

Communication and popular music

Topics in speech communication

W 6:00-9:00p / 315 Nicholson

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Comm 3110-003

Spring 2007

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Course description and objectives

Popular music -- from hip-hop to hard rock, from country to techno -- is an important source of pleasure in many people's daily lives, but it's much more than just entertainment. Music is also a form of cultural expression deeply intertwined with a host of social, cultural, and political issues that can't simply be reduced to questions of taste or aesthetics. As such, our primary focus this semester will be on the cultural politics of popular music. In particular, we will focus on a range of critical and analytical concerns related to the production, distribution, consumption, circulation, and regulation of popular music.

You may be tempted to think that, because we'll spend the semester studying something commonly regarded as "fun," this will be a "party" course that you can coast through effortlessly. While I hope the course will be interesting (and even fun), it will also demand a great deal of work on your part, none of which will go smoothly if you try to simply bull your way through because it's "just entertainment." Please also bear in mind that few (if any) of the questions we'll address this semester have easy answers. How well you do in this class will depend on your ability to think critically about the role of popular music in contemporary society and your ability to argue your position(s) well.

Grading

Final course grades will be calculated using the following schedule:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Attendance/participation | 20% |
| Reading journal (10 entries @ 2% each) | 20% |
| Group research project | 60% |

Final grade point totals will translate to letter grades as follows:

| | | | | | | | |
|----|--------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| A | 93-100 | B | 83-86 | C | 73-76 | D | 63-66 |
| A- | 90-92 | B- | 80-82 | C- | 70-72 | D- | 60-62 |
| B+ | 87-89 | C+ | 77-79 | D+ | 67-69 | F | 0-59 |

- "S/N" grades will only be given to students who have registered for the course on an S/N basis.
- "I" grades will only be given under extraordinary circumstances (i.e., major life emergencies).

Attendance/participation

I will take attendance every time we meet. Unexcused absences, late arrivals, and early departures will all affect your grade. In general, the only absences that will count as "excused" are those resulting from:

- major life emergencies (with suitable documentation (hospital receipts, funeral notices, etc.)) or
- major religious holidays (with written notice presented at least a week in advance).

Our class meetings will primarily be structured around discussions. As such, this is not a course that will reward passive spectators, and you will be expected to make significant contributions to our discussions -- both in class and online -- on a regular basis. Ideally, you should aim to:

- attend all required class meetings (this includes arriving on time and staying until the end),
- make at least one significant contribution to our in-class discussions every time we meet, and
- contribute roughly 200 words of productive commentary to our online discussions every week.

Meeting all the goals above will earn you an A for attendance/participation. Should you fall short in one of these areas, you can make up for it with extra work in one of the others . . . but bear in mind that:

- In-class presence matters. If you miss a class, you should contribute more extensively to our online discussions immediately thereafter.
- Consistent effort counts. All other things being equal, 100 blog-words/week for 15 weeks will serve you better than 1500 blog-words in one massive post.
- Quality counts. A brilliant and insightful 100-word blog post will typically be worth more than a mediocre 300-word post.
- “Fluff” doesn’t count. I reserve the right to penalize people who make repeated and obvious efforts to boost their grade with off-topic comments and/or “padded” blog posts.

Written assignments: general rules

(a) Where/how to submit assignments. All written assignments must be submitted in both printed and digital versions, and the text of each version must be identical.

- Printed versions should be double-spaced and stapled (do not use plastic covers/binders).
- Digital versions should be e-mailed to rodman@umn.edu as file attachments.
- Acceptable digital formats are OpenOffice, WordPerfect, Word, RTF, PDF, HTML, and plaintext.
- I will not print out hard copies of digital submissions, and so you will not receive written feedback unless you submit both versions.
- If you submit printed versions of assignments outside of class, either hand such work directly to me or place it in my campus mailbox in 250 Ford. Do not submit work under my office door.

(b) Deadlines. At least one -- and preferably both -- versions of any assignment must be submitted by 6:00 pm on the relevant due date. If you submit only one of the required versions on time, you have until 11:00 am the next day to submit the other version before grade penalties are assessed. The minimum penalty in all such cases will be one full letter grade deducted from that assignment’s grade.

(c) Grammar/spelling/etc. Grades for written assignments will be based primarily on content, rather than form: insightful, smartly argued essays that contain a few spelling errors will almost always receive higher grades than grammatically flawless papers that have weak arguments. Nonetheless, grammar, spelling, and style still matter to the effective presentation of a strong argument, and assignments suffering from significant “form” problems will be penalized accordingly.

Reading journals

You must turn in at least ten short (~250 word) journals, each of which offers a thoughtful response to a different assigned reading. Each journal is due at the start of the class period for which the reading in question is assigned. Further details about this assignment are available on a separate handout.

Group research project

Your major assignment for this course is a group research project that will culminate in an annotated reading list for a hypothetical course on “Communication and Popular Music.” The final version of this project is due by 6:00 pm on 9 May. There are several mandatory intermediate deadlines (14 Feb, 7 Mar, 11 Apr) that will help you complete this project in a timely and satisfactory fashion. Further details about this assignment are available on a separate handout.

