Popular music (or pop music) is a global network of meaning that cuts across difference in a resounding global call-and-response. It erases, redraws, and then erases again the boundaries between the economic and the aesthetic, the self and the other, the contained unit and its rhythmic unraveling, and the musical and the textual. Popular music, based on the resonance of the African talking drums and continuously harvested to propel marketing schemes, political campaigns, social movements, and community empowerment, cannot be easily tossed into categorical piles of “mainstream” or “alternative.” It relies both on established modes of communication and meaning, and on radical new ways of describing, negotiating, and being in the world.

Thirty years of controversy in the field of popular music studies have shown us that cultural studies have much to gain from taking popular music seriously. Popular music discourses emerge in myriad arenas: in classrooms,
academic conferences, independent weekly newspapers, pop criticism roundtables, in the aisles of record stores, and in front of blaring TVs. Everywhere, people are thinking critically about what music does and what it can do. Critics harvest a deeper understanding of what is going on in a particular song, album, video, or performance, and put that insight into conversation with our affective, embodied, and poetic responses as musical fans, consumers, and practitioners.

This course will sharpen your ability to discern the ways in which musical practice matters politically. We will study how the realm of pop music, for all its play, experimentation, lightness, commercialism, and aesthetic excess, should be taken seriously, even as we dance. We will look beyond genre and labels to examine the deeper meaning embedded in pop communication. Rather than accept interpretations based on surface lyrical content or generic “sound,” we will dig deeply into the music’s aesthetic texts and contexts to understand what it does to the world around it. You will come to better understand how meaning is expressed, created, circumscribed, obscured, laid bare, and made mobile through the medium of pop.

In this course, I use critical key terms and core concepts in cultural and media studies to “unpack” (analyze) the many ways in which all aspects of culture move through popular music. As you learn these terms and concepts, you will become ready to join emerging critical conversations about what kinds of possibilities pop entails, and use your new tools as a music critic to celebrate and nourish pop’s most powerful qualities.

Given the wealth of popular music available online, we will ground our study with blogs, videos, sound clips, and online interviews from musicians, producers, bookers, label owners, dancers, and more. These resources will help us understand the negotiations that take place between their own creative work and the popular market. Because local “scenes” are the crucibles of musical creativity, we will ask what connects local artists to the communities in which they live. We will also have the chance to learn more about the local scene through our assignments, readings, and other course materials.

The questions we will address include:

- What do we mean when we talk about “the popular”?
- What is culture, and what does it sound like?
- What is the relationship of pop to the “folk” and to the “classical”?
- What aesthetic forms can music take in addition to the pop song?
- What is the relationship of aesthetics to politics?
- Who defines what pop music is? How is the commercial definition accepted or contested by its fans and practitioners?
- Who makes popular music? Who consumes it?
- In what ways are women visibly participating in pop music, either as artists or as dancers, fans, journalists, musicians, and so on? How are women involved in the creation of new kinds of music, in the teaching of musical tradition, and in less visible spaces of the church, home, school, or community?
- What are possible correspondences and disconnections between what pop artists mean to say and popular interpretations of what they mean?
- How do the global, historical, and diasporic movements intersect with contemporary movements in local music?
- How is the development of local music similar to and different from the trajectory of other musical scenes and genres?
- What makes certain regions hotspots for musical creativity?
- What kind of movements are emerging in our local music scenes?
If you have a hearing impairment or visual impairment or other special circumstances, you are very welcome in this course! I will be happy to work with you to find alternative assignments that will help you complete all requirements of the course and explore your investments in music critically. Please contact me before beginning Lesson 1 so that we may discuss your needs.

Please read this home page carefully—it serves as a syllabus and as a contract between you, me, and your classmates.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

Upon successful completion of this course, you can expect to

- understand the complexities of meaning inherent in pop music
- understand the forms and functions of pop music criticism
- be able to think critically about the ways in which musical practice intersects with media
- be able to identify and describe the texts and contexts of a given pop song, album, or performance
- have further developed a public critical writing voice
- be able to identify intellectual discourses taking place outside of the academy and engage these discourses in your academic work
- be grounded in the history of your local musical practices
- know the course key words and core concepts
- be able to discuss challenging issues in the politics of pop representation
- be able to critically unpack a pop album, artist, or song.

