

2010

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Recommended Citation

Pepper, Shayne, "Joanna Newsom Covers in the Blogosphere" (2010). *Communication, Media and Theatre Faculty Publications*. 3.
<http://neiuvc.neiu.edu/cmt-pub/3>

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Joanna Newsom Covers in the Blogosphere

Shayne Pepper

*“This is an old song. These are old blues.
And this is not my song, but it’s mine to use.”*
-- “Sadie”

Joanna Newsom’s 2004 album, *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, was released at a time when music blogs were reaching new levels of popularity within certain sections of music and online communities. During this time, songs from nearly every high profile indie rock release seemed to find their way onto music blogs (often, to the chagrin of the music industry, far before slated release dates). Newsom’s songs were no exception – she was often something of a hot topic on blogs like Stereogum, My Old Kentucky Blog, Brooklyn Vegan, Gorilla vs. Bear, and numerous others. Over a relatively short time these music blogs became the arbiters of taste among a select reading audience, helping to propel many up-and-coming indie rock artists, Joanna Newsom among them, into the public consciousness. In this essay, I will examine the phenomenon of Joanna Newsom’s music interacting with the blogosphere, specifically the circulation of Newsom covers performed by a variety of artists. Considered collectively, these covers tell us something about Joanna Newsom’s songs and their relationship with a community of highly engaged fans. With a closer listen to these cover songs and their different arrangements, we can explore the ways in which these songs find a new life, opening up structures and themes that may not have been present in their original recordings. At the same time, such an analysis gives us an opportunity to see how her songs may be appropriated by artists who find something in them that fits within their own milieu or style – perhaps telling us something new about these artists and what drew them to these songs in the first place. These covers may also work as a stepping-stone for casual listeners to encounter Newsom’s music in a more palatable way.

In what follows I will focus on Joanna Newsom covers that appeared on indie music blogs, but these covers are, of course, not only limited to the blogosphere. I consider the blogosphere as just one part of larger mediascape. With the aid of official websites, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, video and music hosting services like YouTube or Vimeo, anonymous-file download services like SendSpace or RapidShare, and websites like Last.Fm these covers spread like wildfire. In addition to the professionally recorded covers by established musicians, there are countless homemade videos of young people in their bedrooms offering their own interpretations of Joanna Newsom’s music. While these are certainly of interest and often appear on the very same music blogs in question, the covers discussed in this essay are arguably the most well known and were, perhaps, the inspiration for many of the Joanna Newsom covers floating around out there today.

“And we were galloping manic to the mouth of the source.”

-- Peach, Plumb, Pear

Covers of Newsom’s songs range in style, popularity, and faithfulness to the original recording, but all of the songs do something interesting with Newsom’s melodies and lyrics. With her signature voice and harp playing absent, these covers allow the listener to hear things in the song structure or lyrics that may not have stuck out in the original. Often the artists take the song and make it something that wholly fits within their own genre of music, turning Newsom’s tunes into everything from an old dust bowl spiritual, to a pirate dirge, to an emo anthem. It is the flexibility of these songs that allow fans of different musical genres to encounter Newsom’s work through covers, and give the songs a chance when they otherwise would have scoffed at such a singular vocal styling. From the earliest to the most recent, these covers do nothing if not make us listen to Newsom’s songs just a little more closely and perhaps make us appreciate them even just the slightest bit more.

Final Fantasy’s cover of “Peach, Plum, Pear” was the first cover to hit the blogosphere, which, if one thinks about it, does make a certain amount of sense. Both artists were part of the same “scene” despite their dramatically different sounds. Joanna Newsom and Final Fantasy became, at nearly the same time, popular for their interesting use of non-traditional instruments (the harp for Newsom and the violin for Final Fantasy). The brainchild of Owen Pallett, a sometimes-touring member of Arcade Fire, Final Fantasy often uses looping machines to perform one-man shows with just Pallett playing violin and singing vocals. Because of Final Fantasy and Joanna Newsom’s simultaneous rise to fame in the indie-rock world and the blogosphere alike (though the two worlds often seem to be the same), fans of Arcade Fire were able to be introduced to Final Fantasy on Arcade Fire’s first major headlining tour after the release of their late-2004 album, *Funeral*. Indeed, even Arcade Fire owes a great deal of their success to the blogosphere as music blogs were one of the primary hype machines for the band as the buzz around their release of *Funeral* on Merge Records reached its fever pitch. While Final Fantasy’s debut album, *Has a Good Home* was not released until March of 2005, Pallett’s music was already making its way through the blogosphere via a recording of his cover of Joanna Newsom’s “Peach, Plum, Pear” from her album, *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, which had been released in early 2004. The intersection of these three artists and their debut LPs was the perfect time for Final Fantasy’s cover to become almost a representative of the zeitgeist of what was happening in the indie rock/blogosphere world at the time.

