

# Sex, Gods, & Rock And Roll: Religion and American Pop

## REL 330D

Instructor: W. Ezekiel Goggin

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Class Meetings: T/R 3:40-5:30 (Tang, SOMR)

Office hours: WF 10:15-11:45am

### Course Description:

A seminar on the historical relationship between religious expression and the production and consumption of popular music in the US. When we try to make sense of the place of popular music in the cultures of the United States, we find ourselves led almost irresistibly toward the analytical categories of religious studies and the lexicons of specific historical traditions. Indeed, popular music stands as a vital source of identity, meaning, community, and profound—even transcendent—experience. Such resonances are no accident. We cannot understand the power of popular music as it arises in US cultures without attention to its roots in the hybridization of various historical developments in American religious consciousness. This seminar will examine diverse genres of popular music (e.g. vaudeville, jazz, psychedelia, heavy-metal, hip-hop, etc.) through theoretical texts, case studies, and popular music recordings. Our investigations will be at once historical, formal, and critical. Historically speaking, we will attend various ways that religious traditions (e.g., West African Diaspora Religions, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, among others) have historically impacted the form, content, and social role of popular music. Formally speaking, we will think about how popular music might open and/or foreclose certain types of religious activity and reflection. Critically, we will consider how attention to the religious dimensions of popular music help us to think through the changing role of religion in the modern world.

### Required Texts:

Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit* (New York University Press, 2002).

Jacques Attali, *Noise: the Political Economy of Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

NB: Other texts will be distributed electronically via PDF or hyperlink

### Course Objectives:

Over the course of the term, students will:

- 1.) Develop an understanding of the role played by specific religious traditions and innovations in the emergence of popular music in and through the cultures of the United States.
- 2.) Articulate the role of popular music's "religious" relevance (e.g., with respect to its historical, functional, and formal characteristics)
- 3.) Develop reflective and expository writing skills through a series of short papers.
- 4.) Hone their facility for public speaking through the oral presentation of research.
- 5.) Produce a term research paper.
- 6.) Listen to some music!

### Assignments & Evaluation

**Five reflection papers (25 points each; *minus* the lowest grade = 100 points total):** Over the course of the quarter, students will compose short reflection papers (**500-750 words**). Each reflection paper must do the following:

- 1.) **Engage** a reading from days marked with an asterisk (\*)
- 2.) **Explain and analyze** at least one key claim from the relevant reading with the respect to the relationship between religion and music as we have explored it in the course (e.g. how do the author's claims demonstrate or contest functional parallels between pop musical performance and ritual, prayer, trance, etc.? The relationship between pop, religion, and power? The idea of pop music as a form of religious expression?)
- 3.) **Substantiate** your claims with reference to a musical recording (audio or visual). Be sure to explain how the sonic and/or lyrical content of the recording supports your claims.  
**NB:** The **“suggested listening”** listed along with several reading assignments are for the purpose of supplying you with possible examples for your reflection papers and for in-class discussion. If you feel there is another musical recording (audio or video) which better helps you make your case, you should feel free to use that instead!
- 4.) **Fall** within page limits
- 5.) **List** page limits at the bottom of the assignment
- 6.) **Cogently** engage the reading
- 7.) **Include** parenthetical citations (Chicago Style) where appropriate.
- 8.) **Be submitted** by hard copy **NO LESS THAN ONE WEEK** after the relevant assignment

### **Research Requirement**

The largest portion of course points comes from the research requirement portion of the course. The aim of the research requirement is to facilitate a deep, sustained investigation on a single topic which will hone your analytical and expository writing skills, give you the opportunity to take part in collaborative research techniques, and to develop an appreciation for the extension of “religious studies” materials to elements of the modern world which are not always understood to be “obviously” religious.

The research requirement involves 4 assignments, which detailed below.

