

Comparative Studies 336 Cultural Studies in American Popular Music
Fall, 2003
University Hall 38
M/W 1:30-3:18

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Office Hours: Tuesday, 10-12; Wednesday, 3:30-5:30
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Course Description:

This course relies on the appeal of popular music to engage lower division undergraduates in the critical analysis of commercial cultural production in a multiply fragmented society. Students should come away from this class having developed skills of critical listening and thinking that allow them to trace musical influences through and across historical periods and musical genres, to understand the impact of systems of reproduction, communication, commodification and commercialization on the construction of the popular, to analyze the musical production of embodied identities (especially the production of gender, sexuality and race), and to discuss the social and political grounds of musical pleasure.

This course is constructed as a set of case studies that provide students with the opportunity to develop and practice the critical skills and knowledge listed above. We will spend the first four weeks developing our analytical model. Our detailed case studies begin with a discussion the music of Motown and the sounds of southern soul as evidence for some of the struggles that took place during the Civil Rights Movement. We will spend a week discussing myths of the sixties as part of our focus on the life and career of Janis Joplin. We will investigate not only her music, but also the social and cultural context within which that music was produced. Continuing our focus on gender, we'll spend a week examining punk and post punk transformations in masculinity and femininity. The final case study will focus on the story of Tupac Shakur and the significance of hip hop. At the end of the quarter, students will have the opportunity to make a group presentation to the class on an approved and appropriate topic that will demonstrate their skills of musical and cultural analysis.

In addition to the required reading there will be required listening. Song lists will be distributed. Tapes of these songs will be available at the Main Library Reserves.

Evaluation:

Three open book exams (including the final)— 25% each for a total of 75%
One group in-class presentation—20%
Overall class participation—5%

Textbooks: Available at SBX Bookstore

Simon Frith, et al, eds. The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock

Alice Echols, Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin Owl Books, 2000

Michael Eric Dyson, Holler if you Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur

Plus a course pack.

Detailed Syllabus:

September 24: Introduction to Course

Week One:

September 29: Popular Music and Cultural Meaning I

Required Reading: Theodor Adorno, "On Popular Music," Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," Susan McClary and Rob Walser, "Start Making Sense." All in course pack.

October 1: Popular Music and Cultural Meaning II

Required Reading: Frith, "Pop Music," Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," Middleton, Pop, Rock and Interpretation," all in Cambridge Companion

Week Two:

October 6: Popular Music and Cultural Meaning III

Required Reading: Cohen, "Popular Music, Gender and Sexuality," in Cambridge Companion; Holly Kruse, "Gender," Norma Coates, "@Evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender," in course pack.

October 8: Popular Music and Cultural Meaning IV

Shank, "From Rice to Ice," in Cambridge Companion; Mark Anthony Neal, "A Soul Baby in Real Time," Paul Gilroy, "Analogues of Mourning, Mourning the Analog," in course pack.

Week Three:

October 13: Popular Music and Cultural Meaning V

Required Reading: Frith, "The Popular Music Industry," Straw, "Consumption" in Cambridge Companion.

October 15:

Required Reading: None

First Exam

Week Four: Motown

Required Reading for the Week: Gerald Early, "One Nation Under a Groove [READER]; "James Brown" and "Marvin Gaye" in Cambridge Companion

October 20: Film: “Standing in the Shadows of Motown”

October 22: The Cultural Meaning of Motown

Week Five: Required Reading: “The Beatles,” “Bob Dylan,” “Jimi Hendrix,” “The Rolling Stones,” in Cambridge Companion; Lester Bangs, “Of Pop and Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review, or, Who’s the Fool?” in READER; start Alice Echols, Scars of Sweet Paradise

October 27: Myths of the Sixties I: Folk Revival to Electric Dylan (scenes from “Don’t Look Back”)

October 29: Myths of the Sixties II: Garage Rock to Psychedelia, not missing the Stooges and the Velvets.

Week Six: Required Reading: finish Alice Echols, Scars of Sweet Paradise

November 3: Film “Gimme Shelter”

November 5: Janis Joplin, white blues, and feminine identity in popular music

Week Seven: (after the exam, think about getting ahead on your reading.)

November 10: Open book exam II

November 12: Film: “Decline of Western Civilization”

Week Eight: Rethinking (white) Gender and Sexuality in the 90s

November 17: Messing with Masculinity

Required Reading: Michael Azerrad, “Black Flag,” “Mudhoney,” “Beat Happening;” Tony Grajeda, “The ‘Feminization’ of Rock” [READER]

November 19: Riot Grrrls and Other Alternatives

Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, “Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock,” “‘Rebel Girl, You are the Queen of My World’: Feminism, ‘Subculture’ and Grrrl Power,” Kathleen Hanna, “On Not Playing Dead,” [READER]

Week Nine: Required Reading: Tricia Rose, “Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music,” pp.62-96 in Black Noise [READER]; Michael Eric Dyson, Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur

November 24: Discussion of Dyson’s take on Shakur

November 26: Group Presentations I

Week Ten: Fandom, Scenes, Contemporary Identity
Dec 1: Group Presentations II

Dec 3: Group Presentations III

Final Exam