

MUSC 1420 Thinking About Popular Music

Instructor

Dr. Jasmine Henry, Assistant Professor of Music

henryja@sas.upenn.edu

Course Description

Catchy yet controversial. Fun but hard-hitting. Popular music is not just entertaining: it presents societal issues, raises questions, and expresses ideas. This course is intended to help you think creatively and critically about popular music. The semester is structured chronologically and thematically, beginning with the foundational roots of American popular music and progressing through significant genres, movements, and debates. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from (ethno)musicology, cultural studies, and critical theory, we will explore the ways in which popular music reflects and shapes broader social, political, and technological shifts. We will consider critical questions: How is identity expressed, repressed, reproduced, and changed through popular music? How does popular music mediate our understanding of tragedy, protest, and political change? What does the history of censorship in popular music reveal about societal fears and anxieties? What does the virality of music in the digital age tell us about power, taste, and cultural production? Throughout the semester, students learn listening and analytic skills, how to engage critically with various writings about music, and how to develop compelling arguments and articulate them verbally in class discussions and writing assignments.

Course Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Use interdisciplinary frameworks to analyze the evolution of popular music in the United States, identifying key social, political, cultural, and technological shifts that have shaped its development.
- Critically evaluate the role of popular music in shaping and reflecting issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other aspects of identity.
- Engage critically with diverse music genres, media platforms, and technologies, examining how they intersect and influence music production, distribution, and consumption.
- Develop listening and analytical skills to engage with music in ways that connect it to broader cultural, political, and historical contexts, fostering deeper understanding and interpretation.

Assessment and Grading

Everyone has an opportunity to earn an A in this course. Grading is cumulative and affected by regular attendance, participation, and coursework submission. You will be assessed based on the following criteria:

- Attendance (25%)
- Discussion Leading/Participation (15%)
- Assignments (700-1000 words)
 - Why I Like It (20%)
 - Object Finder (20%)
 - Music Performance Video or Written Review (20%)

Course Topics (Subject to Revision)

Origins & Fundamentals

- Popular music fundamentals & scholarship
- Roots & streams of U.S. popular music
- Blackface minstrelsy
- Tin Pan Alley & the popular mainstream

Popular Music in/as Politics

- Performing the U.S. National Anthem
- Superbowl Halftime Performances
- Woodstock & the Vietnam War
- Country Music Patriotism Post-9/11
- Childish Gambino's "This is America" (2018)
- Janelle Monae's "Dirty Computer" (2018)

Genre & the Construction of Identity

- Big Mama Thornton & Black Women in Rock
- Funk & The Black Power Movement
- Punk and Outsiderness
- Hip-Hop Origins in the South Bronx
- Reclaiming Blackness & Queerness in Country Music

Gender & Sexuality

- 1940s all-girl swing bands
- 1960s girl groups, agency, and power
- Sexuality and sensuality in 1970s Disco
- Heavy Metal & masculinity
- 1980s Ball culture & house music
- Janet Jackson & Black feminist musicking
- The Filthy Fifteen: Censorship & the PMRC

Technology & the Onlining of Popular Music

- Auto-tune in 21st-Century Popular Music
- DJ Suede & Viral Hip-Hop Remix Culture
- The TikTokification of Popular Music
- Fortnite video gaming & musical performance
- The Viral Spread of K-Pop