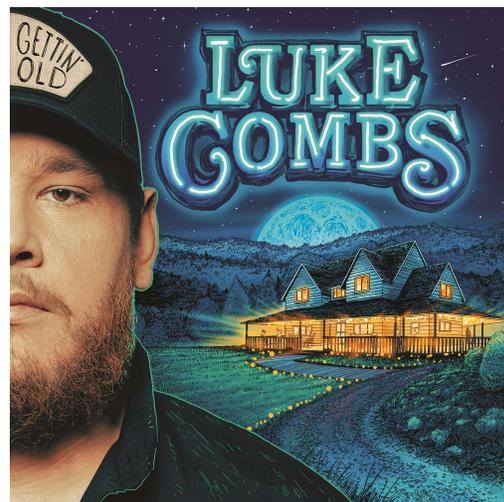
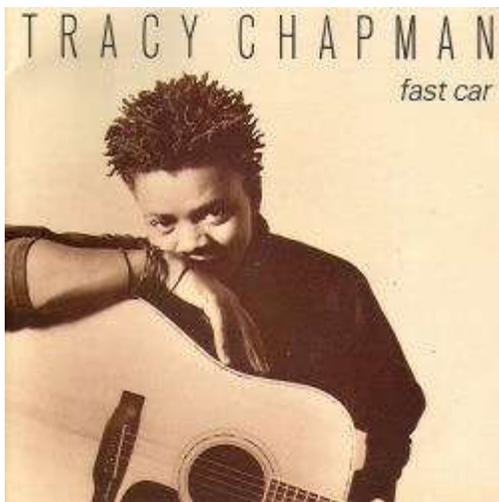


Copyright Laws:

Fast Cars & Cover Songs



Overview

This lesson introduces students to the basics of copyright law and how it applies to music, specifically cover songs. Using the case study of Luke Combs' 2023 cover of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," students will examine how copyright laws protect original creators while also allowing new artists to perform and reinterpret existing works.

The lesson blends legal knowledge (mechanical licenses, royalties, restrictions) with cultural context (cultural appropriation debates, recognition of marginalized artists, and evolving platforms like YouTube). Through discussion, group analysis, and critical reflection, students will grapple with the question of how law balances artistic freedom with intellectual property rights.

Essential Question

How do copyright laws shape the balance between artistic freedom, creator rights, and cultural respect in music?

Supporting Questions

- How are covering a song, sampling it, and remixing it different?
- What legal rights do original artists keep when their work is covered?
- How do mechanical licenses and royalties protect artists like Tracy Chapman?
- How do legal permissions differ from cultural debates about appropriation or respect?
- How have technology and platforms like YouTube changed the way copyright laws are applied?

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of copyright law and define terms like *mechanical license*, *synchronization license*, and *royalties*.
- Distinguish between legal rights (copyright, licenses) and cultural issues (appropriation, representation).
- Analyze how cover songs, like Luke Combs' version of "Fast Car," can spark legal, cultural, and ethical debates.
- Apply copyright principles to hypothetical scenarios involving cover songs, remixes, and uploads to YouTube.

Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science (9-12)

- **SS.CV.1.9-12:** Distinguish the rights, roles, powers, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in the political system.
- **SS.CV.3.9-12:** Analyze the impact of laws on the maintenance of order, justice, equality, and liberty.
- **SS.EC.1.9-12:** Analyze how incentives influence choices.
SS.H.1.9-12: Evaluate how historical developments were shaped by time and place.
- **SS.Soc.2.9-12:** Analyze the impact of social structure, including culture, institutions, and societies.

Common Core State Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop.

Materials and Preparation

- Handout: **Copyright Laws – Fast Cars and Cover Songs**
- Visual: **Copyright Laws and Cover Songs**
- Whiteboard/projector for key terms (*mechanical license*, *royalties*, *fair use*)
- Exit ticket slips

Time Required: 1 class period (50–55 minutes)

Procedure

Part 1: Hook & Case Study (5 minutes)

1. Play short clips (30 seconds) each of Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car” (1988) and Luke Combs’ cover (2023). You may want to clarify that Chapman is the songwriter as well as the original performer of the song.
2. Pose the questions: Should Combs have been required to get Chapman’s permission to cover the song? Why or why not? Allow time for students to present their views on the questions.
3. Explain that students are going to be digging into these questions in today’s lesson.

Part 2: Copyright Law Basics (15 minutes)

1. Distribute the **Copyright Laws – Fast Cars and Cover Songs handout** and allow time for students to read it.
2. Review key concepts from the reading and the handout on copyright laws. Use the visual **Copyright Laws and Cover Songs** to focus student attention and expand on the information provided in the handout:
 - Mechanical License – allows covers but requires royalties.
 - Synchronization License – needed for music videos.
 - Royalties – payments made to the original artist
 - Restrictions – no lyric/melody changes without permission. Cannot promote a song as if they wrote it or license the cover for commercial uses without permission.
 - Sampling – using a portion of the original recording and requires permission.
 - Remixing –altering elements of the original recording and requires permission.
3. Answer any questions students have about the terms.

Part 3: Small Group Analysis (15 minutes)

1. Organize the class into four groups. Assign each group one discussion focus:
 - Legal rights: Did Combs follow copyright law?
 - Economic impact: How do royalties protect artists?
 - Cultural lens: Was this cultural appropriation?
 - Technology: How do YouTube and streaming platforms complicate copyright?
2. Explain that groups are to discuss their members' views on the question, summarize their perspective, and prepare to share the results of their discussion in a two-minute presentation to the class.

