TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES

“ANY OLD WAY YOU CHOOSE IT”:
POPULAR MUSIC AS AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN STUDIES

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The American Studies major at Mount Holyoke is designed to provide students with the flexibility to draw from a variety of traditional disciplines in order to address major problems of American culture and society. A group of sixteen faculty members, representing eight different departments, constitutes the American Studies Committee. Committee members act as advisers to majors, and, on a rotating basis, teach two core courses: “American Studies 101: Introduction to the Study of American Culture,” and “American Studies 301: Seminar.” Both of these are conceived as topics courses that draw on the intellectual interests of the American Studies Committee. The seminar seminar allows students to examine major issues or themes from an interdisciplinary perspective, and also provides a “bonding” experience for American Studies majors.

By contrast the introductory course is meant to invite first- and second-year students into considering the American Studies approach. In consultation with the Committee one faculty member chooses a topic sufficiently broad enough both to attract student interest and to draw on the talents and expertise of other American Studies faculty. By building a number of guest lecturers into the syllabus, the introductory course thus serves to showcase the rich variety of approaches represented on Mount Holyoke’s American Studies Committee. Recent American Studies 101 topics have included “The American City,” “The Culture of the 1960s,” and “Cold War Culture at Home and Abroad.” Regardless of the individual topic the introductory course is framed around several large questions: How can a multiplicity of perspectives enrich our understanding of the American experience? What questions do individual disciplines ask about a culture? How does the project of American Studies build on these questions to forge its own mode of interdisciplinary inquiry?

The idea for organizing this introductory course around popular music had its roots in a History Department research seminar that I team-taught some years back, with John Mack Parachute. That class, “The Social History of American Popular Music,” proved quite successful in opening up some of the important dynamics of American history to students through a focus on popular culture. It centered on exploring the relationships between social change, urbanization, and industrialization and the evolution of American popular music. With enrollment limited to 25 students, we were able to run the class as a research seminar. Each student was responsible for writing a major research paper, integrating primary and secondary sources. Students also made in-class presentations, using musical examples to illustrate the heart of their findings.

The American Studies 101 course, however, presented a thorny logistical problem: pre-registration figures revealed that 100 students had signed up for the class. I thus had to prepare for a large lecture course without the benefit of teaching assistants. I already knew that my version of this course would take a decidedly historical slant on the subject. I organized the readings, lectures, and film series with the goal of giving the students a historical grounding in several important areas: an examination of nineteenth-century folk traditions, principally European and African, and their exploitation for commercial purposes; the establishment of a popular music industry; the privately produced musical commodities such as sheet music; popular music as a mirror for American racism and race relations; the professionalization of musical performance; the relationship between migration and changes in musical forms; the crucial role of evolving technologies in the twentieth century. The central assumption behind my approach was that a close examination of musical practices over time and space could illuminate some of the fundamental issues in American culture and history. By “musical practices” I mean the complex relationships that exist at any given moment between musical performers, audiences, the music itself, the music business, and the technologies that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of music.

On paper, I was ready to roll. But soon after my first meeting with the 100-odd students who jammed themselves into Mount Holyoke’s new, fully equipped media classroom, I realized that I needed to shift priorities. I devoted the first two sessions to listening to the students. I asked each of them to speak to what music they felt passionate about: What did they love and hate? What was the first record they ever bought and concert they attended? How did they feel about their parents’ music? Did they ever perform or write music? What music were they interested in learning more about? How had their own tastes changed?

What struck me most forcefully was the severely narrow range of the music they discussed. The gaps in the class’s collective familiarity with American popular music were staggering. The vast majority of the students seemed to be thoroughly unfamiliar with (and had never even heard) so many of the artists who might be considered foundational figures: Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Rodgers, Thomas A. Dorsey, the Carter Family, Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, Bob Wills, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Muddy Waters, Hank Williams, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Machito, Paty Clive, James Brown, Tito Puente, Ray Charles, and so on. Discussion suggested that the ever-tightening constructions of American mass media were partly to blame: strictly controlled Top 40 radio playing the same “classic,” “hits,” or “current” hits; the rise of AOR format (“Album Oriented Rock”); later dubbed “Apathetic Oriented Radio” virtually devoid of black music; country stations with no sense of history; the paucity of American music performed on television shows; the CD revolution making many older records harder to find. What the students needed above all, it seemed to me, was to listen to as wide a range of American popular music as possible. The primary goal of the class became less to introduce American Studies and more simply to introduce American popular music.