Final Fantasy’s cover of “Peach, Plum, Pear” is relatively straightforward and maintains a lot of the qualities of the original. In many ways it might be the cover that is the most similar to Newsom’s style of playing and singing. Rather than a harpsichord, Pallett picks a violin and (at least live) uses a loop machine to record one part while playing another. His vocals jump octaves quite often, something that is not done by most artists who cover Newsom’s songs, but which is a defining characteristic of her signature vocal style. Pallett’s song has no drums and fits his normal hushed vocals and violin sound, and the tempo is slightly faster than Newsom’s version. The addition of clicks, feedback, and distortion during the “na na na” section increases each time, interestingly juxtaposing these seemingly haphazard qualities with Pallett’s vocal

delivery. Like his staccato violin, each word feels perfectly measured and properly enunciated, a style that might be described as economical even, accentuating the (measured) desperation of the lyrics. This is something altogether different from Newsom's own vocal delivery of "Peach, Plum, Pear" which seems wobbly and warbling by comparison. In her original, the lyrics often feel like they are trying to keep up with the harpsichord melody, but Pallett's version puts the two in near perfect synchronization. His violin picking eventually gives way to the use of a bow near the end of the song, and in the final verses, the vocals become secondary to the violin playing.

Portland-based, hyper-literate indie rockers, The Decemberists, were the next band to deliver a Joanna Newsom cover. Their version of "Bridges and Balloons" was included on a compilation CD that accompanied the 2005 Music Issue of *The Believer*, a magazine released by McSweeney's (created by the noted Joanna Newsom fan Dave Eggers). That *The Believer* would be the home for a compilation of indie rock covers comes as no surprise if one considers that this magazine appeals largely to the same community that would be inhabiting the indie rock blogosphere. This wildly diverse group of hipsters is often driven to discover (whether literary or musical) what is new, off-beat, and full of street cred and to do so before the rest of the world picks up on it. Upon first listen, this cover is clearly a match made in heaven. "Bridges and Balloons" fits within The Decemberists' general canon of songwriting, as the nautical references are right at home with lead-singer Colin Meloy's penchant for GRE vocabulary and obscure literary references. Like reviews of Joanna Newsom's music, reviews of The Decemberists' work often highlight their historical references and allusions to nautical terminology, so it isn't much of a stretch to imagine Newsom's fallible ship (a caravel with its bearings on Cair Paravel) right at home with Colin Meloy's chimney sweepers, trapeze artists from pre-war Paris, or his lovely Leslie Ann Levine.

In this cover of "Bridges and Balloons," a simple acoustic guitar accompanies the vocals, stripping the song down to a simple Colin Meloy acoustic ditty. Gone are the ornamentations often present in many of The Decemberists' songs (accordions, mandolins, etc.). What is left sounds like an unadorned pirate dirge. In addition to the similarities in lyrical style, the song structure matches what is in The Decemberists' own discography. While it's true that "Bridges and Balloons" is filled with bookish lyrics and obscure historical references, the chorus at the heart of the song is a simple plea to a lover. Even Meloy's own songs, despite their fantastic characters, historical settings, and complicated plots, tend to reveal themselves as simple love songs at their core. Unlike Joanna Newsom's original (or even Final Fantasy's cover of "Peach, Plum, Pear"), the ups and downs in the vocal register are gone. Rather, this cover is a straightforward acoustic song, punctuated by Meloy's own unique nasal delivery.

