

"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: Senior Seminar." Both of these are conceived as topics courses that draw on the intellectual interests of the American Studies Committee. The senior 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 Faragher. 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 that mass-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, Patsy Cline, James Brown, Tito Puente, Ray Charles, and so on. Discussion suggested that the ever-tightening constrictions of American mass media were partly to blame:

strictly controlled Top 40 radio playing the same "classic," "lite," or "current" hits; the rise of AOR format ("Album Oriented Rock," later dubbed "Apartheid 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?

"I got no kick against modern jazz
Unless they start to play it too darn 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 awailing sax
I must admit they had a rockin' band
Man they was blowin' like a hurricane

"Way down South they gave a jubilee
The country folks they had a jamboree
They're drinking home brew from a wooden
cup
The folks dancing got all shook up

"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 arockin' 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 South to a jubilee (echoing the celebration of Emancipation), traveling 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 changer, film, and video projection capabil-

TEACHING

from page 9

ity—but occasional technical glitches were inevitable 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, supplemented by four other books.

For example, in the week devoted to Anglo-European Folksong Traditions and African Transformations, I asked students to consider the process by which camp-meeting Protestantism re-invented the psalm-song as the revivalist "spiritual." What role did the nineteenth-century publishers of "shape note" songbooks (perhaps the first mass medium for "popular" music in America) and the itinerant masters of "singing 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.

February 25-27, 1991
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 Chauffeur"
- (1954) Jimmy Rogers, "Chicago Bound"
- (1953) Ruth Brown, "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean"
- (1954) Joe Turner, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll"
- (1959) Ray Charles, "The Right Time"

Video

- (1976) The Band, From *The Last Waltz*
Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy"
Paul Butterfield, "Mystery Train"

FIGURE 1: Blues Recordings Syllabus.

Our first guest lecturer, John Grayson of the Religion Department, offered a thoughtful overview 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 integrated African, European, and indigenous musical 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, provided 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 political 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 migration 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 surviving performance footage of her) led to an extended discussion of Smith's extraordinary popularity, and that of other female blues singers during the 1920s. Out-of-class screenings of *The Harlem Rhythm and Blues Review* (1955) 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 special challenge: nearly everyone in the class hated it. I decided to work with that and I urged the students to articulate why. In fact, a great deal of the dislike for country music turned on class and regional differences, and to (often unconscious) responses to cultural cues ("its 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 humanize the country scene and to 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 accompanied the commercialization of country music. Her music also helped us to consider several of the "master narratives" present in country music, the most important of which may be an insistent longing for a simpler, less complicated, more moral "country life."

Roberto Marquez of the Latin American Stud-

March 4, 1991
American Studies 101

Jazz: New Orleans to Swing

- (rec. 1932) Sidney Bechet, "Maple Leaf Rag"
- (rec. 1938) Sidney Bechet, "Weary Blues"
- (1926) Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, "Muskrat Ramble"
- (1928) Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, "West End Blues" (with Earl Hines, piano)
- (1929) Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?" (written by Fats Waller/Andy Razaf)
- (1926) Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers, "Black Bottom Stomp"
- (1928) Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, "Dardanella"
- (1928) Duke Ellington, "Black and Tan Fantasy" (with Bubber Miley, trumpet)
- (1937) Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter, "Honeysuckle Rose"
- (1935) Benny Goodman, "King Porter Stomp" (written by Jelly Roll Morton; arranged by Fletcher Henderson)

FIGURE 2. Jazz Recordings Syllabus.

ies Program provided a brilliant and concise overview of "The Latin Tinge" in American popular music (Figure 3). Marquez began with examples of Puerto Rican and Cuban roots music from the early twentieth century, including *aguinaldo*, *plena*, *bomba*, and *son* styles. He then traced the migration of these forms to the mainland, the fusion of *son* and *plena* with 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, arguably the most influential of all Latin bandleaders, brought home the creative power of this tradition, as well as its cross-pollination with jazz. The movie *Crossover Dreams*, featuring the Panamanian singer/songwriter Ruben Blades, raised critical (and universal) issues about assimilation and "making it" for musicians outside 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 complex 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 most of them to hear Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, or the other pioneer white rockers as anything but campy. 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

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 students 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 underrated 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 2Live Crew and the politics of music censorship, 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 musical and video identifications. Undoubtedly this

class would work better if it were smaller and if each student were required to write about popular music and present her findings to the class. But I think this version of American Studies 101 succeeded in educating students about the variety, artistry, intelligence, and sheer emotional power to be found in American popular music. Course evaluations suggested that it also encouraged 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 examination 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 commercialization 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 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 lecturers will join us during the semester, giving you some sense of the rich variety of approaches represented on the American Studies Committee.

