

AI 230 American Popular Song: The Melody Lingers On – Spring 2006

Location: Allstate Building, 2775 Sanders Road, Northbrook, IL 60062

Hours: Monday: 5:15 P.M. to 8:15 P.M.

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Office Hours: Monday 4:30 P.M. to 5:00 P.M., or by appointment

Course Description:

Words and music – put them together and you have a song. In theory it seems pretty simple. Most anyone can wed lyrics and melody to make a song; the task requires no specialized training. Amateurs and professionals alike have written tens of thousands of songs. But the number of long-lasting musical marriages – songs called “standards” – is a much smaller figure. Those magical songs, the ones that have become part of our national heritage, are what this course is designed around.

We are going to spend eleven weeks with the great American popular songs, their creators, and the people who interpreted them. The era of the great American songbook begins early in the 20th century and extends past World War II. Those are the glory years for composers like Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Richard Rodgers, and Lorenz Hart. Their creations: classics such as “Cheek to Cheek,” “Old Man River,” “Night and Day,” “Things Are Looking Up,” “One For My Baby,” and “The Lady is a Tramp.”

These songs – and many more – will be listened to, studied, and most of all, enjoyed. We will also examine the American society that spawned this brilliant body of work, and try to explain the songs’ staying power. For great songs do not carry an expiration date. By the end of the quarter, anyone who once said that this is “old peoples’ music” will be singing a different tune.

Faculty Biographical Sketch:

I am a member of the SNL visiting faculty. After receiving my B.A. from DePaul’s School for New Learning, I continued at DePaul, earning an M.Ed. My area of concentration was history. Music has been a great passion since I was young. It sustains me in good times and bad.

Competencies:

H-2-G: Can evaluate the role and impact of mass media or information technology on society.

1. Specifies a medium of mass communications or an information technology and articulates its scope.
2. Describes the role that this medium or information technology plays in society.
3. Evaluates the impact of this medium or information technology on society or on one’s perceptions of societal norms and issues.

Phonograph recordings, radio, and motion pictures popularized the great American songbook. Without the new technologies Broadway and regional stages would have been the only way for most people to experience the music. Records, radio, and movies transformed tunes into “hits” and made performers like Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, and Frank Sinatra into stars. Their interpretations helped Great Depression and wartime audiences escape the reality of their troubled lives long enough to dream of “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails,” and other evanescent images of contentment. The significance of the new media as a coping mechanism during turbulent times will be illustrated throughout the quarter.

A-5: Can define and analyze a creative process.

1. Can define the concept of creativity.
2. Can identify, analyze, and describe the components of a creative process in one or more fields of human endeavor.
3. Can explain how engaging in a creative process affects one’s perception of the world.

Many of the great songwriters were sons of immigrants who elevated themselves above humble beginnings, while others were products of the middle and upper classes. Over time they transcended their classical

training and the European music hall tradition. The result was a modern, distinctly American, musical form. For a nation coming of age in the 20th century the new songs were intoxicating.

The concept of creativity is mysterious and defies easy explication, but the components of the songwriting *process* can be identified as we chart the evolution of the composers' art. Every song enjoys a unique genesis regardless of surface similarities. Our inspection will turn up marvelous examples of spontaneous, seemingly divine creations, as well as special songs that, although sweated through to completion, still manage to sound like they wrote themselves.

A-1-A: Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.

1. Chooses one or more works of art (broadly defined).
2. Analyzes the expression of meaning, values, and experiences through these works.
3. Relates one's interpretation to that of others.
4. Relates the work(s) to one's own experience.

A-1-D: Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.

1. Chooses particular artistic or literary works to consider.
2. Analyzes the works of the artists or writers as those works relate to an aspect of the human experience.

The sentiments expressed in the greatest pop songs never go out of fashion. The composers ingeniously capture universal experiences within the popular song format. Their lyrics touch us in countless ways, i.e., as a salve, a tonic, or an affirmation. But after acknowledging our debt to the songs' creators, we must also credit the artists who interpret them.

We empathize with Sinatra singing an Arlen ballad like "Last Night When We Were Young" (lyrics by E.Y. Harburg), believing that the song describes a heartrending experience of his own. Jazz musicians like saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and Dexter Gordon insisted that a thorough understanding of a song's lyrics is key to delivering a convincing instrumental rendition. Hawkins' seminal 1939 recording of Johnny Green's "Body and Soul" illustrates this maxim. He infuses the melody with his own life's experience, adding another layer to the emotional content of the unspoken, but clearly understood, lyrics.

