

English 334-001 Critical Approaches to Popular Music

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Course Description

This course will focus on understanding popular music from the perspective of literary, rhetorical, and cultural theories. The course will address close listening for musical elements such as song structure and instrumentation; examine how lyrics operate rhetorically through troping, rhyming, and repeating; think about the relationship between creativity and rhetorical situation; analyze how music connects with an audience rhetorically and affectively; work through the relationship between sub- and fan- culture; theorize the racial and gendered ramifications of musical expression; and discuss the economical and technological mediations that influence music production. Throughout these discussions, the course will emphasize the critical approaches being taken over the particular genres being examined. Early in the semester students will identify an artist or genre that they will examine over the course of the semester using these critical approaches. Toward this end, students will be expected to do the readings diligently, write weekly in response to readings and to music, do a mid-term project with corresponding class presentation, develop an ongoing research approach, and produce a final research paper that critically analyzes a song, album, artist, genre, or scene of their choice.

Texts:

- Andersen, Mark, and Mark Jenkins. *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*. Akashic Press, 2003.
- Bennett, Andy, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, eds. *The Popular Music Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Negus, Keith. *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan U P, 1996.

Course Goals

- To understand and apply theoretical approaches to writing about music.
- To deepen your knowledge of the music you consume and/or produce.
- To develop an extended research process that enhances your ability to write and argue.

Assignments

- Blogging/Participation (20%) – On the first day of class each student will create an account with Motime and sign up for the class blog. I'll give a quick tutorial and we'll make initial posts. Your first entry will identify the genre you will investigate over the semester, why you are interested in it (what is good about it), and why you want to examine it (what you want to get out of the examination). A second blog entry will provide a list of resources you already have on the genre (these could be academic, journalistic, or popular—articles, books, web sites, blogs, Myspace pages, DVDs, etc.). Students will then be expected to post regularly in response to readings (roughly 250-350 words). Prior to each class that involves readings, you should post a response to the blog (specifically think about the theoretical approach used in the article and how that could apply to analyzing your particular genre). Other blogs on more specific topics such as applying critical perspectives to short interpretations of songs, for example, may be assigned as the semester progresses. Participation will also include attendance, short class presentations, and peer reviews of the final paper. Comments on the class blog will count as extra credit. Basic Criteria: All blog/participation grades will be P/F—you do it or you don't.
- Research (20%) – Early in the semester students will have to choose one of three possible approaches to doing research: 1) traditional annotated bibliography; 2) a research blog that tracks other blogs and archives your thoughts and links; 3) a Myspace page that includes blogging and tracks fan culture networks. For the bibliography, you'll need to gather articles and books on your chosen genre over the course of the semester, skim them, and do short initial summary entries. The final version will need to follow MLA format exactly. For the individual research blog, you'll need to post entries on writing ideas, responses to relevant articles, links to web sites, Youtube clips, free downloads, flickr accounts, etc.—anything related to your chosen genre. For the Myspace page, you'll need to develop your profile, post images and videos to your page, blog about your genre and the links/resources you find, and build a network that can be used as a form of fan-based research for your final paper. In Week 3, students will write a one-page statement on their research approach: Identify which option you have chosen and why (what you hope to accomplish with this approach, what you want to track). If you are doing a blog or Myspace page, include a url. If you are doing a traditional bibliography, include a research schedule for yourself—dates for gathering articles and books, target numbers of entries for each date, etc. In Week 14 students will have to turn in the bibliographies or have the blogs/Myspace pages finished so I can begin grading the projects.

Basic criteria:

- Bibliography: 15 entries = C, 20 entries = B, 25 entries = A; the bib will be cut by a letter grade if it has bad/incorrect MLA formats—shoot for 50-70 words on annotations.

