the virtuoso level. It seems obvious to all that there should be a division of labor where some people devote all their time to writing good music, and others put their all into playing their instruments. Most pop doesn't have this division of labor, which is sort of silly, especially since the instrument in question is the human voice, and the number of people endowed with both a lovely voice and great songwriting abilities are few indeed. So, take this column as a list of examples of why a songwriter/singer division of labor makes sense.

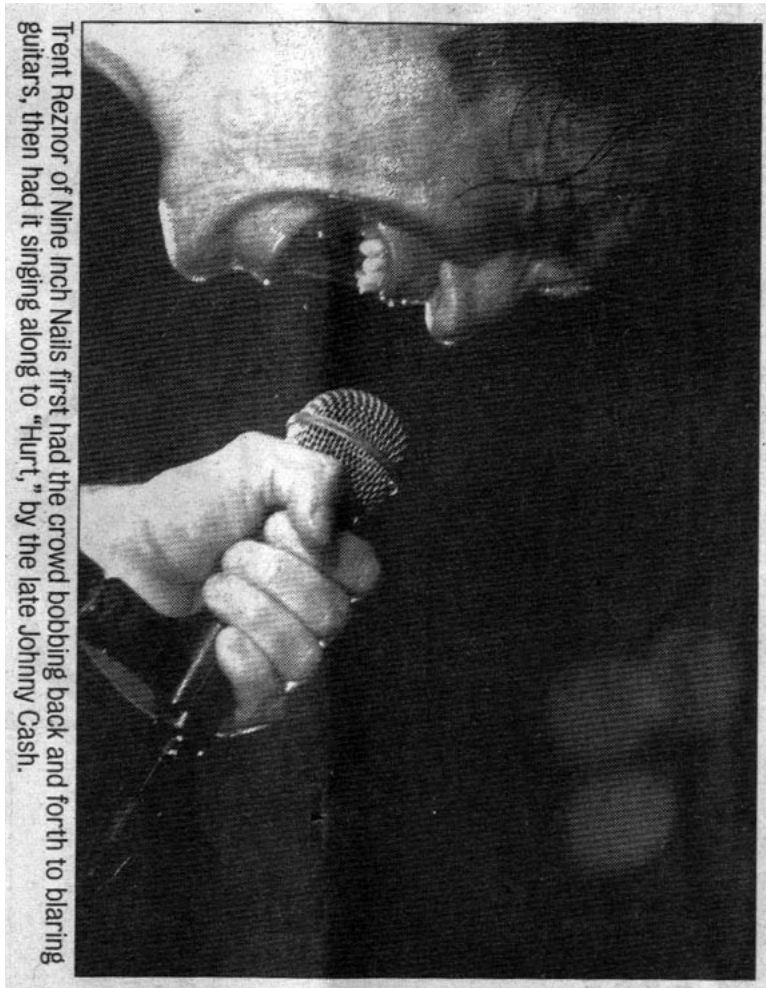
Or just take it as a list of tracks that are fab. By the way, my personal means of carrying pop songs around so I have them when I want them is to put them on my gmail account; user: some.files ; pass: caring . It's pretty convenient.

Johnny Cash covering Trent Reznor: Hurt [on American IV]. As you can see, I'm starting with the obvious picks. Mr. Cash comes from a tradition of performing songs by others, and he is none the poorer for it. Since Mr. Cash doesn't have to contend with Mr. Reznor's angry-for-angry's-sake market, he's also able to remove an annoying blemish from the lyrics ("I wear this crown of thorns...").

Jeff Buckley covering Leonard Cohen: Hallelujah [on Grace]. Sigh. This one's also an obvious pick, to the point that many people don't even know that it's a cover. Leonard Cohen is a bit like Bob "Dylan" Zimmerman, in that pretty much any cover will be better performed than the original. To tell you the truth, I didn't even know that Guns 'n' Roses's "Knocking on Heaven's Door" is actually by Bob Dylan until Ms AS of San Diego, CA, pointed it out to me. [Click through on that link: she has her own list of covers that improve on the original.]

The Bangles covering Simon and Garfunkel: Hazy Shade of Winter [on the Less than Zero soundtrack and pretty much any Bangles Best of]. In the continuing tradition of Jewish folk singers like the above, Paul Simon can write, but his singing is not very exciting. His best stuff always involved collaboration with others who have instrumental and vocal talent (Art Garfunkel, asst Africans and Brazilians).

