

HPSS S695 Seminar: Popular Music and Politics
Wednesdays, 1:10 – 4:10, CB302
Fall 2007

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Course Philosophy

Course Description

Patriots during the American Revolution made fun of King George with bawdy songs. White and black minstrels in the 19th century mocked each other in performance. Depression-era jitterbugs danced across race and class lines as a way to fashion a radical vision of America. Punk fans in the 1970s created an alternative culture that opposed the values of mainstream society. In this course, we will move beyond characterizations of popular music as mere “entertainment” and explore the ways in which it has instead served to communicate dissatisfaction, shape ideologies of opposition, mobilize social groups, and contribute to the debate and dialogue necessary in a democracy.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to: 1) intelligently discuss the social nature of musical life in the United States, particularly music’s power to shape expression, foster unity, and guide advocacy; 2) outline the changing intersections of music and politics in the history of the United States; and 3) convincingly analyze the meanings, both lyrical and musical, of specific topical songs.

The Role of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at RISD

This course is offered by the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences (HPSS) at RISD. HPSS is a multidisciplinary department whose faculty members teach and conduct research in a range of fields across the humanities and social sciences, including American studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The coming together of such disparate fields in one department represents the cutting-edge of scholarship and provides a unique and rich learning experience in which you may readily learn and compare traditional disciplinary approaches to understanding the world (e.g. anthropology, history, philosophy), as well as explore newer, interdisciplinary fields of knowledge (e.g. gender and sexuality, media studies, race and ethnicity). Studying in HPSS will enable you to develop your imagination and independence of thought, your ability to approach issues and problems from different viewpoints, and your communication skills --qualities integral to the creative work of any artist.

The Role of Liberal Arts at RISD

HPSS is one of three departments (alongside English and History of Art and Visual Culture) in RISD’s Division of Liberal Arts. At RISD, the liberal arts are integral to the process of becoming an accomplished artist or designer. Creativity cannot rely on talent alone; it also depends on curiosity, empathy, and communication—a desire to explore and share an understanding about the world in which we live. In fact, the word “liberal” in liberal arts comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and it is meant to convey that learning about culture, history, and philosophy can liberate the mind and thus provide the foundation for truly imaginative and innovative work. Liberal Arts classes are intended to shape fundamental aspects of your vocation by instilling in you a lifelong curiosity about the world, enhancing your capacity to analyze situations and act on ideas with independence and confidence, and enabling you to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

Course Requirements and Expectations

Some Words of Caution

This is a course that approaches music intellectually. If you think that theorizing about human musical practice will somehow ruin your experience of music, this is not the course for you.

This is a course that focuses on politics, and we will cover a range of political positions. You may not agree with some of opinions presented in class, but you must be able, nevertheless, to seriously explore their ideological underpinnings. Disagreement is welcome; mockery of a person's politics is not.

Finally, this is a seminar, which means that discussion will be the primary format for class meetings. There will be little lecturing, and you will not be allowed to sit quietly in class. Think of the class as a research team working on a project; everybody is a member of the team and will be expected to draw on their areas of expertise and contribute their findings.

Evaluation

The following four factors will determine your final grade:

1. Attendance, 15%. You are required to attend all classes, no excuses. This means you may miss a class if you have to (due to illness, etc.) but that it will count against you. Obviously, the more classes you miss, the worse your final grade will be.
2. Sheet Music Report, 25%. The first assignment in the course involves research of patriotic songs in various archival databases of nineteenth sheet music. All students will present their findings in an oral presentation in class.
3. Two Analytical Papers, 25% each. At the end of sections II and III of the course, you will be required to submit an analytical paper that addresses a prescribed question about the history and theory of music and politics.

Grading Policies

Grades will be based on a traditional A-F scale, where "C" equals "meeting the basic requirements of the course." Everyone starts with an assumed C and goes up or down from there as they complete the coursework.

All assignments, exams, etc. not completed by the last day of class will receive an F and factored into the final grade, unless you have made other arrangements with me.

Plagiarism is a serious offence and will result in an automatic F for the assignment and may warrant further judicial action. Be sure that you understand what constitutes plagiarism in the discipline of history before you begin an assignment.

Course Web Site

This course has a required online component that will supplement our face-to-face meetings and facilitate communication. You have on-line access to handouts and other links specific to course, as well as the

ability to engage in discussion about specific topics and submit papers online. In the first week of the semester, everyone will be given instructions for obtaining access to the course site.

Readings

In the first two weeks of the class, we will be reading three classic essays that will be available through the course web site (or, if you prefer, directly through JSTOR, a database of scholarly articles available to students through the RISD Library). Please take the time to learn how to access the articles.

Otherwise, the following books are available for purchase at **Symposium Books at 240 Westminster Street** in Providence (near Tazza Cafe).

- Derek Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935*. University of North Carolina Press: 2006. Paper. 0807854816.
- Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50*. University of Illinois Press, 1995. Paper. 0252065255.
- Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. University of California Press, 1998. Paper. 0520212983.
- T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Paper. 0816637717.

Course Playlist

As part of your study of music and politics, I have created an optional playlist on iTunes. By no means should you limit yourself to these selections; feel free to explore more of the music mentioned in the readings. Just go to www.apple.com/iTunes (or open iTunes, if you already have the application), launch the music store, click iMixes on the left-hand menu bar, and search for "RISD: Popular Music and Politics."

Class Meeting Schedule

Sept 12 Introduction: Music and Democracy

John Blacking, "The Value of Music in Human Experience" (1969) - JSTOR

I. Shaping a Nation: 19th Century

Sept 19 Class, Race, and Nation

Oscar Sonneck, "Notes on the Origin of 'Hail, Columbia!'" (1901) - JSTOR

Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology" (1975) - JSTOR

Sept 26 No Class

Start sheet music research on patriotic music before 1900

Oct 3 Patriotic Expressions

Start Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*

IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS OF SHEET MUSIC RESEARCH

Oct 10 Diversity, Social Order, and Progress

Discussion of Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*

II. Social Change: Mid-20th Century

Oct 17 We Shall Overcome

Start Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*

Film (TBA)

Oct 24 The Depression, People's Music, and Anti-Fascism

Discussion of Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*

Oct 31 Civil Rights Movement

Start Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*

Nov 7 Funk, Soul, and Black Identity

Discussion of Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*

PAPER #1 DUE NOV. 9

III. Culture and Politics: Late 20th Century to the Present

Nov 14 New Movements

Discussion of T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest*

Nov 21 No Class – Thanksgiving Recess

Nov 28 Music and Postmodern Protest

Discussion of T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest*

Dec 5 Multimedia Protest

YouTube videos (TBA)

PAPER #2 DUE DECEMBER 10