

JOU4930: Special Study in Journalism: Music Journalism (Class #21297)

Instructor: Brian DiGenti

Class Time: Mondays, 3:00 PM - 4:55 PM (Periods 8-9); Wednesdays, 3:00 PM - 3:50 PM (Period 8)

Class Location: Zoom via Canvas

Office Hours: Video conference, by appointment through email request

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This course will teach how to think differently about music in order to write differently about music. Putting music in context—*connecting the dots*—is key to offering insightful reporting and sparking your reader’s curiosity about the undiscovered and speeding up their own journey. We will study music criticism, music writing, and music journalism (Q&A and long-form) to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the various forms and create a new foundation for the best way forward. Music journalists should be able to craft portraits of the artist, document the music-making process, provide cultural and historical insights, and talk about the music itself in straightforward terms, as well as creative metaphors.

Reading Requirements: While this class is reading-intensive, a majority of the assignments will either be relatively short or excerpted, along with the occasional long Q&A and long-form prose. But the reading is fun and necessary. All reading assignments will be available on Canvas as either a web link or a provided PDF. All reading will be published works of criticism, reviews, Q&As, and long-form journalism and music writing. Reading these articles will make up the majority of your grade, with both notes and short assignments that prove you have read the pieces (you will be asked to write one sentence/note for each article about one thing that stuck out to you, to be discussed in class; see breakdown below). Please activate a *New York Times* subscription at [myUFL](#) and navigate to “Main Menu”; from there, go to “Quick Links,” then “NY Times” and click on “Subscribe now.”

Attendance: Because classes are synchronous and participation is key, attendance is mandatory. And because it is Zoom, there is no excuse to miss a class. Cameras should be on during all participation segments. If you must miss a class, please email me beforehand. Because classes will include multimedia presentation (slides, videos, music), a good computer is recommended (and a phone is not). Classes will be recorded and available on Canvas. Occasionally, I will offer an asynchronous class of a prerecorded Zoom Q&A with a guest writer in lieu of our normal Wednesday class. You will lose 5% of your total points for every unexcused absence.

Participation: If you do not participate in class, you have the chance to make up those missed points by participating on the Canvas message boards, which will offer a platform for classmates to discuss

lectures and concepts further. I will also offer further reading for those who are interested in digging deeper.

Assignments and Submissions: Please turn in all assignments on their due dates. Please talk to me if there are any issues *before* missing a deadline. Late assignments will be automatically deducted 5% of its total grade. Unless noted otherwise, all assignments should be uploaded to Canvas via a link to an editable Google doc. Make sure to provide me with edit access. Include your name, the assignment title, and the date assigned.

Workshops: Occasionally throughout the course, students will workshop each other's pieces, providing thoughtful, constructive criticism. Assignments that will be potentially workshopped will be noted when assigned.

AI/Machine Learning: While it should go without saying that you are not allowed to generate work with Chat GPT, Bard, and other AI programs (and will cause the student to lose significant points), there is a larger issue: *music writing is a human endeavor*, as we will discuss. We will also discuss using such programs for research, as it is known to be quite problematic.

Plagiarism and Fabrication: Zero tolerance. Also, accidental/incidental plagiarism is a problem in music journalism, usually due to either lazy writing, sloppy research, or poor sourcing. We will discuss this in class so that students know exactly how not to be guilty of this. You are expected to abide by the UF Honor Code.

Diversity Statement: The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class, and religion. We expect each of our journalism courses to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

While the craft of journalism strives to be objective, sources of information for reporting purposes could be from subjective and/or privileged voices. Music journalism specifically has had to acknowledge a stark division within an underprivileged group often subjected to biases and exploited by both record labels and the media itself. We will discuss this in class, as it is an historically important point that informs modern music, culture, and business. Furthermore, historical music writing often used language that is inappropriate and insensitive, which is especially obvious (but just as painful) in

today's culture and society; in the couple instances of this within the assignments, we will directly acknowledge and discuss the use of such language. However, if at any time, you have issues with my approach with the material, please contact me with feedback, as I will use the learning experience to improve the quality of the course. I am committed to creating an inclusive environment in which all students are respected and valued. If you do not feel comfortable talking with me, I urge you to reach out to Joanna Hernandez, CJC director of inclusion and diversity, as your resource. You can email her at jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu.

Grading:

30% When asked, you will be required to write one or two sentences on an article, noting the main thing that stood out to you. At other times, I will tell you specifically what to look for when reading the piece, and you will write one or two sentences on your thoughts about it. You will turn these notes into me, via Canvas/Google Docs, and you will be prepared to talk about them in class, proving a general understanding of assigned reading and showcasing critical thought based on the concepts discussed.

60% Creative/critical/journalism projects [creative Q&A; two reviews; main journalism project]

10% Class participation (solo and group discussions on both assigned reading and lectures) and Canvas discussion board participation

A ≥ 95	B- 80-82.99	D+ 67-69.99
A- 90-94.99	C+ 77-79.99	D 63-66.99
B+ 87-89.99	C 73-76.99	D- 60-62.99
B 83-86.99	C- 70-72.99	E ≤ 59.99

Extra Credit: Throughout the course, I will assign bonus articles that students can read and report on for extra credit.

Tentative Class Calendar:

The following is subject to change based on the availability of guests, necessary workshops for student work, and fluidity of content based on desires of the students as we get further into the semester. I will provide a living spreadsheet on Canvas with updated classes and assignments.

WEEK 1

Monday, Jan 8

Introduction: How to Write About Music and Should You?

(Intro to the various concepts of the course)

Assignments: [“Dreaming When I Wrote This” by Carol Cooper](#)

Write a four-question imaginary Q&A with any artist you want, alive or dead (roughly 250-400 words). Due Friday, Jan 12.

