BLACK MUSIC AND AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY

Course Objective
This course examines the centrality of black popular music in American cultural history from 1945 to the present. It considers the central themes of black music and how they reflect the black experience in postwar America, as well as the ways that the music – and those themes – evolve over time.

Required Texts
A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America, Craig Werner
Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman
The Columbia Guide to African American History Since 1939, Robert L. Harris Jr. and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn
Mo’ Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove, Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and Ben Greenman

Alexander Shashko
shashko@wisc.edu
Office Hours
Mondays 11-1
4137 Helen C. White

3650 Humanities  9:30-10:45 TR
Course Requirements
Midterm Exam One (25%)  
Midterm Exam Two (25%)  
Discussion (20%)  
Our America Final Paper (30%)

Grading Scale
Important Note: The 100-point grading scale is applied on the two midterms, but they are not used to compute the final grade. The 100-point scale grade is changed into a letter grade, which is then computed on a four-point scale. (Examples: 97=A=4.0, 91=AB=3.5)

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<th>Score</th>
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Class Policies

1. Attendance is required in discussion sections. Missing more than three discussion sections will result in a failing grade for your discussion grade. Missing more than four discussion sections will result in a failing grade for the course. Excused absences are intended to cover emergency situations. They are not free days off. Save them until you need them. Attendance will be taken. Note: We do not compute absences until the end of the semester. It is your responsibility to monitor your attendance.

2. Lecture slides and notes will not be posted online, nor will they be shared by the professor or TA. They are only available in lecture on the day they are discussed.

3. Anyone caught plagiarizing any work or cheating on a test will fail the class. I will pursue all disciplinary options to their fullest extent. If you have any questions at all about what constitutes plagiarism, ask the professor or your TA. Presenting more than three consecutive words of any source without attribution is plagiarism. This includes web sites.

4. All grade complaints must be submitted in writing, via email, to the professor within three calendar days of receiving the grade. The TAs will not discuss grade complaints unless or until it is cleared with the professor.

5. Laptops are allowed in lecture and discussion but only for note taking purposes. If you are found using your laptop for other purposes, you will receive one warning. On the second occasion, you fail the course. Surfing the Internet or using cell phones is not allowed.

7. All weekly reading assignments should be completed by the first lecture of the week.

8. Students must take both exams and submit a completed, final paper. You will fail the course if you do not complete all three assignments.
The Movement and the Mainstream

Sep. 5 - Introduction

Sep. 10 - Characteristics, Impulses and Foundations
Sep. 12 - Rhythm and Blues and Rock and Roll
Reading: Werner, Introduction, Ch. 1-3
Columbia, “Foundations of the Movement” and “Black Music and Black Possibility”

Sep. 17 - Elvis, Sam Cooke and the “Crossover”
Sep. 19 - The Making of Motown
Reading: Werner Ch. 4-8
Columbia, “The Civil Rights Movement”

Sep. 24 - Southern Soul
Sep. 26 - Curtis Mayfield and Aretha Franklin
Reading: Werner Ch. 9-14
Columbia, “African-Americans in the Military”

Black Power,
Vietnam and the Seventies

Oct. 1 - Vietnam and the Counterculture
Oct. 3 - James Brown
Reading: Werner Ch. 15-23

Oct. 8 - Black Power
Oct. 10 - Funk
Reading: Questlove 1-4
Werner Ch. 24-30
Columbia, “Naming Ourselves” “Black Power/Black Consciousness” and “African Americans in Literature and the Arts”

Oct. 15 - Disco
Oct. 17 - Midterm Exam One
No Discussion Sections
Reading: Questlove 3-4
Werner Ch. 31-42
Columbia, “Looking Backward” and “Black Business Development”
The Hip Hop Era

Oct 22 - The Rise of Hip-Hop
Oct. 24 - Old School Hip-Hop
Reading: Questlove 4-9

Oct. 29 - Michael Jackson
Oct. 31 - MTV and the Megastars
Reading: Questlove, Ch. 10-16
   Columbia, “A Glass Half-Full”
   and “African Americans in Sports”

Nov. 5 - Gangsta Rap
Nov. 7 - Hip-Hop Crossroads
Reading: Werner, Ch. 52-57
   Questlove, Ch. 17-21

Nov. 12 - Hip-Hop and R&B
Nov. 14 - Conscious Hip Hop
Reading: Werner, Ch. 58-64

Nov. 19 - The Dirty South
Nov. 21 - Midterm Exam Two
   No Discussion Sections

Nov. 26 - The TRL Era
Nov. 28 - Thanksgiving Break

Dec. 3 - The New Superstars
Dec. 5 - Music in an Age of Terror

December 17 - Our America Final Paper Due, 2:45 p.m.
Our America Final Paper Assignment

Your assignment is to design the soundtrack for an imaginary movie based on the book Our America. The soundtrack should include six to eight songs. It should accomplish two things: 1) make it clear that you have read and understand the major events and points made in the book; 2) demonstrate your understanding of how music reflects and takes part in African American life, including information from lectures and other course readings.