In one of these first classes I distributed a lyric sheet for the Chuck Berry classic, “Rock and Roll Music.” After playing his version, and those of the Beatles and the Beach Boys, I asked the class to compare what they had heard. Many were familiar with the two cover versions, but not the original. The Berry version, all agreed, sounded less produced, less raucous, even “folky.” I invited them to read the verses and asked them: What is this song about?

“…got no kick against modern jazz. Unless they start to play it too damn fast. And lose the beauty of the melody. Until it sounds just like a symphony.”

“I took my love way up across the tracks. So she could hear my man a-callin’ sax. I must admit they had a rockin’ band. Man they was blowin’ like a hurricane.”

“We take South to a guelee. The country folks had a jamboree. They’re drinking home brew from a wooden cup. They’s dancing all night.”

“Don’t care to hear them play a tango. I’m in no mood to hear a mambo. It’s way too early for the congo. So keep a rockin’ that piano.”

The consensus was that the Berry song was a straight-ahead celebration of rock’n’roll energy, an invitation to dance and party. I then suggested that Chuck Berry was also a perceptive student of history as well, and that his song revealed an African American artist keenly conscious of the layers of history embedded in popular music. Berry’s verses offer a capsule summary of American black music, defining rock’n’roll as belonging squarely within a long tradition of musical practice. Berry’s song can be read as a “back to the future” tour of African American music. It begins by invoking contemporary “modern jazz,” moving back “across the tracks” to rhythm and blues, then down to “South” to a jukebox, to the celebration of emancipation (travelling further south into popular Latin American rhythms, and ultimately landing back in Africa. One way into the history of American popular music, I suggested, was to pay special attention to the historical sensibility of its greatest artists, such as Chuck Berry.

Although I left myself room to improvise and take off on tangents. I found that careful planning and attention to mechanics for a course like this was crucial. Our classroom was fully equipped with phonograph, tape, multiple CD changers, film, and video projection capabilities.
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ity—but occasional technical glitches were in-

avoidable and sometimes broke the flow of a

class. I put a lot of effort into coordinating
readings, film showings in and out of class,
guest lecturers, and the preparation of tapes. The
class met twice weekly, and I organized each
week around a different topic. For each session
I alternated lecturing with musical examples
from prepared audio tapes or CDs; I handed out
a list of music to be played at the start of each
class. I tried to frame each week with a few key
questions or issues that I asked the students to
engage while listening to the music, doing the
reading, and watching the films. Daniel
Kingman’s American Music (2nd ed.) served as
a useful and comprehensive overview text, sup-
plemented by four other books.

For example, in the week devoted to Anglo-
European Folk-Song Traditions and African
Transformations, I asked students to consider
the process by which camp-meeting Protestant-
ism re-invented the psalm-song as the revivalist
“spiritual.” What role did the nineteenth-cen-
tury publishers of “shape note” songbooks (per-
haps the first mass medium for “popular” music
in America) and the itinerant masters of “sing-
ing schools” play in spreading a new kind of
sacred music throughout the countryside? Why
did songs of “love and death,” such as “Barbara
Allen” and “The House Carpenter,” become the
pre-eminent form of ballad in America? I used
Robert Farris Thompson’s video African Art in
Motion to illustrate how the fundamentals of
West African musical traditions differ from those
of the European in tonality, rhythm, and dance.

Our first guest lecturer, John Grayson of the
Religion Department, offered a thoughtful over-
view of gospel music’s development, focusing
on the career of composer Thomas A. Dorsey.
Grayson argued that gospel music was perhaps
the best example of how popular music inte-
grated African, European, and indigenous mu-

sical styles, and he stressed that gospel had
always blurred the lines between the sacred and
secular concerns of the urban black community.
The class received a special treat when one of
the students, gospel singer Funteller Thomas,
performed a breathtaking, a cappella version of
Dorsey’s “Precious Lord” in class.