Separate doc: Also please list your Top 5 favorite artists; what you would like to get out of this class; and inform me of any preferred pronouns and/or names that differ from the class roll information. Due Tuesday, Jan 9, by midnight.

Wednesday, Jan 10

Style guide, sourcing, AI, accidental plagiarism.

Assignments: MLK stories: [“I Know a Place” by Andria Lisle](#); [“Soul of the Cause” by Chris Williams](#)

WEEK 2

Monday, Jan 15

NO CLASS / MLK DAY

Wednesday, Jan 17

More Than Music: Music as Culture and the Human Experience

Assignments:

Critics Leonard Feather and Harvey Pekar, musician Pat Metheny, and cultural critic Susan Sontag

WEEK 3

Monday, Jan 22

Music Interpretation: Music Criticism, Part I

Assignments: Reviews by Lester Bangs, John Mendelsohn, Jenn Pelly, and Barry Michael Cooper; Lana Del Rey vs. Ann Powers

Wednesday, Jan 24

Fandom and Snark: Music Criticism, Part II

Assignments: [Lou Reed by David Marchese](#); [Jann Wenner by David Marchese](#); [Teddy Pendergrass by Ronnie Reese](#)

Write two reviews, due Jan 29, to be workshopped in class:

1. Write a review of an album you hate without saying anything negative. (roughly 250 words)
2. Write a critical (not necessarily negative) review of an album you love. (roughly 500 words)

Think about criticism deeply; criticism does not have to be negative. What is the role of the artist? What is expected of the artist? What is expected of *this* artist? On this record? How does this fit within the history of music? In their own history? Provide context—musical, historical, cultural. Be creative. Is there an angle?

WEEK 4

Monday, Jan 29

Come Again? Confrontational Interviews

How Do You Sleep? — The Writer's Role in the Artist's Legacy

Wednesday, Jan 31

Workshop

Assignments: Erykah Badu by David Marchese

WEEK 5

Monday, Feb 5

Guest: *New York Times*' "Talk" columnist David Marchese

The Elephant in the Room

Assignments: Hurray for the Riff Raff — [Pitchfork review](#) and [NYT review](#) with interview (comparison)

Wednesday, Feb 7

More talk about the interview process and reviews

Assignments: [Hodgy Beats by Frazier Tharpe](#); Lauryn Hill by Kathy Iandoli [with "Notes on Process" by Todd L. Burns of Music Journalism Insider]; [Tina Turner by Danyel Smith](#)

WEEK 6

Monday, Feb 12

Portrait of an Artist: Art, emotions, guilt, and growth

Wednesday, Feb 14

The Pitch: An Editor's Perspective

Assignments: Andy Beta; Dave Tompkins; [Hanif Abdurraqib essay on Loretta Lynn](#)

Write a 500–750-word artist profile, sourcing from published interviews. Due Wed, Feb 21.

WEEK 7

Monday, Feb 19

Creative Writing: Imaginative ways to write about music

Wednesday, Feb 21

The Pitch: Writers pitch the class/teacher on their final project, either a Q&A with extensive prose introduction (can also be a multivoice oral history), or a prose piece with one or more interviews.

1000-word first draft due for workshoping on Wednesday, Apr 3.

Assignments: Carlos Alomar by Jordan A. Rothacker [excerpt]; “Blindfold Test” with Leonard Feather [Adderley Bros. excerpt]; “Lana Del Rey and Billie Eilish Fall in Love” [excerpt]; Kendrick Lamar by Erykah Badu

Read assigned student profiles.

WEEK 8

Monday, Feb 26

Getting Out of the Way: Letting the artist speak

Assignments: [Marvin Gaye by Travis Atria](#)

Wednesday, Feb 28

Workshop profiles.

WEEK 9

Monday, Mar 4

What’s New?: Crafting, creating, and finding a narrative (more notes on sourcing)

Wednesday, Mar 6

Workshop profiles.

Assignments: Tammi Tarrell by Andria Lisle; Monica Lynch by Carol Cooper [excerpt]; Biggie Smalls by Michael Gonzales

WEEK 10

Monday, Mar 11

NO CLASS / SPRING BREAK

Wednesday, Mar 13

NO CLASS / SPRING BREAK

WEEK 11

Monday, Mar 18

Take It Personal: Subjective reporting and entering the story

Wednesday, Mar 20

Guest: Writer Andria Lisle

Assignments: Rivers Cuomo by Jenny Eliscu; Chris Williams’s “making of the album” interviews; et al.

WEEK 12

Monday, Mar 25

Documenting the Process: Studios, songwriting, and minutiae

Assignments: Greg Tate, Barry Michael Cooper, Mark McCord

Wednesday, Mar 27

Guest TBA

WEEK 13

Monday, Apr 1

Mostly the Voice: The influence of *Village Voice* cultural critic Greg Tate and writer Barry Michael Cooper on rap journalism / Finding your voice

Assignments: *The KLF*, *Stiffed*, *Traveling Soul* excerpts

Wednesday, Apr 3

Guest: Writer and podcaster Mark McCord

Read assigned student projects.

WEEK 14

Monday, Apr 8

Books, biographies, and beyond music

Wednesday, Apr 10

Workshop first draft of final project, discuss any issues, brainstorm.

WEEK 15

Monday, Apr 15

New Media: Podcasting, YouTube, and multimedia production [tentative]

Wednesday, Apr 17

Guest TBA

WEEK 16

Monday, Apr 22

Office hours / Discuss final project

Wednesday, Apr 24

TBD / Final project due