HEARING DIFFERENCE: The Commercial Music Industry and the American Racial Imaginary

IDSEM-UG1802
Fall 2014
Friday, 12:30 – 3:15pm
Silver Center, rm. 507
100 Washington Sq. East/
33 Washington Place
New York University

INSTRUCTOR:
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Office Hours:
W/3-4pm, F/4-5pm
(and by appt.)

SYNOPSIS:
In 1903, at the dawn of the commercial music industry, W. E. B. DuBois famously proclaimed that the foremost problem in twentieth century American society is “the problem of the color line.” Du Bois’s prescience sets the stage for this course’s exploration of racial identity in recorded, commercially available music. We will examine how racial performance has intermingled with music consumption in the United States since blackface minstrelsy in the 1830s. Our goal is to understand how deeply embedded race – both ascribed and claimed – is in American music culture, reverberating throughout the last century in debates on artists’ authenticity, propriety, and popularity.

This course is organized chronologically; each week is devoted to a particular era and its corresponding musical genres leading up to the present. Students will be guided through reading and listening assignments, developing critical thinking and listening skills and gaining a historical perspective on contemporary issues in American music culture like “crossing over,” musical activism, cultural appropriation, audible/visible racial stereotypes, and racialized performances of gender and sexuality.

REQ’D MATERIALS: Digital Course Reader & Course Playlist (which can be found under “Resources” on NYU Classes). Nelson George’s The Death of Rhythm & Blues (1988) and Jeff Chang’s Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation (2005) can be found at the NYU Bookstore and in Course Reserves at Bobst Library.

Figure 1: Bert Williams - Promotional photo by Samuel Lumiere (1921)

Starting Nov. 1, 2014, I will have a new office at 411 Lafayette Street, 3rd floor. I will post the new office number on NYU Classes.
**Grading:**
Participation (in-class discussion): 20%  
“Critical Listening Habits” Blog Post: 20%  
Final paper: 25%  
Paper Presentation: 20%  
Final paper abstract assignment: 15%

**Expectation of Class Participation:**
1) **Attendance:** This is a 3-hr period class that meets only once a week; therefore, it’s imperative that you come to every meeting to ensure your success in the course. More than one unexcused absence and/or persistent late arrivals will severely affect your final grade. Excused absences are limited to documented medical or family emergencies and religious holidays.

2) **Preparation:** You should have completed the reading and listening assignment in full by the start of each class, and you should have a hard copy of the readings on your desk from which you can refer and on which you can take notes. Your (full) completion of the reading and listening assignment prepares you to fully engage and participate (with questions and comments) in the in-class discussion. Attendance alone does not constitute participation.

3) **Electronics:** The use of electronics is prohibited in class. Cellphones should be stored in your bag with the ringer(s) turned off. Exception: laptop or tablet used for reading material only.

4) **Writing assignments & Papers:** All writing assignments should be completed, proofread, and submitted by the due date. No late assignments will be accepted under any conditions. It is important that you budget your time carefully and give yourself ample time to think about, outline, write, and review your work.

5) **In-class Conduct:** This course focuses directly on issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, inequality, and personal habits of consumption—topics that can easily disturb, hurt, and offend people. With this in mind, the utmost sensitivity and respect must be shown to the material and your fellow classmates, especially in consideration of one another’s lived experiences. Each student should be allowed to voice their perspective(s) without fear of attack or belittling; likewise, any thoughts and observations on these topics in response to the reading and listening assignments must be voiced respectfully. Opinion or hearsay voiced without critical reflection can inflict harm on your fellow students by perpetuating unequal power relations, privilege, and ignorance, thereby degrading constructive discussion. Any categorically offensive behavior (remarks or gestures), whether made in class or online, is totally unacceptable and will be reported to the Dean’s Office.

**Expectation of Academic Integrity:**
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)

If you have any questions about how to cite properly, what are acceptable references and source materials, or what constitutes plagiarism, please ask me!
HOW TO COMPLETE THE READING ASSIGNMENTS:
The reading assignments can be long, and a particular few can be challenging to read through. It is imperative that you give yourself enough time during the week to get through the approximately 130 pages (on average) of reading you will have weekly. With this in mind, there are important strategies that you can utilize to get through the readings efficiently and, most importantly, effectively. These strategies include:

- Looking over the assigned reading critically, taking note of what looks like the most important headings, subheadings, sections, paragraphs, etc. to get a sense of the “big picture.” Skim through the excerpt to find topical and sub-topical sentences that will clue you in to the content of each paragraph and the overall organization of the piece.
- Considering paragraphs as whole units of information that can be taken one at a time. Read and re-read them until you can answer the question: “What is the author saying in this paragraph?” How does it relate to the ‘big picture’?
- Retaining important details and mark major conceptual “signposts” by underlining, making notes in the margin, and/or making notes in your notebook. Taking notes on a reading assignment is not excessive or redundant; it is an excellent way to ensure that you are internalizing this information!
- Attempting, after reading a few paragraphs, a major section, or the entire excerpt, to visualize and articulate the most important points of what you just read in your own words. Doing this will test your understanding of the material and help you develop good questions for our in-class discussion.