Part 4: Whole-Class Discussion (15 minutes)

1. Ask each group to present.
2. Encourage dialogue among the students, pushing them to consider the legal vs. cultural debate. Example prompts:
 - Can something be legal but still be considered unfair or disrespectful?
 - Do copyright laws go far enough to protect marginalized artists?
 - How should laws adapt to digital platforms like YouTube?

3. Share with students that Chapman publicly expressed her appreciation for Combs' success with the song, and the two performed "Fast Car" together at the 2024 Grammy Awards. Their collaboration highlighted both the power of copyright law to protect creators and the ongoing importance of considering cultural meaning and respect in artistic expression.

Part 5: Conclusion (5 minutes)

1. Have students answer the following question as an Exit Ticket: Do copyright laws do enough to balance artistic freedom with protecting original creators? Why or why not?

Extension

- Encourage students to research copyright infringement cases involving music. Into what categories would they sort these cases? (*Possible answers: Plagiarism, sampling or remixing without permission, covering without permission, issues around streaming*) What conclusions about copyright law and music could they draw from learning about these lawsuits? (*Answers will vary.*)
- Conduct a carousel discussion of a "hot topic" related to music and copyright. For example, you could choose one of these questions: *Should songs written by AI have the same copyright protections as those written by humans? Does it matter if the performer covering a song has a different cultural background than the songwriter? Fans often share music on social media. Is this a violation of copyright?* To conduct a carousel discussion, have students stand in two concentric circles facing each other. Assign the inner circle to take one position on the topic, the outer circle to take the other. Ask the students in the inner circle to present a argument for their assigned position to the student facing them; then switch and have the outside circle present. Have students rotate two positions and repeat the process, using what they heard in the first cycle to strengthen their argument. On the next rotation, let students argue about their actual positions. Poll the class on their positions and encourage discussion of whether their positions changed as a result of either being asked to argue for a position they disagreed with or hearing such arguments from other students. Encourage interested students to explore how copyright law applies in other areas of expression such as print (newspapers, fiction, poetry, nonfiction) or art (sculpture, painting, film, photography). Do any areas seem to have stronger protections than others? Is determining when copyright has been infringed more difficult with some media than others?

Handout: Copyright Laws – Fast Cars and Cover Songs

Background

In 1988, singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman released her debut album, which included the hit song “Fast Car.” The song describes the struggle to escape poverty and hope for a better more stable life. The song became an anthem for many listeners. It especially resonated with women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Chapman went on to become an award-winning artist known for socially conscious music. She has always been very selective about how her work is used by others.

In 2023, country music star Luke Combs released a cover of Tracy Chapman’s classic 1988 hit, “Fast Car.” Combs’ version became a major commercial success and sparked legal and cultural debates. Some celebrated the cover, while others questioned whether it was fair for a white male country singer to profit from a song written and made famous by a Black female artist. Others argued that Combs’ version stripped away some of the original song’s meaning. This case provides an opportunity to explore how copyright law applies to cover songs.

Under U.S. copyright law, artists who cover songs must obtain a mechanical license and pay royalties to the original artist. This means Combs did not need Chapman’s direct permission to record and release “Fast Car,” but he was legally required to pay her royalties. This ensures that the songwriters are compensated fairly for their work. As a result, Chapman became the first Black songwriter to win the Country Music Association’s Song of the Year award in 2024. But copyright law does not answer the cultural or ethical questions raised by this case.

Key Legal Concepts

- **Mechanical License:** Allows an artist to record and release a cover song as long as royalties are paid.
- **Synchronization License:** Needed if the cover song is used in a video.
- **Royalties:** Payments made to the original artist whenever the cover is sold or streamed.
- **Restrictions:** Cover artists cannot change lyrics or melody without permission.
- **Sampling vs. Covering:** Sampling uses parts of the original recording and requires special permission, while covering means re-performing the entire song under a license.

Group Activity

In groups, analyze the case of Luke Combs’ cover of “Fast Car.” Your teacher will assign your group to discuss one of the following questions:

1. **Legal Rights:** Did Luke Combs follow copyright law? Why or why not?
2. **Economic Impact:** How do royalties help protect original artists like Tracy Chapman?

3. **Cultural Lens:** Was this cultural appropriation, or simply artistic expression? Why?
4. **Technology:** How do platforms like YouTube complicate how copyright laws are enforced?

Be prepared to share your group's discussion with the class. You will have about two minutes to share.

Visual: Copyright Laws for Cover Songs

1. Mechanical License

- Required when recording and releasing a cover song.
- Ensures the original artist receives royalties for each sale or stream.
- Applies only to audio recordings (not videos).

2. Synchronization License

- Needed if the cover song is used in a music video, film, or other visual medium.
- Must be negotiated directly with the copyright holder.

3. Royalties

- Payments that cover artists make to original songwriters.
- Set at a fixed statutory rate under U.S. law.
- Provide economic incentives for artists to keep creating music.

4. Restrictions on Covers

- Artists may not alter the lyrics or melody without the songwriter's permission.
- Covers must give proper credit to the original songwriter.

5. Promotional & Commercial Use

- Cover artists cannot promote a song as if they wrote it.
- They also cannot license the cover for commercial uses (e.g., advertising) without additional permissions.

6. Sampling & Remixing

- Different from covering.
- Sampling uses a portion of the original recording and requires explicit permission.
- Remixing alters elements of the original song and also requires permission.

7. Uploading to YouTube or Streaming Platforms

- Platforms like YouTube often handle some licensing behind the scenes.
- Artists must still comply with copyright law — royalties flow back to the original songwriter.