- Blog: 15 entries = C, 20 entries = B, 25 entries = A; blog grades will be cut by a letter grade if too many entries are links or one-liners only—shoot for at least 250 words as a minimum.
- Myspace: 10 blogs + 20 friends = C, 15 blogs + 40 friends = B, 20 blogs + 60 friends = A; Myspace grades will be cut by a letter grade if blogs don't address the genre or sub/fan culture—shoot for at least 250 words as a minimum.
- Mid-term Project (20%) – By mid-semester students will have to choose one of three possible approaches for a project: 1) write a short paper/review of a music documentary film or historical book on your chosen genre; 2) do a media project (video, Flash, Powerpoint) that “creates a world” that your genre expresses; 3) write a reader response piece on your experience of a genre and its scene but write it as a creative artist/musician. For the paper/review, you'll need to outline or narrate a history of the genre/scene—its originary moments/events, its key artists/innovators, its core ideas (beliefs, lyrical topics, images), and its distinctive musical styles or components (Dance of Days; American Hardcore; Made in Sheffield). For the media project, you might outline a history, create a montage biography of an artist, or use remix principles discussed and exhibited in the music or videos. In each case you'd use music from the artist or key artists. In addition, write a brief artist statement that explains what you were trying to do in the piece and the thinking that went behind it (Covach; DJ Spooky; Andersen). For the response, follow Hornby's approach by writing brief readings of various songs (maybe a top ten list) or follow Klosterman's model by writing brief vignettes that date your experiences of the scene, music, or live shows. This project could be paper-based or could use media—hypertext, for example (Hornby; Klosterman). What I want you to focus on is that texts and creativity don't happen in a vacuum; they happen in a scene—at least the more successful, long-lasting, and innovative movements have this bottom-up structure. The scene is the context for talking about music, songs, lyrics, and their rhetorical effects.

Basic Criteria:

- Review: 4-5 pages, plus minimal works cited (DVD and any other sources—could be web sources or readings from class).
- Video/Flash: approximately 5 minutes long (could use a single song to “ground” the video); should use combo of moving video clips, still images, and cut in text (intro frame, end credits, etc.) Artist statement should be one-page, single-spaced.
- PPT: 10-12 slides, 8-10 images, obviously include some text, maybe music; “Artist statement” should have a brief blurb to go along with each slide (length will obviously vary).
- Response: 4-5 pages, plus minimal works cited (key text you are emulating and any other sources—could be web sources or readings from class.). For a “top ten” approach include a CD with the songs; for a “key dates/events” approach include a montage flyer for one of the events (real or one you fabricated)—could be in paper or digital form.
- Proposal and Research Paper (40%) – At the end of the semester, students will write a traditional, academic research paper on the genre they have been writing and thinking

about over the semester. You should gather research throughout the semester that includes traditional academic journal articles on the topic/genre, fan-based resources tracked online or obtained through personal interviews, and personal experience (seeing the artists live, participating in the scene, etc). You'll want to then decide what kind of theoretical approach you to take on your genre of choice: musicological, affective, sub-cultural, race-gender, economic, mediation, or some combination that fits your topic. Finally, gather some more research on this particular approach, especially if it is related directly to your genre or artist. The final paper will not just be a cataloging of the research you find but a reading or interpretation that makes an argument about the music or scene, examining the world around it that influences and produces it. For the paper we will follow a basic process in class: you will write a proposal for your idea, do some extra research, do drafts with peer reviews, and submit a final paper.

Basic criteria:

- The paper should be 10-12 pages.
- It should exhibit a clear argument (with claim and support) about your chosen genre, scene, band, album, or song.
- It should have 12-15 quality sources with proper MLA citation formats.

Workshops

Some of the assignments in this course take a “multimodal” approach (see [assignments](#)). This means that you'll have the option to do academic writing, media projects, or creative nonfiction. I assume that students who choose to do media projects will have some technological background, so there will be no time spent in class on technology. If necessary, you should take advantage of the workshops and labs available on campus. Topics, dates, and times for these sessions can be found from the workshop schedules below. The Star Labs have many of the software programs you'll want to work with but also have walk-in peer tutoring. Bring in your materials and they can help you with your projects, questions, or problems.

