University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication

JMC:3400:0001 (3 semester hours)

Music Journalism

Spring 2018 Syllabus

Tuesday and Thursday
2-3:15, W332 AJB

Professor: Don McLeese

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Office hours (drop in or by appointment): Tuesday, Thursday 12:25-1:55

Or at other times by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course is a more narrowly focused offshoot of a course I have long taught as Arts and Culture Journalism. Where that course runs the gamut from TV to theater, many of the students it attracts are most familiar with and passionate about music (or movies). So this is a whole course on music journalism in general, and reviewing popular music in particular.

I will not be judging you on how much experience and musical insight you bring to this course, but on how you refine and sharpen your critical instincts over the course of the semester. You will learn the difference between an opinion and an argument, you will learn how your reviews say as much about you as they do about whatever you are reviewing and you will learn how to appreciate (and learn from) reviews that disagree with your point of view as much or more than you like reading those that reinforce your perspective.

You will listen to a lot of music in here and will be asked to respond in various ways, not only to the music itself but to the responses of others, both those in this class and those
who make some sort of living writing about music. Or write for public consumption without pay.

Back to opinions and arguments. To euphemize an old journalism adage, opinions are like belly buttons—everybody has one. There are no right or wrong opinions, just stronger or weaker arguments.

We will learn to judge how and why arguments are stronger (or weaker), and we will then learn how to make the strongest cases for our opinions and beliefs that we can, cases that will leave no doubt in the reader’s mind about how and why you think what you do, even if the reader ultimately doesn’t agree with your conclusion.

Here is an opinion: Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla. Or vice versa. There is no argument here; it’s just a question of personal preference.

But what about this? Gangsta rap is better than country music. Guitars are better than synthesizers. Artists who write their own material are better than those who don’t. Disco sucks (for those who remember the ’70s). Lady Gaga is a greater artist than Bob Dylan. Beyonce is better than Rhianna (or vice versa).

Are those merely opinions or can we develop arguments in favor or against? How do we develop an opinion into an argument, or a counter-argument? With the above, we likely have to begin the process by what we mean by “better.” (Or “sucks.”) More powerful, or more ambitious, or more popular, or more authentic?

And what does “more authentic” possibly mean?

And what we mean by “artist” (Singer? Dancer? Polemicist? Multi-media conceptualist?)

As a trained professional with decades of experience, I can make all of those arguments, and many more, from every possible side. And from a variety of other perspectives. I’ll be trying to show you how to do so as well, to anticipate the other side of the argument so you can respond to it before it is even made, to understand the implications of each side of the argument. To show you what you are really saying, through the larger implications of your argument. I’ll show you that you can make strong arguments for positions that aren’t even your own.

So I’ll be asking a lot of questions, forcing you to define your terms, and making you question some of your own most basic assumptions. I will show you the elements that each of your responses must contain—description, context, analysis, evaluation—but I will give you no magic formula for how much of each a review should contain and/or in what order (though I’ll make a case that evaluation should be close to the top and show where and why there are exceptions to that).

Most important, I won’t tell you what you should think or how you should feel about any kind of music. You and I should and will disagree forcefully about music, at least some
of the time. Because I am a very old white male, set in my ways. And you are you, whoever you are.

And both you and I will learn more about whoever you are over the course of this semester. Because how you respond to music depends in large part on who you are. And, believe it or not, who you are might well change over the course of this semester, at least in regard to musical taste. Because all of you will be exposed to music that you have never heard before, some that you might initially find threatening or disturbing or unlistenable.

But as your ears open to a wider range of sounds, styles and dynamics, you might well discover the power in pushing beyond your comfort zone, in exploring uncharted territory. Just as your taste in food or other forms of entertainment is likely different now than it was when you were very young, your musical taste is something that can mature, become more discriminating.

So, back to basics: How do you know what your own position, opinion or argument is? Here’s what you listen to first—your gut. Your first and best instinct. I really love this. I really hate this. This is really powerful in a really ugly way. This is so smoothly perfect it puts me to sleep. There’s something about this music that repels me in a really intriguing way.

That’s where we start, with how you feel. And then we (or you) try to figure out why, in a way that will make sense to a reader, who may or may not share your feelings, responses and basic premises. In other words, it’s not enough to say I am a big Taylor Swift fan, and everything she does is great, and this is by Taylor Swift, and therefore this is great. You’re going to have to figure out what it is about TS that makes you a big fan and how or if this new stuff differs from what she’s done before, and whether and why you like it better or not as well. And you’re going to have to sustain my interest, to show me why you are a TS fan even if I am not, and whether I might like this more or less than I like her other stuff.

