Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture

Course Outline and Objectives: This upper-level undergraduate music theory course offers an introduction to rap music and hip-hop culture, circa 1980 to present day. The course explores the roots and development of rap music, particularly in the areas of poetics (expressivity and meaning of lyrics), sampling, beat production, flow techniques (rapping), and genre. In addition, the course presents a broad overview of the social fabric of hip-hop culture, touching on subjects of race, politics, gender, sexuality, locality, media, signification, crossover, and legacy. Students will develop a detailed knowledge of music-theoretical approaches to transcribing, analyzing, and deconstructing rap music, with an emphasis on rhythm, meter, form, texture, timbre, and pitch. In addition, students will gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural factors that have influenced—and are influenced by—rap music.

The course convenes as a hybrid lecture/seminar, with meetings twice per week for 80–90 minutes. The study material proceeds loosely chronologically; weekly musical and extramusical topics (see course sequence below) are engaged through required readings and listenings, in-class analytical work, and group discussions. Weeks 1–11 explore these topics, while weeks 12–13 are devoted to student group presentations and exam review.

Pre-requisites/Level of study: Students with a basic background in music theory and musicianship (the freshman year of an undergraduate core sequence will suffice) are ideally suited to take this course. It can be offered as a mid- or advanced-level undergraduate course, and its content can be scaled to suit its inclusion in a core undergraduate theory sequence or as a theory/musicology elective.

Textbook: There is no textbook for this course. Readings are indicated in the course sequence and are available for download on the course website. Students are asked to prepare readings in advance of each meeting and familiarize themselves with the required listening.

Musical Topics: While the course content proceeds roughly chronologically, music-theoretical topics are introduced in spiral form; first appearing in an introductory context and later expanded upon with more detailed analytical exercises.

Grading Scheme:

- Assignments (2 @ 10%) 20%
- Individual Project 15%
- Group Project 20%
- Quizzes (2 @ 10%) 20%
- Final Exam 25%

Quizzes: Short quizzes are held twice during the term, consisting cumulatively of what has been covered up to that point. Students will listen to excerpts drawn from, or related to, in-class listening and be prompted for short analytical and written answers related to questions about each excerpt. Quizzes will also include short-answer or fill-in-the-blank questions.
Final Exam: The final exam will take place during the exam period, and will consist of listening-based questions, multiple choice, analysis questions, short paragraph answers, and short-answer questions.

Assignments and Projects:

Assignment 1: You will create a playlist of rap music that relates to a central topic or theme. Your task is to select and list five (5) songs relevant to the topic you choose from the list provided below, and to provide a 3-4 sentence summary substantiating each choice. At the top of your submitted assignment, please indicate your chosen playlist topic, and for each song please include the title, artist, album, and release year. If you are unsure whether a song you select is classifiable as rap, ask your instructor or simply pick something else if you can.

Please select one of the following topics around which to structure your playlist. If you haven’t listened to much rap music before taking this class, choose your topic accordingly (i.e. don’t choose the second topic if you didn’t listen to hip hop in your adolescence…)

- Five rap songs that I’d choose over all others to listen to for the rest of my life
- Five rap songs that meant a lot to me in my adolescence
- Five rap songs that helped me through a difficult time
- Five rap songs I never want to hear again (be respectful here: demonstrate why these songs are not worth listening to!)
- Five intriguing rap songs that I’ve recently discovered (why are they intriguing?)
- Five rap songs that I feel represent me in some way (this is very broad, and can encompass any facet of identity such as race, gender, orientation, place, language, social status, or anything else)

Try to avoid being repetitive in your 3-4 sentence descriptions. That is, if two songs have very similar meanings to you, please generate unique descriptions for each of them. If this proves impossible, consider substituting one of the songs. If you choose one of the more personal topics, please do not feel pressured to reveal anything you aren’t comfortable sharing.

Assignment 2: You will write a journalistic review of a rap or hip-hop album released since 2010 (inclusive). If you aren’t sure whether or not your desired album is suitable, don’t hesitate to consult the instructor. Since this is a review, you should also give your opinion--does this album succeed at what it sets out to do, or not? **NOTE:** you must write in a review/journalistic style as opposed to a formal essay style—you can use journalistic examples from the list below as stylistic references. Significant credit will be given to those who capture the tenor of review-style prose. You may want to include some of the artist’s biographical details or references to relevant music videos, but the assignment should focus on the music and lyrics of your chosen album. That said, no outside research is required. You may want to consider the following questions:

- How does this album relate to the artist’s work as a whole?
- How does it fit in to the musical genres of rap and hip-hop culture?
- Is it a departure from or continuation of trends you’ve noticed in music and culture?
● Do the lyrics and themes explored in them “match” the instrumental portions of the album? Why or why not?
● Does the album engage with any social or political issues? How might we hear this in the music as well as the lyrics?
● Does the music participate in any genres other than hip-hop? Why might this be significant?

