



SANJOY Narayan

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NEW SOUND
Railroad Earth recreated *Roadhouse Blues* in a manner that I could have never imagined

Judge A Song By Its Cover

Cover versions of songs can be great fun and an excellent way to get introduced to new bands

LAST WEEK, on a self-indulgent nostalgia trip I had recreated one of my playlists dating back to 1976 and put the Crosby, Stills & Nash track *Wooden Ships* on it. My colleague and *Brunch* columnist, Vir Sanghvi, was quick to observe that probably the Jefferson Airplane version of the song, featured on the band's *Volunteers* album, was a better one. I re-heard *Volunteers* and tend to agree. Then I found a rare live version of the Airplane doing the song on YouTube (the link's on the web version of *Download Central*) that was even better. The Airplane changed the melody as well as the lyrics a bit and, of course, there was the icing on top in the form of the excellent vocals of Grace Slick who pitched in with Paul Kantner. Sometimes when a band covers someone else's original song, it can be so different, I thought.

I was wrong. *Wooden Ships*, a bit of research revealed, was originally a song written by David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Airplane's Paul Kantner. It so happened that when it was first released on Crosby, Stills & Nash's eponymous first album in 1969, Kantner wasn't credited for the song he co-wrote in Florida aboard a boat owned by Crosby. It was much later, actually in 2006, when the CSN album was re-released that the Airplane frontman was finally co-credited for it.

Yet, cover versions of other people's original songs can be great fun. Sometimes they are a great way to get introduced to new bands. The first time I heard Sublime, a ska punk (ska is a Jamaican musical genre considered a precursor to reggae) band from Southern California, I got drawn into their music by their cover of a Grateful Dead favourite, *Scarlet Begonias*. The late Brad Nowell from Sublime added an entire new verse to that song, which gave it an edgy, trippy twist that the original didn't have.

So, in December, when I came across a nice, long one-hour and forty-five-minute podcast from live music download website, www.nugs.net, I heard a version of The



SUBLIME GAVE AN EDGY, TRIPPY TWIST TO SCARLET BEGONIAS

Doors' *Riders on the Storm* by Widespread Panic and *Roadhouse Blues* by Railroad Earth. Now, I don't much care for The Doors, but the two bands – Panic with their trademark jams and Railroad Earth with their rootsy, bluegrass sound – recreated those two songs in a manner that I could have never imagined. Nor, I am sure, would have Jim (may his soul R.I.P.).

Good covers are like new wine in new bottles, although the original grape may be the same. Yet, not everyone can pull off a good cover. Some cover bands are boringly predictable. Like The Dark Star Orchestra, which faithfully recreates entire Grateful Dead concerts, each member painstakingly copying the band's every lick, riff and vocal note. Or Think Floyd, a British band that, yes you guessed right, meticulously plays everything that Pink Floyd ever wrote.

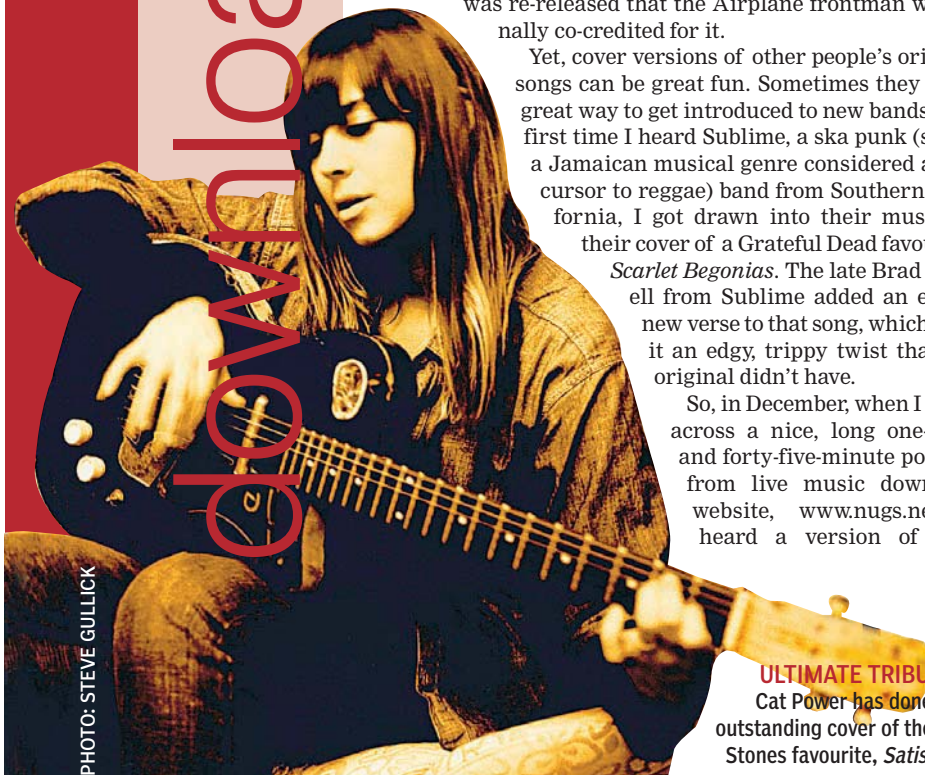
These are tribute bands that could act as a placebo for die-hard fans who can't get over a break-up or demise of their loved musicians and who clutch at anything that recreates or reminds them of their idols. Yet, there are exceptions to this. Some hook you with their originality. Like Lez Zeppelin, an all-woman band from New York who play only Led Zeppelin songs and are really, really good.

One of my favourite musicians is Cat Power (aka Chan Marshall), an American singer-songwriter with a rich oeuvre of her original music in her trademark minimalist style. But Power has an album called *The Covers Record* where she's done songs that are almost entirely covers of other people's songs. And one that's outstanding is the Rolling Stones favourite, *(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction*. Now, I have heard Mick Jagger himself sing *Satisfaction* in several ways over the past four decades and more (sigh!), but I never thought the song could be interpreted the way Power does it on her album. If you haven't heard *The Covers* record, I'd recommend looking for it and checking out several other covers, including her amazing version of Lou Reed's *I Found A Reason*.

Last year, when the attitude-laden Billy Corgan took his band, Chicago's alternative rockers, The Smashing Pumpkins, on tour, he generously laced their gigs with covers, doing their version of classic tracks. Their version of The Beatles' *Nowhere Man* is a must-listen.

Some bands take the concept of doing covers to an altogether different level. Brain Damaged Eggmen is a project that fuses two great jam bands, Umphrey's McGee and The Disco Biscuits, both huge acts on today's jamband scene. Their fusion takes its name from the Pink Floyd song, *Brain Damage*, and a line from The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*. When Brain Damaged Eggmen do gigs, they only do their interpretations of Floyd and Beatles songs – usually dedicating one set to each band. Now, that's what I'd call a real tribute.

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to www.hindustantimes.com. And send feedback to downloadctrl@gmail.com)



ULTIMATE TRIBUTE
Cat Power has done an outstanding cover of the Rolling Stones favourite, *Satisfaction*

PHOTO: STEVE GULLICK