Covers can, of course, be tricky with audiences. While one may enjoy The Decemberists' straightforward take on Joanna Newsom's song, others may be disappointed. For example, one reviewer writes of *The Believer* compilation as follows:

The song I was most immediately excited about, The Decemberists' cover of Joanna Newsom's "Bridges and Balloons," is one of the more disappointing here. Part of it is bad advertisement – this is just Colin Meloy and his acoustic guitar, not the whole band-but mostly it feels steamrolled. The full band could have

fleshed out Newsom's simple and lovely melody, but by himself Meloy loses much of the song's beauty (Hepburn, 2005).

The reviewer is disappointed that the cover is not more lavish, but, alternatively, one could argue that unlike the staccato harp plucking of the original, Colin Meloy actually *amplifies* the "simple and lovely melody" through the strumming of his acoustic guitar, accentuating just how catchy the original tune is.

Sometime after these first two covers made their way around the blogosphere, singer/songwriter M. Ward recorded what appears to be the first distributed cover of "Sadie." Because of her unique voice, Newsom's version makes some listeners have to work to find the melody underneath. M. Ward's cover of "Sadie" makes it sound as if it were recorded in the dustbowl of the 1930s. In his hands, "Sadie" becomes something out of the Great American Songbook, which is perhaps where Newsom's song belongs in the first place. He reorganizes the lyrics, alters the song structure, and essentially turns it into a timeless folk song. Response to this cover by fans of both M. Ward and Joanna Newsom was mostly positive; as it did not attempt to be a straightforward cover of "Sadie," Joanna Newsom fans seemed to have embraced the direction in which M. Ward took the song. Part of the crossover appeal may be accounted for by considering that Joanna Newsom and M. Ward had a tremendous amount of credibility among arbiters of taste in the indie rock blogosphere. He had become a favorite of the major music blogs, gotten high reviews from the music magazines that "matter," and had a style that was nothing if not far from mainstream.

M. Ward's cover of "Sadie" starts in the middle and imagines it as a 4/4-time folk song with a little Mississippi delta blues, fitting into much of his own oeuvre while reorganizing the lyrics to make a somewhat different story. Gone are the "mealy worms," the "salty pyre," and other oddities. What remains is the down-home folk sound that can be found in that spectacular moment in Joanna Newsom's original when she sings, "And all day long we talk about mercy/Lead me to water, Lord I sure am thirsty." Re-imagining the entire song in such a style, M. Ward turns "Sadie" into something with the integrity of an old spiritual that asks of the Lord to lead the thirsty songwriter to water.

After an M. Ward performance in Chapel Hill during the summer of 2008, I had an opportunity to ask him why he chose to cover that particular song. He admitted to being a big fan of Newsom, saying that she was "a wonderful songwriter" and that "Sadie" is his favorite Joanna Newsom song (Ward, 2008). When I asked him why he changed the song structure, he said that he recorded it a long time ago and didn't remember specifically. He admitted that it was, of course, possible that he just forgot how the lyrics went, but that ultimately he felt that everything he wanted to express about the song he said it in his recording of it. His recording does say quite a lot. The cover strips the song down to its simplest elements and then builds from those pieces something entirely new and beautiful. Along with the covers by Final Fantasy and The Decemberists, M. Ward's take on "Sadie" opened the doors to a number of artists taking a stab at translating Newsom's unique songs into their own language. While the next several covers may not have been distributed as widely as these three earlier covers, they continue the history of Newsom's songs' circulation in the blogosphere, exposing untold numbers of new listeners to her music through the emissary of a cover made with love.

*“And do you want to run with my pack? Do you want to ride on my back?
Pray that what you lack does not distract.”*
-- *“The Book of Right-On”*

Unlike these earlier examples, the following covers could be found in places other than blogs. As these singer/songwriters did not have the same large fan base as artists like The Decemberists, circulation was often from the artists’ own website in order to promote their original material as well as their Joanna Newsom covers. Versions of “Sadie” by Danny Malone and Eric Metronome utilized a straightforward modern-rock song structure rather than the eccentric styling of Newsom or the stripped down simplicity of M. Ward’s version. Later, indie acts such as All City Affairs, The Lesser Birds of Paradise, and The Moscow Coup Attempt offered their own unique translations of “The Book of Right On,” “Bridges and Balloons,” and “Sprout and the Bean” respectively. Most recently, emo band Straylight Run released a three-song EP which featured a version of “Peach, Plum, Pear” that could not be further from Newsom’s original or Final Fantasy’s groundbreaking cover.

