A Comparison of Two Versions of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Down on the Corner"
Original Recording vs. Live A Capella

One sign of a great song is that other musicians cover it. Most of the time, the musicians that cover a song change it up a little bit. "Down on the Corner" was written and performed by Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) in 1969, and it was an instant hit. Streetcorner Symphony (SCS), an a capella group, performed a live version of "Down on the Corner," and certainly added their own flare to the song. In this paper, we will analyze the similarities and differences in the percussion, instrumentation, vocals, rhythm, and patterns in the score between the two versions of the song.

We will begin with an analysis of the score to guide the discussion that follows. As can be seen in Figure 1, the chorus is in C (no sharps or flats in the key signature), and because the whole song is diatonic, the key is C throughout the entire piece. The harmonic progression is very simple. For example, the first page of sheet music (available from here) has these chords:

$$\mathbf{I} \rightarrow \mathbf{V} \rightarrow \mathbf{I} \rightarrow \mathbf{V} \rightarrow \mathbf{I} \rightarrow \mathbf{IV}.$$

In the original piece, the chorus only uses the various permutations of 3 chords: I, IV, and V. The harmonic framework of the chorus is indicative of the rest of the song: all I, IV, and V. The a capella version however introduces some more complex harmony, going beyond the realm of I-IV-V and introducing some jazz harmonies. We do not have a score for the a capella version, but the more complex chords can be heard in the piece. The simplicity of the chorus and the song is exactly what made it a hit. The lyrics are about a fictional band, Willy and the Poor Boys, who play music on a street corner, cheering people up and asking for small change. You can think of them like the groups who make up Playing For Change. The simple chords mirror the home-town feel of the lyrical content, transport the listener to happier, simpler times.

Now that we know about the score, we can examine the specific elements and how they appear on spectrograms. The percussion is an integral part of the piece. The original song (the Creedence version) opens with just percussion, followed by the bass riff. After 16 bars of the bass riff, the vocals finally come in. The a capella version starts straight into the bass riff, and then vocals and percussion enter. The a capella group has no instrument accompaniment by definition, so they are faced with the unique challenge of approximating percussion with their voices. One of them is what is known as a vocal percussionist, or a “beat boxer.” He sounds remarkably similar to a drummer: if the listener didn't know beforehand that it was a person and not a drum set, he might not realize it when listening to the song. The spectrogram however reveals a difference between the instrumental percussion and vocal percussion. On the spectrogram of Creedence's recording the vertical percussion, lines are much more crisp and defined. In contrast, the percussion lines in the a capella spectrogram are a bit fuzzier in the first verse. There is another interesting phenomenon in the introduction of the a capella version: there are the telltale vertical lines of percussion at the beginning of every note, but the vocal percussionist has not yet entered at this point. The vertical lines are seen in Figure 2. These vertical lines can be thought of as "vocal attack," and are actually the consonant "D" of the word "Dum" that the bass is singing.

