

# Cultural Studies of Rock Music

Humanities 297/Fine and Performing Arts 297, 4 credits  
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**Course Description:** Rock & roll music has provided inspiration for and identity to at least three generations of people in America and around the world. At the same time, its cultural, historical, and musical significance remains in dispute. This course will explore rock & roll's origins, contexts, images, lyrics, and, of course, music itself. In doing so, we will explore these and other questions: What does rock & roll mean, or represent? How does it create that meaning? What questions does it raise, or answer, about issues of race, class, and gender? What is its relationship to American culture and history?

## Texts:

*Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.*, Reebee Garofalo  
*Rockin' Out of the Box: Gender Maneuvering in Alternative Hard Rock*, Mimi Schippers  
*Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture*, Anthony DeCurtis, editor  
*Great Jones Street*, Don DeLillo

## Syllabus

Date	Topic
23 Aug	Introduction
25 Aug	<i>Present Tense</i> , Preface and "Why Don't We Do it in the Classroom?"; Garofalo, Introduction (1-14)  Response 1: Find a specific rock song - from any time period, subgenre, or national origin - that you can make work with the following questions: How does your song resist academic inquiry - that is, what about it makes it difficult to discuss or describe in an intellectual way or in a college class? Then discuss how and why you would analyze it anyway - that is, how would you interpret the song? What does it mean or represent to you?
30 Aug	<i>Present Tense</i> , "Rock & Roll as Cultural Practice"  Response 2: What specific song defines or embodies what you would call "rock & roll"? Why? Shumway suggests that rock & roll is more than just music but a whole "cultural practice." What does he mean? What specific cultural practices did (or does) your song give rise to? Do/did you engage in any of this song's particular "cultural practices"?
1 Sept	Garofalo chapters 2 (skim) and 4 (read); listen to tracks 1-6  Response 3: Compare the state of rock & roll today with the origins described in the reading. What's the same? What's different? What's surprising? What's disappointing? Use a pre-1961 song ("Tutti Frutti" or "Great Balls of Fire" are fine, although feel free to find one on your own, including any song mentioned by name in the chapters) and a current (1999-present) one to illustrate your comparison.
6	Garofalo, chapter 6; tracks 7-9

Sept	Response 4: Find another pre-1961 rock song (again, feel free to find a song mentioned in the chapter) and describe what some people (feel free to narrow down who) in the 1950s could have been seen as dangerous, controversial, or subversive about it.
8 Sept	<i>Present Tense</i> , "The Enemy Within" Response 5: Why and how did rock & roll's detractors accuse it of being un-American? Find a rock & roll song that for you defines or sounds "American" or "un-American." Explain.
13 Sept	Garofalo, chapter 6; tracks 9-11 Response 6: Find a song from the period (c.1960-1971) that is/was rebellious or political, although not necessarily overtly or deliberately political. How is it political? What does it rebel against? How does it create meaning? Is there a conflict between the song's seeming subversion and the record label's presumed commercialism?
15 Sept	<i>Present Tense</i> , "Church of the Sonic Guitar" Response 7: Consider Palmer's metaphor (or is it a metaphor at all?) of "church" in the title. What aspects of rock & roll, particularly in relation to the electric guitar, lend themselves to a comparison with religion, in the broadest sense of the word. Find and analyze a song that illustrates your point.
20 Sept	Garofalo, chapter 7; Tracks 12-14 Response 8: Record labels and rock stars use the word "artist" synonymously with "musician" (i.e., in Prince's name change to "The Artist Formally Known as Prince," the word "artist" was the least weird aspect of it). But is rock & roll "art"? Do we want it to be? Find a song that supports your assertion.
22 Sept	<i>Present Tense</i> , "Concerning the Progress of Rock & Roll" Response 9: Find a song that for you illustrates an important contradiction of rock & roll. What is the contradiction, what is at stake, how does your song illustrate it, and does the song - or can your analysis - resolve it? Also be prepared to discuss this essay in conjunction with Garofalo's "Genealogy of Rock/Pop Music" back cover fold out.
27 Sept	Garofalo, chapter 8; tracks 15-17 Response 10: In many ways, the descendents of both punk and disco are still alive and well. Find a punk (last names beginning A-L) OR disco (last names M-Z) song from the late 1970s and a song that you would consider a current "punk" or "disco" (i.e., pop, dance, or R&B style) song. How are they still enough alike to place them in a similar category? How are they different? Which do you prefer?
29 Sept	<i>Present Tense</i> , "Living By Night in the Land of Opportunity" Response 11: How is Calder's piece different from the others? What's his point? How it is new yet familiar? Find and analyze one song that, like the essay, both embodies and challenges rock's assumptions and self-importance.
4 Oct	Garofalo, chapter 9 Response 12: The 1980s have been the subject of recent nostalgia (the short-lived "That 80s Show," all the VH1 retrospectives; retro 80s celebrity comebacks, Bowling for Soup's song "1985," etc.), and, unlike most of the musicians from the 50s, 60s, and even the 70s, many of its biggest artists are still critical favorites (Bruce Springsteen), having hits (U2), touring (Metallica), or otherwise, er, in the news (Michael Jackson). Plus, traditional college age students in 2005 were born during this decade. Yet Garofalo's CD HAS NO 80s SONGS!