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 reading. 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*
 Greil 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 Review* (1955)
 March 4: *Last of the Blue Devils* (1982)
 March 11: *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980)
 April 1: *The Compleat 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)

see **TEACHING** on page 12

page 11

April 8 & 10, 1991
 American Studies 101

The Latin Tinge

Roberto Marquez, Guest Lecturer

I. Roots and Rhythm: The Island Backdrop 1880-1920s

Danza: Morel Campos, "Una Caña al Aire"
Mazurca: Ladislao Martfnez, "Aurora"
Aguinaldo: Ladislao Martfnez, "Felicitaciones"
Seis: Claudio Ferrer, "En Borinquen patria mfa" (with *Décima*)
Plena: César Concepción, "La Máquina patinaba"

II. Transition: *Son* and The Cuban Connection: 1930-40

Trio Matamoros, "Lágrimas Negras"
 Don Azpiazu & Havana Casino Orq., "El Manisero"
 Rafael Hernández, "Lamento borincano"

III. Fusion and Merger: *Son*, Swing, and Jazz: 1940-1950

Arsenio Rodríguez, "El Reloj de la pastora"
 Chano Pozo & Dizzy Gillespie, "Manteca"

IV. The *Son* and *Plena* Go Up-Tempo: Machito, Cortijo, and The Barrio Sound: 1950s

Plena: Rafael Cortijo, "Y Pedro Flores en Puerto Rico jugano gallos"
Mambo/Cha Benny Moré, "Bonito y sabroso"
Cha Cha: Mongo Santamaría/Willie Bobo, "Chano Pozo"

V. Salsa Comes Into Its Own: The 1960s and After

Johnny Pacheco/Fania All Stars, "Lamento de un guajiro"
 Eddie Palmieri, "Justicia"
 Celia Cruz, "Quimbara"
 Joe Cuba, "Bang Bang"
 Willie Colón, "Calle Luna, Calle Sol"

VI. Emerging Voices

Yomo Toro, "Funky Jíbaro"
 Paquito D'Rivera, "Manhattan Burn"
 Nestor Torres, "Tropicalfa"

FIGURE 3. *Latin Recordings Syllabus.*

TEACHING

from page 11

CLASS SCHEDULE

Readings

1/28-30:

Introduction to Course
Listening to Learn, Learning to Listen

2/4-6:

Anglo-European Folksong Traditions
African Transformations
In-Class Screening: *African Art in Motion*

Kingman, Ch. 1-2

2/11-13:

"Highway to Heaven": Sacred Song
The Gospel Sound
Guest Lecturer: John Grayson, Religion

Kingman, Ch. 6

2/18-20:

The Music Business: Sheet Music to Records
Minstrelsy, Ragtime, Tin Pan Alley

Kingman, Ch.11-13

2/25-27:

"Blues Fallin' Down Like Rain"
From Country to City: Blues Traditions
In-Class Screening: *St. Louis Blues* (1929),
featuring Bessie Smith

Palmer, *Deep Blues*

3/4-6:

"Struttin' With Some Barbecue":
New Orleans Jazz
From Swing to Bop: Jazz Traditions

Kingman, Ch. 6

3/11-13:

"I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive":
Country and Western Music
The Nashville Sound

Lynn, *Coal Miner's Daughter*
Kingman, Ch. 7

3/25-27

MIDTERM, 3/27

4/1-3:

Rock'n'Roll I: Origins and Early Years
Rhythm and Blues, Rockabilly, Doo-Wop,
Teen Idols, British Invasion

Marcus, *Mystery Train*
("Elvis")
Kingman, Ch. 9

4/8-10:

"Mundo Latino"
The Latin Tinge
In-Class Screening: *Machito* (1989)
Guest Lecturer: Roberto Marquez,
Latin American Studies

Kingman, Ch. 3

4/15-17:

Rock'n'Roll II: Scenes and Styles
Motown Memphis Soul, Folk Rock,
Tex-Mex, Psychedelia, Corporate Rock

George, *Where Did
Our Love Go?*
Marcus, *Mystery Train*
("Sly Stone: The Myth of Staggerlee")

4/22-24:

World Beat: Reggae, Disco, Afro-Pop
New Technologies and the Rise of MTV
Guest Lecturer: Susan Douglas,
Hampshire College

4/29-5/1:

Wild Style: Hip Hop Culture
Censorship and the Politics of Rap
Guest Lecturer: Douglas Amy, Politics