

THE COUNTRY OF COUNTRY MUSIC

INSTRUCTOR: Heather Mease, heather.mease@tu-dortmund.de

CLASS MEETING: Sommersemester 2023, Wednesdays 16:00-17:30, R.420

OFFICE HOUR: Wednesday 15:00 – 16:00 and by appointment for in-person & virtual meetings

OVERVIEW

Perceptions of Country music in the United States often align with cultural conservatism, traditional family values, rural white America, working class authenticity, and rightwing politics. But these social and political associations did not always dominate country music, nor do they accurately reflect the diverse listeners and creators today. This course covers the origins, culture, and political history of American music from blues to contemporary pop country and the Americana in between. Students will complete weekly assignments in the form of reading varied texts by artists and scholars, watching short documentaries, and listening to music. No specific musical knowledge or musicianship is required.

ASSIGNMENTS & DEADLINES

Short Response Essay

Write a 1-page (300 to 400 words) response essay to one week's assignments (reading, listening, etc). The response may include drawing connections to other weeks' readings and topics, critique of the materials, further research, consideration of related musical/media examples, new and unanswered questions, and personal reaction. This assignment may be written and submitted at any time but must be submitted by June 14.

In-Class Group Project Presentation

In groups of 3 – 4, choose a topic (either from a provided list or of your own interest) related to class content (contemporary country music culture and politics) to research and present to the class in a 5-to-10-minute presentation. It could be about a particular artist, song, trend, or idea such as the use of country music in Republican political ads or country trap music. The research will primarily be completed during the entire class period of **June 21** and presentations will be on **June 28**.

Final Exam

The final exam will take place on the last day of class, **July 12**, during the usually scheduled class time. The exam will consist of short answer and essay questions based on themes of the course. If you cannot make the scheduled exam time, you must tell the instructor as soon as possible to coordinate an alternative.

ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

You may have **two unexcused absences**. Beyond two, you risk failure of the course. Your participation is necessary for success, and participation cannot occur with recurrent absence. If you miss more than two classes, please get in contact to discuss possible ways to raise your grade. The first day does not count towards absences. **When you miss class for ANY reason, please send an email to receive information about what was covered during class time and expectations for homework and the following week.**

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 – APR 5 **Introduction**

WEEK 2 – APR 12 **NO CLASS**

WEEK 3 – APR 19 **Some Beginnings**

WATCH: Ken Burns – *Country Music*, [Ep. 1 “The Rub \(Beginnings – 1933\)”](#)

LISTEN: Choose an artist mentioned in the documentary and listen to a few of their songs.

WEEK 4 – APR 26 **Where in the Country is the Country?**

READ: Patrick Huber – “The ‘Southernness’ of Country Music”

Bill C. Malone – *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*, Ch. 1 “Take Me Back to the Sweet Sunny South”

WEEK 5 – MAY 3 **Blues and the Industry’s Color Line**

READ: Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka – *Blues People*, Ch. 6 “Primitive Blues”

Karl Hagstrom Miller – *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, Ch. 7 “Black Folk and Hillbilly Pop: Industry Enforcement of the Musical Color Line”

WEEK 6 – MAY 10 Gendered Dynamics

READ: Amanda Petrusich – “Why The Chicks Dropped Their ‘Dixie,’” *The New Yorker*

Tom Jacobs – “Country Hits Increasingly Objectify Women and Glorify Whiteness,” *The Pacific Standard*

LISTEN: Selections from the class playlist

WEEK 7 – MAY 17 People and Politics

READ: Daniel Geary – “‘The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin’: Johnny Cash and the Politics of Country Music”

LISTEN: Johnny Cash – *At Folsom Prison*
Johnny Cash – *At San Quentin*

WEEK 8 – MAY 24 Genre Trouble

READ: Elias Leight – [“Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind.”](#) *Rolling Stone*

Shana Goldin-Perschbacher – *Queer Country*, Ch. 2 “Genre Trouble”

WATCH: Bebe Rexha ft. Florida Georgia Line – [“Meant to Be”](#)
Lil Nas X ft. Billy Ray Cyrus – [“Old Town Road”](#)

WEEK 9 – MAY 31 Middle Class Distinctions: Anything But Country

READ: Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Ch. 1 “Anything but Country”

LISTEN: Foo Fighters – [“Keep it Clean”](#)

WEEK 10 – JUN 7 Outlaws, Rebels, and Activists

READING: Nadine Hubbs – *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Ch. 4 “‘Fuck Aneta Briant’ and the Queer Politics of Being Political”

LISTEN: David Allan Coe – [“Fuck Aneta Briant” \(1978\)](#)
Lavender Country – [“Cryin’ These Cocksucking Tears” \(1973\)](#)

WEEK 11 – JUN 14 Between the Bar and the Chapel

READ: Bill C. Malone – *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'*, Ch. 4 "With My Friends at the Old Country Church."

Nicholas Dawidoff – *In the Country of Country*, "Hell's Half Acre"

WEEK 12 – JUN 21 Group Project Research

WEEK 13 – JUN 28 Group Project Presentations

WEEK 14 – JUL 5 Presentations cont.; Conclusions

WEEK 15 – JUL 12 FINAL EXAM

BIBLIOGRAPHY (BOOKS)

Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: W. Morrow, 1963.

Dawidoff, Nicholas. *In the Country of Country*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

Goldin-Perschbacher, Shana. *Queer Country*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2022.

Hubbs, Nadine. *Rednecks, Queers, & Country Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Malone, Bill C. *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Miller, Karl Hagstrom. *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

The Oxford Handbook of Country Music. Ed. Travis D. Stimeling. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.