**MATERIALS**

See the course description for the most up-to-date list of materials.

**COURSE COMPONENTS**

Each of the fourteen lessons plus the review lesson contains reading and discussion assignments. In addition, larger assignments and exams that you will complete at different points during the semester are listed below (see Schedule, in the navigation bar at left, for due dates).

**Discussion Forum Posts**

Discussion posts must be posted in the Forums section for the lesson in which they respond to. Regular (short) posts should be 250 words or so; your long posts should be around 600-800 words. Responses to your classmates' posts (longer and shorter) are due the following Monday evening and should be around 100 words. You should write two responses per post/assignment.

**Midterm Essay Exam**

Your midterm exam will be an essay that shows your understanding of the key terms and key concepts covered up to that point. It will become available (and is due) in the Assignments & Exams section as a Microsoft Word document on its scheduled date.
Live Music Review

You will attend a live performance by a local artist or group and use our course materials to critically unpack the creative, political, aesthetic, and poetic values used by your chosen practitioner(s). See Assignments & Exams in the navigation bar at left for details. Your Live Music Review is due in the Assignments & Exams section as a Microsoft Word document by its due date.

Final Project: Artist Profile and Promotional Materials

Your final project will involve research on a local musical practitioner (or group) of your choice. Using interview materials, live performance, recordings, and our critical course materials, you will write a full-length profile of this artist or group and the ways in which they work upon the world through their art. You will gather these materials into a digital press kit. See Assignments & Exams in the navigation bar at left for details. Your Final Project must be submitted in the Assignments & Exams section as a PDF file by its due date.

Final Exam

The final exam will consist of short-answer questions related to our course key words and core concepts. The final will involve listening to/watching/interacting with a particular sample of popular music. You will be asked to engage its specific qualities according to a series of course keywords and critical concepts. It will become available (and is due) in the Assignments & Exams section as a Microsoft Word document on its scheduled date.

Important Note: Be sure to look over all of the course assignments now, at the beginning of the course. If you have issues with mobility and/or serious professional, health, or family obligations that prevent you from completing any assignment as stated, you must let me know no later than the second week of the semester and work with me to find a reasonable and rigorous alternative assignment. With a little time and some creative suggestions on your part, I am happy to work with you in this regard. Last-minute requests for alternate assignments will not be granted.

CLASS DISCUSSION

The discussion forums simulate the three fifty-minute meetings each week of a traditional classroom course. Participation is required. Discussions in this course are a primary teaching and learning activity. Discussion will be student-led.

Regular (short) posts should be 250 words or so; your long posts should be around 600-800 words. Responses to your classmates’ posts (longer and shorter) are due the following Monday evening and should be around 100 words. You should write two responses per post/assignment.

I will post a weekly thread called “Lesson Questions & Clarifications” that will give you a space to ask me questions about the readings, work through difficulties with key concepts, and ask for more explanation of assignments. Rather than email specific questions to me, post them in this thread so that your classmates can also learn from our conversation.

When you are participating in a discussion, each response you post will have two fields that you must complete in order to get credit for your response: the comment field and the subject field. For the subject field, you are required to create a “subject” for your posting that conveys the main point of your comment. It is not enough to post a few key words; you must create a short summary of your main point.
Discussion Policies

You should be aware that, like all popular and/or cultural studies, we will be dealing with issues of racial, class, and gender inequality; sexuality; performances that have been designed to shock and even offend; and the kind of violent imagery or hidden messages that are common to popular culture. Our online classroom is a space in which we learn to consider and challenge others’ viewpoints while critically examining our own viewpoints, using informed thinking and creative reasoning. Often, our most important learning experiences come from conversations and encounters that push us toward the boundaries of our comfort zones.

It is important to approach all materials and conversations in this course with a spirit of collaboration rather than competitiveness. Ask questions for clarification rather than making assumptions about another student’s (or writer’s, or artist’s) political agenda.

