Syllabus

Course Description
Is it possible to say that a piece of music “means” something? Is music a language? Is it pure abstraction? Can music communicate emotion, narrative, or philosophy? Can it embrace or resist political ideology? In what ways is music influenced by, or in what ways does it influence, society? This course will look at the nature of musical meaning from all these perspectives. We will listen to and discuss forms of Western art (i.e. “classical”) music as well as genres of popular and folk music as we explore the relationship of gender, race, class, and politics to musical works. Each unit in this course will take specific musical texts (Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, John Coltrane’s A Love Supreme, the Beatles’ White Album) and explore different theoretical, philosophical, sociological, and musicological approaches to the music’s “meaning.”

Evaluation and Course Requirements
The course will be graded on the following basis:

- Analytical essay: 30%
- Final project: 30%
- Daily Postings: 30%
- Participation/attendance: 10%

The Analytical Essay will be a 5-7-page essay in which you take a single piece of music and explore multiple ways in which it could be said to express different “meanings.”

The Final project will be a topic and format devised by you and approved by me in which you offer your own theory of music meaning. It should reflect some of the reading we have done during the semester, some of your own reading and research, and a considerable amount of original and creative thinking. The project could be a traditional 6-8-page paper or it may be in another format. The final class session will be reserved for you to give short presentations on your projects.

Daily Postings: Each night before class, by 9:00PM you must post two short (1-2 paragraphs) posts that will partly structure the next day’s discussions: 1) I will ask you to respond to a question about one or more of the readings; and 2) you will offer your own analysis of a piece of music (not one we have or will discuss in class) addressing how it might relate to the readings and the topic of the next day’s class.
Course Schedule

Week One:

January 6:

1. Introductions

2. Thinking about the act of listening

3. Introducing questions and issues for the course

January 7:

1. Finding Meaning: The act of interpretation

   Reading: Susan Sontag: “Against Interpretation”

   Laura Bohannan: “Shakespeare in the Bush”

   Gary Tomlinson: “Approaching Others”

2. Music and Meaning: Defining the field

   Reading: Music and Meaning: Chapter 1

January 8:

1. Absolute Music: Music as only Music

   Reading: Music and Meaning: Chapter 3

   From Carl Dahlhaus: The Idea of Absolute Music

2. Music, narrative, language: Can music tell stories?

   Reading: in Music and Meaning: Chapter 5 (just intro/conclusion)

   Bernardini: “Heavy Melville” [first half or so, unless you're really into metal and or literature in which case read the whole thing]
January 9:

1. Finish section on music and narrative

2. Theorizing popular music

Reading:

Theodore Gracyk: “Appreciating, Valuing, and Evaluating Music”

Robert Walser: “Toward the Analysis of Popular Musical Discourses”

Richard Middleton: “Popular Music and Mass culture”

Week Two:

January 13:


2. Music, Race, and Civil Rights

Reading:

Scott Saul: “Coltrane, Malcolm, and the Revolution of the Psyche”

Selection from Landing on the Wrong Note

Viewing: Amandla

January 14:

1. Finish Music and Race

2. Ethnomusicology: Post-colonialism and Diaspora

Reading:

Michael Veal: from Dub: “Starship Africa”

George Lipsitz: “Diasporic Noise: History, Hip Hop, and the Post-colonial Politics of Sound”
January 15:

1. **Music and Gender**

   Reading: Susan McClary: “Sexual Politics in Classical Music”
   Carolyn Cooper: “Metaphor and Role-Play in Dancehall Culture”

2. **Music, biography, and psychology**

   Reading: Ajay Heble: “Performing Identity: Jazz Autobiography and the Politics of Literary Improvisation”

January 16: [Analytical essay due]

1. **Music and History**

   Reading: Kevin Dettmar: “The Brief Life and Protracted Death of Rock & Roll”
   Scott DeVeaux: “Putting the History Back into Jazz”
   Leo Treitler: from *Music and the Historical Imagination*

   Viewing: Ken Burns: Jazz

2. **Music and Emotion**

   Reading: *Music and Meaning*: chapters 10, 11

**Week 3:**

January 21:

1. **Finish Music and Emotion**

2. **Music and Identity**

   Reading: DeNora: “Popular Music and Identity”
   Gracyk: “Taste and Musical Identity”
January 22:

1. **Music, postmodernism, and the future**

   **Reading:**
   - John Cage: from *Silence*
   - Paul Miller (AKA DJ Spooky): from *Rhythm Scienc*

2. **Final presentations**

January 23:

   **Final paper/project due**

   **Final presentations**
Readings: Many of the class readings will be taken from the book *Music and Meaning*, edited by Jenefer Robinson. There will be many other readings from a variety of sources that will either be distributed in class or made available online. For online articles: please print them out to read, comment on, and bring to class. I know it is not environmental, but it leads to much better discussions.

Here is a list of the books that I will be taking the other readings from. Although I will make the required chapters available, you may want to look at the entire work either now or some time in the future.

John Cage: *Silence*
Carl Dahlhaus: *The Idea of Absolute Music*
Kevin Dettmar: *Is Rock Dead?*
Scott DeVeaux: *The Birth of Bebop*
Theodore Gracyk: *Listening to Popular Music*
Ajay Heble: *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*
Lawrence Kramer: *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*
George Lipsitz: *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*
Susan McClary: *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*
Paul Miller: *Rhythm Science*
Richard Middleton: *Studying Popular Music*
Scott Saul: *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*
Gary Tomlinson: *Music in Renaissance Magic*
Leo Treitler: *Music and the Historical Imagination*
Michael Veal: *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*
Robert Walser: *Running with The Devil: Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*

Listening/Viewing: We will do some in class, but be prepared to some listening/viewing outside of class.