

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

office hrs.: Tuesdays 1:30-3:00 and by appointment: MHRA (Moore Humanities and Research Administration Building), rm. 2137 (2nd floor)

office phone: 336/334-5645; home phone: 919/932-7722 (call before 10:00 p.m.)

bpfilene@uncg.edu

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

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 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.

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

Hornby, Nick. “Pop Quiz.” *The New Yorker* (August 20, 2001): 4 pp.

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.

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, 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

Marcus, Greil. "Elvis: Presliad." In *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*: 137-157.

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 Jagger, 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

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.

- For lyrics to Robert Johnson's songs, go to <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

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 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)

White, Matthew B. “‘The Blues Ain’t Nothin’ But a Woman Want to Be a Man’: Male Control in Early Twentieth Century Blues Music.” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 24 (1994): 18 pp.

(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

Charles, Ray. “Ray Charles, or, When Saturday Night Mixed It Up with Sunday Morning.” In *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (2009): 87-94.

Wexler, Jerry. “A Life in R&B.” In *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (2009): 94-98.

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**

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 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”

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

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

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, 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

Music Tradition.” In *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*: 122-153.

Due in class: Thesis paragraph for final paper

November 18—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.

Morgan, Marcyliena. “Hip-Hop Women Shredding the Veil. In *The Hip Hop Reader*, Tim Strode and Tim Wood, eds.: 110-116.

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)

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

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

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)