Sample Reviews:
● Rapsody, *EVE* (Hip-Hop DX, August 24, 2019)
● Puff Daddy, *Forever* (AV Club, August 24, 1999)

**Individual Project:** You are a judge at the Grammy Awards in one of the three following categories:
● Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group (1991–2011)
● Best Rap Solo Performance (1991–2011)

Approximately one month before this assignment is due, the instructor will pass around a hat with a year and award category listed, including the nominees in that category. Once you have received your year and award category, your task is to write an adjudicatory report on who you think should win the award, and why. It doesn’t matter who actually won the award, and your grade will not be affected by whether you choose the real winner as the winner in your report. Your report should include a comprehensive account of who you believe should win the award, as well as (briefly) why the other entries should not win. The criteria that Grammy judges use is notoriously ambiguous, and you need not consult it for this assignment. In lieu, you may want to consider the following methods of assessment when crafting your report:

● How does your winning song relate to its artist’s work in general? Is it a radical departure from their previous work?
● How does your winning song fit into the hip-hop genre at large? Does it push the genre’s musical or social boundaries? Is it genre-defying or genre-bending in some significant way?
● Is your winning song a departure from or continuation of trends you’ve noticed in music and culture?
● In a musical sense, what makes your winning song superior to the other entries? Please articulate this using terms and concepts discussed in class.
● Does your winning song engage with any timely social or political issues? How might we hear this in the music as well as the lyrics?
● Is your winning song commercially successful? If so, can you articulate why, and in your view is this a positive attribute of the song in your view?

It is important that your report include a balanced assessment of the songs in both musical and extra-musical contexts. Grammy Awards often go to artists/albums/songs that are critically acclaimed, commercially successful, and societally relevant. It is also important to write in the context of your award year. If you are adjudicating an award from 1994, for example, try to
evaluate the nominees in terms only of what music and societal contexts have come before them. This may be difficult at times, especially given how far the genre has come. For example, you don’t need to be accepting of misogyny or homophobia referenced in an older song just because those issues were less challenged in hip-hop culture back then. In the same vein, though, try to avoid situating the song in a larger narrative that includes trends or events that came after it. For example, refrain from discussing a song’s legacy; this aspect is never known until years or decades after its release.

Your writing style should be more academic than was used for the two assignments. This is not a formal essay, but please take care with grammar and organization as though it were one. Please use clear and concise prose, void of any unnecessary jargon. If you obtain information from external sources, please cite them properly.

**Final Group Project:** You are part of a legal team involved in a copyright lawsuit, either as part of the prosecution or defense. The plaintiff is suing the defendant for copyright infringement, stating that the accused’s song has copied their musical material. It is the students’ job as the (plaintiff’s/defendant's) legal counsel to convince a jury of their peers (the rest of the class) that their client is in the right. Legal teams will present in a “debate style” court case whereafter a verdict will be issued by the jury. One week after the case, each legal team will be required to submit their stated arguments in writing, with full analytical and citational support. Grading for this project is broken down between written report (50%) and in-class presentation (50%). A bonus of 5% will be given to any legal team who wins their case.

The presentation portion will proceed as follows (15 mins):

- Instructor introduces the case and parties involved (1 min.)
- Prosecution: Opening remarks and preliminary evidence (3 mins.)
- Defence: Opening remarks and preliminary evidence (3 mins.)

**One-Minute Recess**

- Prosecution: Rebuttal, additional evidence, and closing remarks (3 mins.)
- Defence: Rebuttal, additional evidence, and closing remarks (3 mins.)

Cases will be drawn from a hat in class by a delegate from each group of four (two for the prosecution, two for the defence) from the following selection:

- Bridgeport v. Dimension Films (N.W.A. and Funkadelic, 2005)
- Newton v. Diamond (Beastie Boys and James Newton, 2003)
- Marlon Williams v. Calvin Broadus (Snoop Dogg and Marley Marl, 2001)
- Vanilla Ice v. Queen and David Bowie (Out of Court, 1990)
- Lil Joe Wein Music Inc. v. Jackson (Luther Campbell v. 50 Cent, 2007)
- Tone Loc v. Van Halen (Out of Court, 1989)
- Mac Miller v. Lord Finesse (Out of Court, 2013)
- Campbell v. Acuff Rose (1994)
• Ariana Grande v. Princess Nokia (Undecided, 2019)
• The Turtles v. De La Soul (Out of Court, 1991)

You may want to consider the following:

• Which musical features are most important in each song?
• What features make each song unique?
• Are there questions of genre and authenticity at play in your case?
• How much emphasis is put on music vs. lyrics and flow?

This resource maintained by students of the Columbia Law School is a great place to start, but by no means includes all the information you need to make your case. If you use this database, be sure to cite it in your written report.

Make use of any and all evidence you deem relevant. This may include, but is not limited to, musical recordings, transcriptions, analyses, spectrograms, circumstantial evidence, interviews, and music videos.

NOTE: You must submit any presentation audio-visual materials to the instructors at least 24 hours in advance of the presentation. This is so that the instructors can consolidate the materials for a seamless presentation throughout the class.