Your contributions are expected to be both on-topic and respectful in tone. If you have any questions regarding the use of the forum, do not hesitate to email me.

That being said, do feel free to raise critical issues. I want our discussion to recognize the implications of cultural products, performances, and discourses in the lives of people and communities. Evidence and further critical materials and readings can be helpful to our work of understanding how popular culture affects us and our neighbors.

GRADES

Your final grade will be based on the following:

- Participation in Class Discussion: 50 percent
- Midterm Essay: 10 percent
- Live Music Review: 10 percent
- Final Project: 20 percent
- Final Exam: 10 percent

All assignments must be submitted by their due dates. Because other students depend on timely posting to respond, discussion posts will not receive credit if at all late. Late assignments will lose a full letter grade for each 1–24 hours late (a late B will become a C). I will not accept assignments that are more than three days (72 hours) late. In order to submit grades on time in accordance with UNC policies, the Final Exam must be submitted by the due date. Review the Schedule (see left-hand navigation bar) so that you can plan to meet the deadlines. I will not make exceptions.

Grades will be determined on the basis of a C-scale, with students receiving C’s for average work. B’s will be given for those who perform above average, and A’s for those whose performance is excellent.

Remember, participation in the discussion forum is a required element of the course. Each post, much like a question on an exam, is a component of the overall discussion grade. Your contributions to the discussion forum will be evaluated in terms of your engagement with your classmates, along with the originality of your ideas and your use of course key terms, concepts, and reference to the readings. This is very important: If plagiarism is discovered on any post, then the entire discussion portion of the course will be failed, effectively ensuring your failure of the entire course and ensuring your loss of credits for the course on
STUDY TIPS

Read Ahead and Ask Questions

It is critical that you keep up with our reading assignments; if you get behind, the rest of your work will suffer greatly and our weekly discussion forums will be impossible. Some of the materials for this course are quite easy to read and digest, and I’ve used these easy-readers to augment one or two more-challenging theoretical readings that take time and sometimes multiple reads to completely understand them. The more difficult readings have been chosen carefully as important guides to your critical thinking about popular music and are well worth the extra effort. If you struggle with some of them, do your best to gain what you can in terms of the lesson key terms, and be aware that if you have questions, other students likely do, too. Post your questions to the Lesson Questions & Clarifications thread of our weekly discussion forum, which I will check regularly.

Keep Up With Assignments

It is fundamental that you stay up-to-date with the assignments. The work load can become overwhelming and discouraging when one or more lessons are overdue. In addition, late assignments will drastically lower your final grade. In working through each lesson, make sure to read the comments and the full assignment before beginning and make sure you understand and can use the key terms accordingly. Participate in class discussion using the key terms and core concepts, and refer to course materials. There may be several tasks to complete each lesson; reading each lesson page fully before you begin will give you a framework for the whole lesson.

I strongly recommend that you check this site every day (at least Monday through Friday) for new announcements from me and new discussion posts from your classmates.

Explore On Your Own

Much of the music, and many of the styles and artists, discussed in the course can be accessed online. Direct links are provided on each lesson’s page. In addition to the sites listed with each lesson, you are encouraged to explore the Web on your own and discover websites that complement the course. Some places you might begin your musical exploration are listed below.

POPULAR MUSIC ONLINE

If you are interested in learning more about new genres of music online or want to participate in public conversations about musical artists you are just hearing about, check out these great music sites.

- NPR Music is a great place not only to learn about new music, but to hear interviews and gain background information on the artists as well.
- Visit Pandora.com, Beats Music, or Spotify to listen to Internet radio and discover new music.
- The Hype Machine is a music blog aggregator that collects the blog entries and audio files of new music people are writing about—the great thing here is that you can actually download the music!
- Rhapsody.com offers a nearly comprehensive database of artists and styles catagorized in very specific scenes and genre.
• Last.fm not only provides online radio streaming service, but will also keep track of your own tastes and plays with IScrobblor software. It is often quite interesting to see what you have listened to be charted!
• Lastly, don’t forget to check out UNC’s very own great campus radio station, WXYC, which can be listened to at 89.3 FM or streamed here.