And often you might have to do all this in a couple hundred words. And write them so I want to read them all. And so other readers and editors who don’t know you will want to.

Flexibility of mind is a crucial attribute in a journalist and one that will be encouraged here. Though we will generally adhere to the syllabus as far as writing deadlines are concerned, this class will exercise the latitude to respond to current developments, engage in in-class readings and reviewing exercises, and perhaps even accommodate guest speakers as their schedules permit. Just as the working journalist often has no idea when starting work that morning what assignments might come during the day, each class period should include the possibility of surprise and spontaneity, rather than conforming to a syllabus etched in stone.

Without abandoning the role relationships of professor and student, this course will emphasize the working relationship of an editor and writers, with class sessions...
frequently functioning like workshops, story meetings and brainstorming sessions, sometimes as viewing or listening sessions, and almost never like lecture periods.

Perhaps the most important requirement of this course is that you have fun. (That’s an order.) Your writing will be livelier and more engaging. Anyone who treats these assignments (and there will be many, some graded, some not) as obligations rather than opportunities will never be a music journalist. This is an all-consuming vocation, not a 40-hour a week job. It’s a privilege to get paid to do what most other people pay to do.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:**
The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is committed to your academic and professional success. In line with this commitment, we have identified particular learning outcomes that every student should obtain by the time they earn a JMC degree. You can find more information about these learning outcomes here: [http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment](http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment). We regularly assess the curriculum to determine whether students are achieving these outcomes. This course contributes to the following learning outcomes:

### 3. Writing and Storytelling Learning Goal
Understand that clear, concise, correct writing is at the heart of journalistic expression and that reporting and communicating it effectively requires a knowledge and achievement of the highest, professionally-accepted standards in all work.

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate the ability to gather factual story elements, and to evaluate and express them in logical, narrative forms for multiple media and audiences.

**Learning Objective 2:** Students will display the ability to access and analyze data, report facts accurately, research and edit information responsibly and in a manner commensurate with professional standards.

**Learning Objective 3:** Students will demonstrate the ability to apply above concepts in a manner that is sensitive to audiences across all media.

### 4. Multiculturalism Learning Goal
To demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups (including communities defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion and sexual orientation) in a global society in relationship to communications.

**Learning Objective 1:** Students will demonstrate an ability to produce media that serve the needs and interests of diverse communities and reflect their voices and experiences.

**Learning Objective 2:** Students will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of the cultures, histories, perspectives, and socio-economic and political situations of diverse groups.

**Learning Objective 3:** Students will demonstrate an ability to work with members of diverse groups to engage publicly over issues of community interest.
This class has other, course specific outcomes as well…

- To sharpen the observational, experiential and communicative skills required to respond to arts and entertainment with more than personal opinion, gut instinct and kneejerk reaction.
- To recognize the differences in depth and scope between criticism and consumer reviewing.
- To familiarize oneself with a wide range of professional music journalism, learning what to do (and not) in the process.
- To learn how to create and construct engaging critical responses that capture and hold the reader’s attention.
- To develop the skills required to write the longer pieces that arts journalism often requires, becoming adapt at interviewing, reporting and analyzing in the process.
- To learn how to adapt your personal style to communicate with different readerships, from cultists who are passionate about the music you are writing about to generalists who may or may not know anything about it.
- To learn to recognize and engage in valid critical arguments, whether or not one agrees with a particular perspective.

**GRADING**

Writers are judged primarily on their writing, and so will the students in this class, with 70% of the final grade determined by the grades on writing assignments. Grading will be weighted over the progression of the semester, to reward improvement from beginning to end:

Reviews: 40%
Midterm Think Piece or Arts-Related Profile: 15%
Final Enterprise, Trend or Issue Feature: 25%

Review assignments should aim for 300-500 words. (I’m less concerned with whether you go longer than if you go significantly shorter.) And I will be varying this over the course of the semester, depending on collective progress

For the midterm piece, aim for approximately 1,000-1,200 words. For the final trend, issue or enterprise feature, aim for 1,500-1,750. I will require you to do reporting/interviewing for at least one of these stories (and will be fine with you doing some for both, but will allow one to be a so-called “think piece”).