The writers' genius at distilling the essence of collective experiences is their enduring accomplishment. We will analyze the way love, loss, joy, regret, and other aspects of life are represented in American popular songs.

A-1-E: Can interpret the work of writers or artists within a historical or social context.

1. Chooses an artistic or literary work to consider.
2. Identifies a historical or social context relevant to the work.
3. Analyzes the work from the perspective of that historical or social context.

The confluence of talent, opportunity, audience, and media resulted in an outpouring of remarkable songs. Consider this short list of standards: "Where or When," "A Foggy Day (In London Town)," "Thanks For the Memory," "In the Still of the Night," and "My Funny Valentine." Amazingly, those classics were penned during a single year, 1937.

The classic Tin Pan Alley era of American popular song overlaps the Roaring '20s, Great Depression, and World War II. Our job will be to analyze the music from a historical perspective. Is there a connection between the turbulent times and the creation of so many great songs? What made New York City the epicenter of the music world? We will ask more questions along these lines, and have fun trying to answer them.

The Learning Experience:

Listening will be at the heart of the classroom experience, but the course will also include lecture, videos, small group interaction, and discussion. In addition, I will try to schedule a night out so we can get a taste of the music in a live setting. Between classes you will read selected portions of the textbooks and other

handouts, and listen to a number of recordings. Like short stories, these songs reveal more of themselves every time they are experienced. You will doubtless care for some songs more than others, but a sizable cross-section of material will give you a broader foundation on which to form your own preferences.

Your participation in class is critical to your appreciation of the music as well as to your grade. Opinions will be actively sought; nobody will be criticized on account of taste. It will be interesting to gauge the variety of reactions the songs are bound to provoke.

Technical concerns need not intimidate you. Although we will become conversant with terms like rhythm, harmony, meter, chorus, and verse, this is not a course in music theory. My inability to read music has not prevented me from a lifetime of listening enjoyment. An open mind and a sense of hearing are the only prerequisites for the course.

Required Text:

Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (London: Oxford UP, 1972).

Note on the Text:

Your enjoyment of the music will be greatly aided by the Wilder book – the inspiration for this course. It continues to expand my musical horizons some twenty years after I first read it. Wilder is often iconoclastic in his views, yet I agree with him more often than not on matters of quality. Reiterating my previous caution on technicality, do not overly concern yourself with the musical terminology.

Along the way I will share other readings that will offer insights on the composer's craft. Since we are concerned with the "why" and "how" of the songs, these excerpts will help us understand the inspiration and perspiration that are part of the creative process.

The Music:

Requiring you to purchase the CDs, albums, and tapes containing all the songs would be prohibitive from a cost standpoint. Instead I will supply all of the music, taken from my collection, on customized CDs. As they claim on TV, this offer is not available in stores!

You will get an earful of standards performed by a variety of interpreters, including the composers themselves. Classic recordings of Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and other great singers will be part of the mix. You will also receive excerpts from original Broadway cast recordings, as well as instrumental arrangements by big bands, jazz combos, and solo pianists.

For those of you looking for an alternative to your current listening choices, this music represents a taste of something different. You will have the chance to discover the reasons why these songs remain vibrant decades after their introduction.

Recommendations for Additional Study:

As we make our way through the catalogue of songs I will provide suggestions of CDs, books, and films that you might enjoy. Feel free at any time to ask for my advice or give me some of your own.

Evidence of Competence Achievement:

The course is organized to fulfill the requirements of several separate but compatible competencies. The following proof of achievement provides a variety of ways for you to be successful.

- **Attendance and Participation:**

You are strongly encouraged to attend class each week. When you must miss a session, notify me at your earliest convenience and arrange with a classmate to provide you with any handouts, etc. from the class. Missing more than two classes will lower your final grade by one letter unless you complete a short writing assignment of my choosing.

- **Reaction Papers:**

During the quarter you will write four short reaction papers as **responses** to the songs, readings, or class discussions. They are **not** reviews of the songs or readings. They are meant to give you the opportunity to express your opinions, agree, argue, etc. Write your thoughts in 2 to 3 pages, using a 12-point serif font (please, no *Courier*), double-spaced, with standard one-inch margins. Reaction papers are worth up to **25** points each. The class schedule lists the dates for submission of reaction papers. Late papers will be marked down **5** points per day.

