

Of Covers And Mash-Ups

Cover versions are safe, but if musicians create albums from bits and pieces of existing songs, they can get into trouble



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I'VE BEEN fooling around for the past week with a website called Let Them Sing It For You. It's a Swedish website (part of a radio channel) that lets you feed a phrase, a sentence or just arbitrary words and then spews them out as a song. Only, to create the final song for you, the software seeks out each of the words that you fed from a database of popular songs. So, if you write the clichéd blues opening line: "I woke up this morning", it'll pull out "I" from, say, a Chris Isaak song, "woke" from maybe a Nickelback song and so on. The end product, depending on the words you've fed in, can either be a nice mashed up melody or utter rubbish.

Either way, Let Them Sing It For You is, to use an Indian colloquialism, a good time-pass. I first tried putting in true lyrics, choosing popular tracks such as Coldplay's *Careful Where You Stand* off their *Parachute* album. The result was a strange mashed-up version of those familiar lyrics (*I feel safe, I feel warm when you're here/ I am cured, when I'm by your side/ I'm alright, alright*) sounding nothing like the original.

What the Let Them Sing It... website does mechanically is done with true finesse by an American musician called Girl Talk (real name Greg Gillis). His mash-up albums are super. He

takes short samples from existing songs by bands and musicians and fuses them into creations that are unique without using anything more than the mashed up samples and snatches. He'll typically use 20-25 samples from artists as wide-ranging as hip-hopppers, classic rockers and folk singers and

create a four-five minute song that is at once intriguing as it is great to listen to. I may have mentioned one of his albums, *Feed The Animals*, in passing in this column earlier, but it is one of those that speaks for his genius. Besides being absolutely great sounding, Girl Talk's mashed up compositions can be fun if you try to identify the origin of each sample. Difficult too.

I'm not sure that Girl Talk's work is entirely legal - after all, he does filch samples from work copyrighted by others - and I'm also not sure whether he's faced any legal action yet but mash-up artists do walk a thin line. Danger Mouse, the one half of the musical duo that goes by the name of Gnarls Barkley, released a mash-up album in 2004 called *The Grey Album*, a mash-up of rapper Jay-Z's *Black*



CREATIVE LICENCE

Greg Gillis aka Girl Talk's mash-up albums are super. They can be fun if you try to identify the origin of each sample. Difficult too



MIX IT UP

Danger Mouse is one half of the musical duo, Gnarls Barkley, which released a mash-up *The Grey Album*

Album and The Beatles' *The White Album*. Although the release was a limited one - word-of-mouth, the web, etc. - Danger Mouse faced action from music biggie EMI and *The Grey Album* was never released commercially.

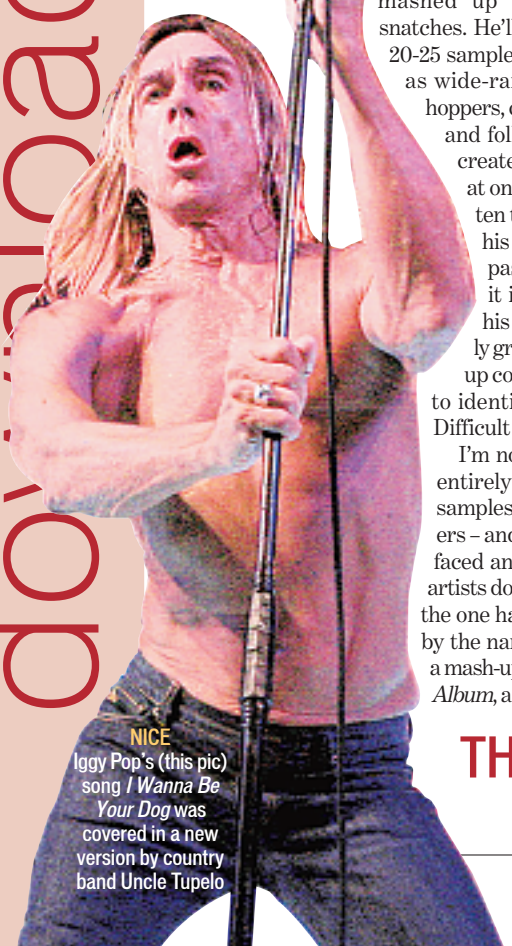
Mash-ups can land their creators in trouble but cover versions usually are safe. A few days back I heard an excellent playlist of covers but with a twist. Nineteen uncompromising punk rock songs but sung by folk musicians! You may have heard The Clash's *Guns of Brixton*, a gangster reggae rendition to be found on their *London Calling* album. Try the version by alternative country band, Calexico. Or, maybe you'd like to check out muscled hard rockers, Black Flag's *Nervous Breakdown* as covered by Whiskeytown. And what about Iggy Pop's *I Wanna Be Your Dog* as covered by country band, Uncle Tupelo? Strange as these versions may sound, they're actually quite nice and could

even help you explore music that you've heard before in ways that you have not.

Cover Lay Down is the name of a blog that does just this. It regularly puts out playlists that explore covers of familiar songs from other genres covered by folk artists. Sometimes, it offers many versions of one song such as Leonard Cohen's *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* done by artists ranging from Regina Spektor, the Soviet-born American singer and pianist, to singer-songwriters, Rufus Wainwright and Josh Ritter.

I have just begun exploring the world of mash-ups and covers and I'm discovering new stuff continuously - such as The Cover Story, a blog that focuses only on amateur covers of familiar songs. Besides the usual predictable covers of artists including Dave Matthews, Donovan, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, The Cover Story has unexpected music. I heard a couple of versions of French electronic house music stars, Daft Punk's hit tracks. Only, they were rendered acoustically! I mean, just imagine *Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger* done without electronics. You'll be surprised how well it works.

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NICE
Iggy Pop's (this pic) song *I Wanna Be Your Dog* was covered in a new version by country band Uncle Tupelo

THE COVER STORY IS A BLOG THAT FOCUSES ONLY ON AMATEUR COVERS OF FAMILIAR SONGS