

Communication 3653
Popular Forms of Public Communication:
Popular Music and Popular Culture
Spring 1996

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Office Hours: Tu, Th 2-3 pm and by appointment

This semester, Communication 3653 will focus on the subject of popular music, including rock 'n' roll, rhythm 'n' blues, soul, disco, punk, rap, grunge, and the like. Perhaps the best way to explain what this course is about, however, is to say a few words about what it *isn't*:

(1) This is not a history course. Any serious attempt to map out all the major trends, artists, genres, and events in the past half century of Anglo-American popular music would require at least a semester, but could accomplish very little else in that time.

(2) This is not a music appreciation course. My goal is not to demonstrate that rock and roll (or rap, or speed metal, etc.) is somehow the aesthetic equal of chamber music, opera, or other types of "classical" music, nor am I interested in "training" you to be a connoisseur of a particular musical style.

(3) This is not a course in music theory. Musicological jargon can be found in the readings, but only on rare occasions, and failing to know the difference between be-bop and a B-flat should not prevent anyone from doing well.

While all three of these concerns -- history, aesthetics, and analysis -- *will* crop up in important ways during the semester, the course's primary focus is on the politics of (popular) culture and public (i.e., mediated) communication: What is culture? How is it related to *popular* culture? Of what value is popular culture -- and to whom is it valuable? And why should we study this popular culture stuff anyway? Bear in mind, however, that few (if any) of the questions we'll address this semester have easy answers. How well you do in this class will depend, not on your ability to provide the "right" answers, but on your ability to think *critically* about the role of popular music (and, by extension, other forms of popular culture) in contemporary society and your ability to *argue* whatever position(s) you take well.

Important caveat: Do not think that because this is a course in popular music (i.e., something commonly regarded as fun) that it will thus be a "party" course you can blow off. While I hope the course will be interesting (and even fun), the fact that so many people can (and do) take pleasure in this music is what makes it important enough for us to take seriously. The bulk of the course is ostensibly concerned with the ways in which popular music is made, distributed, and used, but our study of popular music is *not* an end unto itself; rather it is a means by which we can begin to address broader issues of culture and cultural politics. This course will demand a great deal of reading, writing, and (most importantly) thinking on your part, none of which will go smoothly for you if you assume that you can simply bull your way through because "it's only rock and roll."

Required course materials:

(1) Photocopied essays

A coursepack containing all the required reading for the semester can be purchased at Staples (1401 E. Fowler). A copy of this packet will also be placed on reserve in the USF Library.

(2) An e-mail account

Participation in the listserv (POPFORMS-L) that has been set up for this course will require you to have (and use) an e-mail account. For those of you who don't already have an e-mail account, information on how to sign up for one is available on a separate handout.

(3) Music, music, and more music

Because there isn't enough class time to play all the musical examples relevant to the course and still hold fruitful discussions, I will be placing nine 100-minute audio-cassettes on reserve in the University Media Center (on the 6th floor of the Library). The basic idea here is to make sure that everyone in the class is familiar with a certain slice of post-war popular music. These tapes are by no means a definitive anthology of all the important music or artists of the past 50 years. In fact, many of the most influential artists are *under-represented*, as I'm assuming that most of you have been exposed to them at least briefly. Instead, these tapes contain a number of important examples of various artists and styles that even the most ardent music fan among you may be unfamiliar with.

Grading schedule:

One (1) 3-4 page response paper	10%
Midterm exam	30%
Final exam	30%
Listserv participation	15%
Attendance/participation	15%

Response paper:

You will write one 3-4 page paper, which will be a *critical response* to one or more of the assigned readings for the course. The due dates here are (somewhat) flexible. Your paper must be written in response to material covered in sections 4-9 (i.e., from February 13 through April 25), and you must turn in your essay before we've discussed the reading in question in class. Further details about this assignment will be made available on a separate handout.

Exams:

The midterm will be given in class on **March 7**. Barring verifiable emergencies of the highest order, there will be *no* make-up version of this exam. The final will be a take-home exam due on **April 30**. Both exams will consist entirely of *long essay* questions and will be based on the readings, lectures, and in-class discussions. The final *will* be cumulative.

Listserv participation:

The primary purpose of this list is to provide an ongoing informal forum for discussion of the issues raised by the assigned readings and our class sessions. Prompts intended to spur on the dialogue will be posted on a semi-regular basis.

Because listservs tend to be somewhat freeform in nature, there is no neat and simple formula for me to use in assessing grades for this aspect of the course. The *minimum* contribution to receive a *passing* grade, however, will be five substantial (i.e., more than a paragraph long) posts addressing material from five different sections of the syllabus.

- To *join* the list, send an e-mail message consisting of **subscribe POPFORMS-L your-firstname your-lastname** to **LISTSERV@nosferatu.cas.usf.edu**
- To *post* to the list, send an e-mail message to **POPFORMS-L@nosferatu.cas.usf.edu**

Additional information about the list and how to use it will be sent to you when you subscribe.