You may decide to concentrate on historical or contemporary music, but you should make it clear how the songs you choose relate to what's happening in the book. You can organize the material as you see fit. The following are approaches that students have used effectively in the past:

**Choose songs that relate to specific scenes and organize the paper chronologically, briefly identifying the scene you are imagining and telling how the music relates to it.**

**Choose songs that relate to different people, or perhaps several people at different times in their lives.**

**Choose songs that combine to tell a story similar to that in the book. (If you do this, remember to make the connection clear.)**

**Choose songs that indicate how the impulses interact in Our America.**

If you’re having trouble organizing the paper, the easiest approach is to start off with a paragraph summarizing the main themes of the book and then providing a “liner note” track-by-track listing, explaining how each song ties in.

You may use any song whatsoever. It does not have to be by an African American artist. Minimize usage of songs discussed in lecture to no more than two songs. Incorporate biographical material about the artist, label, or social context, as you see fit.

Your essay should be between 1500 and 2000 words. Include a word count at the end of the essay. Papers that exceed the limit by more than 10% will be penalized.

Finally, you are writing a paper, not a list. Although you may be discussing one song after another, do not use number or bullet points to format your paper. It should have an introduction, conclusion and paragraphs typical of any other paper in the humanities.

Midterm Exam Format

This is the format for the midterm exams:

1. A series of short answer questions about material covered in lecture, discussion and the readings. You will answer 15 of 17 short answer questions on each exam. (2 points each; 30 points total)

2. An essay question that asks you to analyze a song covered in class. A week before the exam, you will receive a list of 10-12 songs potentially selected for the essay question. Of those 10-12 songs, three will be included on the exam and you will choose to write about one. See below for details on the essay portion of the exam. (70 points)
Call and Response Exam Essay Template

Write on one of the following three songs:

a) “Song A”
b) “Song B”
c) “Song C”

Your essay should be divided into two parts, the first focusing on the CALL of the song, the second on your RESPONSE to the call. It is acceptable to divide the two parts with a sub-head, but it is not necessary to do so.

In the CALL section, you should concentrate on explaining what the song meant in the context of its own time. Use any information you have—from lecture, the book, the class handouts—to discuss what the song would have meant to its original audience. Use anything you know about the artist’s life, his/her record company, and the historical events that were occurring when the song was released. Make sure you pay attention to 1) historical context; 2) the lyrics; and 3) the music. Consider the question of whether there are ambiguities in the call—whether it might have meant different things to different people or groups in the audience. You don’t have to deal with every possible audience, but specify what audience you’re concentrating on if that’s relevant.

In the RESPONSE section, you respond to the call outlined in the first part of the essay. Using two other songs discussed in class (NOT among the potential essay songs for the exam itself), discuss how musicians, specific groups of people or institutions, and American culture more broadly responded to the call. You can choose response songs that shared the impulses, themes or sound of the call, songs that differed or countered the call, or songs that head in related or different directions. There is no single correct answer to the response section, but you must make a compelling case for the connections between the call and response in musical and historical terms.

Course Designations

Requisites: None  
Course Designation: Counts toward Ethnic Studies requirement  
Breadth: Humanities  
Level: Elementary  
Repeatable for Credit: No  
L&S Credit: Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S

MEETING CREDIT HOUR POLICY STANDARDS

This class meets for two 75-minute class periods and one 50-minute discussion section each week over the fall/spring semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, problem sets, studying, etc) for about 3 hours out of classroom for every class period. This syllabus includes more information about meeting times and expectations for student work.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will demonstrate literacy in the history of race relations in the United States, focused on the significance of the African-American music within the broader social and political landscape of the United States from the 1940s to the present, through attendance in class and the completion of the course’s written assignments. Students will be able to think and write critically in an interdisciplinary manner about the relationship of music to cultural history, African-American history and the history of race and ethnicity by producing thoughtful and creative writing on their course assignments. Students will display intercultural knowledge and competence through the written assignments but particularly by participating in class discussion. They will build the foundation for civic engagement and lifelong understanding of cultural differences by engaging the nation’s multi-ethnic and multi-racial past and present.
WHAT IS BLACK MUSIC?
Black music has many definitions. Some are musicological. Some are cultural. Some are political. For our purposes, black music is the tension between two differing but related definitions.

1. Black music is music composed, created and distributed by predominantly African-American communities in the United States

2. Black music is the unique result of a merging of cultures and peoples – African, European, Latin, and Arab – both within and beyond the borders of the United States.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF BLACK MUSIC

1. Call and Response is the process by which performance becomes more than an individual statement.
   a. The “I” provides the call
   b. The “we” responds to the call
   c. The “we” response also becomes a new call, and the cycle continues

2. Polyrhythm is the simultaneous sounding of two or more rhythms.
   a. Western Europe: emphasis on melody
   b. West Africa: emphasis on rhythm

3. Improvisation is the process of creating in the moment and in response to one’s surroundings.
   a. Western Europe: emphasis on unchanging, ideal forms
   b. West Africa: emphasis on adapting to change

4. Vocalization is the process of making an instrument sound like a voice or other sound, or making a voice sound like an instrument or other sound.
   a. Western Europe: emphasis on precision
   b. West Africa: emphasis on expression

