

Course Syllabus

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ENGLISH 121

Section 5

WRITING ABOUT [POPULAR] MUSIC

Tuesday and Thursday 1-2:15 p.m.

Instructor: Adam Reid Sexton

adam.sexton@yale.edu

Location: TBA

Office Hours: By appointment

Office Location: LC 008

Texts:

Margo Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*

LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*

Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*

Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*

Readings that are hyperlinked are available online; others will be posted to Canvas

Listening:

Much of the music referenced in the readings will be available for listening on playlists I will post to my Spotify page. For access to these lists you will need a Spotify account, which you can get here for free: https://www.spotify.com/us/signup/?forward_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.spotify.com%2Fus%2Fdownload%2F ↗ (https://www.spotify.com/us/signup/?forward_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.spotify.com%2Fus%2Fdownload%2F)

Course Description: It has been said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture – and indeed, evoking melody, harmony, and rhythm with words can challenge even the most observant and eloquent among us. In this section of English 121, students will read and discuss writing on music by not only scholars and critics (e.g. Margot Jefferson and Kalefa Sanneh) but also journalists (Joan Didion and Susan Orlean), novelists (Michael Chabon, Jeffrey Eugenides, Zadie Smith) and a poet (LeRoi Jones).

The focus will be on popular music (very broadly defined), and among the concepts to be investigated are taste and “cool.” Written assignments will include a critical review of a performance or recording, a literary essay on a musical topic, a feature story, an academic paper, and a musical memoir. The goal of the course is for students to improve their skills at observation, description, and

analysis of culture.

Evoking:

The Critical Review

Spotify playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/1hGn11IXg4GtJik3eToUQV> ↗
(<https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/1hGn11IXg4GtJik3eToUQV>)

Tues. 1/17

Introductions

Thurs. 1/19

Amanda Petrusich, "The Music Critic in the Age of the Insta-Release," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-music-critic-in-the-age-of-the-insta-release> ↗ (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-music-critic-in-the-age-of-the-insta-release>)

Tim Riley, "Hey Jude" from *Tell Me Why* (on Canvas)

Greg Tate, "To Pimp a Butterfly," <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-20150319> ↗ (<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-20150319>)

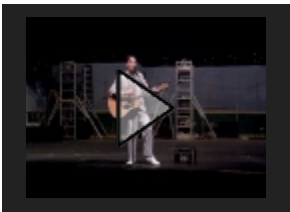
Tues. 1/24

Jon Caramanica, "Jingle Ball Tour Shows Radio Still Rocks," <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/arts/music/review-z100-jingle-ball-madison-square-garden.html> ↗ (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/arts/music/review-z100-jingle-ball-madison-square-garden.html>)

Pauline Kael, "Three Cheers,"
http://www.davidbyrne.com/archive/film/Stop_Making_Sense/s_m_s_press/s_m_s_pauline_kael_nyer.php ↗
(http://www.davidbyrne.com/archive/film/Stop_Making_Sense/s_m_s_press/s_m_s_pauline_kael_nyer.php)

with

Jonathan Demme, dir., *Stop Making Sense*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phvKAm_v5og&list=PLke4g-fS3LOaaUgmHkFiQ8K9Bww8dfKTf ↗
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phvKAm_v5og&list=PLke4g-fS3LOaaUgmHkFiQ8K9Bww8dfKTf)



(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phvKAm_v5og&list=PLke4g-fS3LOaaUgmHkFiQ8K9Bww8dfKTf)

Thurs. 1/26

Josh O'Kane, "Andrew Shartmann explores the enduring legacy of Koji Kondo's Super Mario Bros. soundtrack," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-andrew-shartmann-explores-the-enduring-legacy-of-koji-kondos-super-mario-bros-soundtrack/article25877355/> ↗ [\(http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-andrew-shartmann-explores-the-enduring-legacy-of-koji-kondos-super-mario-bros-soundtrack/article25877355/\)](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-andrew-shartmann-explores-the-enduring-legacy-of-koji-kondos-super-mario-bros-soundtrack/article25877355/)

Alex Ross, "Listening to *Star Wars*" (includes links to works discussed), <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/listening-to-star-wars> ↗ [\(http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/listening-to-star-wars\)](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/listening-to-star-wars)

Jerry Saltz, "On Kanye, Kim, and the New Uncanny," <http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/jerry-saltz-on-kanye-west-kim-kardashian-bound-2.html> ↗ [\(http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/jerry-saltz-on-kanye-west-kim-kardashian-bound-2.html\)](http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/jerry-saltz-on-kanye-west-kim-kardashian-bound-2.html)

Tues. 1/31

Spencer Kornhaber, "*The Hamilton Mixtape*: A Love Letter to Love Story," <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/hamilton-mixtape-review-love-story/509288/> ↗ [\(http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/hamilton-mixtape-review-love-story/509288/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/hamilton-mixtape-review-love-story/509288/)

