Writing About Popular Music  
Gallatin School  
New York University  
Fall 2011, Wednesdays, 6:20 – 9:00 p.m., Silver 702  
WRTNG-UG 1039  
Instructor: Amanda Petrusich

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Course Description:  
Effective music criticism – criticism that places a song or album within the appropriate social, political, personal, and aesthetic contexts – can be as enthralling and moving as the music it engages. In this advanced writing course, we will explore different ways of writing about music, from the record review to the personal essay. We’ll consider the evolving tradition of pop music criticism (How are MP3 blogs and websites challenging print media? How is the critic’s role changing?) and the mysterious practice of translating sound into ideas (How do we train ourselves to be better and more thoughtful listeners?). Through reading, writing, and class discussion, we’ll contemplate the mysterious circuitry that causes people to embrace (or require) music – from Bob Dylan to Lil’ Wayne – and how best to explore that connection on the page.

Goals:  
Music writing is a broad and burgeoning genre. This semester, we’ll explore its various iterations through attentive reading and original writing. Each week, we’ll talk not only about what makes for a successful music writing, specifically, but also about the mechanics of strong prose: how to write in scene, how to make sure every word is doing useful work, how to build solid arguments and ideas, how to avoid platitudes and clichés in favor of specifics, and how to artfully render a character or sound.

Readings:

Required Books:  
* Love is A Mix Tape (Rob Sheffield)  
* Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Legs McNeil, Gillian McCain)  
* Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste (Carl Wilson)  
* Best Music Writing 2010 (ed. by Daphne Carr and Ann Powers)  
* Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung (Lester Bangs)

Recommended Anthologies (the first two are out of print, but very helpful if you can find them):  
* Rock She Wrote (ed. by Ann Powers and Evelyn McDonnell)  
* The DaCapo Book of Rock n’Roll Writing (ed. by Clinton Heylin)  
* Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music (ed. Daphne Carr)  
* Stranded: Rock and Roll for A Desert Island (ed. by Greil Marcus)
This reading list will be supplemented with additional handouts throughout the semester.

**Grading**

-- 60% of your grade will be based on the strength of your writing assignments
-- 40% of your grade will be based on in-class participation, preparedness, and workshop discussions (per the workshop guidelines below). Please note: just showing up is not enough to earn you a desirable participation grade. Writing workshops are contingent on constructive, thoughtful discussion.

**Attendance**

Because our course only meets once a week, attendance is mandatory and paramount. Again, workshops only work when everyone is participating and engaged. If you have to miss a class – especially a workshop day – **you must email me in advance at petrusich@gmail.com**.

Illnesses (please don’t drag yourself to class if you’re sick) and emergencies are excused absences. All unexcused absences will adversely affect your participation grade, as will arriving to class late, leaving early, or not completing the assigned readings. We’ll take a short break halfway through each session, when you can use the bathroom, get a drink, etc.

**Plagiarism**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

**Workshop Guidelines**

As a member of this workshop, **you’re responsible for 4 pieces of original music writing, submitted on time per the workshop schedule.** (If you want to bring something significantly longer or shorter than what’s specified, speak with me beforehand.) **You’re also responsible for thoughtfully – and thoroughly – reading and responding to your classmates’ work each week, and coming to class prepared to discuss it analytically and enthusiastically. Your work as a reader will be as closely evaluated as your work as a writer.** The writing workshop provides a home for a lively, conversational exchange of ideas and support between artists. It should be challenging, fun, and, on occasion, exhilarating.

**Before class, please print and read all the submissions and jot down a few notes.** Try to focus your thoughts on a larger theme or idea (ie. What is this piece really about? How does it work?) and avoid – whenever possible – a laundry list of micro-criticisms. When you’re finished reading, consider the entire draft with a diagnostic eye: What’s the one big thing the writer should concentrate on for his or her second draft? In general, don’t worry about line-editing extensively (that’s my job), and be sure to address the piece on its own terms, always being mindful of authorial intent.
Remember that praise – for a particularly stirring image or scene, for an innovative structure, for a sound or song well-rendered – can be as useful as criticism, although in this course, we’re generally reading with an eye towards revision. **All feedback should be focused on how to make the piece succeed.** If you found an approach or a style unsuccessful, I want to know why and how to make it work. If you found something fantastic, I want to know why and how to harness that magic. Be candid but be careful.

I’ve found it tends to work best when the person whose work is being discussed absorbs the conversation without participating in it too heavily – this is not a hard and fast rule, but it helps to keep the workshop from feeling like a debate. (The author will always have time to ask questions once everyone has offered their comments.) For those participating in the discussion, I encourage you to listen closely and carefully to your colleagues’ critiques – this includes taking notes – and to reference their advice as you give your own. A good workshop operates like an engaging conversation, with organic digressions, movement, and occasional cross-talk.

**Schedule:**

Please note that writing assignments are listed in advance of the class where we will discuss them – an assignment listed for Week 1 is due Week 2, etc.