Although you will be organized in groups of four (for each case), you should be working with your partner on either the prosecution or defence. Contact with the opposing legal team should be kept at a minimum. Each partner must speak once. Working in a group can be difficult, especially since many of us have the experience of one person or a couple of people doing more work than the others. To remedy the situation, groups are encouraged to sign a “Team Contract” to ensure that the work is distributed and completed in a fair and equitable manner that is agreeable to all.
**Course sequence:** Readings are listed in alphabetical order and listenings in chronological order.

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**Week 1:**

*Extramusical topics:* early history (precursors, antecedents, old-school hip-hop, the golden age)  
*Musical topics:* textural layers (flow layer, beat layer), analytical approaches to rap music

**Readings:**


**Listenings:**

- Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight” (1979)  
- Run D.M.C., “Peter Piper” (1984)  
- Eric B. and Rakim, “Paid in Full” (1987)

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**Week 2:**

*Extramusical topics:* sampling (technology, aesthetics, meaning), signifyin’, toasting, the dozens  
*Musical topics:* textural aspects of the beat layer, basic song forms

**Readings:**


**Listenings:**
- Public Enemy, “Welcome to the Terrordome” (1990)
- A Tribe Called Quest, “Buggin’ Out” (1991)
- Rudy Ray Moore, “The Signifying Monkey” (1971)

**Week 3:**

*Extramusical topics:* identity politics, moral panic, early music videos

*Musical topics:* rhythm and meter in hip-hop beats, vocal timbre

**Readings:**


**Listenings:**
- Blondie, “Rapture” (1981)
- Public Enemy, “Fight the Power” (1989)
- Kid Frost, “La Raza” (1990)
**Week 4:**

_Extramusical topics:_ gangsta rap, east coast vs. west coast  
_Musical topics:_ rhythm and meter in hip-hop flow

**Readings:**


**Listenings:**

- Dr. Dre & Snoop Dogg, “Nuthin’ But a G Thang” (1992)
- Tupac Shakur & Dr. Dre, “California Love” (1995)

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**Week 5:**

_Extramusical topics:_ feminism/female rappers, misogyny, homophobia, LGBTQ+ rappers  
_Musical topics:_ integrated song analysis

**Readings:**

Battan, Carrie. 2012. “We Invented Swag: NYC’s Queer Rap.” _Pitchfork_.  
https://pitchfork.com/features/article/8793-we-invented-swag/


**Listenings:**

- Salt N Pepa, “Push It” (1987)
- Big Freedia, “Rent” (2018)

### Week 6:

**Extramusical topics:** the rap music video, hip-hop and film  
**Musical topics:** integrated song analysis

**Readings:**


**Viewing Selections from:** *Boyz N the Hood & Do The Right Thing*

**Listenings (including viewings of these songs’ music videos):**
- Hodgy, Domo Genesis, and Tyler the Creator, “Rella” (2012)
- Azealia Banks, “212” (2012)
- Childish Gambino, “This is America” (2018)
- Megan Thee Stallion, “Thot Shit” (2021)

### Week 7:

**Extramusical topics:** the rise of southern hip hop, other sounds/languages/cultures  
**Musical topics:** song texture

**Readings:**


Manabe, Noriko. 2018. “Rapping to a Different Beat: Flow, Language, and Aesthetics in Non-
Listenings:

- G-Style, “Gangsta” (1993)
- The Streets, “The Irony of it All” (2002)
- Samy Deluxe, “Poesie Album” (2011)
- Miss Christie Lee, “Experience” (2011)
- Sean Forbes, “I’m Deaf” (2013)

Week 8:

Extramusical topics: poetics and narrativity
Musical topics: rhythm, microtiming, and meter in hip-hop flow

Readings:


Listenings:

Week 9:

*Extramusical topics:* politics, religion, and social change
*Musical topics:* pitch-based aspects of rap music

**Readings:**

Harris, Aisha. “Has Kendrick Recorded the New Black National Anthem?” *Slate.*

https://www.esm.rochester.edu/integral/34-2020/komaniecki/


**Listenings:**

- Beyoncé, “Formation” (2016)
- Chance the Rapper, “Blessings” (2016)
- Rapsody, “Maya” (2019)

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Week 10:

*Extramusical topics:* New Atlanta, trap, post-regionalism, SoundCloud rap, social media
*Musical topics:* integrated song analysis

**Readings:**


https://medium.com/@crookcrooked/the-trouble-with-macklemores-same-love-2f44ae5c7546


**Listenings:**

- Macklemore, “Same Love” (2012)
- Le1f, “Wut” (2012)
- Desiigner, “Panda” (2015)
• Cardi B, “Bodak Yellow” (2018)

Week 11:

Extramusical topics: legacy, writing hip-hop’s history, crossover and mainstreaming
Musical topics: integrated song analysis

Readings:


Listenings:

• Kendrick Lamar, “King Kunta” (2015)
• Princess Nokia, “Tomboy” (2017)
• Drake, “God’s Plan” (2018)
• Lil’ Nas X, “Old Town Road” (2020)

Weeks 12/13: Group Presentations / Exam Review
Additional Sources (these could supplement the above reading list)