HOW TO COMPLETE THE LISTENING ASSIGNMENTS:
I do not assume that you are a trained musician with perfect pitch, flawless musicianship, and an ironclad understanding of music theory. It is neither essential nor required that you read music (notation) for this course. What I do expect from you is that you listen to the recordings critically, make note of the content (e.g. lyrics), mood, instrumentation, texture of the voice and/or instruments, and gain a sense for the major sections of the song (i.e. intro, verse, chorus, interlude, outro) by using timestamps (i.e. “1:45”) to mark special moments. Consider how the recording relates to the reading assignment. And, by all means, if you feel unsure about any aspect of your “hearing” of the material, shoot me an email!

SCHEDULE:
I - Sept. 5: INTRODUCTION
Overview of syllabus and major concepts: What is race and ethnicity? How is race and ethnicity understood, broadly, in American culture? What are the origins of the commercial music industry in the United States (sheet music publishers, early commercial recording companies and technology, radio)?

II - Sept. 12: Overview of Race Ideology in the United States (18th c. – 19th c.)

III - Sept. 19: Early American Popular Music (Early - Mid 19th c.)

Listening: 1) Stephen C. Foster, “Old Black Joe” and “Massa’s In De Cold Ground” (sheet music)
2) TBD

IV – Sept. 26: *NO CLASS* (Blog post due next session)

V – Oct. 3: The Birth of the Commercial Music Industry (Late 19th c.)
*“Critical Listening Habits” Blog Post Due!*


Listening: 1) George W. Johnson, “The Laughing Song” and “Whistling Coon” (1890)
2) Scott Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag” and “Elite Syncopations” (1916)
3) Selections from *Earliest Negro Vocal Groups, Vol. 2*, Document DOCD 5288

VI - Oct. 10: Early Commercial Recordings (Pt. 1): “Classical” and Opera (Late 19th c. – Early 20th c.)


Listening: 1) Willhelm Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra:
   a) Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5 in C minor*, Op. 67 (1926)
2) Pablo Casals: J. S. Bach, *Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major*, BWV 1007 (1938)
3) Selections from *The Edison Legacy Vol. 1 & 2* (1898-1912)
4) John Philip Souza, TBA

VII - Oct. 17: Early Commercial Recordings (Pt. 2): “Race Records” and “Hillbilly Music” (1920-30s)


Listening: 1) James Reese Europe, TBA
2) James Reese Europe and The Castles, TBA
3) Mamie Smith, “Crazy Blues” (1920), and others
4) Fiddlin’ John Carson, “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” (1923)
5) Ernest Thompson, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1924)

VIII - Oct. 24: Jazz (1917-50)

2) Patrick Burke, *Come In And Hear The Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd Street* (2008): pp. 13-59. [online]

Listening: 1) Original Dixieland Jazz Band, “Dixieland Jass One-Step” (1917)
2) Jelly Roll Morton, “Mr. Jelly Lord” (1923)
3) Louis Armstrong, “Heebie Jeebies” (1926)
IX - Oct. 31: “Latin” Music (1930-50)


Listening: 1) Various, “The Peanut Vendor”
2) Xavier Cugat (TBD)
3) Desi Arnaz, “Cuban Pete” (1946)

X - Nov. 7: Rhythm & Blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll (1950-60)

*Final Paper Abstract, Outline, and Annotated Bibliography Due!*


Listening: 1) Willie Mae “Big Momma” Thorton, “Hound Dog” (1952)
2) Little Esther, “Hound Dog” (1953)
3) Freddie Bell and the Bellboys, “Hound Dog” (1955)
4) Elvis Presley, “Hound Dog” (1956)

XI - Nov. 14: Soul Music (1960-70)


Listening: 1) Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come” (1963)
2) TBD

XII - Nov. 21: Disco & Rap (Pt. 1)


Listening: TBD

XIII – Dec. 5: Rap (Pt. 2) and the Culture Industry

*FINAL PAPER DUE!*


Listening: TBD

XIV - Dec. *???* & 12: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS

*END OF SEMESTER*
SUGGESTED READING:


BIBLIOGRAPHY:


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*Figure 2: Portrait of Egbert ("Bert") Austin Williams, by Samuel Lumiere (1921 or 1922)*