

Meaning and Memory in American Popular Music HSS202 (section 01)

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00-12:15

Classroom: **MHRA 1209** (Moore Humanities and Research Administration Building)

Professor Benjamin Filene

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Course Description

Sometimes popular music is treated like disposable culture—the fad of the month—but a closer look shows that the most innovative figures in American music are sustained by a deep sense of history. How do artists draw on the past to create vibrant new musical styles? How do Americans' visions of “authentic” musical roots reflect their ideas about race, class, and identity?

In this course, we will look at *and listen to* case studies to understand how music is shaped by—and shapes—a vision of American history. The course traces four lines of influence in American vernacular music: from blues to rock, gospel to soul, “folk” to folk revival, and funk/disco to hip-hop. But the lines being drawn here go in both directions. We will explore how the old styles evolved into new, but even more we will focus on how innovators *looked to the past to make something new*. How did rock draw on the blues? How did the folk revival decide what to revive? How does hip-hop sample the past?

Student Learning Outcomes

By tracing the roots of these musical genres, you will gain a richer understanding of American culture and how it is created. Specifically, the course shows that

- popular music has roots;
- these roots often lie in marginalized sectors of society: African American culture, the rural South, poor white mountain residents;
- these traditions are not isolated from each other: American culture is hybrid; it draws on and reworks multiple pasts;
- discovering cultural roots can involve idealism but it can also involve appropriation, misunderstanding, and power: borrowing culture usually involves re-shaping it.

In exploring these themes, you will gain the skills of the historian, including:

- **reading secondary sources** carefully and thoughtfully and with an eye for new ideas
- **reading primary sources, both written and non-written** (musical, visual) as cultural evidence

- **building, sustaining, and supporting a main idea or argument**
- **writing** in a clear and persuasive style
- **speaking** with passion and clarity
- **collaborating** with energy, sensitivity, and an awareness of how much you can learn from your peers
- **experimenting** fearlessly to build your skills

Writing Assignments

As a **Writing Intensive** class, you will be writing almost every week throughout the semester, with assignments that vary in length and style. These various pieces are designed to make you comfortable communicating your ideas in writing and to help you try out different kinds of voice, evidence, and analysis in your writing. You will turn in drafts of your main papers and a research update and a draft of the thesis paragraph for your final paper. The draft of your first essay will be read by a peer reviewer; the professor will comment on the other draft materials.

Weekly responses—informal reflective writing—10%

Each week engage with the readings by writing informally about them—posting a response on an online discussion board, posing questions, or doing a short piece of creative writing. See syllabus for each week’s assignment.

“Songbook”—personal essay, 3-5 pp. —10%. *Draft due September 2; final due September 11*

Write in a first-person voice about a song that means something to you. Modeled on Nick Hornby’s *Songbook*, this assignment asks you to explore connections between music and your personal life beyond music and to experiment with doing a close reading of a single song—why does this piece of music move you?

Thesis Statement Exercise—5%. *Due September 18*

Write a practice thesis paragraph that reflects effective argument-driven writing.

“Mashup”—analytical essay, 5 pp. —20%. *Draft due October 2; final due October 16*

Compare and contrast two versions of a single song from different eras and build an historical argument about how *and why* they differ from each other.

“Musical Roots”—original research and analysis, 8 pp. —30%. *Final due December 16*

From a list provided, choose a popular artist (or group) whose work reflects a strong sense of history. Do secondary and primary source research to identify at least two musical influences and precedents (dating to at least 20 years before the artist’s time) that shaped the artist and his/her music. By comparing and contrasting the artist with his/her sources, explore how and why the earlier musicians influenced this artist?

Other Graded Requirements

Class participation—10%

To ensure a lively, thought-provoking, and supportive classroom atmosphere, you are expected to attend class, do the reading, speak up in discussions, and help foster a sense of shared exploration within the group.

“Testimonial”—5%

Once during the semester you will bring to class a song that you like and, in a 5-minute presentation, present it to the class and explain why it interests and appeals to you.

Oral Presentation—10%:

At the end of the semester, you will take part in an in-class panel discussion based on your “Musical Roots” research project.

Grading scale

A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-: 80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76

If things go awry...

...it's your responsibility to tell me—right away.

LATE PAPERS:

If a paper or project is late without direct, prior approval from me, I deduct ½ a letter grade per day (e.g., from A to A-)—no exceptions.

