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## SOUL COVERS: RHYTHM AND BLUES REMAKES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ARTISTIC IDENTITY

Michael Awkward. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. Xxvii, 246.

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The last three decades have been bittersweet for the three featured artists in Michael Awkward's new study, *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity*. Although Aretha Franklin continues to garner a slew of Grammy nominations and is seen by many in the industry as a living legend of sorts (a 'diva', to adopt the vernacular of her peers), the latter half of her career has been marked by a precipitous decline in record sales, troubles with the Internal Revenue Service, and the gun-related death of her father in 1984. Al Green, known by many as "the last great soul singer," has also settled nicely into legend status even though, like Franklin, his record sales peaked during the mid-1970s, shortly after a crazed fan poured a boiling pot of grits on him while he showered.<sup>1</sup> Phoebe Snow, perhaps the least accomplished of Awkward's subjects, presents an even starker image of decline. Best known for her 1975 hit single 'Poetry Man', Snow, a Jewish New Yorker who often passed as a light-skinned black, failed to capitalize on the success of her debut album, almost died of an unspecified illness, and was relegated to the ghetto (albeit a lucrative one) of singing commercial jingles and television theme songs, including, most notably, the opening music for the *Cosby* spin-off, *A Different World*. At their peak, however, all three performers made significant contributions to American popular music, mixing critical success with phenomenal record sales. In this well-researched, fascinating book, Michael Awkward, Professor of Afro-American Literature and Culture at the University of Michigan, examines the ways in which all three of these artists struggled to establish their 'star story'—their artistic and social identity—by wrestling with accepted notions of tradition, religion, gender and race. Eschewing the historical/biographical approach of many historians of popular music, Awkward examines these artists' struggle for identity by concentrating his interpretive energies on an oft-neglected feature of popular music: the cover song.

Awkward begins by discussing Aretha Franklin's 1964 album *Unforgettable: A Tribute to Dinah Washington*. Conscious of Washington's immense popularity during the 1950s and early 1960s, Franklin saw *Unforgettable* as both a celebration and a repudiation of Washington's impressive body of work. Like Washington, Bessie Smith and Billie Holliday before her, Franklin understood that success in the music business was predicated at least in part by transcending the "immense anxieties of indebtedness," by engaging in a somewhat Freudian battle with her forbearers in order to assume her rightful place at the top of the proverbial heap.<sup>2</sup> In substantiating such claims, Awkward offers us a close reading of four covers: *Cold, Cold Heart*, *Drinking Again*, *Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning*, and *Evil Gal Blues*. Though Franklin was careful to avoid radically altering Washington's iconic songs, Awkward points

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Awkward, *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), Xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

out that the changes she made were quite significant. Thus, *Cold, Cold Heart*, a jazzy, citified song in Washington's hands, became a ragged, countrified ditty in Franklin's. Similarly, Washington's restrained, melancholy performance in *Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning* was re-invented by Franklin as an angry rant about lost love, marked by a frenzied, "go-for-broke emotionality."<sup>3</sup> By making a "respectful assault" on Washington's source material, Awkward argues, Franklin used covers to, in effect, achieve liberation from the influence of her predecessor/s and establish herself as the next great soul singer.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Franklin's use of covers stemmed from her attempts to both honor and repudiate her musical forbearers, Green's use of covers on his 1973 album *Call Me* was seen by Awkward as an attempt to establish a "thematically coherent and formally coherent narrative self."<sup>5</sup> In simpler terms, Awkward suggests that Green's choice of covers reflected an attempt to transcend the mish-mash of hazily defined personalities that had characterized his star story up to that point in his career. The covers on *Call Me* had an almost therapeutic affect in that they attempted to remedy an identity crisis that was fueled by spirituality, questions of masculinity, and his southern roots, among other things. According to Awkward, Green didn't know whether he was a cosmopolitan soul singer or a southern bumpkin with an affinity for nature; a smooth soul man with a voracious sexual appetite or a devout follower of Christ; a Tin Pan Alley-style hit-maker or a serious singer-songwriter in the mode of Marvin Gaye. By covering Willie Nelson's *Funny How Time Slips Away* and Hank Williams Sr.'s *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*, Green was able to affect a synthesis that was both radical and traditional, one which allowed him to acknowledge his country boy roots while also presenting his listeners with a "characteristic vulnerability" that was at odds with traditional notions of masculinity within the African-American community.<sup>6</sup> While Awkward is reluctant to discuss Green's ultimate success in re-imagining his star story, the author does an admirable job illustrating how 'the last great soul singer' saw cover songs as an inherently valuable means of reconciling contradictory aspects of his artistic identity.

