First-Year Writing Seminar: Musical Subcultures  
FIRST-UG 413  
Gallatin School  
New York University  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4:55 – 6:10 p.m.  
Silver Center (100 Washington Square East / 33 Washington Place), Room 406  
Professor Amanda Petrusich  
Email: petrusich@gmail.com  
Office Hours: 411 Lafayette Street, Room 375, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30-4:30 p.m. (please email me before stopping by, just to make sure I’m free!)

Course Description:

The American musical landscape is now comprised of many self-contained factions, subcultures that exist and thrive independent of mainstream culture and operate according to their own ideologies and rules. In this first-year writing seminar, we’ll consider the best ways for music writers to define and reveal these communities on the page. What exactly defines a subculture, musical or otherwise? What happens when certain sounds are co-opted by the mainstream? As writers, how do we look past preexisting archetypes and our own presumptions regarding certain movements and their fans? Do we keep an objective distance or fully submit ourselves to the experience, participating as we document? Students will explore, study, infiltrate, and report on several musical subcultures – web-based or otherwise – of their choosing, submitting four original essays. Readings will include Dick Hebdige, Nathan Rabin, Legs McNeil, Chuck Klosterman, Sara Marcus, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Kent Russell, and more.

Goals:

This semester, we’ll work on defining and understand what a subculture is and how it functions, both in theory and in practice. We’ll also learn how to observe and investigate musical subcultures and scenes, writing clear, compelling narratives that give equal attention to the qualities of the music and the qualities of its adherents, balancing text and context, object and fandom, finding the places where they intersect or overlap. 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.

Required Books:

*How to Write About Music* (ed. by Mark Woodworth and Ally-Jane Grossan)
You Don’t Know Me, But You Don’t Like Me (Nathan Rabin)

Subculture: The Meaning of Style (Dick Hebdige)

We will also be reading selections from:

Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk (Legs McNeil, Gillian McCain)

The Post-Subcultures Reader (David Muggleton, Rupert Weinzierl)

Heads: A Biography of Psychedelic America (Jesse Jarnow)

Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrl Revolution (Sara Marcus)

*This reading list will be heavily supplemented with additional articles and essays 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:

Attendance is, of course, 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 real emergencies are excused absences. All unexcused absences will adversely affect your participation grade, as will arriving to class late, leaving early, or not arriving prepared to discuss the assigned readings. If you miss more than two classes, your grade will drop. We’ll often 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
Workshop Guidelines:

As a member of this workshop, you’re responsible for three pieces of original music writing, submitted on time per the workshop schedule, plus one final piece that will be evaluated only by me. (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.

Arrive with notes – three to five sentences on what you think the piece accomplishes and how it might be improved – for each piece.

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.
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 the week in which they are scheduled to be workshopped.** This DEADLINE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. This way, everyone has two full days to read the submissions before class meets on Tuesday. 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.

So that we have time to address everyone’s work, the class will be divided into four groups, A, B, C, and D. They will workshop on alternate weeks. We will loosely plan on spending 15-20 minutes discussing each submission.

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. 6: Introduction/Review of syllabus
**Reading:** John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Upon This Rock” (GQ); Chuck Klosterman, “Viva Morrissey!”
Sept. 8: **NO CLASS**

**Week 2**
Sept. 13: Discussion: How do we define a subculture? Consideration of contemporary subcultures, both established and nascent: what counts? How do we tap into our own experiences of subculture and present them on the page? What’s the best way to write about it?
In-class exercise: Joe Brainard, “I Remember”
**Reading:** Chapter 6, The Personal Essay, How To Write About Music; assorted pieces by Maria Sherman
Sept. 15: Discussion: Writing personally about your own participation in or observations of a culture.
Visitor: Maria Sherman, journalist
**Writing Assignment #1:** Write a 1000-1500 word first-person personal essay about a musical subculture – either one you participated in or observed from afar – that affected you or your life in some pivotal way.

**Week 3**
Sept. 20: Workshop A
Sept. 22: Workshop B
Week 4
Sept. 27: Workshop C
Sept. 29: Workshop D
Reading: Kent Russell, “American Juggalo” (N+1)

Week 5
Oct. 4: Discussion: what are some contemporary micro-communities with fervent, devoted fan groups? What are the germane questions of race/class – how is acceptance determined? How and when should a journalist infiltrate these groups? What can be learned, and what might get lost?
In-class viewing: “American Juggalo”
Reading: Nathan Rabin, You Don’t Know Me But You Don’t Like Me
Oct. 6: NO CLASS

Week 6
Oct. 11: Discussion: Identifying a Subculture: How do we write the “other” responsibly?
In-class viewing: “Heavy Metal Parking Lot”
Reading: Excerpt from Heads: A Biography of Psychedelic America by Jesse Jarnow
Oct. 13: Visitor: Jesse Jarnow, author
Writing Assignment #2: Write a 1500-2000 word researched essay on a musical subculture, concentrating on the qualities of its adherents: how do fans self-identify and how do they identify each other?

Week 7
Oct. 18 – Workshop D
Oct. 20: Workshop C

Week 8
Oct. 25: Workshop B
Oct. 27: Workshop A
Reading: Selections from Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk-Rock

Week 9
Nov. 1: In-class viewing: “The Decline of Western Civilization”
Reading: “The Life and Death of Punk, the Last Subculture” by Dylan Clark from “The Post-Subcultures Reader,” Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Part One
Nov. 3: Discussion: Punk as political statement: how is music weaponized? How does it become a rallying cry? Are there countercultural anthems now? Has the function of a musical subculture changed?
Reading: Jessica Hopper, “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t”; “Lady’ Punks in Bands: A Subculturette?,” by Helen Reddington, from “The Post-Subcultures Reader”; excerpt from Girls to the Front by Sara Marcus
**Week 10**
Nov. 8: Class visit to the Riot Grrl Collection at Fales Library/Special Collections
Nov. 10: Discussion: Riot Grrl; role of the critic/writer in the development of a subculture?
Visitor: Sara Marcus, author (via Skype)

*Writing Assignment #3: Write a 2000-2500 word essay on the intersection of music and politics: this can be personal or researched*

**Week 11**
Nov. 15: Workshop A
Nov. 17: Workshop B

**Week 12**
Nov. 22: Workshop C
Nov. 24: **NO CLASS / THANKSGIVING**
Reading: Chapter 11, "Music Scenes," from *How To Write About Music*

**Week 13**
Nov. 29: Workshop D
Reading: "Anarchy Unleashed," Calvin Tomkins (the *New Yorker*)
Dec. 1: Discussion: Commodification of a subculture: Punk at the mall and at the Met. What happens when subcultures go mainstream? What does it mean to sell out? In-class viewing: Rihanna on *Saturday Night Live*; online subcultures moving offline, the strange story of seapunk

*Writing Assignment #4: Write a 1500-2000 word essay describing and analyzing the commodification of a musical subculture – is credibility always exchanged for money?*

**Week 14**
Dec. 6: Individual meetings to discuss your final portfolios; schedule TBD
Dec. 8: Individual meetings to discuss your final portfolios; schedule TBD

**Week 15**
Dec. 13: **NO CLASS / LEGISLATIVE DAY / CLASSES MEET ON A MONDAY**

*Schedule*
Dec. 15: Pizza party!

***FINAL PORTFOLIOS – THREE REVISED ESSAYS AND A NEW 2500-WORD ESSAY ON THE IDEA OF “SELLING OUT,” AS IT RELATES TO A PARTICULAR SUBCULTURE – ARE DUE TO ME, VIA EMAIL, BY NOON ON MONDAY, DEC. 20***