All writing about music tries 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.

Almost all writing about popular music is influenced by general-audience journalism and has swung definitively towards the floor. A lot of it might not really be about the musical notes: 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 musical principles. Which can leave you thinking: O.K., 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, in context and in practice. And it puts a special emphasis on the writer’s role as listener, demonstrating how close listening can be a reliable starting place, no matter where you want the writing to go. It makes your writing both "stage" and "floor."

Many of these readings are for the most part not standard evaluative reviews. They come from the last 75 years or so of critical or clarifying writing on jazz, rock, hiphop, classical music, electronic music, and beyond (musicology, memoirs, philosophy, and fiction). They get to the essence of performers, styles, and eras, provoke basic questions about why we make music and why we respond to it.

**Written assignments:** 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. There will also be a system of student discoveries: through the course of the semester, every student will find a piece of music writing they responded to and share it with the class; the student will come to class prepared to talk a little bit about the piece, the publication, and what tradition in writing about music it might represents.
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. This is a writing class; it’s also a seminar. I need everybody to speak up regularly—that’s the only way this class can work.

**Please note:** Come talk to me about your work during office hours, at least once during the semester, preferably twice or more. This is not a “requirement”: it is an expectation. If you are sure that you can’t ever make it to office hours, be in touch soon, and we’ll figure out an alternative. Meeting one-to-one is the fastest way for me to know what kind of writing you want to be doing. 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 your work late, you will 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](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html). Plagiarism and recycling is easy to spot and does you no favors.

**READINGS:**

Please buy these books:

Jace Clayton, *Uproot: Travels in 21st Century Music and Digital Culture*
Geeta Dayal, *Brian Eno’s Another Green World* (33 1/3 series)

Other readings are in the course packet (available at Unique Copy Center, 2525 Greene St) or through links given here.
Jan. 24: *Introduction*

Jan. 31: *Eulogies and Reappraisals*

— Whitney Balliett: “Monk” (on Thelonious Monk)


— Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá: from *Cortijo’s Wake* (p. 19-44)

**Short response due:** These are very different kinds of reflections on great musicians, written shortly after their death—and all pretty short except for Rodríguez Juliá’s, on the great Puerto Rican bandleader Rafael Cortijo, which needs its space to set the scene. Write one yourself: **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? Music? The economy? The understanding of the musician’s time, or of time itself? The musician’s reputation? Your knowledge and range of reference?

**And:** if you are unsure about the long-essay proposal due next week, make an appointment to see me asap.

Feb. 7: *How Music Travels*

— Jace Clayton, from *Uproot:*
  Chapter 1, “Confessions of a DJ”
  Chapter 2, “Autotune Gives You a Better Me”
  Chapter 3, “How Music Travels”
  (audio guide to Clayton: [http://uprootbook.com/listening-guide](http://uprootbook.com/listening-guide))

— Ned Sublette: “The Kingsmen and the Cha-Cha-Chá” (audio guide to Sublette: [https://open.spotify.com/user/benratliff/playlist/0iPRz4CLEmQWQfe94Ikrv7](https://open.spotify.com/user/benratliff/playlist/0iPRz4CLEmQWQfe94Ikrv7))


**Short (less than one page) proposal due for the 2500-word essay.** Your 2500-word essay is due March 7. It will be workshopped on April 4 and 11, and you’ll hand in a revised version on May 2, the last class. Your essay 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. 14: Close Listening (GUEST: Jace Clayton)**

—Charles Keil: “Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music”


—Owen Pallett, “Bad Romance—Great Tritone,” on Lady Gaga (http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/03/lady_gaga_s_bad_romance_owen_pallett_explains_the_pop_diva_s_genius_using.html)


**Essay 1 due (750 words):** there is a piece of music out there, or a part of it, 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. Figure out what is essential to it—the piece that, if it were carefully removed, would make the music lose its power. 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. 21: The Culture Around Music: 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/


**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 necessi-
tates powerful writing about music. How do these “contracts” work? What is their function? And how can we “read” them?

**Feb 28: The Gig**


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

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

**Essay 2 due (750 words):** All these pieces imply that there is a ritual going on around performance, no matter how small or large, casual or rigid. For this assignment you will go hear a musical performance—any kind of music and any kind of performance, in a club or theater or in a public space, any time of day. Give the reader a sense of the music, but also talk about the dynamics of the performance. Was the audience subservient to the performer, or vice versa? What understandings were in place between stage and floor? What was the arc of it and how were expectations managed?

**March 7: What Are We Doing When We’re Listening?**

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

—Peter Szendy, “Prelude and Address: 'I'm Listening',” from *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, pp. 1-11

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


—Crafts, Cavicchi, Keil, from *My Music*: Lisa, Mabel, Wanda

**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?

**2500-WORD ESSAY DUE**

**March 14—SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS**

**March 21: Listening for the form: Brian Eno**

—Geeta Dayal, *Brian Eno’s “Another Green World”*
—Brian Eno, “The Studio as a Compositional Tool” (http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/downbeat79.htm)

—Brian Eno, “Ambient Music” (http://ciufo.org/classes/114_fll1/readings/Eno_ambient.pdf)

March 28: Ways of writing about David Bowie and Prince (GUEST: Geeta Dayal)

—Simon Critchley: from On Bowie, pp. 50-70

—Rob Sheffield: "Major Tom" from On Bowie (pp. 39-57)

—Ann Powers: “Reflections of a Bowie Girl”


—Wesley Morris: “Prince Knew What He Wanted: Sex, Soul, and You”

Short response due: There were many ways to write about Bowie and Prince: both were like long books, with lots of story and lots of meaning. Think of a musician you consider to be in the same league. Write 300 words on how that person will be remembered after the first wave of journalistic responses.

April 4: Long essay workshop I

April 11: Long essay workshop II

April 18: Trying to hear things as they really are

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


—Theodor Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” p. 564-567

April 25: Close Listening II: Writing from Inside the Song

—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 or method of a song or album, however you can. Write a short piece in that spirit—250 to 400 words. It can be objective, anecdotal, or fictional.

**May 2: Discoveries and first encounters**


**Revised version of 2500 word essay due**