

**MUSC 373**  
**Writing About Popular Music**  
**4 units**  
**Spring 2017**  
**Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00-1:50pm**  
**TMC G156**

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**Catalogue Description:**

Immerses students in criticism, scholarship, and creative writing dealing with popular music. Students participate in that discourse through developing their own authorial voices.

**Course Description:**

Contemporary popular music's commercial, emotional, and symbolic import is well known, but less studied are the types of writing that popular music inspires. This course immerses students in the rich body of writings that critique, research, and creatively respond to twentieth- and twenty-first century popular music. The first third of the semester will be spent with music criticism from the most celebrated journalists in the industry, paying particular attention to working-class, African-American, and female writers. In the second third, we will turn to academic writing on popular music, especially from so-called Critical Musicologists as well as scholars in fields outside of music. The final third will turn to instances of creative writing about popular music, from bestselling novels and the writings of musicians to album covers, blogs, and the Pitchfork phenomenon. Throughout the semester, we will attend to the slippages between primary and secondary sources – how the most incisive meditations on popular music become artistic and literary objects in their own right. This is not a historical (or ahistorical) survey of popular music. Rather, it explores the most innovative and courageous examples of criticism, scholarship, and creative writing dealing with pop, and challenges students to participate in that discourse through developing their own authorial voices. By the end of the semester, students will have learned how to situate their own and others' writing about popular music amid larger conversations about identity and ownership, aesthetic value, and the challenges and responsibilities of curation.

**Learning Objectives:**

This course addresses the following four learning objectives:

- Analysis: Through close reading of texts and close listening to the music discussed in those texts, students learn rhetorical strategies for critiquing and interpreting popular music. What distinguishes an effective piece of pop music writing from fan worship?

- Connectivity: Students will consider how specific writings espouse (or disregard) intellectual virtues. What, for instance, can writing about pop music teach us about careful listening and aesthetic ecumenicalism, and how could these qualities be applied outside art?
- Context: We will trace the history and conditions that made popular music writing possible and desirable. When, for example, did pop music journalism begin, and why was academia so late in accepting pop music as a legitimate object of inquiry?
- Making: The last third of the semester will focus on creative writing about popular music, and students will create their own short creative work (e.g., short story or creative nonfiction essay) that goes beyond critique or scholarly research. How can pop music writing become an artform in its own right?

### **Course Materials:**

#### Readings:

There are several texts to purchase, borrow, or rent for this course. We will read approximately one **complete** book per week; depending on the book, weekly reading assignments will range between 150 and 300 pages. Class meetings will be spent discussing specific passages and general themes of each text. Specific reading assignments are detailed in the Class Schedule below; a complete book list is listed here in order of appearance in the semester.

Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock 'n' Roll As Literature and Literature As Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Anchor, 1988).

*Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Plexus, 1995).

Robert Christgau, *Rock Albums of the 70s: A Critical Guide* (New York: Da Capo, 1981).

Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy, from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century* (London: Dey Street, 2016).

Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

Fred Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2011).

Adrian Daub and Charles Kronengold, *The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Belknap Press, 2009).

Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

Joanna Demers, *Anatomy of Thought-Fiction: CHS Report, 2214* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017).

Additional shorter writings (e.g., essays, chapters, etc.) will be available on Blackboard, and are also listed in the Course Schedule below.

### Listening:

All required listening is available on a YouTube playlist for this course. This playlist is called "[course number] Demers Spring 2017 listening", and the author is "Joanna Demers". This list is available for public viewing.

### **Grading Policies:**

Students will be graded on the following items:

1) **Three written projects:** These are pieces of at least 3000 words that present original criticism, research, or creative work on some aspect of popular music. Project #1 (first draft due Week 5; final draft due Week 6) asks the student to critique a live pop music performance s/he attends somewhere in the Los Angeles-area. Project #2 (first draft due Week 10; final draft due Week 11) asks the student to conduct original research on a pop music album s/he chooses. Project #3 (first draft due Week 15; final draft due during Finals Week) asks the student to write either a fictional short story or a short creative nonfiction essay relating to popular music. Detailed descriptions for each project are posted on Blackboard.

For each project, the writing takes place in two steps: a) the student will write a **first draft**, which s/he will print out by the day it is due (Week 5, 10, and 15, respectively) and give it to two other pre-assigned partners who will make editing suggestions during in-class writing workshops. This edited paper is due back to the student during the next class meeting of the same week. The student will then take the weekend to revise the essay, and turn in a printed copy to me either in class (Week 6, 11, or Finals Week, respectively). Projects #1 and #2 are worth 15% of the course grade, and Project #3 is worth 20% of the course grade.

2) **Seminar Presentations:** Two students will be paired to give a presentation at some point during the semester. [The number of enrolled students will determine the length of the presentation; I envision these presentations taking one hour, but will reduce that length if enrollment is high.] Sign-up sheets will be available during Week 1. During their presentation, the pair will lead the class in discussions involving the assigned listening and reading for that day's class. Detailed directions and grading policies for the Seminar Presentations are posted separately on Blackboard. The Seminar Presentation is worth 15% of the course grade.