	<p>So: find a musician or group that you see as representative of or synonymous with what you view as “the eighties.” Analyze one specific song to support your assertion.</p>
6 Oct	<p><i>Present Tense</i>, “The Eighties”</p> <p>Response 13: Find another song that represents the 1980s but that sounds very different from the one you chose for Response 12. Compare them. Taken together, how can they - and their differences - help us to understand the period? What don’t they tell us?</p>
11 Oct	<p><i>Present Tense</i>, “Sexual Mobilites in Bruce Springsteen”</p> <p>Response 14: Why does Smith choose Springsteen for this kind of analysis, as opposed to a performer more overt in his or her sexual ambiguity or homoeroticism? What may this essay help to illustrate about rock &amp; roll in general, if not Springsteen specifically? Then, choose another artist from the 1980s that lends him - or herself to a “sexual mobilities”-style discussion, using at least one specific song for analysis and illustration.</p>
13 Oct	<p>Garofalo, chapter 10, track 14 again and 20</p> <p>Response 15: Garofalo concludes by stating that rap and metal, in the end, are “decidedly political, whether they intended to make an over political statement or not” (364). Do you find this statement hard to believe? What is/was “political” about these styles, then? Find a metal (last names A-L) OR rap song (M-Z) c.1980-1995 that does not seem political in the same way as the 1960s music or in an overtly “political” way. Then, analyzing the music itself, the related “cultural practices” (Shumway again), and, of course, the lyrics, show how the songs nevertheless portray a (veiled?) political sentiment.</p>
18 Oct	<p><i>Present Tense</i>, “Voguing at the Carnival”</p> <p>Response 16: Using Rubey’s essay as a model, find a video from any artist, genre, or year, watch it a few times, and take notes. Keep your notes for class discussion. Then: What aspects of image, metaphor, narrative, innuendo, or message emerge? Do they revolve around power, sex, or race, as do all of Rubey’s examples? What do they convey?</p>
20 Oct	<p><i>Present Tense</i>, “About Salary or Reality”</p> <p>Response 17: Light focuses on rap’s conflicts and contradictions. Compare these conflicts and contradictions with those of rock &amp; roll, using one song (any genre) for support and illustration.</p>
25 Oct	<p>Garofalo, chapter 11, tracks 18, 19, 21, 22</p> <p>Response 18: As Garofalo implies, many of the successful rock acts of the 1990s were called “alternative.” Find two different-sounding or -styled “alternative” songs from the period and examine why the “alternative” label may suit them both while also discussing how they differ from each other.</p>
27 Oct	<p>Schippers, Preface; chapters 1-3</p> <p>Response 19: Schippers suggests a major shift between the 1980s and the 1990s in the ways that hard rock addressed gender. Find one 1980s song and one 1990s song that you think illustrates, complicates, or even contradicts her thesis.</p>
1 Nov	<p>Schippers, chapters 4-5</p> <p>Response 20: By now you’ve noticed that Schippers combines sociology, cultural analysis, music, and, most strikingly, personal narrative. Based on all four approaches, what does she mean by her title’s “gender maneuvering”? Find a specific group and song that you can discuss in terms of “gender maneuvering.” How is it like or unlike Smith’s similarly named “sexual mobilities”?</p>

3 Nov	Schippers, chapters 6-7  Response 21: Find a song that embodies what Schippers describes as “feminist politics.” Explain. Is it from the early-mid 1990s? Does the kind of feminism that Schippers describes in her conclusion end with 1990s alternative hard rock? Find a second, current (1999-present) song that for you takes up Schippers’s activism or that suggests that this action has yet to be undertaken.
8 Nov	DeLillo, 1-82  Response 22: Imagine that Great Jones Street is being adapted into a film. (Relax, it’s not.) What rock star, dead or alive, with the possibility of age-, race-, or gender-blind casting, would make a good Bucky? Find and refer to one specific song by this person for support.
10 Nov	DeLillo, 83-200  Response 23: What song from the period in which the novel was written (c. 1974) to you resonates with the book’s images, themes, faux lyrics, or any of the book’s possible points (about rock stardom, America, authenticity, language, violence, etc.)?
15 Nov	DeLillo, 201-end  Response 24: Imagine that Great Jones Street movie again. What song would you use in its soundtrack, and where would it be in the film (with matching page numbers)?
17 Nov	Garofalo, ch. 12  Response 25: Find and analyze a current song that you think indicates the future direction of rock & roll. What does your choice say about this future, for better and worse?
29 Nov	Discography due. Be prepared to read and discuss your responses.
1 Dec	Continued discussion of Discography. And: <i>Present Tense</i> , “A Corpse in Your Mouth.” How is this essay a kind of “cannibalism”? Why does Marcus use the cannibalism metaphor for rock & roll? How is rock & roll “cannibalistic”? Why end with this?
6 Dec	Last meeting, conclusion, discussion and evaluation of course

**Requirements and Grading Policies:**

Reading and Class Participation (30% of course grade)

Response Papers (60% of course grade): Each class (for a total of 25 assignments) will assign a 1-2 page (always typed) response to a specific question listed below in the Calendar. To answer the response questions, you will need to use at least one rock & roll song of your choice for support, illustration, or analysis. Keep track of your songs in an ongoing discography (see below), and bring copies of your songs to class daily for sharing and discussion.

Discography (10% course grade): By the end of the semester, you will have found and collected at least 25 songs and 1 video in conjunction with your Response papers. On Nov. 29, I will collect your discography (the written citations and the recordings themselves). In addition, beginning on a separate sheet, write 3 pages that evaluate what you’ve collected, making specific references to your specific songs, in order to answer the following: What does this particular song collection say about rock & roll music? What does it say about American or world culture? And what does it say about you, the person who picked all these songs?

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