

CRW 5376

Writing About Popular Music

General Information

Instructor: Dr. Jeff Sirkin
E-mail: jsirkin@utep.edu
Office Phone: 915-747-5529
Office Hours: TBA

Software Requirements

Adobe Reader (or some functional PDF reader)
Microsoft Office (available at [UTEP Bookstore](#))
UTEP E-mail account

Course Description

This class will focus on nonfiction writing about popular music. We will read a variety of nonfiction essays, along with some poetry, short fiction, and critical/cultural theory that examines popular music, popular musicians, and technologies of music and music reproduction from the early twentieth century to the present.

We'll read work by writers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Dick Hebdige, Judith Butler, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, and Frank O'Hara. Additionally, we'll read essays from contemporary music journalists and critics such as Robert Christgau, Vanessa Grigoriadis, Ann Powers, Solvej Schou, Jason Cherkis, Joe Hagan, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Kimberly Chun, Kim Gordon, Susan McClary, and many others.

Writing assignments for this class will include analytical responses to the reading material; nonfiction personal essays on popular music, musicians, live performances, genres, and musical experiences; and a final critical/creative project.

Students registered in this class should have a working understanding of essay form, should be able to write at the graduate level (critically and creatively), and should be able to read nonfiction, poetry, fiction, and theory analytically. This class will require students to read multiple essays every week, to write Creative Nonfiction essays for several small-group workshop sessions, and to participate in *all* online discussions.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, students will:

- Understand forms, techniques, strategies, and thematic concerns of nonfiction writing on popular music.
- Discuss nonfiction music writing as a mode of social, theoretical, and personal inquiry.
- Distinguish between various genres of nonfiction music writing, including record reviews, live reviews, and personal essays.

- Explore social, political, and personal ways of understanding music and music writing.
- Discuss the relationship between music and writing.
- Understand the various ways music conveys and/or structures meaning and/or experience.
- Write creative nonfiction about popular music, and/or about our own experiences with popular music.

Required Texts

Our class reading consist entirely of short essays, reviews, stories, and poems. All required texts are available as PDFs, organized by thematic unit within the "[Reading Packet](#)" folder on our home page. Additionally, you'll find a folder of "Nonrequired Reading," containing additional essays, etc., that are not required, and not assigned, but you might find of interest.

General Guidelines

Class interaction

The primary goal of this Creative Writing seminar is to develop our skills as both readers and writers. The best writers are always the best readers. We will accomplish this goal by thinking, by writing, and by engaging in discussion about the assigned texts. While I will sometimes provide brief introductions to each reading assignment, I will not lecture, as such. The majority of our interaction will instead take place via the Discussion Board, in your written responses to the texts we read for class, and the discussions that evolve around them.

Discussion Boards

In this online seminar, the discussion forums take the place of the discussion one might have in a graduate seminar classroom. They are a place to think, to ask questions of the assigned text, and to work with your classmates and the instructor to develop an understanding of the assigned reading. Make the most of the situation.

What I Expect From Your Critical Writing

Though we all have our favorite writers, books, and genres, and though there are other writers, books, and genres that we do not like, these judgments are matters of taste, and are not relevant in a graduate seminar. When writing about the books and essays we read for class, please refrain from declaring something to be "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," or variations of these. We are not here to judge the work we encounter as good writing or bad writing, real music writing or false, but to try to understand and learn from the reviews, essays, poetry, and fiction we read. Personal taste, in other words, is not productive to our conversations here. Save it for the coffee shop.

When writing critical responses in the context of this class (and others you may take as a graduate student) focus on what a text attempts to accomplish, what it says, and how it goes about doing these things. How do its various details work together to create meaning? How does its narration function to bring into focus the writer's world and the choices one

might have within that world? How does its plot (or other structure) work to illuminate or obscure the meanings it seeks to convey? How do its seemingly insignificant details help us understand its larger structures? How do its layers of structure, detail, and narration help us understand something about our own world? What are its key arguments, about music, about writing, about the ability of the writer to comprehend and convey meaning, about the world? Once we understand how something works and what it says, then we can decide if we agree or disagree, we can articulate our own informed arguments, and we can use these as the rationale for our own work. Similarly, when reading critical or theoretical work, focus on key terminology and major arguments first, then compare them to other essays and/or reviews, stories, poems we've read.

What I Expect From Your Creative Writing

Any creative nonfiction piece that you turn in for workshop should not be your first draft of that essay. Try to turn in the best possible work, to the appropriate discussion board, that you can when each workshop assignment is due. Doing so will allow you to get more advanced feedback that can help you revise towards an ultimately stronger essay. In other words, the harder you work at each stage of the writing process, the faster and better you will develop your work.

If your creative work is not posted on time for a workshop session, we will not re-schedule a future workshop for that piece. I will make no exceptions in this matter. We have a very tight schedule and can't afford to create a backlog or require your workshop group to do extra work because of lack of preparation on your part.

