

BLUES DOWN UNDER THE COVERS:

Canonisation and reinterpetive practices
in Australia's blues music culture

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Abstract

Blues Down Under the Covers: Canonisation and reinterpetive practices in Australia's blues music culture. Pleffer, Andrew J. PhD candidate, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Supervisor: Professor Philip Hayward, PhD.

This dissertation examines the manner in which contemporary musicians participate in and contribute to the construction of canons in blues music. Focussing primarily on engagements with the genre by Australian artists, this analysis looks at the ways in which male African-American blues musicians consistently function as a fundamental presence and influence, even in internationally disseminated contexts. This is demonstrated particularly via perpetuated stereotypes of “the bluesman” as well as through the practice of recording versions of previously released blues “standards”.

After an initial assessment of the existing literature, discussion immediately addresses “the bluesman” as a discursive construct and the preconceptions it subsequently (and inevitably) conveys to audiences about blues music. Working backwards toward the source, this study then discusses the musicians, songs, playing styles and equipment typically associated with blues music before identifying the integral role of recordings in representing, disseminating and reiterating the canon.

From here discussion leads into a historical analysis of the practice of versioning previously recorded songs. Before focussing exclusively on how this applies to blues, this thesis reassesses the terminology currently attached to versioning practices in popular music and constructs a new glossary of terms that more aptly describes the creative processes applied by musicians to pre-existing material. The effectiveness of this language is then analysed with regard to various existing methodologies in blues literature, namely David Evans' *Big Road Blues* (1982). Following this, the new terminology is employed while carrying out a case study of an Australian compilation comprising entirely of local “reinterpretations” of the blues canon—*The dig Australian Blues Project* (Various, 2005).

The remainder of the thesis is specifically concerned with three Australian artists who regularly engage with the blues genre by way of performing versions (or “covers”) of blues songs previously recorded by African-American blues musicians. These case studies each provide biographical information and an overview of recorded output as well as discussion about how each artist fits into Australia’s blues community. Most importantly though, each case study assesses the manner in which these contemporary musicians take part in constructing the blues canon by analysing five of their recorded versions and the patterns that appear in their respective approaches to recontextualising the genre for Australian audiences.

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. The work herein is entirely my own, except where acknowledged. Ethics Committee approval has been obtained for this research: HE26AUG2005-D04241.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Pleffer', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrew James Pleffer