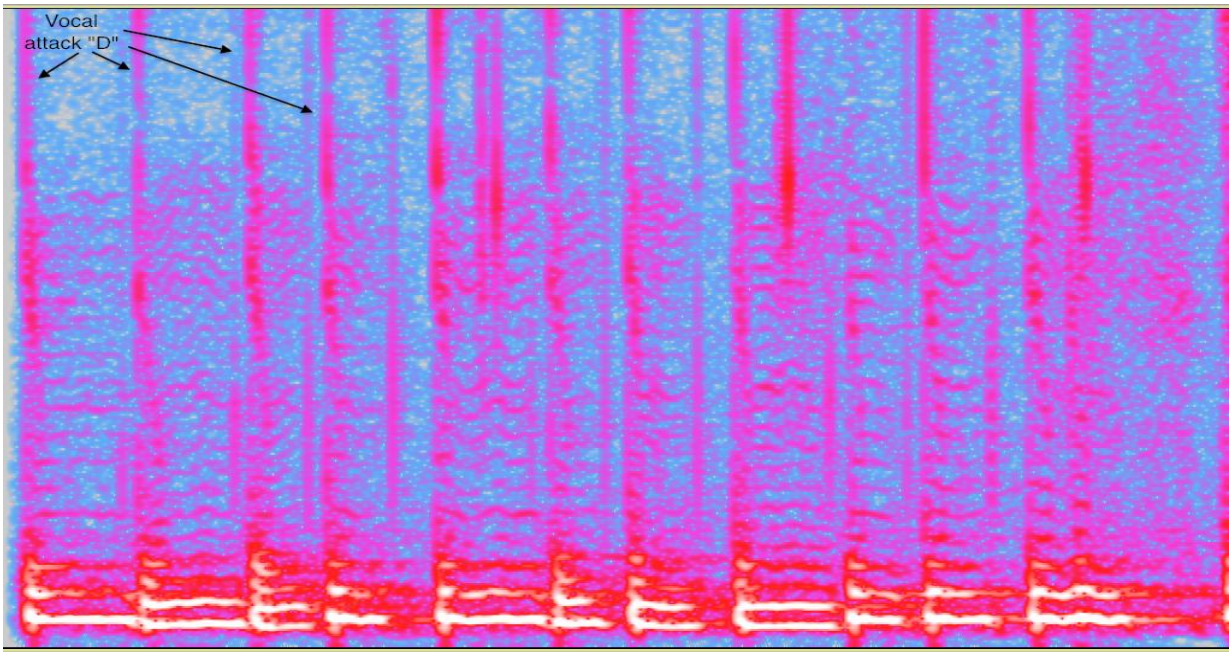

Figure 2: This is a clip of the spectrogram of the beginning of the a capella version, showing vertical lines of the vocal attacks.

The vocal style employed by Creedence Clearwater Revival is rather gravelly, and this can be seen by all the dissonance in the harmonics of the vocal line. This can be heard and seen, as segments of the vocals are perforated like Swiss cheese by the beating phenomenon characteristic of dissonance. The dissonance in the vocal harmonics is seen in Figure 4.

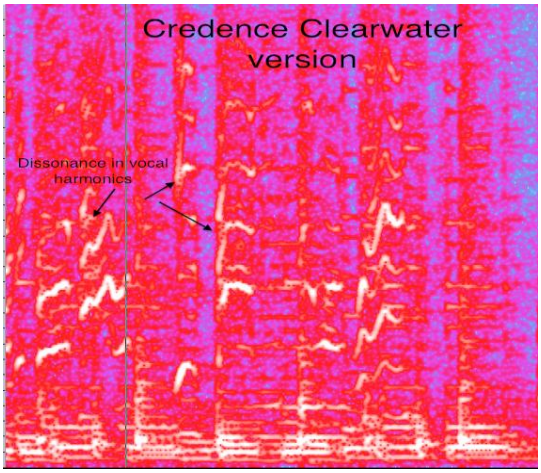

Figure 3: This shows the dissonance.

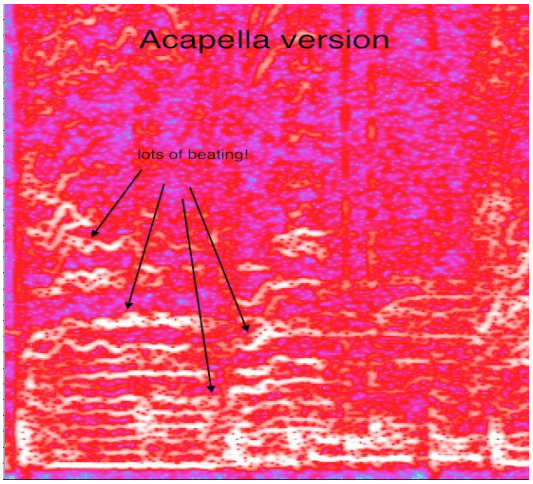

Figure 4: This shows the increased beating.