Course blog

In addition to our face-to-face meetings, we will conduct a significant amount of discussion and course business online via a course blog. A partial list of the ways we will use the course blog includes:

- graded discussions of assigned readings and other issues related to the theme of the course,
- occasional “virtual lectures” designed to stimulate (additional) online discussion, and
- course-related business announcements.

Full details on how to access and contribute to the blog are available on a separate handout.

Academic integrity

The following is a *partial* list of major examples of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism in any of its forms,
- copying assignments (in whole or in part) written by other students,
- having someone else research and/or write substantial portions of any graded assignment, and
- knowingly assisting someone else in their efforts to engage in any of the above practices.

The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty is a *zero* for the assignment in question.

Further information about the University’s official policies with respect to academic dishonesty -- including more detailed explanations of what constitutes “plagiarism” and “cheating” -- can be found online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww/plagiarism/>

Etiquette

- From time to time, our class sessions may cover topics that provoke strong differences of opinion within the group. I do not expect our class meetings to produce unanimous agreement about the issues under discussion, but I *do* expect *all* of our conversations to be characterized by mutual respect and collegiality. Strongly expressed opinions are acceptable in this class; verbal bullying and personal attacks, on the other hand, will *not* be tolerated under any circumstances.
- Significant disruptions of the normal flow of course-related business -- e.g., using cell phones in class, excessive side chatter -- may result in penalties to your attendance/participation grade.
- If you wish to, you may make audio recordings of our class meetings, provided you can do so without disrupting the ordinary flow of the class. The purchase and/or sale of either written notes or audio recordings of our class meetings, however, is strictly prohibited.

Reading/assignment schedule

[All the required readings are available on the course CD-ROM, which will be made available in class.]

Jan 17

no reading

Jan 24 -- History and tradition

Michael Ventura, "Hear That Long Snake Moan"
Michael Jarrett, "Concerning the Progress of Rock and Roll"

Jan 31 -- Aesthetics and affect

Groups assigned

Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music"
Susan McClary and Rob Walser, "Start Making Sense!"
Greg Seigworth, "Sound Affects"
David Sanjek, "I Give It a 94. It's Got a Good Beat and You Can Dance to It"

Feb 7 -- Money and commerce

Keith Negus, "Industry"
Simon Frith, "The Popular Music Industry"
Courtney Love, "Courtney Love Does the Math"

Feb 14 -- Technology and (re)production

Topic maps due

Andrew Goodwin, "Sample and Hold"
Jonathan Sterne, "The Social Genesis of Sound Fidelity"

Feb 21 -- Creativity and originality

Malcolm Gladwell, "Something Borrowed"
Kembrew McLeod, "Copyright Criminals"

Feb 28 -- Performance and authenticity

David Shumway, "Performance"
Philip Auslander, "Tryin' to Make It Real"
Robert Drew, "Anyone Can Do It"

Mar 7 -- Audiences and fandom

Draft #1 (one reading) due

George Lipsitz, "Foreword"
Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections"
Greil Marcus, "Another Country"

Mar 14 -- NO CLASS -- SPRING BREAK

Mar 21 -- Politics and protest

John Street, "Rock, Pop, and Politics"
Reebee Garofalo *et al.*, "Who Is the World?"
Tricia Rose, "Fear of a Black Planet"
Todd Boyd, "Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self"

Mar 28 -- Noise and rebellion

Greil Marcus, "Prologue"
Steve Waksman, "Kick Out the Jams!"
Tricia Rose, "Soul Sonic Forces"

Apr 4 -- Youth and pleasure

Sheryl Garratt, "Teenage Dreams"
Susan McClary, "Same As It Ever Was"
Jim Walsh, "Baptism by Bruce"
Trent Hill, "Why Isn't Country Music 'Youth' Culture?"

Apr 11 -- Gender and bodies

Draft #2 (one week) due

Cheryl Cline, "Little Songs of Misogyny"
Norma Coates, "Can't We Just Talk About Music?"
Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl?"
Lisa Henderson, "Justify Our Love"

Apr 18 -- Race and appropriation

bell hooks, "Madonna"
Gayle Wald, "From Spirituals to Swing"
Gilbert Rodman, "A Hero to Most?"

Apr 25 -- Morality and censorship

Trent Hill, "The Enemy Within"
Martin Cloonan, "Call That Censorship?"
bell hooks, "Gangsta Culture"
Gilbert Rodman, "Race . . . and Other Four Letter Words"
Robert Wright, "I'd Sell You Suicide"

May 2 -- Copyright and digitalization

Lee Marshall, "For and Against the Record Industry"
Siva Vaidhyanathan, "The Peer-to-Peer Revolution and the Future of Music"
Gilbert Rodman & Cheyanne Vanderdonckt, "Music for Nothing"

May 9 -- NO CLASS

Final project due