Danny Malone’s cover of “Sadie” was recorded in his friend’s home studio in Austin and was part of a 4-song EP released in 2006. Malone brings in drums and acoustic guitar making it very much an up-tempo, 4/4-time rock song. The volume increases as he foregrounds an electric guitar during what could perhaps be considered the chorus. Malone even seems to create something of a classic rock bridge during the “all that we built” section as he attempts something of a falsetto to match the most memorable parts of Newsom’s own singing. At the “mealy worms” moment, the song drops its volume and this section becomes a breakdown with the drums dropping out, a humming sound in the background, and then a crescendo back into the normal 4/4-time verse. The final bit becomes an almost-spoken outro, coupled with just an acoustic guitar – utilizing a tried and true singer/songwriter technique that might be found in a Howie Day or Better Than Ezra song.

I had an opportunity to conduct an e-mail interview in the fall of 2008, and when I asked why he recorded such a radically different arrangement of the song, Malone replied,

I don't really know. I recorded it exactly like I wanted to. That's how I heard it in my head the instant I thought I should cover it. I played every instrument on the recording, so it came out pretty much exactly how I wanted it. Afterward, though, I realized I sang some of the words wrong. But they still work in the context of the song (Malone, 2008).

The misremembering or changing of lyrics is a reoccurring theme among the cover artists interviewed; while changing the song structure to fit their own style, the lyrics are often shifted a bit as well. When asked what he thought of Newsom’s own lyrics, Malone described them as “heady and intelligent” and “a bit childish, not in an amateur sense, but in the fact that they are a bit naïve and innocently delivered. It’s the view of a world from the most brilliant seven year old girl to have ever lived.”

Eric Metronome’s version of “Sadie” sounds almost like a bedroom demo. The inclusion of a drum machine gives the song a DIY vibe. The use of very simple

instruments gives the impression of one person playing all instruments and mixing them on a computer. In fact, as this song was part of a yearlong project in which Metronome recorded covers, it is entirely possible that this is just the case. Like many Joanna Newsom covers, these artists' varying arrangements are testaments to the strength not only of her poetic lyrics, but also her adept gift of melody that is sometimes lost in her own arrangements which alternate between incredibly lavish or stripped bare and deconstructed to just the heart of the song. This is not to say that Metronome's version is simple to the point of being too basic. On the contrary, his mixing skills highlight the doubled vocals, funky bass line, slightly fuzzy guitar, and a general bounce that he adds to the song, making it instantly likable to anyone who enjoys the qualities similar to that in Of Montreal's "Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" made famous in recent Outback Steakhouse commercials. The upbeat tempo of Metronome's cover gives the song an energetic, happy sound that causes the listener to reconsider Newsom's lyrics once again – this time as a pop song rather than a folk song or spiritual.

Several years after the release of *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, a handful of other bands have recently tread through the forest of Joanna Newsom covers. The Lesser Birds of Paradise gave a shot at covering "Bridges and Balloons" on their Bored Love EP released in 2007 which couples their Joanna Newsom cover with covers of Stevie Wonder, Will Oldham, and Jimmy Davis. This release groups Newsom with the highly respected songwriters with which she perhaps rightly belongs. The Lesser Birds of Paradise's version of "Bridges and Balloons" removes the urgency of the original and works with a much slower tempo than The Decemberists' take on the song. What we hear from it are subdued and deadpan vocals backed by a simple arrangement of an acoustic guitar and drums, almost making it sound like a song by The Mountain Goats. In fact, the vocals are so quiet that the listener must pay close attention to hear the lyrics, and with the absence of a driving melody the song almost becomes a spoken-word short story.