5. Functionality is the idea that music is an active part of daily life.
   a. Western Europe: emphasis on music as contemplation
   b. West Africa: Emphasis on music as action
THE THREE IMPULSES OF BLACK MUSIC

1. **The Blues Impulse**
   a. Fingering the jagged grain of your brutal experience
   b. Finding a near-tragic, near-comic voice to express that experience
   c. Reaffirming your existence

2. **The Gospel Impulse**
   a. Acknowledging the burden
   b. Bearing witness
   c. Finding redemption

3. **The Jazz Impulse**
   a. Clarifying realities
   b. Envisioning possibilities

“The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” - Ralph Ellison
How to Write an Academic Essay

Below are my general rules for writing an essay. Remember, you are presenting an argument, not merely an opinion. You are explaining how a debate has unfolded over time and why it was and/or is important.

Miscellaneous observations on a topic are not enough to make an accomplished academic essay. An essay should have an argument. It should answer a question or a few related questions. It should try to prove something - develop a single "thesis" or a short set of closely related points - by reasoning and evidence, especially including apt examples and confirming citations from any particular text or sources your argument involves. Gathering such evidence normally entails some rereading of the text or sources with a question or thesis in mind.

When - as is usually the case - an assigned topic does not provide you with a thesis ready-made, your first effort should be to formulate as exactly as possible the questions you will seek to answer in your essay. Next, develop by thinking, reading, and jotting a provisional thesis or hypothesis. Don't become prematurely committed to this first answer. Pursue it, but test it - even to the point of consciously asking yourself what might be said against it - and be ready to revise or qualify it as your work progresses. (Sometimes a suggestive possible title one discovers early can serve in the same way.)

There are many ways in which any particular argument may be well presented, but an essay's organization - how it begins, develops, and ends - should be designed to present your argument clearly and persuasively.

Successful methods of composing an essay are various, but some practices of good writers are almost invariable:

They start writing early, even before they think they are "ready" to write, because they use writing not simply to transcribe what they have already discovered but as a means of exploration.

They don't try to write an essay from beginning to end, but rather write what seems readiest to be written, even if they're not sure whether or how it will fit in.

Despite writing so freely, they keep the essay's overall purpose and organization in mind, amending them as drafting proceeds. Something like an "outline" constantly and consciously evolves, although it may never take any written form beyond scattered, sketchy reminders to oneself.

They revise extensively. Rather than writing a single draft and then merely editing its sentences one by one, they attend to the whole essay and draft and redraft—rearranging the sequence of its larger parts, adding and deleting sections to take account of what they discover in the course of composition. Such revision often involves putting the essay aside for a few days, allowing the mind to work indirectly or subconsciously in the meantime and making it possible to see the work-in-progress more objectively when they return to it.

Once they have a fairly complete and well-organized draft, they revise sentences, with special attention to transitions—that is, checking to be sure that a reader will be able to follow the sequences of ideas within sentences, from sentence to sentence, and from paragraph to paragraph. Two other important considerations in revising sentences are diction (exactness and aptness of words) and economy (the fewest words without loss of clear expression and full thought). Lastly, they proofread the final copy.
Writing and Speaking About Race

The concepts of race and ethnicity are two ways that humans classify each other, often to define and distinguish differences. These classifications are highly complicated; sometimes they are used for positive reasons and other times not. Be aware that the meaning of these concepts and the specific language used change depending on contextual factors, including the speaker, the audience, and the speaker’s purposes.

As a writer and speaker:

Use terms that focus on people rather than on the method of categorization: people with disabilities rather than disabled people; enslaved peoples rather than slaves.

Be as specific as possible. When writing about a group, refer to the specific group: People of Korean descent rather than Asians; Dominicans rather than Hispanics.

Use African American or Black to refer to Americans of African lineage. They can both be used, as both are considered appropriate.

When referring to African Americans in the plural, simply use "African Americans." Do NOT use "the African Americans." Similar, do NOT use "the blacks" or "the whites." These are highly inappropriate adaptations of the correct terms.

Avoid the term minority if possible. Minority is often used to describe groups of people who are not part of the majority. This term is being phased out because it may imply inferiority and because minorities often are not in the numerical minority. An alternative might be historically marginalized populations. If avoiding the term is not possible, qualify the term with the appropriate specific descriptor: religious minority NOT minority.

Note that the terms people of color and non-white are acceptable in some fields and some contexts and not in others. Check with your professor if you’re uncertain whether a term is acceptable.

Hispanic is typically used to refer to anyone from a Spanish-speaking background. The term white sometimes includes people who identify as Hispanic. Note, however, that many Hispanics do not identify as white.

The terms Latino/Latina/Latin are used mostly in the US to refer to US residents with ties to Latin America.

Capitalize racial/ethnic groups: Black, Asian, Native American. Depending on context, white may or may not be capitalized.

Do not hyphenate a phrase when used as a noun, but use a hyphen when two or more words are used together to form an adjective:

African Americans migrated to northern cities. (noun) African-American literature. (adjective)