

**Popular Music and Identity K10.0369**

**715 Broadway, #501**

**Fall 2009**

**Monday, Wednesday 11:00-12:15**

**Instructor: Gregory Erickson (gte1@nyu.edu)**

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**Office hours: Monday 10-11 (other times by appointment)**

**Course Description**

Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in the amount of critical attention given to the study of popular music. More than just entertainment for the young, popular music has been established as an important cultural force, especially its role in the creation, negotiation, and articulation of cultural, ethnic and geographical identities. Identity, as well, has been a much-discussed topic, and one as difficult and slippery to define as music. In this course, we will think and write about the various effects popular music can have on identity: as a link to one's past, as part of defining a subculture or creating an imagined community, as an expression of sexuality, gender, nation, or race, and as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies. We will be concentrating throughout the class on writing issues of tone, clarity, organization, and structure—all topics that resonate deeply in any discussion of music. Through the challenge of writing about the complex and ineffable qualities of music and identity, I hope to introduce you to ways in which your writing is a process of questioning and exploring ideas and not merely communicating what you already know or what you think some teacher wants you to say.

**Evaluation and Course Requirements**

The course will be graded on the following basis:

Three 4-5 page essays	30% (10% each)
One 6-8 page critical essay	25%
Informal writing	15%
Class presentation	10%
Class participation/attendance	20%

**Essays:** Each of our three 5-page essays will examine a piece or genre of music and relate it to a cultural issue. The actual topics for each essay will come out of class discussions, group workshops, and through consultation with me. You are required to complete all writing assignments on time and papers must be legibly typed in order to receive a grade. For each paper you will be expected to work out your own topic, to write multiple (at least two) drafts, and often to work with other students on the papers. We will devote one class per paper to workshopping your draft, so it is just as important that you bring in your draft on time as your final project. Please proofread your papers carefully for spelling errors, grammar, etc. You are allowed to re-write one paper and resubmit it for a new grade. (I wish I could allow infinite rewrites but time constraints make this impossible.)

The **final critical essay** will be on a topic of your choice, approved by me, that focuses on an issue of popular music and identity that we *have not* discussed in class. Take advantage of your own interests and resources.

**Informal Writing:** The informal writing will consist of two parts. First, you are required to write a personal reaction to **each** assigned reading (I will usually give some sort of prompt, but even if I forget you must write something). You should post this on the class Blackboard site so it can be part of our next class discussion. You should also bring this to class the next session as I may ask you to read some of it to facilitate our discussion. Secondly, in many class sessions we will have a 5 or 10 minute free write, often based on music we will listen to and/or on the assigned reading. I will give you a topic or a question to respond to, but your writing should be free and uncorrected. The point of these writings is to give you a chance to work out your own ideas, interests, and opinions, to experiment with different forms and styles of expression, and to give me a chance to see you're your interests are. Although I will give you a grade on your informal writing, I will pay little attention to grammar, spelling, organizations, etc. I will look for creative effort and thought and at whether you have done the work.

Each of you is responsible for one **in-class presentation**. For this you have several options. You can give a presentation on an artist or genre of your choice, on a live performance that you attended, or on a subculture that you have a particular interest or expertise in. Your presentation should be about 10 minutes long and should include a couple minutes of class discussion. On the day you present you must give me a printed abstract (summary) or outline of what you are going to talk about. Since the syllabus only touches on a few musical genres, one of the purposes of the presentations is to give the course more broad coverage.

It is my firm belief that writing is not, as is often thought, a purely solitary pursuit, but is a form of communication that involves interaction and feedback. In other words, learning to write well is a social experience. In this course, therefore, class participation and attendance is very important. I expect you to be responsible about keeping up on assignments and about participating in group activities. If you will miss more than three classes *you must come talk to me* or your grade will be lowered.

### **Course Outline**

#### **Part One: Definitions:**

Week One:	9/9	Introductions
Week Two:	9/16, 9/18	Studying Popular Music Reading: Bennett: "Introduction"
Week Three:	9/23, 9/25	Contemporary concepts of identity Reading: During "Identity" <i>(9/25) Essay number one draft due</i>
Week Four:	9/30, 10/2	Popular Music and Identity Reading: Gracyk, DeNora <i>(10/2) Essay number one due</i>

#### **Part Two: Gender and Race**

Week Five:	10/7, 10/9	Gender issues in popular music; reading music video I Read: McClary
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Week Six: 10/14, 10/16 Heavy metal and gender; reading music videos II  
Read: Walser

Week Seven: 10/20, 10/22 Jazz: race and gender  
Read: Heble, Baraka, Mailer  
*(10/22) Essay number two draft due*

### **Part Three: Diasporic and Post colonial identities**

Week Eight: 10/27, 10/29 African Diaspora I; jazz and AfroCaribbean  
Reading: Monson  
*(10/29) Essay number two due*

Week Nine: 11/2, 11/4 African Diaspora II: Latin and Dub  
Reading: Tallaj, Veal

Week Ten: 11/9, 11/11 South Indian Diaspora; Bhangra and Asian Underground  
Reading: Gopinath

### **Part Four: Subcultures**

Week Eleven: 11/16, 11/18 The English Punk movement  
Reading: Hebdige  
*(11/18) Essay number three draft due*

Week Twelve: 11/23, 11/25 Music subcultures in the 80s and 90s: disco, hip hop, grunge  
Reading: Bennett "Subculture or Neo Tribes"  
*(11/25) Essay number three due*

Week Thirteen: 11/30, 12/2 contemporary subcultures  
Reading: TBA  
Viewing: Film "Merchants of Cool"

Week Fourteen: 12/7, 12/9 Finishing up; workshops  
*(12/9) Critical Essay draft due*

Week Fifteen: 12/14 The future of popular music cultures  
*Critical Essay Due (12/16)*

**Required Readings:**

Most of the readings are contained in the course packet available for purchase at Unique Copy. I may occasionally distribute readings in class and ask you to listen or view music videos outside of class.

**Reading Packet:**

Amiri Baraka	“Miles Davis: ‘One of the Great Mother fuckers’”
Andy Bennett	“Introduction”
	“Subculture or Neo Tribes?”
Simon During	“Identity” from <i>Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction</i>
GayatriGopinath	“Bombay, UK, Yuba City: Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora”
Theodore Gracyk	“Taste and Musical Identity”
Dick Hebdige	from <i>Subculture: The Meaning of Style</i>
Ajay Heble	“Nice Work if You Can Get It: Women in Jazz”
Susan McClary	“Living to Tell: Madonna’s Resurrection of the Fleshly”
Ingrid Monson	“Riffs, Repetition, and Theories of Globalization”
Norman Mailer	“The White Negro”
Angelina Tallaj	“ <i>Domicanyorks</i> , Identity, and Popular Music”
Michael Veal	“Starship Africa: The Acoustics of Diaspora” from <i>Dub</i>
Robert Walser	“Forging Masculinity” from <i>Running with the Devil</i>