3) **Midterm and Final Exams:** These are essay-based exams that draw on the assigned readings. The Midterm will be administered during the first class meeting of Week 7, and is worth 12.5% of the course grade. The Final will be administered during the University-mandated Final Exam period, and is worth 12.5% of the course grade.

4) **Participation:** A writing-centered class is successful only to the extent that all students participate regularly, and in a thoughtful manner. The Participation grade will be based not only on attendance (which is merely the bare minimum), but on regular and substantive participation in class discussions. Full-credit for the Participation grade requires sustained vocal participation during every class meeting. The Participation grade is worth 10% of the course grade.

In other words, the course grade will be calculated as follows:

Project #1: 15% of course grade  
 Project #2: 15% of course grade  
 Project #3: 20% of course grade  
 Seminar Presentation: 15% of course grade  
 Midterm Exam: 12.5% of course grade  
 Final Exam: 12.5% of course grade  
 Participation: 10%

What the grades mean:

A	Excellent; exceeds expectations	94-100%
A-	Generally excellent; fully meets expectations	90-93%
B+	Good in all respects, and excellent in some; fully meets expectations	87-89%
B	Good in all respects; fully meets expectations	84-86%
B-	Good in most areas; meets expectations	80-83%
C+	Good in a few respects; basically meets expectations	77-79%
C	Average; minimally meets expectations	74-76%
C-	Lacking in some requirements	70-73%
D	Largely does not meet requirements	60-69%
F	Totally unacceptable; evidence of plagiarism	Below 60%

### Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

#### Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

#### Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for

international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* [http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

## **Class Schedule**

### **Unit 1 (Weeks 1-5: Criticism)**

#### Week 1: The Golden Age of Pop Curation in The Silver Age of Pop

Elvis Costello famously quipped that writing about music is like dancing about architecture. We begin with gonzo journalist Lester Bangs, champion of a muscular approach toward pop. We turn to Penman's essay on Scott Walker's unsuccessful middle period, and ask: how do you, in fact, dance about architecture? How do you curate music you love desperately, especially if no one else loves it?

#### Reading:

Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock 'n' Roll As Literature and Literature As Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Anchor, 1988).  
Ian Penman, "A Dandy In Aspice: Scott Sings Songs From His TV Series, 'Til The Band Comes In, The Moviegoer," in *No Regrets: Writings on Scott Walker*, ed. Rob Young. Pgs. 75-138. (London: Orion Books, 2012). [Blackboard]

#### Listening:

Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks* (1968)  
The Stooges, *Fun House* (1970)  
Scott Walker, *'Til The Band Comes In* (1970)  
White Witch, *White Witch* (1972)

#### Week 2: Women Critics and Pop

Pop music criticism has often been described as having a "woman problem", a paucity of female writers and a minimum of interest in female musicians. We consider the most notable curative of this problem, the *Rock She Wrote* volume, as well as Angela Davis' seminal blues book.

#### Reading:

*Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Plexus, 1995).  
Angela Y. Davis, "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity," in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), pg. 3-41. [Blackboard]

Listening:

Madonna, "Vogue" (1990) and "Justify My Love" (1993)  
Billie Holiday, "My Man" (1939)  
Bessie Smith, "St. Louis Blues" ((1925)

Week 3: Robert Christgau

Robert Christgau is famous for his (literally) thousands of reviews. We consider Christgau's career as the logical consequence of late capitalism's penchant for collecting, and conceptualize collection as a form of melancholy.

Reading:

Robert Christgau, *Rock Albums of the 70s: A Critical Guide* (New York: Da Capo, 1981).

Listening:

Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin IV*(1971)

Week 4: Simon Reynolds and learned criticism

British music journalist Simon Reynolds (who now lives in Los Angeles) will visit to discuss his forthcoming book, *Shock and Awe*, a history of glam rock that draws from over two hundred interviews with musicians and participants.

Reading:

Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe: Glam Rock and Its Legacy, from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century* (London: Dey Street, 2016).

Listening:

David Bowie, *Hunky Dory* (1971)  
Slade, *Old New Borrowed and Blue* (1974)

Week 5: Project #1 week

**First class meeting of the week:** PROJECT #1 DUE IN CLASS, TWO COPIES PRINTED OUT. Editing workshop. Exchange papers with your partners to begin editing.

**Second class meeting of the week:** RETURN YOUR PARTNERS' PROJECTS TO THEM, WITH YOUR EDITS HANDWRITTEN ON THE PAPER. Discuss each other's projects.

**Unit 2 (Weeks 6-10): Academic writing**

## Week 6: Susan McClary and the rise of pop music scholarship

YOUR REVISED PROJECT #1 IS DUE TO ME, IN CLASS, PRINTED ON PAPER.

Popular music was not considered a valid subject of research until the 1990s, largely thanks to the publication of Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*. Why did academia take so long to accept pop?

### Reading:

Susan McClary, "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pg. 148-168.