Caroline Siede, "For Better or Worse, *Grease*: Live Revolutionizes the TV Musical," <http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/better-or-worse-grease-live-revolutionizes-live-tv-231541> ↗ [\(http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/better-or-worse-grease-live-revolutionizes-live-tv-231541\)](http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/better-or-worse-grease-live-revolutionizes-live-tv-231541)

*Draft of Essay #1 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 2/2

Workshop

Reporting:

The Feature

Spotify playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/3oFJCQqE5WvU3DsrQuWwI2> ↗ [\(https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/3oFJCQqE5WvU3DsrQuWwI2\)](https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/3oFJCQqE5WvU3DsrQuWwI2)

Tues. 2/7

Jon Pareles, "Kate Bush Is Running Up That Stage for a Giant Live Album," <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/arts/music/kate-bush-before-the-dawn-interview.html> ↗ [\(http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/arts/music/kate-bush-before-the-dawn-interview.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/arts/music/kate-bush-before-the-dawn-interview.html)

Nitsuh Abebe, "Bjork's Big Bang," *New York*, 2/26/12, <http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/profiles/bjork-2012-3/> ↗ [\(http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/profiles/bjork-2012-3/\)](http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/profiles/bjork-2012-3/)

with

Bjork, <http://biophiliaeducational.org/> ↗ [\(http://biophiliaeducational.org/\)](http://biophiliaeducational.org/)

*Final copy of Essay #1 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 2/9

Zadie Smith, "The House That Hova Built," http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/t-magazine/the-house-that-hova-built.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1 ↗ [\(http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/t-magazine/the-house-that-hova-built.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/t-magazine/the-house-that-hova-built.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1)

Tom Wofe, "The First Tycoon of Teen" from *The Age of Rock* (on Canvas)

Tues. 2/14

Jonny Coleman, "Keep It Alive or Die: The Ongoing Evolution of Live Electronic Music," <http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9957-keep-it-alive-or-die-the-ongoing-evolution-of-live-electronic-music/> ↗ [\(http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9957-keep-it-alive-or-die-the-ongoing-evolution-of-live-electronic-music/\)](http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9957-keep-it-alive-or-die-the-ongoing-evolution-of-live-electronic-music/)

John Seabrook, "Factory Girls: Cultural technology and the making of K-pop,"

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/factory-girls-2> ↗ [\(http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/factory-girls-2\)](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/factory-girls-2)

Thurs. 2/16

Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," *Esquire*, 8/8/07, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ1003-OCT_SINATRA_rev_ ↗ [\(http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ1003-OCT_SINATRA_rev_\)](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ1003-OCT_SINATRA_rev_)

Joan Didion, "Waiting for Morrison," from *The Age of Rock* (on Canvas)

Tues. 2/21

Susan Orlean, "Meet the Shaggs," <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/09/27/meet-the-shaggs> ↗ [\(http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/09/27/meet-the-shaggs\)](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/09/27/meet-the-shaggs)

Hua Hsu, "The Melancholy Pop Idol Who Haunts China," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-melancholy-pop-idol-who-haunts-china> ↗ [\(http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-melancholy-pop-idol-who-haunts-china\)](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-melancholy-pop-idol-who-haunts-china)

*Draft of Essay #2 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 2/23

Workshop

Exploring:

The Essay

Spotify playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/1LFeElgL4ooTgYEjIJjYwi> ↗
(<https://open.spotify.com/user/12172218546/playlist/1LFeElgL4ooTgYEjIJjYwi>)

Tues. 2/28

LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*

*Final copy of Essay #2 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 3/2

Greil Marcus, "Elvis: Presliad" from *Mystery Train*

Lisa Carver, "Yoko Ono: A Reconsideration," <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/magazine/how-i-learned-to-love-yoko-ono.html?pagewanted=all> ↗ (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/magazine/how-i-learned-to-love-yoko-ono.html?pagewanted=all>)

Tues. 3/7

Margot Jefferson, *On Michael Jackson*

Kelefa Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism," <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/the-rap-against-rockism.html> ↗
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/the-rap-against-rockism.html>)

Thurs. 3/9

Rick Moody, "Against Cool" (on Canvas)

Tom Smucker, "Boring and Horrifying Whiteness," <http://www.tomsmucker.org/carpenterswelk.htm> ↗
(<http://www.tomsmucker.org/carpenterswelk.htm>)

SPRING BREAK

Tues. 3/28

Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*

Jody Rosen, "In Defense of Schlock Music" <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/jody-rosen-in-defense-of-schlock-music.html> ↗
(<http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/jody-rosen-in-defense-of-schlock-music.html>)

*Draft of Essay #3 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 3/30

Workshop

Researching: The Academic Paper

Tues. 4/4

Caroline Krasnow, "Fear and Loathing in the '70s: Race, Sexuality and Disco," *Stanford Humanities Review* 2, no. 3. (on Canvas)