Academic Integrity Policy

All students have a responsibility to uphold the standards of “*Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, and Responsibility*” detailed in the Academic Integrity Policy. Instances of cheating, plagiarism, misuse of academic resources, falsification of information, and facilitating of academic dishonesty are treated with utmost seriousness by the history department and dealt with severely by the University administration. The full policy appears in the *Student Calendar/Handbook* and at academicintegrity.uncg.edu.

Per university policy, you will be asked to sign a copy of the Academic Integrity Pledge for each major assignment in this class.

Special Needs

If you require accommodations for special learning needs, please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Disability Services, located within the Elliot University Center (334-5770)—and please let me know!

Books to Buy

Hornby, Nick. *Songbook*, 2003

Keyes, Cheryl L. *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 2004

Polizzotti, Mark. *Highway 61 Revisited*, 2006

All other readings appear on electronic reserve

Recording to Buy

Dylan, Bob. *Highway 61 Revisited*, 1965.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READINGS

“[N]othing in American vernacular music holds still....Every phrase and image, every riff and chime, is always moving, state to state, decade to decade, never at home with whoever might claim it, always seeking a new body, a new song, a new voice.”

-Greil Marcus, *Like A Rolling Stone*, 2005

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

-William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951

Part I: Searching for Roots (Begging, Borrowing, Stealing?)

WEEK ONE

August 26—Definitions and Introductions: “Roots,” “Vernacular,” “Memory”

August 28—Music, Personal Memory, and the Writer’s Voice

Hornby, Nick. *Songbook*: 3-32.

WEEK TWO

September 2— Music, Personal Memory, and the Writer’s Voice (continued)

Due in class (for in-class peer review): two pages of “Songbook” essay

Sanneh, Kelefa. “The Rap Against Rockism.” *The New York Times* (October 31, 2004): 3 pp.

Hornby, Nick. *Songbook*: 45-52 and 60-64.

September 4—Authenticity, Public Memory, and the Singer’s Voice

Weekly response due in class: After reading about and listening to Lead Belly and Nirvana, do a short piece of creative writing: You are Kurt Cobain. Write your diary entry on the night you hear your first Lead Belly recording.

Barker, Hugh and Yuval Taylor. “Where Did You Sleep Last Night? Nirvana, Leadbelly and the Allure of the Primeval.” In *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*: 1-27.

WEEK THREE

Weekly response due Monday, 9:00 p.m.: After reading Marcus’s essay, take part in a conversation on the Blackboard Discussion Board

September 9—The King

Marcus, Greil. "Elvis: Presliad." In *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*: 120-171.

September 11—Still The King

Due in class: "Songbook" essays

[Class visits Writing Center at 12:00]

Part II: The Blues and American Memory

WEEK FOUR

Weekly Response: due Monday, 9:00 p.m.: After reading the following, join in a Blackboard discussion of the following question: Why were young white musicians in the 1960s so drawn to the blues?

September 16—The Blues and Rock: Robert Johnson in Memory

Welding, Pete. "Hell Hound on His Trail: Robert Johnson." In *Down Beat's Music '66*: 73-74, 76, 103.

Norman, Philip. *Symphony for the Devil: The Rolling Stones Story*: 43-53.

DeCurtis, Anthony. "My Journey to the Blues." In *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey*, Peter Guralnick, ed.: 271-275.

Richards, Keith. "Well, This Is It." In liner notes to *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*: 25.

Clapton, Eric. "Discovering Robert Johnson." In liner notes to *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*: 26-27.

[In class: thesis-building writing exercise]

September 18:

Due in class: Thesis Statement Exercise

WEEK FIVE

Weekly Response due Tuesday, 8:00 a.m.: After listening to the Robert Johnson recordings, write your personal reactions to his music. Be sure to cite specific songs.

September 23—

In class: Discussion of Thesis-Building for "MashUp" essay

September 25—Robert Johnson in His Times

Wald, Elijah. "Introduction" (xiii-xxvi); "What Is Blues" (3-13); **and** "The Blues Cult"

(244-249). In *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*.

WEEK SIX

Weekly response due Monday, 9:00 p.m.: After reading Rotella's article, write questions about it for class discussion

September 30—Electric Blues

Rotella, Carlo. "Too Many Notes." In *Good With Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt*: 51-103.

[In class: Final paper assignment introduced]

October 2: Women and the Blues

In class: Wild Women Don't Have The Blues

Due in class: Drafts of "MashUp" essay

Part II: Gospel and American Memory

WEEK SEVEN

One-on-One Conferences about "MashUp" essays held this week

October 7: Sister Rosetta Tharpe

Due in class: Indicate your topic choice for "Musical Roots" essay (choose from list provided on assignment sheet)

Wald, Gayle F. Excerpts from *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*: vii-xii, 38-73, 151-155, and 215-219.