Reading

Students are expected to read each week's assignment prior to that week's open discussion period. Please read all texts closely, carefully, and thoughtfully. Whether we are reading theory, criticism, fiction, poetry, Discussion Board posts, joke books, cereal boxes, or some hybrid of all the above, it is our job, as writers, critics, and thinkers, to understand the material we're working with, to approach the material seriously, honestly, openly, and without prejudice. If we all engage our work in this way, this will be a great class. See the **Weekly Schedule** for a schedule of readings and assignments.

Weekly Discussion Boards

In addition to each week's reading, students will be expected to participate in each week's discussion of the reading assignment, which will take place on a Blackboard discussion board, in three parts.

- Monday Discussion Questions. The discussions will open when I post a series of questions about the week's reading on Monday morning, and you will be expected to respond thoughtfully to each of my questions with an answer of at least 150 words per question, and to read your classmates responses and respond to some of these as well.
- Critical Reading Response. The first discussion question each week will ask for your critical response to the reading, so be prepared to offer a critical analysis

(approximately 250 words, please) of some aspect of the reading at the start of each discussion.

- Wednesday Follow-up Questions. I'll post a series of "follow-up" questions on Wednesday in response to the class discussion as a whole. You will be expected to answer one or more of these follow-up questions, again with posts of at least 150 words each.

See the **Course Mechanics** page for details on weekly deadlines. All responses to discussion questions must be well considered and meaningful, and they should always provide evidence from the text(s) to support your thinking.

Final Project

The final project will consist of two items, an **analytical preface** and a **creative nonfiction essay** related to the themes and concerns of the course (i.e. music, understood from any perspective we've encountered).

- Analytical Preface: The analytical preface is a 3-5 page essay that presents, within the context of the reading you've done for the course and relevant outside sources, the rationale for your final project, and it should place your final creative nonfiction piece within the context of the fiction and non-fiction you've read for the course. You will include the final version of this Analytical Preface as the introduction to your final project. This is a formal, analytical essay. MLA formatting is required, including proper citation of texts.
- Creative Nonfiction Essay: The remainder of the final project is a 12-15 page creative nonfiction essay that examines—through its narration, characters, structure, plot, imagery, and settings—an idea about music and/or a personal experience involving music (utilizing the themes, ideas, and questions that interest you from the course readings and discussions), and that you will write about in your analytical preface. The final Creative Nonfiction Essay is due Week 15 for small group workshop. You will include the final draft along with your Analytical Preface as your final project.

Deadlines

Please be aware of all upcoming due dates. Deadlines for assignments are not flexible.

Office Hours

I will be available during specified office hours via e-mail. During this time I will answer any queries as soon as possible.

Course Communication

The interaction in this class will take place primarily through Blackboard's communication tools, including announcements, e-mail and the discussion board. Of these, we will most often use the discussion board. This is where course discussions will take place, as well as your small group workshops.

Fostering a beneficial and enjoyable classroom environment—virtual or otherwise—requires that those involved participate, that they become invested in the outcome of this participation, and that they strive for productive and supportive communication. This class will, over the course of the semester, build an intellectual community that depends primarily on virtual exchanges, and, therefore, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- An online classroom is not an anonymous environment in which to insult or attack someone else. Think about what you write before sending it—sit on it for a while, and if you later realize that the content or tone could be misinterpreted, don't send it. Please respond to each other's ideas; personal attacks are neither necessary nor acceptable. I will not tolerate antagonistic behavior, and neither should you.
 - The very nature of a graduate seminar classroom requires honest and open critique, and while this can sometimes be uncomfortable for all involved (nobody likes criticism, after all), we must stress a high level of professionalism when discussing both the course reading and our classmates' writing. This means that we should never take anything too personally, nor make personal attacks. It does not mean, however, that we can only be congratulatory or neutral. Instead, we should strive to provide constructive, thoughtful, and well-articulated criticism.
 - Effective communities share resources, so if you find an interesting article, short story, journal, review, or album, let others know.
 - For all message and discussion board postings, use a clear subject line.
 - Be clear and concise, use proper punctuation, and avoid using all capital letters; it makes reading a large number of messages less taxing and more enjoyable.
- For more on **what I expect from your critical or creative writing**, see the **Course Guidelines**.

If at any time you have a question, consider the following options:

- If you have trouble with Blackboard, go to the "UTEP's Blackboard Help" page. (in the left-hand menu)
- If you have a question on course mechanics or guidelines, review the syllabus, especially the **Course Guidelines** and **Course Mechanics** pages.
- Check the Student Help Board, which is unmonitored, and is meant (along with the Student Lounge) to be *your* virtual space. In this space you are encouraged to post questions about the class and assignments to your classmates or to answer their questions. Additionally, feel free to use the Student Lounge to discuss other class-related, or non-class-related topics. This is your space. (Please, however, for the sake of maintaining a stress-free and friendly space: no politics, no religion, and no trolling.)
- If your question cannot be answered by any of the above resources, feel free to send me an e-mail.