The difference in the vocal timbre between Creedence and Street Corner Symphony's voices is evident, however. CCR's lead singer John Fogarty's twang in the original recording shows distinctly on the spectrogram. When compared with the a cappella version, there is a broader frequency spread and less amplitude in the higher harmonics. The combination of emphasis on lower harmonics and a broader, beating frequency spread show Fogarty's gravelly twang. Figures 5 and 6 show the comparison described.

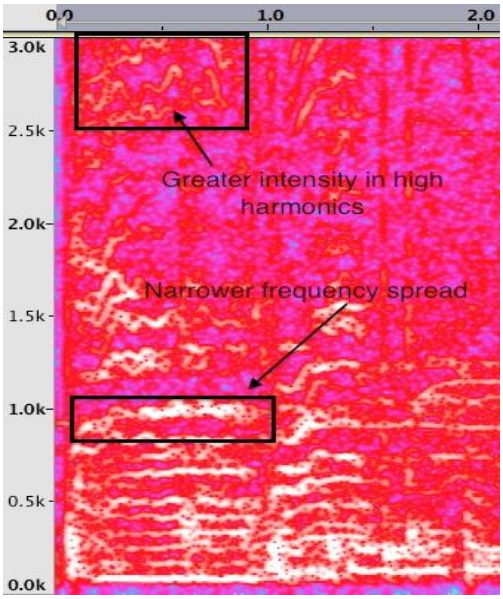

Figure 5: A Capella version, no twang.

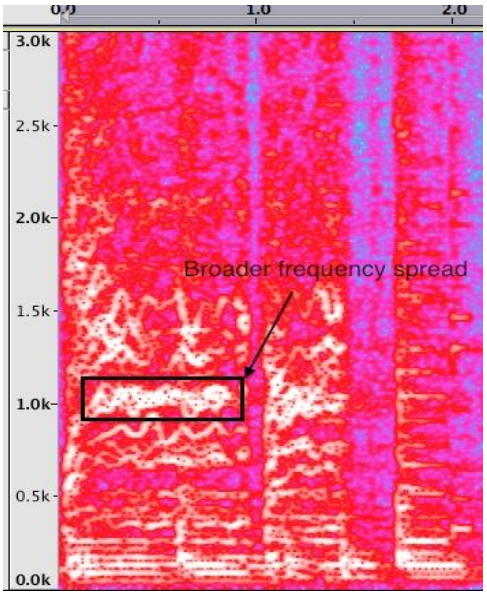

Figure 6: CCR version with Fogarty's twang.

Looking at the "instrumental" harmony on the spectrograms of the original and a capella version, shown in Figures 3 and 4, it is evident that the a capella version hits all of the main notes, but it has fewer spectral lines in that region. Looking at this region, one can immediately identify the a capella version. The lines are distinctly vocals, as they have the characteristic jagged lines of typical singing. Of course, it is possible for vocals to hit a perfect pitch, but for this performance, such vocal perfection was not necessary and in fact not preferred. The a capella harmony uses some vibrato, as shown in Figure 3, and since the notes are close together,

this results in beating. The original Creedence Clearwater Revival version also has beating, but the fundamental tones and harmonics in the harmony are performed by stringed instruments (guitars) and therefore have purer pitches.

The rhythm of both of the performances is similar, as is typical for original version and covers of songs. This shows how crucial the rhythm is to the integrity and heart of the song. Figure 7 maps out the rhythm of the bass guitar for the verses in CCR's version, and the rhythm of the bass singer in the a capella version.