Attendance/participation/pop quizzes:

This course is geared towards in-class discussions, although there will be days when I lecture extensively. It will thus be more enjoyable for all of us (and you'll do better) if you (1) attend class regularly, (2) do the required reading and (3) be prepared to discuss what we've read in class. Consistently lackluster discussions will force me to take drastic measures (i.e., pop quizzes) to assure me that y'all are doing the required work. In the event quizzes become necessary, final grades will be calculated on a revised schedule:

Response paper	10%
Midterm exam	30%
Final exam	30%
Listserv participation	7.5%
Attendance/participation	7.5%
Pop quiz(zes)	15%

Barring the scenario described above, failure to participate in class discussions will not directly hurt your grade (i.e., I will not automatically penalize students who don't speak up in class) . . . but contributing to discussions regularly and thoughtfully *will* help boost your grade. I will take attendance on an irregular basis and points will be awarded to (or subtracted from) your final grade appropriately.

TEN TIPS ON HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS COURSE

- (1) Read your syllabus and assignment handouts.** Aside from telling you what to read (or listen to) and when you need to do so, these documents contain the basic ground rules by which this course works. And while, under exceptional circumstances (e.g., life and death emergencies), I may be willing to bend some of these rules, ignorance of the rules on your part isn't one of them.
- (2) Read and listen to the required course materials as scheduled.** This should be self-explanatory. But to drive the point home: *everything* you'll do for a grade this semester depends on your having thoughtfully consumed readings and/or music listed on the syllabus.
- (3) Think about what you read and listen to.** None of the material for this course is intended to be consumed passively. If you're *only* reading or listening to absorb "facts" or to be entertained, you will not do well. And while you're certainly allowed (and even encouraged) to learn new facts and have fun, it's more crucial that you approach the assignments in a critical and thoughtful fashion.
- (4) Attend class.** Not just because I'll take attendance irregularly, but because our discussions will raise questions about the material at hand that won't always be obvious from the readings alone. Our class periods will be spent discussing (and often arguing about) the readings, *not* summarizing them. You can expect issues raised in class to be on the exams.
- (5) Come to class prepared to discuss the readings.** Think about what the readings are trying to say and then share those thoughts with the class. Even if you don't understand a given article, feel free to ask questions about it. Not all of these readings are easy: if you're confused, it's likely other people are as well. The more people who participate in our discussions, the more we'll all get out of them.
- (6) Write clearly.** This is not a remedial writing class, so you aren't guaranteed a good grade on your papers, your listserv posts, or your exams merely by constructing grammatical sentences made up of properly spelled words. Nevertheless, if your grammar (or spelling or punctuation) interferes with my ability to understand what you're trying to say, your grade *will* be negatively affected.
- (7) Argue your points.** Do not merely assert them. For example, simply saying that you think that Madonna is obscene is far less convincing (and receives far less credit) than explaining *why* you think she's obscene. On a related note, avoid using terms like "obviously," "clearly," and "of course." In most cases, if you have to say something is "obvious," it isn't obvious at all.
- (8) Argue your points well.** Make sure the facts support your case. Avoid sweeping generalizations. And, perhaps most importantly, anticipate potential counter-arguments to your position -- *especially* if your argument runs contrary to ideas we've already covered in the course. You *don't* have to agree with any of the authors we'll read, but if you take a contrary position to an argument made in the assigned course material, you *do* have to explain *why* you're right and the reading in question is wrong.
- (9) See me as necessary.** If you don't understand why you received a given grade, or if the reading has you baffled, or if you just want to chat about the new Liz Phair album (or some such), come talk to me during my office hours, or make appointments to meet with me at some other time.
- (10) Think ahead.** The chances of my accepting late work without penalizing you improve dramatically with advance notice *and* a reasonable justification for the anticipated delay. Similarly, do *not* wait until the night before the exam to catch up on all the reading. This is not a course where simple rote memorization of names and dates will earn you an acceptable grade. Bear in mind that the semester will go faster than you think and plan accordingly.

WARNING: The opinions expressed in the readings do not necessarily reflect those of the instructor. Just because a given essay is part of this course does not mean the instructor agrees with it. In other words, THINK about what you're reading, don't just absorb it.

0: Introduction and Overview

Jan 9 no readings

1: Theorizing Music

Jan 11 Katz, "Rock, Rap and Movies Bring You the News"
Middleton, "What Is Popular Music?"

Jan 16 Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication"

Jan 18 Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music"
McClary & Walser, "Start Making Sense"
Pareles, "Meaning Is in the Ears of the Beholder"

Jan 23 Shuker, "Pushin' Too Hard"

Jan 25 Marcus, "Notes on Life and Death and the Incandescent Banality of Rock 'n' Roll"
Grossberg, "Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care?"