### **Research Proposal (10 points)**

The research proposal is your opportunity to begin to formulate an idea for your term paper (see term paper requirements below). It must include:

- 1.) An abstract (100-200 words) which describes the musical works or artist you will investigate (one we have not covered in class), and the basic trajectory of the paper (i.e., the claim you plan to make, and how you plan to make it).
- 2.) A list of possible sources (no less than 5)

### **Participation in Small Group Research Workshop and Completion of Worksheet (15 points)**

Prior to Spring Break, you will “workshop” your research proposal with a small group of your peers on the date listed on the course schedule below. This will include a record of the questions or suggestions posed to the student by their group, as well as a statement of the student’s plans to address these in the course of their research.

### **Individual Presentations (100 points)**

Your individual presentation will be an opportunity for you to share the research you’ve done throughout the term for your term research paper and to workshop your ideas with your fellow classmates. These presentations should offer 1.) Be about 15-20 minutes in length, 2.) Offer background

on the artist and musical recordings/performances/etc. that you will be analyzing 3.) Explain the historical and conceptual significance of this figure/work with respect to theological and religious themes explore in the class. 4.) Include some form of audio or visual component (E.g., select concert or documentary footage, guided listening to a musical recording, etc.) 5.) Conclude with a Q&A.

### **Term Research Paper (225 points)**

Students will prepare a term research paper **2,500-4,000 words**) as the capstone of their work in the course. In this paper, students will offer a sustained argument regarding the religious significance of the works of a popular musical artist, movement, or genre of their choice provided this was **not covered in our course**. Students will develop the thesis of this essay in conversation with our readings and discussions.

The term paper must contain: 1.) A thesis statement 2.) A cogent argument in support of the thesis statement 3.) Parenthetical, in-text citations. 4.) A works-cited page. Paper conferences are encouraged but not required. Conferences should be scheduled in advance via email. In order to provide you flexibility in during finals, the **long essays will be due electronically any time before the end of finals week**.

Term-paper rubrics will be circulated in advance.

**Class Participation (50 points)** Attendance, punctuality, preparation, and participation will all contribute to the class participation grade:

- 1.) Attendance: **All students are required to attend every class meeting**, and students who incur unexcused absences will receive zero participation points for the day.
- 2.) Punctuality: **Habitual tardiness will result in a loss of participation points**. The amount of points lost will be determined by the frequency and severity of the problem.
- 3.) Preparation: **Students are expected to prepare for each class by completing all the assignments for that day and bringing the relevant readings/materials with them to class meetings**. If you are not prepared for class you are not only doing yourself a disservice, but also your peers –lack of preparation precludes effective participation in class, thus diminishing our capacity to learn.
- 4.) Participation: Students should engage the material and **join in class discussions of the reading assignments**. Students are expected to be respectful, charitable, and rigorous in their exposition of argument and in their reception of the arguments made by their peers. **Failure to respectfully and thoughtfully engage in discussion will result in a loss of participation points**. Cell phones should be silenced or turned off and stowed away prior to class, and should remain so during the entirety of class time. Please refrain from any texting, snapchatting, tweeting, and other forms of digitally broadcasting/consuming information during class time, please.

## Grading Policy

Grades for the course will follow the point scale and breakdown below:

### Point Scale

500-491 = +A  
490-465 = A  
464-455 = -A  
454-445 = +B  
444-420 = B  
419-410 = -B  
409-400 = +C  
399-350 = C  
349-330 = -C  
329-300 = D  
299 & below = F

*A note on grading:* Grades are an assessment of the students' efforts and abilities. Only exceptionally sophisticated work will receive an 'A,' Good work will receive a 'B.' Satisfactory work warrants a 'C.' Unsatisfactory work will receive a 'D.' Work which does not meet the basic course requirements will receive an 'F.' I have clearly laid out the points scale so that you may easily keep track of your progress through the course. I am a difficult but fair grader, and I stand by the marks I assign. You are welcome to discuss any grade with me (e.g., why you received it, what you could have done differently), though chances are slim that the mark will change, unless I have made a glaring error in assessment (in which case please bring it to my attention!).