Susan McClary, "Living to Tell," in *Desperately Seeking Madonna* (on Canvas)

*Final copy of Essay #3 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 4/6

Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* (on Canvas)

Tricia Rose, "Rhythmic Repetition, Industrial Forces, and Black Practice," from *Rap on Rap* (on Canvas)

Tues. 4/11

Daphne Brooks, "All That You Can't Leave Behind,"

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1292676.files/BrooksBeyonceSoulsingin.pdf> ↗

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1292676.files/BrooksBeyonceSoulsingin.pdf>

Juliet Williams, "Same DNA, but Born This Way: Lady Gaga and the Possibilities of Post-Essentialist Feminism"

<http://popmusicstudies.org/?p=118> ↗ <http://popmusicstudies.org/?p=118>

*Draft of Essay #4 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 4/13

Workshop

Recalling: The Memoir

Tues. 4/18

Rob Sheffield, from *Love Is a Mixtape*, <http://www.robsheffield.com/excerpts-3> ↗ <http://www.robsheffield.com/excerpts-3>

Ann Powers, "Reflections of a Bowie Girl," http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/01/11/462673934/reflections-of-a-bowie-girl?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social ↗
(http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/01/11/462673934/reflections-of-a-bowie-girl?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social)

*Final copy of Essay #4 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 4/20

Michael Chabon, "Sailing by Ear," <http://michaelchabon.com/uncollected/musical/sailing-by-ear/> ↗
(<http://michaelchabon.com/uncollected/musical/sailing-by-ear/>)

Jeffrey Eugenides, "Hand Me My Air Guitar, I'm Still a Jethro Tull Freak," <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/04/arts/pop-view-hand-me-my-air-guitar-i-m-still-a-jethro-tull-freak.html> ↗ (http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/04/arts/pop-view-hand-me-my-air-guitar-i-m-still-a-jethro-tull-freak.html)

Tues. 4/25

James Wood, "The Fun Stuff," <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/the-fun-stuff> ↗
(<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/29/the-fun-stuff>)

Patti Smith, "Just Kids (Excerpt)," <http://genius.com/4314685> ↗ (http://genius.com/4314685)

*Draft of Essay #5 due by 11:59 p.m.

Thurs. 4/27

Workshop

Thurs. 5/4

*Final copy of Essay #5 due by 11:59 p.m.

Course Requirements

Assignments: You will be required to write five papers, each of which must consist of a first draft and a final copy. First drafts will not be graded, though I will comment on them in detail. The better your draft, the better my comments; thus I urge you to submit the strongest, most polished work you can at this stage. Drafts as well as final copies of essays must be submitted to me via email, to adam.sexton@yale.edu

***Format for papers:** Papers should be typed in Times New Roman or Arial 12-point type, double-spaced. They should be submitted to me as a Word document (*not* a pdf). (I will mark them up using Word's "Comment" function.) Please include a word count at the bottom of the last page.

Nonfiction and Sources: All writing in this course must be true and verifiable. As you gather information, keep track of its sources

(as professional writers of nonfiction must). When submitting your review, feature, essay, and memoir, you are not required to cite those sources (though you should be prepared to if I ask you to do so). Your research paper must cite its sources using MLA format.

Workshops: Each student will have one opportunity over the course of the semester to present a draft for peer review. At the start of the term, therefore, you will be assigned a workshop date and will be responsible for emailing the class and instructor your draft by the class meeting prior to that date.

Please TYPE your reactions (150 words minimum) to each workshop draft you receive, stating what worked best in the draft and how the writer might improve his or her work during revision. Make sure to put your name on these typed comments, and also on the draft you read, which you must print out. Bring two copies of your typed comments to class (one copy for the writer, one copy for me) and return the printed drafts to the writers at the end of workshop.

These workshops are crucial to improving your skills as a critical reader and thus as a writer. Failure to attend a workshop will hurt your grade, and failure to attend the workshop you're scheduled for will severely damage your grade.

Attendance and punctuality: On-time attendance in class is required. Both absence and lateness can significantly affect your overall grade.

Grades: Your grade will be based on the writing you submit and on your contributions to class. Class contributions encompass thorough preparation for and useful participation in all discussions, as well as thoughtful, substantial workshop feedback.

While your drafts are not graded, the overall effort that goes into the paper – both in creating a good draft and also in working to improve it – will affect its grade. Make sure to refer to my comments on previous drafts while revising, so as to avoid making the same mistakes on your final copy. If I find myself repeatedly pointing out the same errors, your final grade will suffer.

One-extension policy: Upon request you are entitled to one extension over the course of the term. You must ask for your extension no later than the class preceding the deadline. Late drafts that have not been granted an extension will receive few or no comments. Late papers that have not been granted an extension will automatically be penalized by one third of a grade per day. (These penalties do not apply to late work accompanied by a dean's excuse.) A paper or draft extension allows you one additional week to turn in your paper.

Assignments Summary:

Date	Details
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