

# Irony & Improvisation in Jazz Covers by The Bad Plus

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While The Bad Plus (TBP) is hardly the only jazz piano trio to perform covers of modern popular songs, their approach is more consistently heard as ironic by fans and critics alike. The band has rejected this facile interpretation, asserting that their covers are earnest attempts to “make rock, pop, and electronica songs vehicles for contemporary improvisation” (TBP 2007). But the trio maintains a reputation “for being irony-steeped hipsters who play irreverent pop covers, and who like nothing better than to thumb their noses at the jazz tradition” (Argue 2006).

In this paper, I argue that these two dimensions of TBP’s covering practices are interdependent. Building on work on musical irony by Janet Bourne (2016), I posit three recurring TBP arranging techniques that court ironic hearings by flouting various combinations of so-called Gricean maxims that govern “cooperative” verbal conversation. After examining the first two techniques—*side-slipping* and *overextension*—I explore what I call *parameter shifts*: changes in the structures that trio members use to coordinate their individual and collective improvisations. While such changes yield pronounced incongruities that are the stuff of musical irony, they also amount to shifts in how the trio treats a source song as an improvisational referent, creating contrasting types of solo spaces in cover performances. By analyzing interactions between these three techniques, I suggest that TBP’s cover transformations can yield both compelling developmental processes and dynamic improvisational environments, even when—or perhaps, *especially* when—these transformations are catalyzed by ironic subversion.