What does it mean for someone or something to be thought of as “cool”? What factors play into being accorded such a distinction? How has the meaning of this word changed over time? Is “cool” organic or can it be manufactured? Where does this idea come from in the first place? What happens when “cool” reaches the masses? How does the contemporary use of the word “cool,” relate to more historical uses?

The term “cool” is one of the most widely used and concurrently one of the most misunderstood words in the American lexicon. This course is interested in investigating the concept of “cool” and the way in which “the cool” has circulated throughout American culture over time. In addition the course is also interested in the related concept of “hip” and how this notion has functioned in relation to cool.

Beginning in the early 20th Century with iconic boxer Jack Johnson, the course will study a range of individuals whose image help set the stage for “the birth of the cool” at mid-century. In addition to Johnson, the course will study influential figures such as Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, and Mezz
Mezzrow, among others. Moving forward, with a specific focus on the Cold War era, the course will highlight “cool” during the historical period in which it was “born;” the years immediately after World War II through the mid 1960s.

“The Cool,” as it were, emerged from the world of bebop jazz and urban street culture, beginning in the mid to late 1940s. Central to this era is the cultural influence of Charlie “Yardbird” Parker. Bird’s cool would be appropriated by various white figures, most notably The Beats, in a practice that has come to characterize a significant segment of American cultural history; a phenomena of racial and cultural appropriation specifically addressed in Norman Mailer’s well known 1957 essay “The White Negro.” To this end the course will study figures such as Anita O’Day, Hugh Hefner, Lenny Bruce and the filmmaker Shirley Clarke.

In many ways the course is centered around the emblematic figure of Miles Davis, whose 1957 album The Birth of the Cool provides the class with its title. Miles represents the combination of style, politics, philosophy, artistic mastery, and cultural rebellion at the heart of cool.

Other figures to be covered will include; Sugar Ray Robinson, Thelonious Monk, Pannonica de Koenigswarter aka “The Jazz Baroness,” Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, John Coltrane, James Baldwin, Richard Pryor, and Malcolm X.

By the late 1960s cool was now being consistently appropriated by corporate forces such as the advertising industry and because of this cool had began to give way to a different cultural aesthetic, a move best exemplified in both music and style by Miles Davis’ transition from jazz into what some have called “jazz rock fusion.”

By the 1980s, coinciding with the introduction of new technology in the form of the compact disc, nostalgia for cool began to reemerge through various cultural figures and representations. The work of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, retro films like Round Midnight, starring saxophone player Dexter Gordon, and Spike Lee’s Mo’ Better Blues, demonstrate the rebirth of the cool aesthetic for a new generation.

Finally the course will look at the continued appropriation of cool and hip in corporate form; e.g. print/tv ads for The Gap and Apple, Starbucks coffee culture, as well as the contemporary urban figure often misidentified as the “hipster.”

In addition to jazz, the course will study various developments in cinema, modern art, design/style, fashion, literature, politics, and sports, among other areas of the culture.

**Screening Schedule**
1/14/14: *Unforgivable Blackness* Parts 1 & 2, Ken Burns (2004)

1/21/14: *Lady Sings the Blues*, Sidney J. Furie (1972)

2/4/14: *The Miles Davis Story*, Mike Dibb (2001)


3/11/14: No Screening (Midterm Exam)

3/18/14: Spring Break


4/1/14: *The Cry of Jazz*, Edward Bland (1959)

4/1/14: *Shadows*, John Cassavetes (1959)


4/29/14: No Screening (Final Class Lecture)

**Books**


*Blue Note Records: The Biography*, Richard Cook.

*Blue Notes in Black and White: Photography and Jazz*, Benjamin Cawthra.


*Miles: The Autobiography*, Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe.

Blues People: Negro Music in White America, LeRoi Jones.

Going to Meet the Man, James Baldwin.

If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday, Farah Jasmine Griffin.


The Birth of the Cool course reader