- **Oral Report Option:**

You may choose to submit an oral report of your reaction to the songs, readings, or class discussions instead of writing a reaction paper. The oral report will last approximately five minutes and will be accompanied by a written outline of your ideas. Be prepared to conduct a brief Q & A/discussion following your presentation. Oral reports will be worth up to **25** points. This option can be used **two times** during the quarter.

- **Exam:**

You will take an exam during the first half of the seventh class session. The exam will consist of ten terms, five each from study guides 1 and 2. You will define four terms (who, what, when, where, why) – two of the five from study guide 1 and two of the five from study guide 2. Each term will be worth up to **25** points.

- **Final Project:**

Creativity is at the heart of this course. It makes sense that you should have the chance to demonstrate mastery of the material in your own fashion. Be sure to settle on a topic that truly interests you. To insure conformity with the guidelines of your competencies I will approve your choice.

Some examples: develop your own musical consisting of songs of your choosing; explore the connection between popular song and the world of jazz; compare and contrast two Broadway musicals – focusing on the evolution of the art form; pick one songwriting team and explain their special chemistry. The possibilities are endless. Whatever direction you choose, have fun with this assignment.

I will work with you to guarantee compliance with your competencies, keep you on track, and give you whatever support you may require. You will present a short description of your project in class for the edification of the whole group. The final project will be worth a maximum of **150** points. Because of the in-class portion of the assignment, no late projects will be accepted.

Grading Scale	Maximum
Reaction Papers	100 points
Exam:	100 points
Final Project	<u>150 points</u>
Total:	350 points

Grade Distribution:

A: 92 – 100%	322 – 350 points
B: 85 –91.9%	298 – 321 points
C: 77 – 84.9%	270 – 297 points
D: 70 – 76.9%	245 – 269 points
F: 70% - below	244 points – below

“Incomplete” Grade Policy:

The student who needs a grade of incomplete (**IN**) must formally request in writing that I issue this grade. The request must be made by the end of the ninth week of the quarter in which you are enrolled, i.e., the 2004 Summer term. A copy of the policy accompanies this syllabus. I strongly recommend completing your coursework according to schedule. Please understand that **IN** grades are issued only in exceptional circumstances that justify your inability to complete all coursework by the end of the quarter. If you receive

an “Incomplete,” you will sign a contract agreeing to complete all work by a specified date (no later than two quarters after the end of the 2003 Fall term) or receive the grade of “F.”

Pass/Fail Grade Option:

You have the option of taking this course on a Pass/Fail grading basis. Be aware that a “Pass” or “Fail” grade will have no effect on your Grade Point Average. For those students receiving worksite tuition reimbursement, a letter is available from DePaul describing the school’s Pass/Fail grade option.

Class Schedule (tentative):

1st Session:	<p>Introduction Hand-out syllabus, discuss assignments Overview of course Lecture: why this music matters A taste of the music</p>
2nd Session:	<p>The Transition Era, Kern, and Berlin Lecture: the critical juncture, an American music Discussion Listening First Reaction Paper due</p>
3rd Session:	<p>Gershwin and Porter Lecture: music for the people – two distinct styles Discussion Listening</p>
4th Session:	<p>The Musical Lecture – evolution of an art form Discussion Video segments – age of musicals on film Listening Second Reaction Paper due</p>
5th Session:	<p>Rodgers and Arlen Lecture: an explosion of creativity Discussion Listening Study Guide One handout</p>
6th Session:	<p>Music and the Media Lecture: records, radio, and films – entertainment for the masses Discussion Listening Video segments – great movie songs Third Reaction Paper due Study Guide Two handout Final Project Topic due</p>
7th Session:	<p>Exam The Great Craftsmen Lecture: Carmichael, Schwartz, etc. Discussion</p>

Listening

8th Session:

The Interpreters Part One

Lecture: the vocalists

Discussion

Listening

Video segments – singers

Fourth Reaction Paper due

Final Project Progress Report due

9th Session:

The Interpreters Part Two

Lecture: the instrumentalists

Discussion

Listening

10th Session:

Summing Up, Final Projects

Lecture: the melody lingers on

11th Session

Field Trip

Venue to be determined

Vincentian Mission Statement:

This course and its assessment tools are designed to actively incorporate the Four Cornerstones of a high-quality learning relationship here at DePaul University: **empathy, clarity, integrity, and flexibility**.

Academic Integrity Policy Statement:

This instructor will vigorously uphold the University's written guidelines (see attached) on academic integrity. Please be **very** attentive to the meaning of this policy – breaking it could cost you your degree.