## Plagiarism

No plagiarism of any kind is acceptable in this class (or any other, for that matter). **Any occurrence of plagiarism will result in an automatic grade of zero for the assignment and immediate referral to the University administration, who may recommend disciplinary action.** Students should consult the Academic Integrity Handbook for a full explanation of College expectations and policy. [https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook\\_Web.pdf](https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook_Web.pdf)

Any material, from any source, must be cited according to standard citation procedures. This includes books, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, television, internet, lectures and even personal conversations. *Papers may be submitted to Turnitin.com.* If you are unsure of how to properly cite materials, check out: <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/help/citing-sources>

## Writing Center and Academic Support

The development of clear, communicative, and effective writing skills is essential to a liberal arts education. Students who may be struggling with any phase of the writing process (drafting, research, editing, etc.) are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the academic support resources provided by the college's Writing Center. The Writing Center also offers specialized support for English language learners and academic coaching and counseling services to help students develop skills necessary for academic success (e.g., time-management, organization skills, etc.). Consultations are available by appointment through the Writing Center's website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

## **Accessibility**

Skidmore is committed to an inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning community. Students who require special accommodations for should contact Meg Hegener ([mhegener@skidmore.edu](mailto:mhegener@skidmore.edu)) at the Office of Students Access Services at the beginning of the term in order to facilitate their full participation in course activities and full access to course materials.

Further information can be found at the Office of Student Access Services' website:  
<https://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/>

## **Title IX Statement**

Skidmore's Title IX statement as approved by the Student Government Association and endorsed by the Curriculum Committee is as follows: "Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available."

## Course Schedule

### Introduction: Body, Spirit, Mind, and Music

#### Week 1

1/21

Introductions and Syllabus review

1/23

Robin Sylvan

*Traces of the Spirit*

Chapter 1, “The Connection Between Music and Religion”

### Music and Critical Theory: What Does Music “Show”?

#### Week 2

1/28

Theodor Adorno

“On Popular Music” (available as PDF)

1/30

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

Chapter 1 “Listening;”

Chapter 2 “Sacrificing”

#### Week 3

2/4

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

Chapter 4 “Repeating”

Chapter 5 “Composing”

2/6

Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

### Historical Perspectives: Commodifying Revolution, Race, and Religion

#### Week 4

\*2/11

Michael Ventura, *Shadow Dancing in the USA*

“Hear That Long Snake Moan” *Shadow Dancing in the USA* (Available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Vodou, *Ritual Possession of the Dead* (1997; recorded live, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)

[https://open.spotify.com/album/59CbKUAzItxKq2FjpGd6R5?si=7KmF57BSMCtjAr\\_jUH00g](https://open.spotify.com/album/59CbKUAzItxKq2FjpGd6R5?si=7KmF57BSMCtjAr_jUH00g)

2/13

Robin Sylvan

*Traces of the Spirit*

Chapter 2 “West African Possession Religion and American Popular Music”

## Week 5

2/18

John Leland *Hip: The History*

“In the Beginning was Rhythm: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and the Blues”  
from (Available as PDF)

[In-class Film: *The Ringshout and the Birth of American Music*]

Suggested Listening: Harry C Browne *Comic Minstrel Songs 1916-1921*

[https://open.spotify.com/album/0XqPaGvZZcC4c0PT6ypjRm?si=nif9TYP6TP25pgl\\_RkMiLA](https://open.spotify.com/album/0XqPaGvZZcC4c0PT6ypjRm?si=nif9TYP6TP25pgl_RkMiLA)

2/20

John Leland

*Hip: The History*

“The O.G.s: Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman”  
from *Hip: The History* (Available as PDF)

Walt Whitman

*Leaves of Grass*

“Song of Myself” (available as PDF)

[In-class Film: *Blacks and Vaudeville*]

## Week 6

2/25

WEB DuBois

*The Souls of Black Folk*

“Forethought”

Chapter I-II, Chapter XIV (Available as PDF)

Amiri Bakara

*The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*

“The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American Music” (available as PDF)

\*2/27

Jason Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion*  
“Cleaning the Mirror” (available as PDF)  
“Truth on Your Instrument” (available as PDF)

[In-Class Film: *The Church of Saint John Coltrane*]

Suggested Listening: John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (1965); Alice Coltrane  
*World Galaxy* (1972)

## Week 7

3/3

**\*DUE: Research Project Proposal\***

Small Group Research Workshops

3/5

LIBRARY SESSION

Class will meet in Scribner 222 (second floor, near circular staircase)

