

Cover Versions in 21st-Century Popular Music

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The twenty-first century opened with an international hit “Dancing Queen,” a cover version of the celebrated Swedish pop group Abba's 1976 hit song, as recorded by a young Swedish pop group called A*Teens. The cover version was part of the larger Abba-revival phenomenon, in which Abba songs were covered -- and thus “canonized” -- by different musicians including Richard Clayderman, Whitney Houston, Abba Cadabra, and even Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. However, the A*Teens version stands out among the many cover versions, in that it is unmistakably oriented towards imitation, rather than reworking, of the original. The group in fact started out as an Abba cover band, initially calling themselves Abba Teens and performing Abba's songs relatively strictly with only a few minor changes to the originals. While many of the 20th-Century cover versions change the original radically and often take ironic stance to it, the A*Teens version may sound like a straightforward homage to Abba with no agonistic attitude.

Yet an acute listening would reveal an artificial, calculated aspect of the homage. The song's characteristic melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation are too strictly kept intact, even though they could have been changed at least slightly. Many subsidiary elements such as embellishing melodies and fill-in rhythmic motifs are also imitated precisely. Some minor elements are revised into the style of *N Sync, Nick Kamen, Britney Spears, and Aaron Carter, for the obvious purpose of benefiting from the successful Teenybopper styles, but these styles are carefully incorporated so as not to conflict with the Abba tune. By avoiding any ironic edge, the homage is thus made up skillfully to get the most out of the legendary hit tune along with the contemporary styles. Then, this is not a sincere homage, but a fabricated, blank homage, which represents one way 21st-Century popular musicians have been engaged in the process of canonization; they certainly pay homage to the canon, but also explicitly utilize it.

This paper considers various ways in which 21st-Century popular musicians relate to the popular music canon, and illustrates a kind of blank homage, as distinct from sincere homage or irony, as a new direction in the history of the genre. A*Teens' recordings, Abba's original songs, other musicians' cover versions of Abba's songs, and a number of 20th- and 21st-Century cover versions in general are examined and contextualized. The paper further discusses changing faces of postmodernity in 20th- and 21st-Century popular music, and suggests the regress of radical deconstructionism and the emergence of subtle and elaborate exploitation of the canonized work.