The two weeks spent on blues and jazz were
especially intense, and I probably tried to cover
too much (Figures 1 and 2). Robert Palmer’s
Deep Blues, although perhaps too detailed, pro-
vided an excellent introduction to the Delta
blues tradition. As with our explorations into
New Orleans jazz I asked the students to try to
connect musical styles to specific times and
places. What was unique in the social and politi-
cal history of post-Reconstruction New Orleans
that helps account for the explosion of what
became known as jazz? What was the role of
Creoles—who are neither black nor white, and
both—in the development of this innovative
style? How did the obscure musicians who lived
and worked in the turn-of-the-century Delta
create a music that is now instantly recognizable
(and more popular than ever) around the world?
To what extent has the rather continuous migra-
tion of twentieth-century black America from
country to city been imaginatively reflected in
blues music? Conversely, how have even the
most polished “uptown” blues stylings retained
the themes and feel of classic country blues?
An in-class screening of Bessie Smith’s spectacular
short 1929 film St. Louis Blues (the only surviv-
ing performance footage of her) led to an ex-
tended discussion of Smith’s extraordinary popu-
larit y, and that of other female blues singers
during the 1920s. Out-of-class screenings of
The Harlem Rhythm and Blues Review (1935)
and Bruce Ricker’s seminal documentary Last
of the Blue Devils (1982) illustrated the wide
range of expressive performance styles in the
r&b and jazz traditions.

Dealing with country music presented a spe-
cial challenge: nearly everyone in the class
had it. I decided to work with that and urged
the students to articulate why. In fact, a great
distinction between country music turned on
class and regional differences, and to (often uncon-
scious) responses to cultural cues (“it’s low-rent,”
“it’s for the uneducated,” “every song sounds the
same,” “it’s for men only”).

Reading Loretta Lynn’s autobiography, Coal
Miner’s Daughter, as well as seeing the film
version of her story, definitely helped to human-
ize the country scene and dispel easy notions
about the music’s “inherent” sexism. Lynn’s
career also provided a fine case study of the
tangled contradictions that have always accom-
panied the commercialization of country music.
Her music also helped us to consider several of
the “master narratives” present in country mu-
sic, the most important of which may be an
insistent longing for a simpler, less compli-
cated, more moral “country life.”

Robert Marquez of the Latin American Stud-
ies Program provided a brilliant and concise
overview of “The Latin Tiempo” in American
popular music (Figure 3). Marquez began with
examples of Puerto Rican and Cuban roots
music from the early twentieth century, includ-
ing aguinaldo, plena, bomba, and son styles.

He then traced the migration of these forms to
the mainland, the fusion of son and plena with
every kind of jazz, the extraordinary popularity of
mambo and other Latin dance styles in the 1950s, and
the emergence of salsa in the 1960s. An in-class
screening of the documentary on Machito argu-
alaby the most influential of all Latin musicians,
drove home the creative power of this tradi-
tion, as well as its cross-pollination with jazz.

The movie Crossover Dreams, featuring the
Panamanian singer/songwriter Ruben Blades,
rasted critical (and universal) issues about as-
similation and “making it” for musicians out-
side the mainstream. In addition to educating us
about the particulars of Latin music, Marquez’s
presentation also forced the class to consider
American Studies as something far more com-
plex than simply United States Studies.

Rock ’n’ roll, soul music, world beat, and hip-
hop all received short shrift I’m afraid. The story
of early rock ’n’ roll was fairly familiar to the
students, but it was hard for many of them to hear
Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, or
the other pioneers white rockers as anything but
cammy. They were intrigued, however, by the
relationship between the origins of rock and
the rise of the teenager as a key force in postwar
consumer culture. Nelson George’s Where Did
Our Love Go? is the best book on Motown, and
it contains an enormous amount of insight about

American Studies 101

Blues Styles

(1936) Robert Johnson, “Crossroad Blues”
(1936) Robert Johnson, “If I Had Possession
Over Judgment Day”
(1950) Muddy Waters, “Rollin’ and
Tumblin’”
(1960) B.B. King, “You Done Lost Your
Good Thing Now”
(1927) Bessie Smith, “Empty Bed Blues”
(1929) Bessie Smith, St. Louis Blues
(Film)
(1942) Memphis Minnie, “Me and My
Chaffeur”
(1954) Jimmy Rogers, “Chicago Bound”
(1953) Ruth Brown, “Mama, He Treats
Your Daughter Mean”
(1954) Joe Turner, “Shake, Rattle, and
Roll”

Video

(1976) The Band, From The Last Waltz,
Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
Paul Butterfield, “Mystery Train”