LIVE PERFORMANCE VENUES

The experience of witnessing popular music in performance is important to your understanding of how music affects us. Some of the unique venues in which to find a variety of local music in the North Carolina Triangle region include:

• Local 506, Chapel Hill
• Cat’s Cradle, Carrboro
• The Pinhook, Durham
• Carolina Theatre, Durham
• Alumni Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill
• Duke Performance Series, Durham
• Equateur International, Raleigh
• The Nightlight, Chapel Hill

ACADEMIC POLICIES

By enrolling as a student in this course, you agree to abide by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill policies related to the acceptable use of online resources. Please consult the Acceptable Use Policy on topics such as copyright, net-etiquette, and privacy protection.

As part of this course, you may be asked to participate in online discussions or other online activities that may include personal information about you or other students in the course. Please be respectful of the rights and protection of other participants under the UNC-Chapel Hill Information Security Policies when participating in online classes.

When using online resources offered by organizations not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill, such as Google or YouTube, please note that the Terms and Conditions of these companies and not the University’s Terms and Conditions apply. These third parties may offer different degrees of privacy protection and access rights to online content. You should be well aware of this when posting content to sites not managed by UNC-Chapel Hill.

When links to sites outside of the unc.edu domain are inserted in class discussions, please be mindful that clicking on sites not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill may pose a risk for your computer due to the possible presence of malware on such sites.

Honor Code

Remember that as a student of UNC-Chapel Hill, you are bound by the University’s Honor Code: “It shall be the responsibility of every student at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to obey and support the enforcement of the Honor Code, which prohibits lying, cheating, or stealing when these actions involve academic processes or University students or academic personnel acting in an official capacity.” An especially serious
Honor Code violation is plagiarism, and you must be careful not to quote or paraphrase online or other materials for your blog assignments without citing them properly.

Please view this brief Plagiarism Tutorial created by the librarians of UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University, NC State University, and NC Central University. If you are uncertain about what needs to be cited, err on the side of caution.

Again: If plagiarism is discovered on any discussion post, the entire discussion portion of the course will be failed, effectively ensuring your failure of the entire course and ensuring the loss of credits for the course on your transcript.

Policy on Computer Difficulties

Enough time has been allotted in the course schedule so that any computer difficulties can be addressed and fixed prior to the due date for the assignment. Should emergencies happen, it is important that you contact me prior to the deadline for the assignment. If you wait until after the assignment is due, your assignment will be graded down regardless of computer difficulties.

Office of Accessibility/Special Accommodations

If you are a student with a documented disability, you can receive services through Accessibility Resources & Service. You must self-identify through Accessibility Resources to receive services or accommodation from either of these offices. Accessibility Resources works closely with programs, offices, and departments throughout the University to help create an accessible environment.

The office is located in Suite 2126 of the Student Academic Services Building (SASB), 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC, and is open from 8 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday. You can contact them by phone at 919-962-8300 or 711 (NC-RELAY), or by email at accessibility@unc.edu.

ONLINE LEARNING READINESS

Before you begin, please complete this Online Learning Readiness Questionnaire. The assessment results include information on self direction, time management, learning preferences, improving reading skills, listening skills, study habits, avoiding procrastination, and technology skills.

COMM 142 includes a substantial amount of coursework. It is vital that you keep up with assignments. Falling behind can sometimes present an overwhelming obstacle to success.

LESSONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit One: Sounding the Popular Arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Unit Two: Markets/Mediation/Representation |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 5</th>
<th>Production and Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 6</td>
<td>Fandom and Genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 7</td>
<td>Mediated Representations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 8</td>
<td>Working Through the Pop Sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unit Three: Cultural Emergence/Popular Movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 9</th>
<th>Participation and Aesthetics: Local Scenes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 10</td>
<td>Where My Ladies At?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 11</td>
<td>Music, Diaspora, and Ethnography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 12</td>
<td>Going Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 13</td>
<td>Celebrating North Carolina and the Global South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 14</td>
<td>Digital Living and Global Media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© The University of North Carolina
Send comments and questions to fridaycenter@unc.edu.