October 9: Resolved: The Blues and Gospel Are Sexist

Weekly Response: Come prepared for in-class debate!

WEEK EIGHT

Weekly Response: Come prepared for in-class "fishbowl" discussion

October 14: Ray Charles

Guralnick, Peter. "Prologue to Soul." In *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*: 21-28 and 50-70.

October 16

CLASS MEETS AT LIBRARY for introduction to library resources (Amy Harris)

Due in class: Final "MashUp" essay

Part III: Folk and Folk Revival

WEEK NINE

Weekly response due Wednesday, 9:00 p.m.: After listening to at least three songs from each disc of the Anthology of American Folk Music, write an Associated Press-style newspaper summary (approximately 50-75 words) that tells the story of one of the songs in the anthology.

October 21—no class (fall break)

October 23—*The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music*

WEEK 10

Weekly response due Monday, 9:00 p.m.: Based on the readings, write a thought piece: What did Dylan want from folk music?

October 28-- **Bob Dylan: Folk Troubadour**

Marcus, Greil. "Another Country." In *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*: 19-29.

Pancake, Jon and Paul Nelson. "Bob Dylan." In *The Dylan Companion: A Collection of Essential Writings about Bob Dylan*, Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, eds.: 59-61.

Turner, Gil. "Bob Dylan—A New Voice Singing New Songs." In *The Dylan Companion*: 62-66.

Dylan, Bob. "River of Ice." In *Chronicles: Volume One*: 225-248 **and** 280-286.

October 30—**Bob Dylan: Folk Troubadour** (continued)

WEEK 11

November 4—**"It Ain't Me Babe"—Bob Dylan: Traitor?**

Silber, Irwin. "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan" (1964). In *The Bob Dylan Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*: 26-28.

Due in class: Research Update on "Musical Roots" essay

November 6— **Bob Dylan: Still Rolling**

Weekly response due in class: After listening to Highway 61 Revisited and reading Polizzotti, choose your favorite song other than "Like A Rolling Stone" and write a thought piece: Do you or agree or disagree with Polizzotti's interpretation of that song?

Polizzotti, Mark. *Highway 61 Revisited*: pp. 5-57; **and** read about your favorite *Hwy. 61* song *other* than “Like a Rolling Stone”

Springsteen, Bruce. Speech delivered at Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame induction (January 20, 1988). In *The Dylan Companion*: 286-288.

Part III: Hip-Hop Samples American Memory

WEEK 12

November 11—Hip-Hop’s Roots

[In-class discussion of final papers challenges and strategies]

Weekly response due Wednesday, 9:00 p.m.: What question do you feel Keyes answers well? What question of yours does she leave unanswered?

November 13—Hip-Hop’s Roots

Keyes, Cheryl. “The Development of the Rap Music Tradition.” In *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*: 39-66.

D., Chuck. “Blues: The Footprint of Popular Music.” In *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey*, Peter Guralnick, ed.: 280-281.

WEEK 13

Weekly response due Monday at 9:00 p.m.: Take part in a conversation on the Blackboard Discussion Board about the following: Should hip-hop be considered a fine art form? Be sure to cite Keyes and Dyson/Powell in your response.

November 18—Hip Hop As Art?

Keyes, Cheryl. “Street Production: The Aesthetics of Style and Performance in the Rap Music Tradition.” In *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*: 122-153.

Dyson, Michael Eric and Kevin Powell. “Is Hip-Hop Dead? Two Sides” *Ebony* 62 (June 2007): 60-61.

Due in class: Thesis paragraph for “Musical Roots”

November 20— Hip-Hop Women

Come prepared for in-class debate! Resolved: Hip-Hop Is Sexist

Dyson, Michael Eric. “Cover Your Eyes As I Describe a Scene So Violent’: Violence, Machismo, Sexism, and Homophobia.” In *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*: 91-122.

WEEK 14

Weekly response due in class on Tuesday: After reading Tanz, select an example of marketing to bring in to class that uses hip-hop to sell products other than music. Write a short reflection: What would Tanz say about the marketing strategy for the product?

November 25

Tanz, Jason. "Selling Down: The Marketing of the Hip-Hop Nation." In *Other People's Property*: 178-199.

November 27—no class (Thanksgiving)

WEEK 15**December 2 & 4—Oral Presentations**

December 9: no class ("Reading Day")

December 16: final papers due (no final exam)