Course Mechanics

Our weekly activities will adhere to the following schedule:

For Weeks With Reading/Discussion

- **You should complete each week's reading by Sunday evening**, which means you should always begin the following week's reading (or writing) assignment on Friday, at the very latest. Keep in mind that often we'll be reading several essays, each of which require attention. Additionally, more theoretical readings (such as Benjamin & Barthes) will require more time and focus due to their relative difficulty. That said, I've designed the reading assignments generally to be shorter so that we can focus on the details. Always look ahead at the reading so you can plan for the time you'll need to complete it.
- Aside from reading the assigned texts, students have two primary responsibilities each reading week: 1) posting thoughtful responses to the week's discussion questions on the week's discussion board thread (including your critical response as answer to question #1); and, 2) reading all your classmates responses and participating in the general discussion.
- Students should post their responses to the Monday Discussion Questions by 11:59 p.m. Tuesday at the latest.
- Students may post responses to the Wednesday Follow-Up Questions anytime before Friday at 3:00 p.m.
- Your original or primary post must thoughtfully respond to all of my "Monday Discussion Questions," (this includes your **critical reading response**), must be the proper length (250 words for your critical reading response; 150 words for each additional answer), and must provide evidence from the texts being discussed to support your answers. These must be posted to the week's Discussion Board by **Tuesday at 11:59 pm**. Secondary responses (and tertiary, etc.) may be posted anytime before **Friday at 3:00 pm**.
- Postings must be written in your own words, they should relate to the readings of the week and demonstrate an understanding of the material by explaining a work's main argument and/or its key points, how and why it uses the elements of writing (or, if theory, its key terms), how music functions in the text, or how music is presented or described, etc.—and, again, you must provide evidence from the text(s) being discussed to support your claims about the text(s).
- Secondary discussion posts must show real engagement with the thread in which you are participating. Always read through an entire thread's posts before responding. Always indicate to whom and to what you are responding. Always be courteous, polite, and fair. See the section titled **Course Participation / Communication** for more on proper behavior in course communications.
- You will not get credit for merely stating your opinion or summarizing an essay, story, or review. In order to get credit for your posts, you must contribute something new to the discussion. You will not receive credit for merely agreeing with someone, or by setting forth questions. You need to write thoughtful and cogent statements that contribute to the discussion.

For Weeks With Workshop

- Students will post their five-page work of creative nonfiction to their group's discussion thread by **Monday at 11:59 p.m.** (I will assign workshop groups prior to the each workshop week.) Be sure to include your last name in the file name.
- Read your group members' work and prepare a constructive critique for each.
- A constructive critique (i.e., constructive feedback) will: 1) make an effort to understand what the author is trying to accomplish in a story, and it will identify and point out themes, ideas, and meanings running through the story; 2) it will then point out what is working well in a story (point to specifics in characterization, setting, narrative structure, narrative voice, prose, how music figures in the work and/or how music is figured in the work, etc.); 3) it will identify what is not working well in the story (again, be specific--see previous list); and—*very importantly*—it will offer suggestions for improving the story on its own terms.
- A constructive critique will not judge the piece under review as good or bad. It will be constructive in tone. It will be amiable in disposition. It is meant to help guide the writer towards possible revision strategies. You will not get credit for a constructive critique that fails to meet these criteria.
- Students will post their initial constructive responses (minimum 200 words) to each group members' nonfiction work by **Wednesday at 6:00 p.m.** Aside from your initial response, you will be expected to follow up with at least one post for each group member. Workshop discussions will close Thursday at 6:00 pm.

Grading Policy

Your Final Class Grade will be based on the following:

- Critical Reading Responses: 30%
- Online Participation: 20%
- Workshop Participation: 20%
- Final Project: 30%

General Course Policies

Plagiarism

Plagiarism in this class means that you are handing in creative or critical work under your name that you did not write yourself. It could also mean that you are handing in work you've written for another class. Neither is acceptable, and this type of behavior is subject to disciplinary action. To avoid plagiarism, simply do not submit work under your name that you did not do yourself, do not turn in work you've written for another class, and always cite sources for ideas or language taken from another writer. Please refer to UTEP's policy for further information:

<https://www.utep.edu/student-affairs/osccr/student-conduct/academic-integrity.html>

Disabilities

I will make reasonable accommodations for students with limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities. Please contact the Center for Accommodations and Support Services within the first two weeks of class:

Web: <https://www.utep.edu/student-affairs/cass/>

Phone: (915)747-5148 voice or TTY

Fax: (915)747-8712

E-Mail: cass@utep.edu

Technical Support

The University of Texas at El Paso offers complete technical information and help desk support at: <https://www.utep.edu/technologysupport/>.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions, McGuirk microreviews

Week 2: Powers, Bogart, Aaron, Morley, Hopper

Week 3: Schou, Grigoriadis, Hermes

Week 4: WORKSHOP #1 (The Musical Event)

Week 5: Benjamin, O'Hara, Wojahn

Week 6: Walker, Ewing, Marchese

Week 7: Sullivan

Week 8: WORKSHOP #2 (Getting Personal)

-SPRING BREAK-

Week 9: Barthes, Cherkis

Week 10: Christgau, Wood, Hagan

Week 11: Baldwin

Week 12: WORKSHOP #3 (Finding Your Voice)

Week 13: McClary, Powers

Week 14: Riot Grrrl, Gordon, Hopper

Week 15: FINAL PROJECT WORKSHOP

****Final Projects Due Monday, May 11th****