Living Colour covering Al Green: Love and Happiness [on the Biscuits EP]. You get to pick: Al Green's Hammond organ, or Living Colour's over-the-top lead singer and electric guitars.



Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails first had the crowd bobbing back and forth to blaring guitars, then had it singing along to "Hurt," by the late Johnny Cash.

Figure 1: When a cover's good enough, you forget who originally wrote the song.

Concrete Blonde covering Roxy Music: End of the line [on Mexican Moon]. Johnette Napolitano has a voice to die for, and has a Roxy Music fetish, as she explains in the song “Roxy” (on Group Therapy). C.B. has done many a cover, such as Mr. Cohen’s *Everybody Knows*, or J Hendrix’s *Castles made of sand*. *Castles* is notable for Johnette’s modification of the girl in the wheelchair’s line from ‘and she smiled to her legs and said you won’t hurt me no more.’ to ‘and she looked up and she said you’ll never hurt me no more.’

Prince covering Joan Osborne: One of us [on Emancipation, disc 3]. Joan wrote a brilliant piece, but just doesn’t belt it in performance. Prince, meanwhile, has that fire ‘n’ brimstone preacher thing going, as per “The Cross”.

You know that song “Georgia on my mind”, a semi-standard that everybody associates with Ray Charles? Check out the Maceo Parker version, on Life on Planet Groove. I’m trying to steer clear of songs that were written by songwriters who have no singing career of any sort, but since this one is so closely associated with Ray Charles, I thought it deserved a place on the list. If I didn’t follow this rule, the list would be ten times longer, due to tracks like *If your girl only knew*, by Missy Elliot but made popular by Aaliyah and made *amazing* by Rahzel (Make the Music 2000), or *Wichita Lineman* by Jimmy Webb, typically sung by Glen Campbell, wonderfully covered by the Scud Mountain boys on Pine Box.

Ambitions Lovers covering Gilberto Gil: O Preciso Perdoar [on Lust]. Have I said enough about how wonderful this little piano piece is. The rest of the album is standard 80s synth, but this little throw-away at the end of the album makes it well worth the \$0.01 plus shipping and handling. And hey, while we’re talking Arto Lindsay, what about his cover of Prince’s *Erotic city*, on Mundo Civilizado. Prince’s version is kitschy, but at risk of sounding un-economist, Arto’s version, with its battery of samba drums, is *hot*.

Which reminds me of Caetano Veloso’s album of covers, A Foreign Sound (if only because the Ambitious Lovers produced Caetano’s Estrangeiro). It’s mostly lite to the point of dullness—I picture Caetano telling the executives ‘I’m Caetano Veloso and I’ll record what I darn well please to!’—but here and there, his chillness has that effect that good Bossa Nova has, confusing you as to whether you should be rocking out or sinking into the couch and going ‘aahh’. I think the ending to *Come as you are*, with its off-kilter bass would be OK by Kurt, giving the right accent to a song that is supposed to be on-edge and creepy. Caetano is never too heavy with the battery, which makes it all that much more effective as the outro of his cover of “Blue Skies (shining on me)”.

Caetano’s cover album leads us to Guns ‘n’ Roses’s Spaghetti Incident?. It’s mostly what you’d expect from G’n’R, but track one, *Since I don’t have you*, reveals that in an alternate universe, Axl Rose is a carnival barker by day and a torch singer by night. The song is another standard, by Beaumont & Rock and originally performed by The Skyliners.

Seu George covering David Bowie: Life on Mars. Dude, you’ve seen one Wes Anderson movie about Bill Murray in a mid-life crisis, you’ve seen ‘em all, but at least The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou had Seu George on guitar. Though I’ve sung its praises before, we should also mention David Lynch’s use

of Roy Orbison's *Crying in Mulholland Drive*, covered *a capella*¹ and in Spanish to moving effect.

Willie Nelson and Sinead O'Conner covering Peter Gabriel: Don't Give up, from Willie's cover album, *Across the Borderline*. This is a semi-self-indulgent album where Willie flew around the planet and did duets with other famous people. The guitar solo in the break of every last one of 'em consists of Willie repeating the melody—yawn. But this is a country song, and though the original is heartfelt, Mr. Gabriel doesn't do country. Oh, and while we're on Ms O'Connor, we all know that *Nothing Compares 2 U* is by Prince, but check out The Artist himself doing this song on his Warner Brothers contractual obligation B-sides album. You get to decide which is the cover in that pair.

¹*In the style of the cathedral.*