Meaning and Memory in American Popular Music
HSS202 (section 01)
Fall 2010

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00-12:15
Classroom: Curry 303

Professor Benjamin Filene
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Credits: 3 hours
Prerequisites: none; open to undergraduate honors students

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 successfully completing this course, you will build the skills of the historian, including:

- **reading, evaluating and analyzing secondary sources** carefully and thoughtfully and with an eye for new ideas
- **reading, evaluating, and analyzing primary sources**, both written and non-written (musical, visual), as cultural evidence
- **synthesizing source materials** to create, sustain, and support an original 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

**Teaching Methods, Assignments, and Evaluation**
This seminar depends on active and engaged discussions that allow you and your classmates, individually and collectively, to gain comfort with the approaches and skills of historians. The classroom will be a setting for engagement with multiple voices—not only the professor’s but the students’ and those of our historical “informants,” as revealed through a range of sources. You are expected to complete reading assignments before every class meeting and arrive ready to share personal opinions on the material. Class sessions will regularly involve informal full-group discussions, oral presentations, small-group conversations, debates, and on-the-spot analyses of primary sources. As detailed below, class participation is a significant part of your grade. In addition, you will engage with the course content through a series of out-of-class assignments that involve building your writing and speaking 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 help you become more comfortable communicating your ideas in writing and to invite you to explore different kinds of voice, evidence, and analysis in your writing. You will turn in a draft of your analytical essay and a draft of the thesis paragraph for your final paper. I will hold one-on-one conferences with you about the midterm paper.

**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.

**Thesis Statement Exercise**—5%. *Due September 17*
Write a practice thesis paragraph that reflects effective argument-driven writing.
“Mashup”—analytical essay, 5 pp.—20%. Draft due September 30; final due October 14 and October 21 (students will sign up in advance for due dates)

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.

Final paper—“Making History Music/Making Music History”—original research and analysis

How do musicians draw on and reshape the past? From a list provided, choose a song that was written about a historical event. How has the singer/songwriter re-written that history and reshaped it for audiences? What messages does the performer convey through the way he or she tells the story? What musical strategies do they use to convey them? How do these messages compare to how people at the time saw the event and to how historians see it today?

There are two parts to this assignment:

1. **Writing and Re-Writing the Historical Record, 3-4 pp.—10%. Due November 2**
   What happened in this event and how have people understood it differently over time? Do primary source research (newspapers) to see the “first pass” at telling the story of the event. Compare secondary sources (Wikipedia, a textbook, an analysis by an academic historian) to see how later analysts have re-written the event since.

2. **Final paper, 6-8 pp.—30%. Due December 9**
   How does the singer/songwriter’s account “re-write” and reshape the event? Comparing to the accounts in the “historical records,” what versions does the singer choose. Why?

**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, C-=70-72;
D+=67-69; D=63-66; D-=60-62; F=59 or less

If things go awry…
…it’s your responsibility to tell me—right away.

LATE PAPERS:
If a paper (or draft) 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

All other readings appear on electronic reserve

Recording to Buy
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 24—Definitions and Introductions: “Roots,” “Vernacular,” “Memory”

August 26—Music, Personal Memory, and the Writer’s Voice
Hornby, Nick. *Songbook*: 11-42 and 63-67;

*WEEK TWO*
August 31—Music, Personal Memory, and the Writer’s Voice (continued)
Weekly response due in class: Write in the first-person voice about a song that means something to you. Inspired by Nick Hornby’s *Songbook*, this assignment asks you to make a connection between music and your personal life beyond music and to experiment doing a close reading of a single song—about 2-3 pp. See assignment sheet for additional details.


September 2—Authenticity, Public Memory, and the Singer’s Voice
In-Class Exercise: Based on your reading about and listening to Lead Belly and Nirvana (see below), we will take time in class 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.

**WEEK THREE**

Weekly response due Monday, 8:00 p.m.: After reading Marcus’s essay, take part in a conversation on the Blackboard Discussion Board on the following:

Did Marcus lead you to see Elvis in different way? Why or why not? Be sure to give an example from the essay.

September 7—The King


September 9—Still The King

[In class: MashUp assignment introduced]

Part II: The Blues and American Memory

**WEEK FOUR**

Weekly Response: due Monday, 8:00 p.m.: After reading the following and listening to Robert Johnson’s songs, send a personal reflection on the following:

Keith Richards, Mick Jaggar, Eric Clapton and the other musicians we’re reading about this week were in their late teens and early twenties when Robert Johnson rocked their world. After listening to Johnson yourself, can you relate to their excitement about him or do you find their passion puzzling? Explain. If not the blues, is there something else that you or other young people today feel passionate about in this way?

