

Philosophy of Popular Music

Philosophy 240, Spring 2025

MW 3:00–4:20

HU 123

The nature and significance of music has been an issue for philosophers since ancient times, but the last 75 years have significantly changed how we relate to music. Recording technology means that musical performance is no longer an ephemeral event, here and then gone. Moreover, studio recording technology allows for the creation of tracks which do not represent any possible performance. As a result of these developments, recent music poses questions and puzzles that simply could not have arisen for philosophers a century ago. Topics include the metaphysics of music, the nature of artistic value, and the significance of genre.

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Office hours: W 10:30–11:30, F 11:00–noon, and by appointment

Texts: All course readings are available on Brightspace.

I strongly encourage you to read actively and to mark up the readings.

Requirements and grading:

10%	response papers
10%	short paper
5%	Showcase Day reflection
25%	first midterm exam
25%	second midterm exam
25%	third exam

Class attendance and participation: You should come to class and participate in discussion, but the class is large enough that I won't check for this every day. Instead, participation in class activities and discussion will add to your grade, up to two-thirds of a letter grade. For example, a B could become an A–.

Response papers: You will be responsible for writing five reading response papers during the term.

Reading response papers may be written for any five readings, but must be turned in *before* we have discussed the readings in class. The dates on this syllabus are my best guess for that, but response papers turned in after class has started to discuss the reading will not be accepted for credit.

- Each reading response should begin by quoting one or two sentences from the reading which you think best provide the **central thesis** of the reading. *Often the thesis is not concisely stated on the first page!*
- The quoted passage should be in quotation marks and you should indicate which page of the reading it appears on.
- The reading response should then include an explanation of the thesis in your own words. What reasons does the author give for believing the thesis? Why do they think it matters?
- The part in your own words should be at least 250 words.

Short paper: You will be responsible for writing one short paper (about 1000 words) on an assigned topic.

Exams: There will be two in-class midterm exams and a final exam.

Paper grades: Papers will be marked ✓, ✓+, or ✓-. A grade of ✓ is full credit, and completing all the work with a ✓ will give you an A for that part of your grade. ✓+ is especially good, while ✓- falls short of expectations. A response paper that does not even approach expectations will be marked zero, but you may do another one to complete the required five.

Academic honesty: Cheating will not be tolerated. Papers and exam answers should be your own words.

Turning in the output of an AI system like ChatGPT or Copilot is cheating. Part of the value in academic writing is figuring out what you think about an issue. Using the output from an AI system doesn't just skip the writing, it skips the thinking.

Absences: If you will need to miss exam or due dates for foreseeable reasons, you should discuss them with the professor at the beginning of the term. If you are sick— or might be— then you should not come to class. You are welcome to follow up in office hours about material you missed.

Schedule of topics

This is a provisional and approximate schedule. I have indicated which readings we will discuss in each week, but even this might be nudged one way or another. I will always announce in class what we will be doing at the next meeting. If we get ahead or behind the schedule on content, it will change what's on the exam rather than the date of the exam.

Week 1 Jan 22

Introduction

Week 2 Jan 27, 29

Songs as music and as poetry

read: Andrew Kania (2020) "Song and the Medium of Music"

Week 3 Feb 3, 5

Understanding cover songs

read: P.D. Magnus (2022) *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, chapters 1–2

Week 4 Feb 10, 12

Appreciating cover songs

read: Magnus *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, chapters 3–4

Week 5 Feb 17, 19

Review

FIRST EXAM Wednesday, Feb 19

Week 6 Feb 24, 26

Music ontology

read: Peter Kivy (1987) "Platonism in Music"

Ontology and cover songs

read: Magnus *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, chapter 5

Week 7 Mar 3, 5

Ontology (continued)

read: Magnus *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, chapter 6

Taylor Swift's rerecording

read: Alex King (2025) "Meaning and Morals in Taylor's Versions"

Week 8 Mar 10, 12

Swift and conceptual art

read: Sherri Irvin (2025) "Conceptual Art (Taylor's Version)"

SPRING BREAK! no class

Week 9 Mar 24, 26

Music and imagination

read: Enrico Terrone (2020) "A Phenomenology of Pop Songs"

Listening to sad music

read: Attie-Picker et al. (2024) "On the Value of Sad Music"

Week 10 Mar 31, Apr 2

Review

SECOND EXAM Wednesday, Apr 2

Week 11 Apr 7, 9

The meaning of lyrics

read: Stephen Lester Thompson (2005) "How Hip-Hop Lyrics Mean"

Lyrics and epistemic injustice

read: Tareeq Jalloh (2022) "... Critical Scrutiny of Drill ..."

Week 12 Apr 14, 16

SHORT PAPER DUE Apr 14

Culture and belonging

read: Paul Taylor (2005) "Does Hip Hop Belong To Me?"

Week 13 Apr 21, 23

Country music

read: John Dyck (2021) "The Aesthetics of Country Music"

Week 14 Apr 28, 30

Conclusion

SHOWCASE DAY Apr 30, no class

Week 15 May 5

THIRD EXAM Monday, May 5

SHOWCASE REFLECTION DUE May 9