- [Star Workshop Schedule](http://media.gmu.edu/workshops) <<http://media.gmu.edu/workshops>>
- [IT Training Workshops](http://ittraining.gmu.edu/view.cfm?) <<http://ittraining.gmu.edu/view.cfm?>> (list of all IT workshops, including Star)
- [IRC Workshops](http://www.irc.gmu.edu/wems/workshops/default.cfm) <<http://www.irc.gmu.edu/wems/workshops/default.cfm>>
- [Star Lab JC 229](http://media.gmu.edu/star/starlab.html) <<http://media.gmu.edu/star/starlab.html>> (student mentors help walk-in students)
- [Star*T Lab JC 344](http://media.gmu.edu/start/start.html) <<http://media.gmu.edu/start/start.html>> (open lab if no workshops are being held)
- [Web Star Lab JC 311](http://media.gmu.edu/web/webstar.html) <<http://media.gmu.edu/web/webstar.html>> (also has peer mentors who will help with web development)

Fall for the Book

Each year the English department co-sponsors Fall for the Book (<http://www.fallforthebook.org/>)

a week-long literary festival that brings in a wide array of authors to multiple venues around Northern Virginia. Of interest to us is Mark Anderson, who co-wrote *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* with Mark Jenkins. Anderson will read from the book at George Mason on September 25 from 3:00-4:00 and a band with a connection to the book will play from 4:00-5:00 following the reading. Since this is during class, we will all attend.

Attendance

Each class we will discuss the readings, give presentations, and do short assignments. Consequently, attendance is extremely important and will count towards participation grades. If you stop coming to class, it will be your responsibility to drop. Failure to do so will result in an 'F'.

Office Hours

I will have office hours in Sci-Tech I 105 on T and R from 4:30-6:00. If you need to speak to me and cannot make these times, then ask me to schedule a time that is convenient for both of us. I check my e-mail several times daily, so this will be the best way to contact me in a hurry if you have a question or problem. The only other option is to call and leave a phone message, but I will not receive it immediately.

Grades

Students in English 334 receive a final grade of A+ (4.0), A (4.0), A- (3.67), B+ (3.33), B (3.0), B- (2.67), C+ (2.33), C (2.0), C- (1.67), D (1.0), or F (0.0). The bulk of your grade (80%) will come at the end of the semester with the blogging, research, and final projects (see assignments). This means that you may have a hard time sensing where you stand in the class as it progresses. Best advice is to identify a research topic early; keep up with the blog entries, ongoing research, and class attendance; and make sure that you do a good job on the mid-term. I will not field "how am I doing in this class" questions: only you know whether or not you are keeping up with the work. If you are concerned about your grade over the semester, comments on the class blog will count as extra credit.

Rewrite and Late Policy

Responses to readings need to be posted to the blog before each class (entries are time stamped). Any other blog assignments should be done in class or by the next class period. Since the mid-term is the only primary grade during the semester, I will give you the option to rewrite based on my comments after I return grades. If you are concerned about your overall grade, I recommend this revision. The final paper will be developed over the last few weeks of class, so there should be plenty of time for feedback and revision even though there will be no time to rewrite. The rest of the work will be ongoing with no options for rewrites. Best advice is to not put things off until the end of the semester. You won't be able to get it all done at the last minute. Since the mid-term includes a class presentation, and most of the other main assignments are due at the end of the semester, late papers really won't apply. You'll either do them on time or you won't.

Syllabus

This is a tentative schedule by week for readings, assignments, and activities. Tentative means I can vary it as much as seems appropriate. I will post all additions to the syllabus on this web page. The updated web version will always override the initial printable PDF version. Readings and assignments bulleted under a day should be done before that class period unless otherwise indicated.

Week 1: Introductions

T 26 – in class, go over syllabus and set up blog accounts: after class, write blog entry

- Your first entry will identify the genre you will investigate over the semester, why you are interested in it (what is good about it), and why you want to examine it (what you want to get out of the examination).

R 28 – in class, discuss various genre and criteria for their evaluation: after class, write blog entry

- Your second blog entry will provide a list of resources you already have on the genre (these could be academic, journalistic, or popular—articles, books, web sites, blogs, myspace pages, DVDs, magazines/fanzines, etc.).