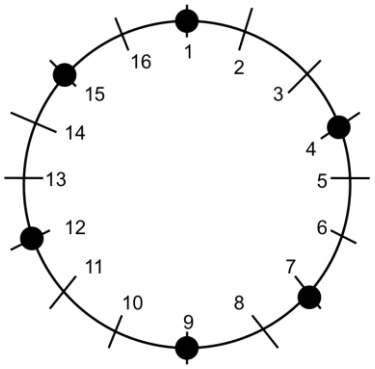

Figure 7: Two measures of the rhythm of the bass for both versions

In general, the spectrograms have the same basic representation of the music. This makes sense because both groups - Creedence and Street Corner - are singing the same song. However, there are qualitative differences so the way that each group represents the same pattern of notes. The chorus serves as an ideal example for this comparison. The dominant note in the chorus, like the rest of the song, is G. In particular, only 6 out of 30 vocal notes are not G. Both groups represent this with a rather continuous intonation of G_4 throughout their respective performance. However, this does not necessarily mean that both groups performed the piece with the same interpretation.

For example, the first phrase of the chorus "down on the corner" and the associated change from A to G is more clearly denoted and enunciated in the SCS performance than the CCR one. Figure 8 is the SCS performance. Figure 9 is the CCR performance. Notice that at

~1000k Hz SCS's sound is much more distinctive than CCR's. Specifically, CCR has a much more complicated spectrogram and is filled with, what presumably, is also instrumentals and not vocals masking as instrumentals. While characteristic of the nature of each performance, this is perhaps the most significant example of this sort of difference.

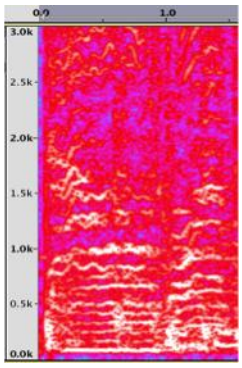

Figure 8: The First phrase from SCS's interpretation of the chorus

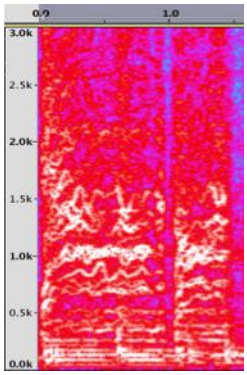

Figure 9: The First phrase from CCW's interpretation of the chorus

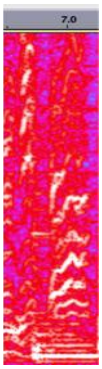

Figure 10: The spectrogram for the lyric "nickel" in CCR's performance

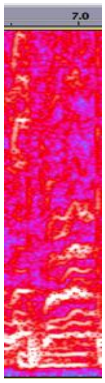

Figure 11: The spectrogram for the lyric "nickel" in SCS's performance.

Figures 10 and 11 provide a more clear representation of the G notes associated with the lyric "Nickel". Figure 10 is CCR's performance and Figure 11 is SCS's performance. Notice that CCR's performance of this G note is brighter and seems to present more vibrato. However, SCS's performance covers a larger frequency band for its dominant harmonic, which may indicate a beating between the different singer's voices.

In general, though, both performances have a very clear and distinctive representation of the score. The differences crop up in the band's interpretation and the difference in a vocal and instrumental creation of a note. While this is not an exhaustive comparison of the two group's performance and their relationship to the score, the two examples do provide an archetypal

example of the manner in which the groups interpret the score and perform this lovely and pleasant piece of music.

The original, studio version of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Down on the Corner," and Street Corner Symphony's live version are definitely the same song, but there are plenty of differences between the two that can be both heard and seen in the analysis of the spectrograms. A drum set mainly does CCR's percussion, but SCS's version has a "beat boxer," which still creates vertical lines on the spectrogram, as seen in Figure 2, but they are fuzzier than the in CCR's version. The instrumentations are obviously different, due to the fact that SCS only use vocals. This is seen in Figures 3 and 4, where SCS's version has more jagged, vocal instrumentation. The rhythms of the two versions are very similar, and are mapped out in Figure 7. Both musical groups play, for the most part, the same notes, but both groups create their own, unique feeling to the song.