

Lesson, Writing About Music
Compare-Contrast and Musical Meaning: “Born in the U.S.A.”

One goal of the compare-contrast unit in my ENG 242 is to dramatize the way changes in music change meaning. Music impacts, curves—potentially even undermines—how we understand words. Yet, students seem to labor under the assumption that all meaning is carried by lyrics, and therefore, so long as the words are the same, the song “says” the same thing. For the lesson, I used two versions of “Born in the U.S.A.,” one the hit song everybody knows, the other the lesser-known version demo’d during the recording of Springsteen’s previous album, *Nebraska*. I got the idea to do this from reading *33 Revolutions a Minute*, a history of protest songs by *Guardian* critic Dorian Lynskey (thanks to Prof. Gerald Meyer, who gave me the book as a gift). As you may be aware, the hit version of “Born” is an example of a song where music and lyrics—and to a certain extent, verse and chorus—clash. Since many people have a hard time understanding the words beyond the chest-thumping chorus, it is difficult to hear the song as anything but a patriotic anthem, this though the verses are deeply critical of American myths of opportunity and equality.

I begin the lesson by playing the song, and then ask for reactions: both *what* students think the overall message or feel of the song is, and *how* the music serves to create it. After this, I distribute the lyrics, which we read and discuss as a class—the students remarking, of course, on the difference between what the words seemed to be saying and the feeling created by the music. (One student did present the interesting alternative that the rousing chorus was meant to show the protagonist retained his fighting spirit despite all the obstacles—an ideal “U.S.A.” that lies beyond the powers the song criticizes. In this reading, the song becomes patriotic in its dissent.) After this, I play the *Nebraska* version—solo guitar and voice. In the two times I gave this lesson, the reaction from the class was quite dramatic—how different was this protagonist and what he wanted to us to understand about his trials, and about his perceptions of his homeland, from the other! Finally, I hand out a passage from the Lynskey text (below), where he calls the song “a Trojan horse with the door jammed shut”—a wonderfully pregnant allusion to unpack ... and also full of advanced quote conventions (like ellipses and brackets) to remind students about.

Bruce Springsteen, "Born in the U.S.A." (1984)

Born down in a dead man's town
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much
'Til you spend half your life just covering up

[chorus:]
Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.

I got in a little hometown jam
And so they put a rifle in my hands
Sent me off to Vietnam
To go and kill the yellow man

[chorus]

Come back home to the refinery
Hiring man says "Son if it was up to me"
I go down to see the V.A. man
He said "Son don't you understand"

[chorus]

I had a buddy at Khe Sahn
Fighting off the Viet Cong
They're still there, he's all gone
He had a little girl in Saigon
I got a picture of him in her arms

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I'm ten years down the road
Nowhere to run, ain't got nowhere to go

I'm a long gone Daddy in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.
I'm a cool rocking Daddy in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.

“The official version of ‘Born in the USA’ was misunderstood so widely that Springsteen has to take some of the blame. A song’s meaning does not just reside in its lyrics, but in its melody, its production, its tone of voice. [...] On the demo, you feel like you’re leaning in to hear the life story of a broken man; on the single, he’s hollering it at you while riding in a tank. When you listen to Ron Bittan’s triumphantly martial synthesizer riff, Max Weinberg’s heavy-ordnance [sic] drums, Springsteen’s full-throated roar, the major-key melody, you don’t hear bleakness and betrayal; you hear a battle cry. [Springsteen’s manager Jon] Landau thought the original version was too small, but this one is far too big. It is a Trojan horse with the door jammed shut. The subversive lyrics cannot get out.”

– Dorian Lynskey, 33 Revolutions Per Minute, pg. 376

ENG 242 Writing About Music Graded Assignment #2: Cover Mania!

For this assignment you will listen to a piece of music and a cover version of it, and then write a 600-900 word (2-3 page) essay describing the two versions and exploring what you consider to be the major differences between them. Our goal here—at least one of them—is to think about how changes in the musical structure and presentation of a song alter its meaning.

STEP ONE: Listening and Annotating

Choose ONE of the pairs of pieces available in the “Cover Versions” folder on the External Links page. (Don’t necessarily choose the pieces that you are most familiar with ... it might actually be better to pick a pair that you don’t know much about.)

1. Listen to the first piece on the list a few times and write a paragraph describing your overall impression of it. Describe the lyrics, instruments, sound, and structure. Pretend that you are a music critic, and that you are trying to figure out what the intention of the composer or performer was in making his or her musical choices. In a second paragraph, comment on what you think might be the overall impact or the most important meaning or messages of this song. Finally, for a third paragraph, do some basic research: write a brief summary about the artist, the time, and the place out of which the piece came. In other words, where is this piece placed in history?
2. After you have written your response for the first song, repeat the steps for the second song, and complete as much as you can of the handout.

These paragraphs may be handwritten or typed. Please make sure to bring your paragraphs on the first song to class with you for workshop discussion, and on the cover version to the next class, together with the handout. You will work in groups with other people working on the same song, sharing observations and ideas, and listening together.

STEP TWO: Writing the paper

You have three choices for how to approach the final paper.

First choice: formal compare-contrast essay

- a. Introduce both the original piece and the cover song (first paragraph)
- b. Compare musical features of both songs (two to three paragraphs): Notice changes from one to the other in lyrics, instrumentation, structure (verses-chorus), sound (rhythm, melody, tone of voice, timbre of instruments, tempo, dynamics), and anything else you find significant.
- c. Comment on changes in overall meaning (last paragraph). Some issues you *may* want to consider: How did the meaning change from the original song to its cover? Was the cover aimed at a different audience? Why do you think that the artists made those specific changes? How does each version reflect and comment on the time and place out of which it came?

Second Choice: contrasting reviews

Take the role of a music critic and write two short (2 or 3 paragraphs each) reviews: one that likes the cover version, and one that dislikes it. Make sure to develop your (specific!) reasons for either liking or disliking the cover in each case (the lists of points and questions under letters “b” and “c” above might help you).

Third choice: creative assignment

Pretend you are the creator/artist behind the cover version. Respond in writing (1 or 2 paragraphs each) to the following questions (you may write this as a “mock interview”):

1. What made you decide to cover the original song?
2. Can you explain your reasoning behind some of the changes you made to the original?
3. Do you think the original artist would like your version? Why or why not?