Peter Andreadis, a member of the 1980s-influenced band named Baby Teeth, recorded a cover of "The Book of Right-On" for his side project All City Affairs. The cover by All City Affairs was the first in a growing number of covers released on his blog. Andreadis turned "The Book of Right-On" into a breakup song that on the surface is seductively sleek but underneath has incredibly sharp teeth. Filled with synthesizers and electronic beats, All City Affairs' cover sounds like a cross between Tori Amos's "Caught a Light Sneeze" and The Cure's "Lullaby." Like those two musical acts, Baby Teeth sometimes create a mismatch between lyrics and music that tricks you into one emotion while really delivering something else. In his own words, Andreadis describes the lyrics to "The Book of Right On" as "kind of tough sounding, but also delivered in a fragile way" (Andreadis, 2008). He continues, saying that Newsom's original "establishes this cute mousy voice with a persona that is not to be messed with. But then later in the song she says, 'Even when you touch my face, you know your place.' So she's letting you in, but not without giving up any of her power. I think it's sexy and kind of paranoid at the same time." Newsom's original maintains a certain sweetness mixed with spite; the All City Affairs cover combines music and lyrics in a way that continues this duality.

Recorded during a time of self-confessed writer's block, Andreadis details his motivation for recording the cover on his blog, writing, "Right away I knew I was on to

something as far as how free I felt toying around with someone else's song." He continues,

When you're working on your own song and trying to come up with chords, melody, lyrics, orchestration, etc., there's a pressure you put on yourself to make sure all of the parts add up to a greater whole. But if you take out the whole "writing" part of it, suddenly you're free to think about the littler things. Like what if this song was done as a synthy, hip-hop beat? And what if I sang the vocal through a used paper towel roll? (true, by the way) (Andreadis' blog post, 2008).

Andreadis decided to experiment with the cover, making it more of his own, by writing a synthesizer part, following the chord changes to the song, something he says he would often do to his own songs to make it "more pop" and to "give dynamics to the form." He claims the reason for using the paper towel tube was to "give the recording a narrow, almost telephone-like quality that makes the voice seem whispery and lonely" (Andreadis, 2008). For Andreadis, this covers project works to promote not the only artists he covers but also his own material by utilizing Joanna Newsom's built in fan base and the fan bases of the other artists whose songs he covers.

Joanna Newsom's "The Sprout and the Bean" has been covered by two radically different bands. Sholi, a three-piece band from San Francisco, turns the song into a very slow tempo, somewhat dreamy, experimental rock song that gets faster and more frantic at parts. With an electric guitar, bass, and drums their cover treads somewhere between The Jesus and Mary Chain and Broken Social Scene and was a b-side to a 7-inch single. The Moscow Coup Attempt, a film and music project out of Los Angeles, recorded another version of "The Sprout and the Bean." This cover actually employs a female vocalist (a rarity, surprisingly enough, among available Joanna Newsom covers) named Vera Ostrova to turn the song into a drum and piano track. The video component of this "song project" is a haunting collection of archival footage from the personal archive of Ivan Besse, a projectionist and amateur filmmaker who worked in South Dakota in the 1930s. The images of people in his town provide a unique visual to accompany the beautiful voice and appropriately somber piano melody.

In an interview with Derek Whitacre of The Moscow Coup Attempt, he like many of the cover artists, says that he had not heard any previously recorded covers and set about recording his own take on Newsom's song. He says that upon hearing the original song for the first time he didn't know if he was "annoyed or fascinated" by Newsom's voice. Like the visuals in his video for the cover, he describes her voice as being "from another time... anachronistic yet at the same time, timely" (Whitacre, 2008). He describes Newsom's lyrics as "Elfishly whimsical but with the emotional weight of the observant, introspective traveler. Pixies without smiles." That emotional weight comes through not only in the cover song but also in the stark footage in the accompanying video. The images of children, looking curious at times and desperate at others, blends well with the slow tempo of the percussion and the more playful piano fills.

More recently, indie rock band Straylight Run has released a cover of "Peach, Plum, Pear" on a three-track EP to coincide with the release of their sophomore album. Known for their impressively ornate arrangements and boy/girl vocals that sometimes seem out of place in the emo band genre in which they often find themselves lumped,

Straylight Run takes “Peach, Plum, Pear” and makes it wholly fit within their larger catalog of music. As a cover, it’s completely appropriate that the band would pull from Newsom’s indie-folk catalog rather than an ironic 80’s power ballad or a Weezer b-side. Always a step of difference away from their emo companions, Straylight Run pulls a hat trick with their three-song EP, giving the hipster indie rock community license to accept a band that is often considered too mainstream because of their genre of straightforward emo anthems that lack the quirky or more “indie” sensibilities of the hipster vanguard.

