

# COMM 307 SOUND CLASH

## Popular Music and American Culture

Professor Josh Kun

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Office Hours: TUESDAYS 1-3 and by appointment

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**Course Objective:** This course on popular music as communication asks students to interrogate the idea of America and American identity through the comparative study of popular music. We will use music as a method for exploring issues of race and ethnicity in the constitution of American culture and in the making and unmaking of the American self. This is NEITHER a linear and comprehensive history of American music NOR is it a musicology course with attention to musical formalism and technique. Rather, it emphasizes music as inter-cultural communication, a living cultural space where ethnic, racial, national, and sexual identities are both formed and de-formed. While focusing on major musical movements throughout the 20th century (minstrelsy, blues, jazz, corridos, salsa, rock, punk, hip hop), we will root our thinking through several key critical rubrics: performance, community, memory, affect, and technology. What is music's role in the construction of "America" as a geopolitical idea as well as the notion of transnational, inter-American identities? We will also pay particular attention to the role of the music industry and music technologies. How has the music industry changed from the days of vaudeville to the days of Beats and Spotify?

**Learning Outcomes:** Students completing this course will learn: how to think critically about popular music as sound and culture, with an emphasis on community, performance, history, and affect; the theoretical tools and concepts needed to understand popular music as sound, technology, industry, and culture; how to analyze the impact of popular music in the communication of racial and ethnic meanings and identities; how to study race and ethnicity as musical performances and structures; how to write about the role of music in their own lives and in the daily lives of others

**Required Texts** Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow, 1963) Charles Mingus, *Beneath The Underdog* (New York: Vintage, 1991); All Other Essays available on Blackboard

### Course requirements/Grading

-Weekly Blog Posts on Course Readings -10%

-Songbook Essay – 15%

-Analytical essay – 30%

-Critical Playlist – 15%

-Final Project – 30%

**General Policies** 1. Attendance: Habitual tardiness and absence will result in a lower grade. More than 3 unexcused absences will result in failure of the course. If you must miss class, please let me know in advance. You will not, however, be excused from preparing the assignments. 2. Deadlines: Papers and assignments are due at the beginning of class. Unless I have granted an extension, I will grade late papers down 1/3 of a grade for each class period passed. I will not accept any papers more than one week late. 3. Format: All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced with one-inch margins, paginated and stapled (please do not use folders or report covers). Please use MLA format as outlined in MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (fifth edition).

**Academic Integrity:** When taking this class, you enter into a contract that states that all the work you are turning in is your own and no one else's, and that you have not turned in any work for which you have received credit in another class. The appropriation of the ideas and/or words of others without proper citation is a serious violation. When citing texts in a paper, please use MLA format. The School of Communication is committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and ethical support. It endorses and acts on the USC campus policies and procedures detailed in the section titled "University Sanction Guidelines." These policies, procedures and guidelines will be assiduously upheld. They protect your rights, as well as those of the faculty. It is particularly important that you be aware of and avoid plagiarism, cheating on exams, submitting a paper to more than one professor, or submitting a paper authored by anyone other than yourself. Violations of this policy will result in a failing grade in the course, and be reported to the Office of Student Conduct. If you have any doubts about any of these practices, you must confer with the professor.

**Disability** Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213)740-0776.

## **SCHEDULE OF LECTURES & READINGS**

## **8/26 An Introduction to Critical Listening**

## **8/28 An Introduction to Music and Communication**

Stan Denski, "Towards a Model of Music and Communication" (excerpted passage); Jonathan Sterne, "There Is No Music Industry"

## **9/2 Entry Points: The Musician As Theorist**

Bob Dylan, from *Chronicles*; Questlove, from *Mo Metta Blues*; Michael Ventura, "The DNA of Pop"

## **9/4 Empire States of Mind: Industry, Identity, & Power v.1**

Simon Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music"; Ron Eyerman & Andrew Jamison, "Structures of Feeling and Cognitive Praxis"

## **9/9 Empire States of Mind: Industry, Identity, & Power v.2**

Theodor Adorno, "On Popular Music"; Simon Frith, "Music and Identity"

## **9/11 New Slaves: Black Music and the Legacy of Slavery v.1**

Leroi Jones, *Blues People* ("Introduction" & Chapters 1 & 3)

## **9/16 New Slaves: Black Music and the Legacy of Slavery v.1**

Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (Chapters 4-6)

## **9/18 The Minstrel Mask**

David Wondrich, "Minstrelsy, or get Out de Way" (20 pp.); Ralph Ellison, "Change the Yoke and Slip the Joke"; SONG ASSIGNMENT DUE;

## **9/23 The Vaudeville Mask**

Robert Snyder, "Taming the Bowery Boys;" Krystyn R. Moon, "The Rise of Chinese and Chinese American Vaudevillians 1900-1920s"

## **9/25 Jazz Up North: Tin Pan Alley Days**

David Suisman, "When Songs Became a Business"

**9/30 Jazz Down South: New Orleans**

John Szwed, "1900-1925 New Orleans;" Matt Sakakeeny, "Onward and Upward"

**10/2 Swing: From Verb to Noun**

*Blues People*, Chapter 10

**10/7 Bebop: From Verb to Noun to Verb**

*Blues People*, Chapter 12

**10/9 The Race of Rock**

Alice Walker, "Nineteen Fifty Five;" Ned Sublette, "The Kingsmen & the Cha Cha Cha"

**10/14 Autobiographies of Music, Race, & Power v.1**

Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*

**10/16 Autobiographies of Music, Race, & Power v.2**

Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*

**10/21 Songs for Change**

Craig Werner, from *A Change is Gonna Come*; Anthony Heilbut, "Aretha: How She Got Over"

**10/23 There's a Riot Goin On**

PAPER DUE; in class screening: *The Night James Brown Saved Boston*

**10/28 Shaking It, Off v.1**

Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality"; Patti Smith, from *Just*

*Kids*; Tavi Gevinson, “Just Kidding Love Sucks: Notes on Taylor Swift”

**10/30 Shaking It, Off v.2**

*SELENA*; Jenni Rivera, from *Unbreakable*; Lydia Mendoza & La Familia Mendoza, “La Alondra de la Frontera”

**11/4 The Corrido of America v.1**

Americo Paredes, “The Legend,” “The Corrido On The Border”

**11/6 The Corrido of America v.2**

Sam Quinones, “The Ballad of Chalino Sanchez”; Josh Kun, “Death Rattle”

**11/11 The Latin Tinge: Heard & Unheard**

Murray Forman, “Maracas, Congas, & Castanets”; Ricky Martin, from *Me*

**11/13 Love Will Save the Day**

Alice Echols, “One and Oneness in Gay Disco”

**11/18 South Bronx, South South Bronx v.1**

PLAYLIST ASSIGNMENT DUE ; In Class: *Mambo to Hip Hop* Screening

**11/20 South Bronx, South South Bronx v.2**

Tricia Rose, “All Aboard the Night Train: Flow, Layering, and Rupture in Postindustrial New York”

**11/25 South Central, South South Central**

Jeff Chang, “The Culture Assassins”; “Kendrick Lamar and the Post-Hip Hop Generation”

**12/2 Watch the Throne**

Jay-Z, from *Decoded*

**12/4 Run the World**

Isaac Miller, “Who Runs The World?: On Beyonce, Sampling, Race, and Power;”  
NPR Code Switch: “When Our Kids Run America”

**FINAL PROJECTS DUE THURSDAY DECEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> BEFORE 1PM**