September 14—The Blues and Rock: Robert Johnson in Memory


- For lyrics to Robert Johnson’s songs, go to [http://www.theonlineblues.com/robert-johnson.html](http://www.theonlineblues.com/robert-johnson.html)
[In class: thesis-building writing exercise]

September 16— The Blues and Rock: Robert Johnson in Memory (cont.)
   Due in class: practice thesis statement

WEEK FIVE
   Weekly Response due via email Monday, 8:00 p.m.:
   Do the 10-minute (anti-)plagiarism exercise found at
   http://library.acadiau.ca/tutorials/plagiarism/, choosing the character Maiko.
   At the end of the exercise, you’ll see that Maiko paraphrases a document about
   Irish emigration. Type up and turn in Maiko’s two-sentence essay that includes
   her paraphrase of information about Irish emigration.

September 21—
   In class: Discussion of Thesis-Building for “MashUp” essay
   Silvia, Paul J. “A Brief Foray into Style.” In How to Write a Lot (2007): 59-76.

September 23— Women and the Blues
   In class: Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues

WEEK SIX:
   Weekly response due Monday, 8:00 p.m.: Summarize Elijah Wald’s argument in a
   sentence or two.

September 28— 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.

September 30—Writing the Blues in Black and White

   Due in class: Drafts of “MashUp” essay
   [In class: Final paper assignment introduced]
Part III: Gospel and American Memory

WEEK SEVEN

First round of one-on-one conferences about “MashUp” essays held this week

October 5—Sister Rosetta Tharpe


October 7—Resolved: The Blues and Gospel Are Sexist

Weekly Response: Use the following articles to come prepared for in-class debate!

Carby, Hazel. “Introduction” (p. 2) and “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues” (excerpt): 12-22.

(not on e-reserve; copies distributed by BF)


(not on e-reserve; copies distributed by BF)

WEEK EIGHT

Second round of one-on-one conferences about “MashUp” essays held this week

October 12—no class (fall break)

Weekly Response: Come prepared for in-class “fishbowl” discussion, including the following questions:

- What were the building blocks of soul?
- Based on listening to Ray Charles’s music, what did he do to gospel?
- What did soul mean in the 1960s?

October 14—Ray Charles


Due in class:

- Final “MashUp” essay (alternate due date 10/21)
- Indicate your topic choice for the final paper (choose from options provided on assignment sheet)
Part IV: Folk and Folk Revival

WEEK NINE

October 19—CLASS MEETS AT LIBRARY for introduction to library resources (Amy Harris)

Due in class: Final MashUp essay (alternate due date)

Weekly response due Wednesday, 8:00 p.m.:
The Anthology of American Folk Music and its original liner notes are on reserve for you behind the desk at UNCG’s Music Library. After listening in the music library to at least three songs from each of the three volumes of The Anthology of American Folk Music (“Ballads,” “Social Music,” and “Songs”) and reading the corresponding original liner notes, write an Associated Press-style “you are there” newspaper summary (approximately 50-75 words) that journalistically reports the story of one of the songs in the anthology—i.e., give a headline and a short news summary of the event the song describes.

October 21—The Anthology of American Folk Music

WEEK 10

Weekly response due Monday, 8:00 p.m.:
After doing the reading and listening to the Woody Guthrie songs on Blackboard, focus on Dylan’s “Song to Woody” (also on Blackboard). Do a close reading of the song (considering, perhaps, lyrics, sound, vocal style, etc.): how is Dylan paying respect to Guthrie?

October 26—Bob Dylan: Folk Troubadour


October 28—Bob Dylan: Folk Troubadour (continued)
WEEK 11
November 2—“It Ain’t Me Babe”—Bob Dylan: Traitor?

**Due in class: Historical Account**

November 4—Bob Dylan: Still Rolling

*Weekly response due Wednesday, 8:00 p.m.: After listening to Highway 61 Revisited and reading Polizzoti, choose your favorite song other than “Like A Rolling Stone.” Then, using both Polizzoti and your own ears, write a thought piece: What about this song is “old” (i.e., draws on musical roots) and what is new?*

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


Part V: Hip-Hop Samples American Memory

**WEEK 12**

*Due Monday, 9:00 a.m.—i.e., 9:00 in the morning!*

*Alternative lyrics to the song you selected for your final paper*

November 9—Hip-Hop’s Roots

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

*Weekly response due Wednesday, 8:00 p.m.: What question do you feel Keyes answers well? What question of yours does she leave unanswered?*

November 11—Hip-Hop’s Roots


**WEEK 13**

*Weekly response due Monday, 8:00 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 in your response.*

November 16—Hip Hop As Art?

Keyes, Cheryl. “Street Production: The Aesthetics of Style and Performance in the Rap

**Due in class: Thesis paragraph for final paper**

November 18—Hip-Hop Women

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


**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? Do you agree?*

November 23—Hip-Hop As Memory (and Marketing)


November 25—no class (Thanksgiving)

**WEEK 15**

November 30 & December 2—Oral Presentations

December 7: no class ("Reading Day")

Thursday, December 9: final papers due (no final exam)