

PROSPECTUS

MUSC 1420

Section 001, CRN 63037

Thinking about Popular Music

Prof. Goodman

T/R 10:15-11:45

What is this class about?

Catchy yet controversial. Fun but hard-hitting. Popular music is not just entertaining: it presents societal issues, raises questions, expresses ideas. This course considers how popular music of the 20th century manifested the hopes, contradictions, ingenuity, and challenges of life in the United States, as seen and heard through the experiences of musicians and audiences. We will address three core questions: (1) How is “talent” and “good” music distinguished? (2) What happens when we treat music as “property,” especially with respect to broader ideas of ownership and credit? (3) When, how, and why is music considered dangerous? We delve into these questions by profiling musicians’ lives, analyzing the musical traits of specific repertoire, investigating changes in how music circulates, and situating popular music in U.S. cultural history. This course is not a chronological survey and does not aim to cover all U.S. popular music (or global popular music). Instead, each core question is addressed through case studies. Over the course of the semester students learn listening and analytic skills, how to engage critically with a range of writings about music, how to develop compelling arguments and articulate them verbally in class discussions and in writing assignments.

What happens in class?

- This class meets in person two times week. Typically, we will focus on each case study for three class sessions.
- Each class session is divided into three parts: lecture, group work with course materials, and discussion. We will discuss assignments in class.
- Class participation is part of the final grade. Attendance and participation in class discussions is mandatory.

What kinds of work happen outside of class?

- Students are expected to complete reading and listening assignments before each class meeting. All assignments will be made available on Canvas. There is no textbook.
- There are two kinds of larger assignment: papers (two) and playlists (two). We will discuss each larger assignment in class. Each assignment will be discussed in class, and feedback from each will allow students to improve for the next assignment.

When are things due and how are grades distributed?

- Writing assignment 1 due Sept. 30: 3-page song analysis 10%
- Annotated playlist 1 due Oct. 21: five songs, topic assigned 10%
- Midterm exam Nov. 3: 15%

- Writing assignment 2 due Nov. 18: 5-page album review 15%
- Annotated playlist 2 due December 16: ten songs, topic chosen by student 15%
- Final exam TBD: 20%
- Attendance and participation: 15%

Semester Schedule (subject to revision)

Tuesday, August 30 – introduction

UNIT 1: Talent

September 1-8: Three-class focus on the question of where good music comes from. Ideas about “genius,” producers, songwriters from the 1960s and 1970s (Ray Charles, Carole King, Aretha Franklin, others).

September 13-20: Three-class focus on why innovation is valued and how important conventions are in what we actually hear. We go back to the early 20th century and look at songwriters like Irving Berlin.

September 22-29: Three-class focus on where in the music-making process credit for good music is identified, what kinds of structural, gendered, raced patterns emerged in mid-20th c. Especially focuses on the difference between recorded music and live performance. Whitney Houston and others.

Sept. 30: Writing assignment 1 due descriptive analysis of an assigned song (4 pages).

UNIT 2: Belonging and Property

October 4-13: Three-class unit on how we gauge influence and make sense of the grey area between homage and theft. Cultural appropriation. Crossovers (especially country to pop).

October 18-25: Three-class focus on copyright (20th c. cases and recent cases)

Oct. 21: Playlist 1 due five-song playlist on assigned topic; students pick genres/artists

October 27-November 1: Two-class focus on subcultures, underground scenes, and carving out spaces of belonging and ownership away from the mainstream.

Nov. 3 Midterm exam in class. Covers units 1 and 2.

UNIT 3: Danger

November 8: Sexy music on the screen in the 1950s. Elvis, Little Richard.

November 15-22: Three-class focus on 1980s parents’ panicking about youth music.

Nov. 18: Writing assignment 2 due album review (chosen by class voting)

November 29-December 6: Three-class focus on why hip-hop became the target of so much criticism and anxiety in 1990s.

Final playlist, topic of your choice, due Dec. 16

Final exam (cumulative) TBD