FIGURE 1: Blues Recordings Syllabus.
the music business and the price of crossover success for African American culture. Students
did not quite know how to react to "The T.A.M.I.
Show," a 1964 filmed concert that includes
powerful performances from James Brown, the
Miracles, Marvin Gaye, and the Rolling Stones,
along with painful-to-watch appearances by
Lesley Gore, Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas,
and Gerry and the Pacemakers—all surrounded
by female go-go dancers in cages. Several stud-
ents wanted to know if James Brown had been
on drugs. Were these the same ones who had
never heard of Bob Dylan? Stan Lathan's un-
derrated 1984 film Beat Street breathed life into
a standard, Hollywood formula music film by
fully showing the connections between rappers,
breakdancers, and graffiti writers. Douglas Amy
of the Politics Department led a lively session
on Live Crew and the politics of music censor-
ship, which brought us up to the present.

As with all survey courses, there was not
enough time to appropriately cover the topic.
To a certain extent the class was a victim of its
own success: too many students, not enough
discussion or attention to readings, no space
for student presentations. The large lecture format,
of course, inhibited discussion, and with no
TAs I made final papers optional. Everyone
took a midterm and final, which included musi-
cal and video identifications. Undoubtedly this
class would work better if it were smaller and if
each student were required to write about popu-
lar music and present her findings to the class.
But I think this version of American Studies 101
succeeded in educating students about the vari-
ety, artistry, intelligence, and sheer emotional
power to be found in American popular music.
Course evaluations suggested that it also en-
couraged further listening, reading, and viewing.
And I like to think that the course also
proved Chuck Berry right: "Any old way you
choose it," taking popular music seriously offers
a vital and exciting way into American culture
and history.

COURSE SYLLABUS

AMERICAN STUDIES 101
SPRING 1991 PROF. DANIEL CZITROM
POPULAR MUSIC AND AMERICAN CULTURE

For any musical innovation is full of
danger to the whole State, and ought to be
prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can
quite believe him; he says that when modes
of music change, the fundamental laws of
the State always change with them.
—Plato, The Republic, Book IV

It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that
swing.
—Duke Ellington

Roll over Beethoven/And tell Tchaikovsky
the news.
—Chuck Berry

This class offers an introduction to American
Studies through popular music. Our course is
based on the assumption that a close examina-
tion of musical practices over time and space can
illuminate some of the fundamental issues in
American culture and society. Among these are
the formation of communities, courtship rituals,
urbanization and immigration, race relations,
social protest, generational conflict, the com-
mercialization of leisure, and the growth of the
mass media. By "musical practices," I mean the
complex relationships that exist at any given
moment between musical performers, audiences,
the music itself, the music business, and the
the technologies that influence the production,
distribution, and consumption of music. Above all,
you will be asked to listen to, read about, and
respond to many different types of American
popular music. In addition, several visiting lect-
urers will join us during the semester, giving
you some sense of the rich variety of approaches
represented on the American Studies Com-
mittee.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Each student will take a Midterm (March 27)
and Final (to be scheduled). These exams will
test material covered in class sessions, films,
and readings. A portion of the exams will consist
of musical identifications. In addition, you have
the option of writing a short, 5-7 page paper on
a topic that you want to explore more fully.
Paper possibilities include (but are not limited
to): a brief research paper on a particular musical
figure, trend, or historical event; an analysis of
songs or performances; a review of a musician's
autobiography; the treatment of music in film or
fiction. A paper is NOT required for achieving
the highest grade in the course; it offers an
opportunity for you to get deeper into a subject
of special interest.

REQUIRED BOOKS

Daniel Kingman, American Music, 2nd ed.
Robert Palmer, Deep Blues
Loretta Lynn, Coal Miner's Daughter
Grell Marcus, Mystery Train
Nelson George, Where Did Our Love Go?

FILM SERIES

This is an integral part of the course; all films
are REQUIRED viewing. Screenings will be in
Dwight 101 at 7:30 pm SHARP.

February 11: Say Amen, Somebody (1983)
February 25: Harlem Rhythm and Blues Re-
view (1955)
March 4: Last of the Blue Devils (1982)
March 11: Coal Miner's Daughter (1980)
April 1: The Complete Beatles (1982)
April 8: Crossover Dreams (1986)
April 15: The T.A.M.I. Show (1965)
April 22: The Harder They Come (1973)
April 29: Beat Street (1984)

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<td>2/18-20:</td>
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<td>Minstrelsy, Ragtime, Tin Pan Alley</td>
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