**Week 1/Sept. 7: Introduction / The Record Review**
**In-class writing/listening:** One sentence song reviews (6 songs, 6 words each) / Writing without context
**Discussion:** What does criticism look like? What does it do? How is it changing? What is the critic’s job beyond describing sound?
**In-class reading:** “Lost in the Suburbs: How We Failed Arcade Fire” (Nick Sylvester), “Rate This Article” (Chris Colin, Wired)
**Reading assignment:** “Astral Weeks” (Lester Bangs, Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung), “The Decade in Indie” (Nitsuh Abebe, Best Music Writing 2010), assorted recent Pitchfork reviews (Red Hot Chili Peppers/I’m With You – Ian Cohen, Grandaddy/The Sophthouse Slump –Mike Powell, Lil Wayne/Tha Carter IV – Ryan Dombal)

**Week 2/Sept. 14: The Record Review**
**Discussion:** Lester Bangs’s “Astral Weeks” – is this a record review? What’s the purpose of a record review? How is criticism different than opinion? Can it be personal? Why is it important to contextualize art? What do the best reviews do?
**Visitor:** Brandon Stosuy, editor, Pitchfork
**Writing assignment:** Write one 400-600 word record review on an album of your choice

**Week 3/Sept. 21: Workshop A (Record Reviews)**
**Reading assignment:** Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the Edge of Taste (Carl Wilson)

**Week 4/Sept. 28: Workshop B (Record Reviews)**
**Visitor:** Nitsuh Abebe, pop music critic, New York magazine
**Reading assignment:** Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the Edge of Taste (Carl Wilson)
**Week 5/Oct. 5: Going Broad: Music Writing as Cultural Criticism**

**In-class listening:** Schmaltz!

**Discussion:** Carl Wilson’s argument for Celine Dion as outlined in “Let’s Talk About Love.” What does taste have to do with it? Do we need to take commercially successful artists more seriously? Being popular doesn’t make you bad – but does it make you good? Does it make you important? How do we define cultural currency?

**Visitor:** David Barker, 33 1/3 series editor

**Writing assignment:** Write a critical essay of 500-1000 words using a commercially successful piece of music – looking at a song, an artist, a moment, a movement – to make a larger point about contemporary culture. Why is this popular? Why does it matter? What does it mean?

**Week 6/Oct. 12: Workshop B (Cultural Criticism)**

**Reading assignment:** Love Is A Mixtape (Rob Sheffield)

**Week 7/Oct. 19: Workshop A (Cultural Criticism)**

**Reading assignment:** Love Is A Mixtape (Rob Sheffield)

**Week 8/Oct. 26: Music and Memoir**

**Discussion:** How is music a useful base for memoir? How do we write about our personal experience of a song, album, or artist in a way that feels useful and universal?

**In-class exercise:** Joe Brainard’s “I Remember”

**Writing assignment:** Write a first-person essay, 750-1000 words, about a moment in your life inextricably linked to a piece of music.

**Week 9/Nov. 2: Workshop A (Music and Memoir)**

**Reading assignment:** “Biscuits and Jam with a Side of Mud” (Evie Nagy), “Still Ill” (XXL Magazine staff), from Best Music Writing 2010

**Week 10/Nov. 9: Workshop B (Music and Memoir)**

**Reading assignment:** Chapters 1-3 of Please Kill Me (Legs McNeil, Gillian McCain)

**Week 11/Nov. 16: Music as Subculture, Music as Scene**

**Discussion:** How can we use music trends to make larger political/personal/social arguments? How do music scenes work? Why are they important? How do we capture them on the page?

**In-class viewing:** Heavy Metal Parking Lot

**Visitor:** Daphne Carr, editor, Best Music Writing

**Writing assignment:** Write a 750-1000 word piece – either a broad think piece (ie. TK) or a piece of reportage or oral history (ie. McNeil) – about a musical scene or trend, past or present. Be mindful of placing it in the proper cultural/social/personal contexts. You can also shape this as a performance review, if you feel like a band or artist’s audience provides an appropriate/compelling context.

**Week 12/Nov. 23: Thanksgiving Eve (class may be rescheduled)**

**Week 13/Nov. 30: Workshop B (Music as Subculture/Scene)**
Week 14/Dec. 7: Workshop A (Music as Subculture/Scene)

Week 15/Dec. 14: Portfolios – with edited versions of your four pieces – due!
Final Discussion: What is good music writing? How is it changing?

Workshop Logistics
Successful writers and critics MUST be able to hit a deadline. Magazines, newspapers, and even websites and blogs operate on very strict publication schedules, and this workshop is no different. Writing assignments are due at 10 p.m. on the Sunday before they are scheduled to be workshopped. THIS DEADLINE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. This way, everyone has 2 full days to read the submissions before class meets on Wednesday. Submissions should be emailed to me (petrusich@gmail.com), and I will distribute them to our class mailing list late Sunday night. Please read over the syllabus and the deadlines below and note when assignments are due, and schedule your semester accordingly. You might want to get a head start of some of these pieces now.

So that we have time to address everyone’s work, the class will be divided into two groups, A and B. They will workshop on alternate weeks. We will loosely plan on spending 15-20 minutes discussing each submission. Please note your writing deadlines below.

Group A deadlines:
Sunday, September 18 (record reviews)
Sunday, October 16 (cultural criticism)
Sunday, October 30 (music and memoir)
Sunday, November 27 (music as subculture/scene) *note this is the Sunday after Thanksgiving

Group B deadlines:
Sunday, September 25 (record reviews)
Sunday, October 9 (cultural criticism)
Sunday, November 6 (music and memoir)
Sunday, November 20 (music as subculture/scene)