All writing about music tries in one way or another to answer some basic questions: what’s the essence of it? What does it do? Why is it significant? What holds it together? What gives it power? In formulating the answer, writers look toward the stage and the floor.

“Stage” writing might mean describing what’s on the score paper, or what comes out of the instruments on the bandstand, or outlining what the composer and musicians intend. “Floor” writing might mean interpreting music through the desires and interests of the audience, and understanding the generative, identity-shaping culture that forms around any kind of song.

Almost all writing about popular music is influenced by general-audience journalism and has swung definitively towards the floor. A lot of it isn’t just about sound, or isn’t much about sound at all: it’s social history, identity, sexuality, theory, protest, image description. All of which can leave you thinking: what about all that information in the sound itself? Whereas a lot of writing about the classical and jazz traditions still looks more to the stage: the success or failure of a piece of music based on technique and presence and embodiment of musical principles. Which can leave you thinking: yeah, but what does that music mean?

Most of the greatest writing about music, the kind that transcends its context, achieves a mixture of both.

This course considers the virtues of each. Our readings are for the most part not standard reviews or pieces of criticism. They come from a hundred years of critical or clarifying writing on jazz, rock, hiphop, the classical tradition, electronic music, and beyond (musicology, memoirs, philosophy, and fiction). They will suggest the essence of performers, styles, and eras, provoke basic questions about why we make music and why we respond to it, and establish—if it needed establishing—that writing about music is a literary endeavor with its own traditions of style and strategy.

Three essays are required—two 750 word pieces and one 2500 word piece—as well as shorter responses to assigned texts, and to music that the students seek out and experience. I encourage you to seek out the music described in these texts, but I’ll also make them available to you in the class website.

You’ll be in charge, sometimes in pairs or groups, of leading discussions on some of the readings. (Where there is a link below for a reading to be found online, please print out the
reading and bring it into class; whenever possible, mark it up with your notes and reactions. With your notes, our discussions will start.) You’ll also be bringing in current essays from the outside, distributing them, and talking about them.

Grades will be calculated as follows:
- 60 percent written work—judged by the strength of what you turn in, but also your desire to grow.
- 40 percent reading and demonstration of your reading through class participation. I need everybody to speak up regularly—that’s the only way this class can work.

Please note: in my experience I have seen a causal link between students not coming to talk to me about their work and their falling off track regarding expectations and performance. Please make appointments to see me during my office hours—definitely once per semester, preferably twice or more. I will share Google Doc sign-up schedules to make it easy.

All students must email their work to me at bpr212@nyu.edu, double spaced, complete and on time. If you hand in papers late, you will definitely see that reflected in your grades.

Gallatin’s rules on academic integrity apply in this class:
http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html. Plagarism and recycling is easy to spot and does you no favors.

READINGS:

All other readings are in the course packet or through links given here.

Jan. 28: Introduction

Feb. 4: Eulogies and Reappraisals

-George Bernard Shaw, “Beethoven’s Centenary”
http://eclyptius.blogspot.com/2009/05/beethovens-centenary.html

-Greg Tate, “Michael Jackson: The Man In Our Mirror”:

-Ann Powers, “Reflections of a Bowie Girl”:
Guest: Greg Tate

Short response due: write a response, 500 words, about how you have come to understand a musician/composer/band differently now, as opposed to earlier—perhaps before they died or stopped performing, or perhaps just now that you're, let's say, five years older and listening to the same person. What has changed? Society? The musician’s reputation? Your knowledge and range of reference?

Feb. 11: The Culture Around Music I: Participants, Listeners, Politics


Prompt for class discussion: We are all part of the culture around music. What do we use music for? What is its function for us?

Short (less than one page) proposal due for the 2500-word essay. Your 2500-word essay is due March 10. It will be workshopped on April 7 and 14, and you’ll hand in a revised version on May 5. It will illuminate a musical subject of your choice. It will engage directly with the mechanics of the music itself, or with the reception and possible meaning of that music in the culture around it, or both—but tell me now, in a short proposal, what you will focus on and how. It can be critical or historical or personal, according to what tradition you feel closest to. But it must be clarifying. It must be working out an idea.