### Listening:

Madonna, "Live to Tell" (1986)

## Week 7: Critical Musicology

First meeting of the week: Midterm Exam

Second meeting of the week: McClary's *Feminine Endings* was a beginning, but pop musicology has progressed in the past thirty years to become a model in its own right, not just music's answer to literary criticism. We turn to Mitchell Morris' stunning *The Persistence of Sentiment* as a model for future musicology.

### Reading:

Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

### Listening:

Barry White, "Never Never Gonna Give You Up" (1973)

Cher, "Half-Breed" (1973)

Stylistics, "You Make Me Feel Brand New" (1973)

## Week 8: Black Writing on Music

The theme that unites Weheliye's and Moten's books is connoisseurship. Both the Afrofuturists of Weheliye's *Phonographies* and the jazz musicians of Moten's *In the Break* were consummate lovers of *all* types of music, as are Weheliye and Moten themselves. How do these two writers elevate discourse on music all too often reduced to discussions of race?

### Reading:

Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke

University Press, 2005).  
Fred Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Listening:

Afrika Bambaataa, "Planet Rock" (1983)  
Duke Ellington, "Take the A Train" (1957)

Week 9: Music Scholarship Outside of Music

Music scholarship is not relegated to musicology. We turn to Daub's (a Germanist) and Kronengold's (a composer) James Bond book, and essayist Bracewell's diatribe on superficiality. What skills do non-musicologists bring to pop music writing?

Reading:

Adrian Daub and Charles Kronengold, *The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).  
Michael Bracewell, "Culture-vulturing City Slickers," in *When Surface Was Depth: Death by Cappuccino and Other Reflections on Music and Culture in the 1990's*. pgs. 1-51. (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002). [Blackboard]

Listening:

Nancy Sinatra, "You Only Live Twice" (1967)  
Paul McCartney, "Live and Let Die" (1973)  
Duran Duran, "A View To A Kill" (1985)  
Madonna, "Die Another Day" (2002)

Week 10: Project #2 week

**First class meeting of the week:** PROJECT #2 DUE IN CLASS, TWO COPIES PRINTED OUT. Editing workshop. Exchange papers with your partners to begin editing.

**Second class meeting of the week:** RETURN YOUR PARTNERS' PROJECTS TO THEM, WITH YOUR EDITS HANDWRITTEN ON THE PAPER. Discuss each other's projects.

**Unit 3 (Weeks 11-15): Creative writing**

Week 11: Greil Marcus: Rock flâneur

YOUR REVISED PROJECT #2 IS DUE TO ME, IN CLASS, PRINTED ON PAPER.

Greil Marcus was the first writer to treat pop as the starting point for feverish reflections on music, art, and late capitalism. We approach his masterpiece, *Lipstick Traces*, as a modern-day reincarnation of Flaubert's *flâneur*.

Reading:

Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Belknap Press, 2009).

Listening:

Sex Pistols, "Anarchy in the UK" (1977)

Week 12: Musicians who write

Julian Cope headed a 1980s psychedelic band called The Teardrop Explodes before writing the first treatments of Krautrock and experimental Japanese pop. Kim Gordon is a founding member of Sonic Youth, and wrote canny essays on the art scene and general culture of New York. We consider Cope's exquisite taste, and Gordon's withering authority.

Reading:

Julian Cope, *Japrocksampler* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009). excerpts [Blackboard]  
Kim Gordon, *Is It My Body?: Selected Texts* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014). excerpts [Blackboard]

Listening:

Les Rallizes Dénudés, "People Can Choose" (1977)  
Sonic Youth, *Daydream Nation* (1988)

Week 13: Creative Writing

What happens when we write about music that does not exist? We turn to Higgs' sprawling true-life account of The KLF as prefatory for two fictional discussions of pop: Hornby's classic novel, *High Fidelity*, and Demers' new novel on the thought-fictions of contemporary pop.

Reading:

John Higgs, *KLF: Chaos, Magic, and the Band Who Burned A Million Pounds* (London: Orion, 2013). excerpts [Blackboard]  
Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).  
Joanna Demers, *Drone and Apocalypse: An Exhibit Catalog for the End of the World* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015).

Listening:

Scott Walker and Sunn 0))), "Brando" (2014)  
The JAMs, "Justified and Ancient" (1991)

Week 14: The Pitchfork effect

Pitchfork is the preeminent Internet source of pop criticism. We consider the effect of Pitchfork on listening and writing habits, particularly the ludicrousness of its rating system. We conclude with the dangers of social media and lazy writing.

Reading:

Various Pitchfork reviews.

Listening:

Various albums and tracks reviewed by Pitchfork.

Week 15: Project #3 week

First class meeting of the week: ROUGH DRAFT OF PROJECT #3 DUE IN CLASS, TWO COPIES PRINTED OUT. Editing workshop. Exchange papers with your partners to begin editing.

Second class meeting of the week: RETURN YOUR PARTNERS' PROJECTS TO THEM, WITH YOUR EDITS HANDWRITTEN ON THE PAPER. Discuss each other's projects.

Final Exam meeting: [Final exam meeting during University-scheduled time]

DURING THIS MEETING, YOU WILL TURN IN YOUR PRINTED PROJECT #3 TO ME. The Final Exam will be administered at this time.