

PROSPECTUS

MUSC 1420

Thinking about Popular Music

Prof. Goodman

Fall 2023

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 larger assignments: annotated playlists. 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.
- There are listening quizzes and two exams.

- Participation and attendance are significant parts of the course and count for 15% of the grade. This course is for people who are ready to engage actively and critically with the materials.

At the end of Fall 2022 I asked students in MUSC 1420 to offer advice to future students who take the course. Here are some excerpts:

Be prepared and open-minded, especially in class. A lot of the time in discussions, people have similar or opposite views. Sometimes people may feel opposite to how you feel about a topic, or song, or your view of a topic may not be what the overall message of the class was supposed to be. Challenge yourself to come to class with open-ears to understand everyone's opinions and the reason they may feel the way they do about a genre, song, or topic, because it challenges you to also be critical of your own way of thought, and gives you the opportunity to form a better informed opinion about what is being discussed in the class.

I would make them aware of the fact that the class does not test your knowledge in traditional ways, and they need to be ready for that. There will be no Scantron waiting to be bubbled in during the midterm or final exams, but rather a space that allows each student to individually share what they learned throughout the duration of the course (which was one of my personal favorite parts of MUSC 1420).

Another piece of advice for students looking to take this class is to form opinions in advance to inform your thinking and question yourself. By drawing conclusions ahead of hearing others', you can better call attention to where your arguments' weaknesses may be and thus improve your own thought process rather than allowing someone else to inform your initial thinking.

If someone were to be taking this class, I'd tell them to enter every class with an open-mind! This class is a great opportunity to immerse yourself in new genres of music and learn something that allows you to better appreciate a style that has never previously resonated with you. I would also tell them that listening to music in this class is very different from traditional, recreational listening to music. It is important to listen to songs multiple times, in a focused environment listening for form, for lyrics, and for instrumentals, in order to fully understand all of the components of a song. Finally, I would advise someone taking this class to always try to participate in class discussions, because in-class personal opinions often spark fascinating discussions and, for me, always helped me formalize your own inklings of opinions and thoughts.