



Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity (Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Phoebe Snow) (Refiguring American Music)

Michael Awkward

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Soul Covers is an engaging look at how three very different rhythm and blues performers—Aretha Franklin, Al Green, and Phoebe Snow—used cover songs to negotiate questions of artistic, racial, and personal authenticity. Through close readings of song lyrics and the performers' statements about their lives and work, the literary critic Michael Awkward traces how Franklin, Green, and Snow crafted their own musical identities partly by taking up songs associated with artists such as Dinah Washington, Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, George Gershwin, Billie Holiday, and the Supremes.

Awkward sees Franklin's early album *Unforgettable: A Tribute to Dinah Washington*, released shortly after Washington's death in 1964, as an attempt by a struggling young singer to replace her idol as the acknowledged queen of the black female vocal tradition. He contends that Green's album *Call Me* (1973) reveals the performer's attempt to achieve formal coherence by uniting seemingly irreconcilable aspects of his personal history, including his career in popular music and his religious yearnings, as well as his sense of himself as both a cosmopolitan black artist and a forlorn country boy. Turning to Snow's album *Second Childhood* (1976), Awkward suggests that through covers of blues and soul songs, Snow, a white Jewish woman from New York, explored what it means for non-black enthusiasts to perform works considered by many to be black cultural productions. The only book-length examination of the role of remakes in American popular music, *Soul Covers* is itself a refreshing new take on the lives and work of three established soul artists.

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