Text

Week 2 – Music Principles

T 2 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Robert Walser, “Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances” (*Analyzing Popular Music*)
- Ch. 6 Form (*What to Listen for in Rock*)
- Ch. 7 Analysis (*What to Listen for in Rock*)

Also see:

- PMIG Glossary <http://www.unc.edu/music/pop-analysis/glossary.html>
- Music Analysis (Wikipedia) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_analysis
- Glossary (*What to Listen for in Rock*)

R 4 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Stan Hawkins, “Feel the Beat Come Down: House Music as Rhetoric” (*Analyzing Popular Music*)
- Ch. 1 Middleton, “In the Groove or Blowing Your Mind?” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 1 Rhythm (*What to Listen for in Rock*)

Week 3 – Voice and Lyrics

T 9 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 3 Griffith, “Home is Living Like a Man on the Run” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 4 Bracht, “Family Values in Music?” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 5 Tagg, “Subjectivity and Soundscape, Motorbikes and Music” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

R 11 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry; write one-page statement on research approach: in class, discuss essays, do class activity, turn in statement

- Dai Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-lyric: Analyzing the Words in Pop Songs” (*Analyzing Popular Music*)
- Ch. 37 Smith, “Popular Songs and Comic Allusion in Contemporary Cinema” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Forrest of Rhetoric <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm> (see tropes)
- One page statement on research approach due

Author

Week 4 – Worlding/Creativity

T 16 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- John Covach, “Destructuring Cartesian Dualism in Musical Analysis”
<http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.94.0.11/mto.94.0.11.covach.art>
- John Covach, “Musical Worlds and the Metaphysics of Analysis”
<http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.95.1.1/mto.95.1.1.covach.tlk>
- John Covach, “Pangs of History in late 1970s New-wave Rock” (*Analyzing Popular Music*)

Also see:

- Keith Hill and Marianne Ploger, “The Craft of Musical Communication”
<http://www.musicalratio.com/aboutthecraft.html>

R 18 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- DJ Spooky, “In Through the Out Door: Sampling and the Creative Act” (*Sound Unbound*)
- Jonathan Lethem, “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism Mosaic” (*Sound Unbound*)
- Ken Jordan and DJ Spooky, “Freeze Frame: Audio, Aesthetics, Sampling, and Contemporary Multimedia” (*Sound Unbound*)

Also see:

- Ch. 8 Toynbee, “Making up and Showing Off: What Musicians Do” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 9 Reynolds, “War in the Jungle” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Week 5 – Documenting Scenes

T 23 – before class, read first half of book below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss book, do class activity

- *Dance of Days* (first half)

R 25 – before class, read first half of book below: in class, attend Andersen talk; after class, blog on the talk

- *Dance of Days* (second half)
- Fall for the Book: Dance of Days/DC Punk event with Mark Andersen from 3 to 4. A band with a connection to the book will play from 4 to 5, following Mark's reading.

Mid-term Project

Week 6 – Histories, Presentations

T 30 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, make a final decision on your mid-term projects, sign up for presentation time

- Ch. 5 Histories (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Nick Hornby, *Song Book* (short cuts)
- Chuck Klosterman, *Fargo Rock City* (short cuts)
- Ch. 16 Denora, “Music and Self-Identity” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Also see:

- Robert Miklitsch, “Rock 'N' Theory: Autobiography, Cultural Studies, and the ‘Death of Rock’” <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.199/9.2miklitsch.txt>

R 2 – presentations (proposal of project/feedback)

Week 7 – Presentations

T 7 – presentations (drafts of project/feedback)

R 9 – Mid-terms due (final presentations of projects)

Audience

Week 8 – Affect, Reception

T 14 – No class: Columbus Day (Tuesday classes don’t meet; Monday classes meet on Tuesday)

R 16 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 1 Audiences (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Ch. 17 Bull, “Filmic Cities” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- J. Bottum, “The Soundtracking of America.”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/03/bottum.htm>
- Keith Hill and Marianne Ploger, “On Affect.”
<http://www.musicalratio.com/on affect.html>