Awkward's final chapter is perhaps the most interesting of the lot. As was mentioned earlier, Phoebe Snow, a New Yorker of Jewish extraction (her real name was Phoebe Ann Laub) was quite often mistaken as a light-skinned black woman. As a result, Snow found herself front and center in the debate about white artists recording and profiting from black musical styles. In her 1976 album *Second Childhood*, Snow responded to this debate by covering three so-called 'boundary songs': *No Regrets*, a Tin Pan Alley love song that Billie Holliday reconfigured to reflect the cultural traditions of African Americans; *Going Down for the Third Time*, a pop song from an act (The Supremes) whose "cultural blackness" has always been in question; and *There's A Boat That's Leaving Soon for New York*, a song from *Porgy and Bess*, "a beloved but controversial musical, the cultural authenticity of whose sounds and representations is frequently called into question because their famed primary author, George Gershwin, was white."<sup>7</sup> Awkward seems to suggest that Snow responded to the issue of exploitation/appropriation by de-emphasizing race and replacing it with themes of gender and gender-equality. For example, *There's A Boat That's Leaving Soon For New York*, a song about a dope dealer named Sporting Life who seduces the lead character (Bess)

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; Boundary songs are ditties that were written/performed by white and black performers.

by promising her clothes and other riches, was reconceived by Snow in a much more modern, feminist manner, affecting a subtle transformation of the lyrics “in ways that render[ed] them appropriate for an urban, liberated middle-class woman.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Billie Holliday song *No Regrets*, whose lyrics both critiqued and internalized male domination when it was originally recorded in the 1930s, was parodied by Snow in such a way as to express a profound distaste for “the ideologies of romantic love that supported baleful gendered inequities.”<sup>9</sup> Snow, Awkward concludes, used cover songs as a means of expressing her own feminist sensibilities while deftly skirting the larger issue of exploitation/appropriation.

As intriguing as many of his arguments are, Awkward’s identity-centric approach can at times seem one-dimensional, especially as it relates to the issue of artistic autonomy. Unfortunately, Awkward discusses the music of Franklin, Green, and Snow as if they had ultimate control over their work. His take on the creative process is especially beholden to auteur theory, the idea that the artist and the artist alone decides what shape his or her product takes. As anyone familiar with the trappings of the American music industry knows, this is a problematic perspective. The music industry, like the film industry, is marked by a great amount of collaboration, be it from producers, technicians, record executives, and of course the artists themselves. In *Soul Covers*, however, the input of record executives is nil, while the producers (most notably, Jerry Wexler and Willie Mitchell) make only brief appearances. Moreover, when the higher-ups do make an appearance—for example, the record execs who designed the layout for Snow’s album cover by emphasizing her ‘blackness’—Awkward’s argument is subtly undermined by noting that the desires of the artist could often be cast aside in favor of other, less lofty ideals. By neglecting the structural aspects of the music industry and refusing to talk about how profit motives may have affected artistic decisions, Awkward’s identity-centric interpretations start to lose their sheen. For example, his argument that Aretha Franklin’s tribute to Dinah Washington was based on a desire to outdo her predecessor could also be explained by noting that artists in the 1950s and 1960s were often pushed into doing covers of popular songs in order to boost record sales with minimal effort. This argument doesn’t so much apply to Green, who had already sold millions of records by the time he released *Call Me*, or even Phoebe Snow, but Awkward does admit that Franklin’s career was at a stand-still before she recorded *Unforgettable*. Would it be too much of a stretch to suggest that covering one of the most revered female singers of the 1950s and 1960s also made good business sense?

*Soul Covers* also suffers, at times, from a lack of historical context. As with many other academics dealing with this era of American history, Awkward makes mention of the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and other larger historical trends. However, it is his inattention to changing musical trends that is most problematic. While he does discuss, briefly, the emergence of concept albums during the late 1960s in his chapter on Al Green, as well as the singer/songwriter movement in the Phoebe Snow section, his chapter on Aretha Franklin fails to take into account the decline of jazz as a popular genre of music during the late 1950s and 1960s. This is important because Dinah Washington was primarily a blues/jazz artist, a torch singer in the tradition of Billie Holliday. In explaining Franklin’s rowdy re-interpretation of Washington’s hits, Awkward fails to mention that by 1964 (the year *Unforgettable* was released) jazz and blues were fast becoming niche genres. His suggestion that Franklin’s interpretation of Washington’s work was much less refined than the originals may not have been the result of generational

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

conflict, but rather an acknowledgment that torch-light, nightclub jazz had become an unfortunate victim of R&B and rock 'n' roll. In other words, Franklin might have given Washington's songs a more energetic treatment not because of some desire to vanquish her predecessor, but simply because she knew which way the wind was blowing.

Despite these oversights, *Soul Covers* is an intriguing book. Awkward's research and interpretative abilities are above reproach, and his enthusiasm for R&B is matched only by his propensity for insightful comment. Moreover, Awkward should be applauded for shedding light on cover songs, a neglected, yet vitally important, feature of popular music in the twentieth century. After all, it is no coincidence that some of the most popular rock acts of the last forty years included cover songs on their early albums, including the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and Led Zeppelin, to name only a few. The only shortcoming of Awkward's work is that his examination is too narrowly defined. While I agree with his basic point that cover songs were frequently used to establish/refine artistic identity, Awkward's work could have been enhanced somewhat by acknowledging that cover songs had a number of uses—for artists, producers, and record executives alike.