## Week 8

3/10

NO CLASS (Spring Break)

3/12

NO CLASS (Spring Break)

## Musical Subcultures as Religion: Deadheads, Metalheads, Hiphopheads

### Week 9

\*3/17

Robin Sylvan,

*Traces of the Spirit*

Introduction to Part II, “Popular Music Subcultures as  
Religion: A Comparative Analysis Based on Ethnographic  
Research”

Chapter 4 “Eyes of the World: The Grateful Dead and the  
Deadheads”

Suggesting Listening: *Aoxomoxoa* (1969)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/1dwtN0qpt3OIWlu1MKx8HK?si=eZo4BECBSnWWyxMo-qrQvQ>

3/19

**DUE: Workshop Worksheets**

[In-Class Film: *The Grateful Dead Movie* (1977)]

**Week 10**

\*3/24

Robin Sylvan

*Traces of the Spirit*

Chapter 5, “Stairway to Heaven, Highway to Hell: Heavy Metal and Metalheads

Suggested Listening: Black Sabbath *Master of Reality* (1971)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/7pGb2cOGVz6vLyaZaKOOQ7D?si=Y-f6XqJQT5itjNfTcf7Yfg>

3/26

Owen Coggins

*Mysticism, Ritual, and Religion in Drone Metal*

(Selections, available as PDF)

**Week 11**

3/31

Robin Sylvan

*Traces of the Spirit*

Chapter 6, “The Message: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture”

\*4/2

Thomas Nesbit

“Planet Rock: Black Socioreligious Movements and Early 1980s Electro” from *Call Me The Seeker Listening to Religion in Popular Music*

Angela M. Nelson

“God’s Smiling on You and He’s Frowning Too: Rap and the Problem of Evil” from *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (Available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, *Planet Rock* (1986)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/5SgUEiP95ghNOAbha6bLDV?si=CHhLDpt-SFWsOb9128Q2cw>

## Pop as Religious “Text”: Prince, Madonna, and Kendrick Lamar

### Week 12

\*4/7

Gavin Hopps

“Theology, Imagination, and Popular Music” in *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*.

Rupert Till

“The Personality Cult of Prince: Purple Rain, Sex and the Sacred, and the Implicit Religion Surrounding a Popular Icon” in *Implicit Religion* (available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Prince *Purple Rain* (1984)

[https://open.spotify.com/album/7nXJ5k4XgRj5OLg9m8V3zc?si=6sWXyir9SqG5TpLTyMV\\_xQ](https://open.spotify.com/album/7nXJ5k4XgRj5OLg9m8V3zc?si=6sWXyir9SqG5TpLTyMV_xQ)

\*4/9

Carla Freccero

“Our Lady of MTV: Madonna’s *Like A Prayer*” from *boundary 2* (19:2, Feminism and Postmodernism) (Available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Madonna, *Like a Prayer* (1989)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/48AGkmM7iO4jrELRnNZGPV?si=rWlcbT5mTj6uBuN0RmzgVw>

### Week 13

\*4/14

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas

“The good, the m.A.A.d., and the holy: Kendrick Lamar’s meditations on sin and moral agency in the post-gangsta era” (Available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Kendrick Lamar, *good kid m.A.A.d. city* (2012)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/6PBZN8cbwkqm1ERj2BGXJ1?si=Fci8DXGdQ-OkLFGRWWhKgbw>

\*4/16

Spencer Dew

“Hebrew Israelite covenantal theology and Kendrick Lamar’s constructive project in DAMN.” (Available as PDF)

Suggested Listening: Kendrick Lamar, *DAMN.* (2017)

<https://open.spotify.com/album/4eLPsYPBmXABThSJ821sqY?si=V3fD9vkvTqu3-Z1j55SJ3A>

**Week 14**

4/21

Individual Presentations

4/23

Individual Presentations

**Week 15**

4/28

Individual Presentations

Course Review & Final Remarks

**TERM RESEARCH PAPERS DUE: MAY 6<sup>th</sup> 11:59:59PM**  
**(Absolutely no extensions)**