Also see:

- Ch. 18 Lanza, “Beautiful Music” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Week 9 – Sub/Fan Culture

T 21 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 11 Thornton, “Understanding Hipness” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 12 Bennett, “Subcultures or Neo-Tribes?” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 13 Shank, “Punk Rock at Raul’s” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Also see:

- Ch. 14 Tsitos, “Rules of Rebellion” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

- Ch. 15 Kahn-Hanis, “Roots” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

R 23 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 40 Gottlieb and Wald, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” *Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 41 Fast, “Rethinking Issues of Gender and Sexuality in Led Zeppelin” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 42 Pini, “Women and the Early British Rave Scene” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Perlman, Marc. “Idioculture: De-Massifying the Popular Music Audience.” <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.993/review-7.993>

Also see:

- Ch. 43 Smith, “Housewives’ Choice” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

World

Week 10 – Gender, Race

T 28 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 4 Identities (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Ch. 6 Echols, “Little Girl Blue” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 39 Bayton, “Women Making Music” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Also see:

- Ch. 2 McClary, “This is Not a Story My People Tell” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

R 30 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 7 Waksman, “Black Sound, Black Body” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 20 Gilroy, “Jewels Brought from Bondage” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 25 Rose, “Voices from the Margins” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Also see:

- Ch. 23 Hug, “Asian Kool?” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 24 Simmot, “Technobanda and the Politics of Identity” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Week 11 – Industry, Technology

T 4 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 2 Industry (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Ch. 28 Hesmondhalgh, “The British Dance Music Industry” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 29 Power and Hallencreutz, “Profiting from Creativity?” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Steve Albini, “The Problem with Music.” <http://www.negativland.com/albini.html>
- David Byrne, “David Byrne's Survival Strategies for Emerging Artists—and Megastars.” http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/magazine/16-01/ff_byrne?currentPage=all

Also see:

- Ch. 6 Geographies (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Ch. 26 Frith, “The Industrialization of Music” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 27 Kraft, “Musicians in Hollywood” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

R 6 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 10 Auslander, “Liveness” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 30 Altman, “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 31 Goodwin, “Rationalization and Democratization in the New Technologies of Popular Music” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 32 Theberge, “Music/Technology/Practice” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Also see:

- Ch. 33 Eshun (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

Week 12 – Mediation

T 11 – before class, read essays below and do a blog entry: in class, discuss essays, do class activity

- Ch. 3 Mediations (*Popular Music in Theory*)
- Ch. 36 Hanke, “Yo Quiero mi MTV” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)
- Ch. 38 Laing, “Anglo-American Music Journalism” (*Popular Music Studies Reader*)

- Brian Dillon, “Jim DeRogatis : Paul Morley : Let It Blurt : Nothing : Critical Mass.” *Spike Magazine*. <http://www.spikemagazine.com/0600bangsandmorley.php>
- David Hesmondhalgh, “Rock History and Visual Culture.” <http://flowtv.org/?p=1160>

R 13 – before class, think about your topic for the final paper and do a blog entry on your basic idea: in class, watch video, discuss how it puts into practice many issues discussed over the semester

- *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. Dir. Byron Hurt. PPS/Independent Lens, 2007.
- Full episode: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2020029531334253002&q=&hl=en>
- Web site: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/film.htm>

Final Research Project

Week 13 – Proposals, Research

T 18 – before class, write a proposal for your final argument/research paper, include the sources you have so far; in class, turn in proposals and discuss topics/arguments

R 20 – before class, work on research; in class, open lab to do database searches, I will be there to give feedback on research and topics

Week 14 – Drafts, Research

T 25 – before class, write a rough draft of your paper and include your initial works cited, finish your research assignments; in class, research projects due (turn in full annotated bib, finish any work on blogs or Myspace pages, I will start grading), do initial peer review of drafts

R 27 – No Class – Thanksgiving

Week 15 – Final Research Papers

T 2 – before class, produce a final draft of your paper; in class, do peer reviews

R 4 – Final papers due, teacher evals