Feb. 18: Close Listening I: Details


- Read around in the ilxor.com “Best Moments In A Song” thread, (http://www.ilxor.com/ILX/ThreadSelectedControllerServlet?boardid=41&threadid=49018)

**Essay 1 due (750 words):** there is surely a part of a piece of music out there that moves you or makes you feel something deeply, but you don’t quite understand how it provokes that reaction in you. Find that piece of music. Listen closely to the part that moves you. Listen again. Write 750 words about that passage, using whatever tools you have and whatever you may understand about it, breaking down that special part of the song through close description, and supplying a theory about the source or meaning of its power.

**Feb. 25:** Close Listening II: Writing from Inside the Song

- Morrissey, from Autobiography, on the New York Dolls, pp. 68-75
- John Darnielle, from Master of Reality, on Black Sabbath, pp. 23-32
- Nathaniel Mackey, from Bass Cathedral, on Art Blakey and Wayne Shorter, pp. 78-81
- Marcel Proust, from Swann’s Way,” on Vinteuil’s “Sonata for Piano and Violin,” pp. 216-221

**Short response due:** try to get inside the spirit of a song or album, however you can. (This is probably different from the “details” pieces you read a week ago.) Write a short piece in that spirit—under 200 words. It can be objective, anecdotal, or fictional.

**March 3:** The Culture Around Music II: Participants, Listeners, Politics

- LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, “Jazz and the White Critic,” from Black Music, pp. 11-20
- Meredith Graves, essay on Andrew W.K., Lana Del Rey and authenticity: http://thetalkhouse.com/music/talks/meredith-graves-perfect-pussy-talks-2/
Guest: Marianna Ritchey

Prompt for class discussion: sometimes musicians can’t control how they are received and understood. But more and more, they try to, which results in a kind of unspoken contract between musician and audience. The contract is complex and open to interpretation, and often necessitates powerful writing about music. How does these “contracts” work? What is their function? And how can we “read” them?

March 10: The Gig

-Ciaran Carson, “Around the World for Sport” from Last Night’s Fun, pp. 109-116

-Alma Guillermoprieto, “A Samba Night,” from Samba, pp. 15-21

-Christopher Small, “A Separate World,” from Musicking, pp. 64-74

Prompt for class discussion: These stylish writings all seem to imply that performance is the ultimate expression of the culture around a music. Do you agree? And how are they using performances—as witnesses, musicologists, reporters?

2500-WORD ESSAY DUE

March 17—SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS

March 31—NO FORMAL CLASS—READING ASSIGNMENT:

Close Listening IV: Traditions Connecting

-Alex Ross: “Chacona, Lamento, Walking Blues,” from Listen To This, pp. 22-54

(look at/listen to audio guide to that essay here: http://www.therestisnoise.com/2008/05/chapter-2-chacona-lamento-walking-blues.html)

Short response due: These are unusually broad ways to think about music. What do you make of these essays?

April 7: Long essay workshop I

April 14: Long essay workshop II

April 21: Trying to hear things as they really are

-Albert Murray, from Stomping the Blues, “The Blues As Statement”: 227-254, minus illustration pages

Essay 2 due (750 words): think about all the assumptions and received wisdom that has built up around a musician, and write 750 words about how it may be not quite correct.

Or, write 750 words about a contradiction or a hypocrisy suggested by a song or musical event you have heard.

April 28: What We’re Doing When We’re Listening

-W.A. Mathieu, from Bridge of Waves: “One Hundred Ways To Listen To Music,” pp. 259-264


-Wayne Koestenbaum, from The Queen’s Throat, pp. 42-43

Short response due: Think about a piece of music you’re currently involved with—old or new—and consider how you listen to it. Write about it for 500 words. What does it do for you? What parts of your brain—analytical, emotional, visual, spatial, or anything else—does it engage? How does it make you reflect on who you are?

May 5—Discoveries and first encounters


Revised version of 2500 word essay due