

Comparative Studies 336 Cultural Studies of American Musics

Rationale for GEC Visual and Performing Arts Category and Assessment Plan for the Course

Course Description

Comparative Studies 336 currently fulfills the GEC Arts and Humanities: Cultures and Ideas category. We are proposing here that the course instead fulfill the Visual/Performing Arts requirement. We propose that change in status because, in addition to its social, cultural and political contextualization of popular music, the course develops students' listening and interpretive skills, as well as their appreciation of significant forms of artistic expression.

This course offers an in-depth analysis of significant moments in the history of American popular music. Students are required to develop analytical abilities that enable them to listen carefully and to identify key musicological developments, aesthetic strategies, and signs of social and political significance in selected genres and subcultures of American popular music. Particular emphasis is placed on elements of race, gender, sexuality, technology, commodification, and power as they are performed and represented in and through the codes of popular music.

The class begins with a unit on cultural musicology. This approach, which draws from ethnomusicology, popular music studies, and cultural studies as well as traditional musicology, encourages students to listen for the encoded social and cultural meanings performed in musical sound. Cultural musicology focuses on the conventions that define particular genres along with the social contexts within which those conventions became popular. Much in-class time is devoted to careful listening and the aural identification of generic conventions.

The second unit provides an opportunity to practice those listening skills through a backwards historical journey from Chicago blues styles to Mississippi delta blues styles to "classic" blues, ragtime, vaudeville and, eventually, blackface minstrelsy. The volatile role of race in the development, propagation and commercial exploitation of popular music is contextualized historically in the Jim Crow period from the end of Reconstruction to World War II.

Those units are followed by a series of case studies that engage musical styles developed after WWII. Examples of these case studies include the development of rock'n'roll, the folk revival, the rise of "new" country, disco, hip-hop, punk, riot grrrl, and electronica/rave music. Each of these case studies is based on academic analyses that demonstrate the close links between popular music conventions and social and political developments. Examinations provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the skills they have developed in the social and cultural analysis of popular music styles of the 20th century.

General goals of the GEC Arts and Humanities, Analysis of Texts and Works of Art requirements:

- Aesthetic and historical response and judgment: Students consider the historical development of a range of popular music genres as these affect and are affected by social, political, and economic conditions.

- Interpretation and evaluation: Students learn about the methods used in musicological, ethnomusicological, and cultural studies approaches to the interpretation and evaluation of popular music genres.
- Critical listening, reading, seeing, thinking, and writing: Students become active and critical listeners and learn to analyze popular music performances in a series of writing assignments.
- Experiencing the arts and reflecting on that experience: Students learn to be active listeners to a range of popular music genres and to analyze their own experiences in light of that experience.

General learning objectives of the GEC Arts and Humanities, Analysis of Texts and Works of Art requirements:

- To have direct contact with major forms of human thought and expression as distinctive and as interrelated cultural phenomena, and to nurture informed responsiveness to them and heightened participation in them. Students learn to actively listen to a range of popular music genres of the 20th century.
- To acquire a perspective on human history and an understanding of the force of the past in shaping human activity. Such a perspective should enable a student to examine the present cross-culturally and cross-temporally; to view cultural phenomena in context; and to be aware of human interaction with the material world. Students learn to examine critically the relationships between popular music production and changing social, political, and cultural contexts.
- To develop a capacity to comprehend and evaluate critically the personal and social values of one's own world as compared with those of other communities in time and space. Students are encouraged to examine the ways in which their own values and perspectives are shaped by various popular music genres.
- To contribute to a student's sense of social and cultural diversity and sensitivity to problems of inequity and of individual similarity and difference (e.g., race, color, gender, ethnicity, religion, and class). The course emphasizes the ways in which different forms of popular music may disrupt or reinforce stereotypical thinking about social and cultural differences.
- To examine the cultures of major regions of the world and through such study to develop international and global perspectives. This course focuses on American popular music with some attention to diasporic influences.
- To contribute to a student's understanding of the foundations of human beliefs, the nature of reality, and the norms which guide human behavior. Students analyze the ways in which popular music plays an important role in shaping values and beliefs in American society.
- To learn to appreciate and interpret significant writings (e.g., literary, philosophical, or religious). The focus of this course is on becoming critical listeners and knowledgeable

interpreters of popular musics. Students read a variety of critical essays about the history and production of American popular music.

- To develop abilities to be an enlightened observer or an active participant in a discipline within the visual, spatial, musical, theatrical, rhetorical, or written arts. Students are encouraged to become lifelong analysts and critics of the musical world that surrounds them and to understand the role music place in shaping their own values and beliefs.

Assessment plan for the course:

Assessment is embedded in the grading criteria for the assignments; that is, assignments will be evaluated based on the goals and objectives of the course. Specifically, the course will evaluate whether students' written and oral assignments indicate that they have learned to

- write and speak with clarity and precision so as to advance thoughts and arguments coherently and persuasively
- engage in critical analysis of American popular music genres in social, cultural, and political contexts
- understand research methods used in the fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies
- achieve an understanding of and develop an appreciation for ethnic, gender, racial, and class differences as these are expressed in American popular musics
- appreciate the role of popular music in shaping their own cultural values and beliefs

The instructor will assess the degree to which the main objectives of the course, as stated above, have been achieved in the various course assignments. In particular, the assessment will focus on students' ability to express a critical understanding of the development of American popular music genres in relation to diversity in the United States. The assessment will also focus on students interpretation and appreciation of popular music.

In addition, students will be asked to fill out narrative evaluations at the end of the quarter. Narrative evaluation forms used in Comparative Studies ask detailed questions regarding the effectiveness of the course, including the teaching materials. Based on the comments of the students, but also including the instructor's assessment of the course (which includes an evaluation of the materials and pedagogy employed to reach the objectives of the course), appropriate changes will be made to the syllabus.