If one were to simply listen to the song without a prior knowledge of Joanna Newsom’s original, the story of a sensitive bore who is suddenly shy and calling upon a girl who is markedly more might be the well-rehearsed territory of any emo band. Instead, Straylight Run with a simple acoustic guitar and piano brings sense of simplicity and urgency to the song. Lead singer John Nolan’s vocals have a smoothness that is all together the opposite of Newsom which makes the repetitive “na, na, nas” a lullaby rather than a shrill chant and calls for the listener to pay attention. Lyrics like “I am blue and unwell,” could have been cribbed from any lovesick teenager’s notebook or any run of the mill emo song, but in the context of Newsom’s other lyrics (like “swallowing panic in the face of its force” and “knocking me down with the palm of your eye”), these words seem like a moment of unguarded simplicity. Somehow, Straylight Run manages to bridge that divide, creating a song that appeals to both sensibilities.

It is this very ability to bridge the gap between the sweet and simple melodies, knowledgeable but innocent lyrics, and beautiful yet difficult vocals that informs Joanna Newsom’s music, and these qualities are separated out and rendered visible in these cover versions. Newsom’s music is full of these contradictions, but they somehow manage to form coherent art. That these cover artists are able to pinpoint these contradictions and then turn them into something new, if not more palatable, is a testament to the complexity of Newsom’s work.

*“And the signifieds butt heads with the signifiers,
and we all fall down slack-jawed to marvel at words.”*
-- *“This Side of the Blue”*

As indicated in the interviews (and confirmed simply by listening to the tracks), these covers were not conscious efforts to mimic Joanna Newsom’s own musicality or to perform in her idiom. Rather, as cover artists often do, these artists worked to translate Newsom’s lyrics and melodies into their own styles. With only a handful of albums and EPs, Joanna Newsom’s output may not be enough to satiate the most rabid of her fans. That’s where these covers fit in. Some are satisfying translations and others push Newsom’s songs in directions we never could have imagined. Taken together, they make up an important addition to the life of her art.

Because her voice is so unique, it can often be difficult for new listeners to appreciate her music on the first listen. These covers offer something of an entry point to the first-time listener or the second-time denier. As Judy Budnitz writes,

Trying to describe Joanna Newsom to people is difficult. It’s a bit like the parable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant. You could start by saying she’s a harpist and singer. But when most people hear the word “harp” they immediately

imagine classical music, or tinkling music-box stuff, and their eyebrows go up. You say: No, no, it's sort of folk music, but sort of not, has a touch of Appalachia but really it's a style all its own. That just makes people more skeptical. You tell people she's got an incredibly unique voice, singular in the way Björk's voice or Cat Power's voice is, and people get even more confused. You try to describe the lyrics, the intricate constructions and marvelously obscure words. 'Catenaries and dirigibles!' you cry. By now your listeners have given up and are backing away, nodding politely. Finally, in desperation, you shut up. You make them listen to Newsom's music, which is what you should have done in the first place. Because now the confusion drops away. Because whatever it is, however you describe it, it's really, really, really good—haunting, sad, lovely, a bit scary, and wonderfully peculiar (Budnitz, 2004).

And in the end, if they still won't listen, there is now the possibility of letting them hear one of these covers. Through the new arrangements, different vocals, or complete re-imagining of song structures, perhaps then those "wonderfully peculiar" elements of the songwriting can come through, and they'll give Joanna Newsom's voice just one more chance.

These cover songs, re-imagined in a variety of genres and styles, perhaps offer a way to invite people over that line in the sand that Newsom's music often creates. If the listener connects with a particular lyrical or melodic element in the cover song, then that sensibility will perhaps remain in their mind and in their ears as they re-listen to Newsom's original version. While it is important not to overstate the blogosphere's importance in helping her music to achieve popularity, it does become clear that the blogosphere has allowed her music to disseminate widely and take on a whole new life through these cover versions. A cover not only offers listeners a new entry (or re-entry) point into Newsom's music, but also helps us to appreciate just how complex her songs are in the first place.

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