2: Historicizing Music

Jan 30 Ventura, "Hear That Long Snake Moan"

Feb 1 Jarrett, "Concerning the Progress of Rock & Roll"

3: Selling Music

Feb 6 Frith, "Video Pop"

Feb 8 Newcomb & Palmeri, "What's Not to Love?"
Musician, special report on music business

4: Owing Music

- Feb 13 Wallis and Malm, "Patterns of Change"
Laing, "The Music Industry and the 'Cultural Imperialism' Thesis"
- Feb 15 Goodwin, "Sample and Hold"
Pareles, "In Pop, Whose Song Is It, Anyway?"
Wyman, "The Big Sample"
- Feb 20 Negativland, *Fair Use* [selections]

5: Watching Music

- Feb 22 Levy, "Ad Nauseam"
Acland, "Look What They're Doing on TV!"
- Feb 27 Goodwin, "From Anarchy to Chromakey"
- Feb 29 Frith, "Making Sense of Video"
Hill, "Inside MTV"
- Mar 5 review for midterm
- Mar 7 **MIDTERM**
- Mar 12 **SPRING BREAK -- NO CLASS**
- Mar 14 **SPRING BREAK -- NO CLASS**

6: Music and Race

- Mar 19 Wood, "Who Says a White Band Can't Play Rap?"
Rodman, "A Hero to Most?"
- Mar 21 Walser, "Clamor and Community"
Rose, "Fear of a Black Planet"
- Mar 26 hooks, "madonna: plantation mistress or soul sister?"
Dyson, "Mariah Carey and 'Authentic' Black Music"
Wood, "Niggers, Negroes, Blacks, Niggaz, and Africans"

7: Music and Gender

- Mar 28 Mifflin, "The Fallacy of Feminism in Rock"
Cline, "Little Songs of Misogyny"
Twersky, "Why *Bitch*?"
Johnson-Grau, "Dreams That Poison Sleep"
McNeil, "Sinead"
- Apr 2 Garratt, "Teenage Dreams"
Wise, "Sexing Elvis"
- Apr 4 Williamson, "The Making of a Material Girl"
McClary, "Living to Tell"
Henderson, "Justify Our Love"

8: Music and Youth

- Apr 9 Hebdige, "Hiding in the Light"
- Apr 11 McClary, "Same As It Ever Was"
Solatoroff, "Subliminal Criminals"
American Medical Association, "Statement of Concern"
Brown and Hendee, "Adolescents and Their Music"
Committee on Communications, "Impact of Rock Lyrics and Music Videos on Children and Youth"
- Apr 16 Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* [selections]

9: Music and Censorship

- Apr 18 Bloom, "Music"
Goldman, "That Old Devil Music"
Altman, "Let's Stop Crying Wolf on Censorship"
Raspberry, "Common Sense Should Win Over Rights When Rappers Spew Filth"
- Apr 23 Mauer, "Letter of Resignation"
McDonald, "Censoring Rock Lyrics"
Marsh, "Perception: Protection -- Reality: Censorship"
- Apr 25 Udovitch, "Body of Evidence"
Aletti, "Put Your Hands All Over My Body"
Champaign Public Library and Information Center press releases re: *Sex*
Jones, "The Signifying Monkees"
Dyson, "Gangsta Rap and American Culture"
- Apr 30 **TAKE-HOME FINAL DUE**

NAME:
HOME TOWN:

AGE:
MAJOR:

What were the *last* three records/tapes/CDs you purchased?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

What are your *favorite* three records/tapes/CDs of those you've acquired in the past year?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

What are your three favorite genres of popular music?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

What are your three *least* favorite genres of popular music?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

What (if any) are the three main print sources you turn to for news and information on popular music?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

In order of preference, what local radio station(s) do you listen to?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

In order of preference, what local retail outlet(s) do you usually shop for music at?

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

In the pre-CD era, they were called "record stores." In the soon-to-be (already here?) post-vinyl age, what should we call them?

Do you own . . .

- . . . a portable stereo system [e.g., a “boombox”]? _____
- . . . a “walk-person”? _____
- . . . a record player/turntable? _____
- . . . a cassette player/recorder? _____
- . . . a CD player? _____
- . . . a DAT player? _____
- . . . a mini-disc player? _____
- . . . a television? _____
- . . . a VCR? _____
- . . . other? [please specify: _____] _____

On average . . .

- . . . how many records/cassettes/CDs do you buy each month? _____
- . . . how often do you go to concerts/live-music-clubs each month? _____
- . . . how often do you visit dance clubs each month? _____
- . . . how many hours of music videos do you watch each week? _____

What *one* song, album, or artist would you use to try to explain your favorite genre of music to a stranger . . . and (this is the tough part, of course) why do you think that particular song, artist, or album captures the essence of the genre in question?