

Writing Music

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“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture”

--anon., sometimes attributed to Thelonius Monk

Writing about music is always an act of translation. Trying to set the indescribable—sound, beyond words—into a worded space. This class will explore different tactics taken by writers across form and genre and look at how they attempt to solve the problem; we’ll also practice writing about music within different conventional forms in order to test out their strengths and weaknesses ourselves. As primarily a writing class, here students will build a toolbox of techniques, looking to both academic and popular forms, and will leave knowing more about developing article and essay pitches for journalism and web outlets as well as with a broader knowledge of the different kinds of music writing there are and ways to use them in combination and separately.

The internet changes how we listen to music, what we are able to encounter, and most importantly, how and what we write about in relation to music: the ability to incorporate sound and multimedia objects within writing, as well as the ability for someone to listen directly to what you’re referencing with the written word, has never been easier, and with this change also comes new possibility, challenge and ideas. In this class we will look to those expanded approaches as well as older ones, as defined in the four nodes of the course: personal, contextual/analytical, fictional, and multimodal, with the idea of communication about and with music at the center of all the writing we do. These readings and this toolbox are geared towards music writing that is not strictly academic—while we will also look at academic texts, the main purpose of the course is for students to develop their own writing voice and adapt it, keeping in mind that many students may not pursue graduate or specialized education and giving them the resources to use their skills right away. The writing done in this course encounters the challenges of using specialist language while talking to people who might not be familiar with it, explaining and clarifying information for a public audience.

In the current times, virtual concerts, alternative spaces of music-making, and the politicized resistance of some bands to these changes (i.e. Smash Mouth's performance at Donald Trump's South Dakota rally) all make music—in person and apart—take on a new and different heft: how can writing incorporate the new emphasis on the virtual and distanced that music has to contend with as well? When virtual concerts and music writing are occupying the same social media platforms or more directly linked, what does this change about them both?

There will be five assignments:

1. Musical timeline/autobiography (1000 words): track significant musics within your life and how they connected you or what their importance was, either in timeline form or as a written account--this can be music that you listened to or that you performed or made, organized thematically or structurally in the ways that you choose, and can incorporate a linked playlist or visual elements if you wish.
2. Review (500-1000 words): review a concert, album, or musical experience of your choice, with the idea of introducing it to someone who didn't or hasn't heard it and helping them to make sense of what they will experience.
3. Experiment (200-1000 words): pick a musical moment that is important to you and write about it in a way that communicates that significance to the reader—this is an unstructured assignment meant to benefit you by focusing on what you're interested in, so choose any type of writing you wish to.
4. Encyclopedia entry (500-1200 words): use Wikipedia to find a “stub” article or dead link to a (musical) topic of your choosing; then either write a well-sourced sample of the article to be submitted for class or published directly onto Wikipedia. Follow the conventions of a reference article: title, brief abstract paragraph overviewing the subject, a main body with subheadings (for a person, something like: birth, early life, career/professional life, significant works, death), references. This gives you an opportunity to publish your writing for others immediately (if you wish to) and to contribute to well-sourced and verified Wikipedia information and sharing that information in an open-access

web space; it is also an opportunity to practice writing reference entries as a form.

5. Final paper/project (2000 words): a longer study of a musical work/experience that ties together the forms we study in class; can be a creative project, a video essay, podcast, essay, or other form—as with the experiment assignment, this is an opportunity to pursue specific interests of your own. 250 word proposal is due ahead of the final; must be approved by the instructor in order to proceed with the project.

I. PERSONAL

How do you fit yourself into the story of the music that you're telling? How do you write about music that you're making? How do you make it clear you care without sounding cheesy and cliched?

Week 1

Introductions

Learning musical backgrounds and interests; coverage of course material.

Autobiographies

Kristen Hersh, *Rat Girl* (Winter 1986-Spring 1986 section, pp 243-276)

Grace Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* (Disco chapter)

Week 2

Blogs

Assignment due: musical timeline.

Foster Kamer, [Fostertalk Year-End Musical Roundup](#)

Doug Shadle, [What's Santa Got To Do With It?](#)

Jstor Daily, [Chill Beats to Study/Relax To](#)

Biographies

Prince, *The Beautiful Ones*, Dan Pipenberg's introduction, pg. 4-46

Week 3

Essays

Daphne Brooks, [The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie](#)

(Personal) Essays

Hanif Abdurraqib, *They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*: "Carly Rae Jepsen Loves You Back"; "The Night Prince Walked On Water"

II. ANALYTICAL

What are formal conventions in traditional music writing? What information is helpful to find in a review? In a profile? How do you write about music you don't like? What happens when the musician doesn't feel that they're portrayed in a flattering way?

Week 4

References

Kieran Devlin; [How Stan Culture Has Changed The Critics' Role](#)

Examples of articles in Grove music online:

Keith Waters, [McCoy Tyner](#)

Susan Fast, [Rock](#)

Cynthia Adams Hoover and Edwin M. Good, [Piano](#)

Philip Bohlman, [Diaspora](#)

Reviews

Nat Hentoff, [Jazz in Print](#)

Faith Pennick on D'Angelo's *Voodoo*

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Encyclopedia Article

Week 5

Profiles

Gay Talese, [Frank Sinatra Has A Cold](#)

Amiri Baraka, from *Black Music*, “A Day With Roy Haynes”

Nat Hentoff, [Abbey Lincoln](#)

Liner Notes

Sorrel Hayes, [Voicings for tape/soprano/piano](#)

Ashley Kahn, John Coltrane, *Offering: Live at Temple University*

Brian Eno, *Oblique Strategies*

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Review

III.

FICTIONAL

What does fiction afford in ways we can expand or imagine? How can music fit into those worlds, and where can specific technical knowledge about how music happens fit in?

Week 6

Stories

Willa Cather, *Song of the Lark* ([pt. ii: Song of the Lark](#))

Jennifer Egan, [Ask Me If I Care](#)

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Final Project Proposal

Imagined Worlds

Jon Bois, [17776/What Football Will Look Like In The Future](#)

IV.

MULTIMODAL

How can we expand out—including the music, images, video, and other information? What does technology allow us to incorporate and create?

Week 7

Podcasts

John Cage, *Silence*: “Manifesto”

Questlove Supreme: [“Weird Al” Yankovic](#)

Interviews

Ben Ratliff, Sonny Rollins: *The Jazz Ear*, pp. 31-45

Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, Ikue Mori (73-81) and Annea Lockwood (114-128)

[Nardwuar vs. Joanna Newsom](#)

Week 8

Video Essays

[John Bresland, On The Origin Of The Video Essay](#) and Video Essay Suite

Ian Garwood, [Indy Vinyl on the Clock](#)

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Experiment

Hyperlinks

Milo, [Bob’s Son’s Cafe](#)

[Futuro Conjunto: The Flickering Century](#)

Week 9

Documentaries

A Band Called Death (2013)

Introduction to Logan Center Media resources, film and sound equipment.

Documentary form; brief introductions to scripting, filming and recording

Ghengis Blues (1999)

Week 10

Presentations on final project topics; group critique and feedback