For both the profile and trend feature, you will have the option of revising your story to raise your grade on that assignment by as much as a letter. Only students who have
presented drafts on time to participate in workshopping and who have turned in their features by deadline will be permitted to revise for a higher grade.

On all assignments, pieces will be evaluated according to incisiveness, accuracy and effectiveness (the subjective but crucial quality of how the writing grabs this reader and sustains his interest), with points deducted for errors of spelling, grammar or other violations of the Associated Press Stylebook.

Grading standards are based on the standards of the marketplace. An A paper is a publishable piece. (If I give you a C on an assignment and you can show me I’m wrong by finding a quality outlet to publish the piece, I will change that grade to an A. With no disrespect intended toward the Daily Iowan or other student publications, these don’t count.)

All work is expected to be new and original to this class (no stories or reviews previously published elsewhere or written for a different class). You will be encouraged to find outlets to publish your work, since clips will benefit a prospective journalist more than grades, but such work should be submitted here before it is accepted elsewhere. If you are trying to coordinate assignments for this class with work you’re doing for the DI or other publications, let’s discuss. I don’t want to see a review handed in that I’ve already read in the paper, without a prior conversation.

All stories are due on the deadline date, posted to dropbox (or, occasionally, discussion thread) of the ICON/CANVAS site. Deadlines are crucial for the working journalist, not to be violated unless permission has been negotiated in advance (which it rarely will be in this class, and only in exceptional circumstances). Late papers will be penalized a full letter grade per day. Thus a paper due on Tuesday that would have merited an A will receive a C if it isn’t turned in until Thursday. Again, no revisions will be permitted on those longer assignments if they are turned in late.

The remaining 30% of the final grade will reflect class attendance and participation, presence of mind as well as body. Any ungraded assignments will be included within this grade. Prompt attendance (i.e. at the start of the class) is MANDATORY. Participation in class discussion will figure as heavily in this grade as attendance. If you can’t be here, are going to be late or need to leave early, let me know in advance.

The learning we do in here has little to do with a specific body of knowledge to master. If you’re more comfortable in a course with lecture points to memorize or PowerPoints for reference, this ain’t it. In this course learning is a collective dynamic; we learn from each other. We learn by doing—by listening, discussing, debating, arguing, writing, reading, rewriting. We will do some of much of this in every class period. So, if you’re not here, you’re not learning, and you’re not contributing to the learning of others.

Some of the closest calls in final grading are deciding between A/A-, A-/B+, B+/B etc., with the decision typically determined by class performance (and extra credit).
For extra credit, you have the option of writing a 3-5 page paper (750-1250 words) analyzing your own critical perspective, why you like what you like and don’t like what you don’t like, how you feel the musical arts function (or should function) within society and how your perspective has changed (if at all) over the course of this semester. Including work from other critics with whom you agree or disagree could help bolster your analysis. Showing how this course has helped shape your perspective (or not) should be a component.

In monitoring your own progress and performance, you should pay no attention to anything on the ICON/CANVAS gradebook that is not a letter grade assigned by me. The network seems to make some computations on its own, in percentages or some such, and I do not use them. You should, for example, come to class because I insist on your coming to class, and know when you are not—not because the computer tells you you have a 67 or whatever in attendance.

**TEXTBOOK**

There is no textbook. Instead, I will be peppering you with things to read throughout the semester, many of which have yet to be written. I like conducting my courses in what I call “real time,” which means that, like professional critics, we will often be focusing on music that has yet to be released commercially, and then on responses to that music when it is released.

That said, most of the principles articulated within this course, and some of the longer pieces we will examine, can be found in the textbook I wrote for my Arts and Culture course (which a couple of you have already taken):


A couple of notes: My book contract called for a flat fee with no per-sale royalties, so I’m not trying to squeeze any extra nickels and dimes out of you by suggesting. We’ll augment the journalistic examples in the textbook by assigning the reading of more current reviews and features, ranging far beyond *The New York Times* (though including plenty from the NYT as well).

**The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Policies and Procedures**

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**The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Policies and Procedures**
Teaching Policies & Resources — Syllabus Insert

Administrative Home
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) is the administrative home of this course and governs its add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other policies. These policies vary by college (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook).

Electronic Communication
Students are responsible for official correspondences sent to their UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for all communication within UI (Operations Manual, III.15.2).

Accommodations for Disabilities
UI is committed to an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (such as mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related condition) by registering with Student Disability Services (SDS). The student should then discuss accommodations with the course instructor (https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/).

Nondiscrimination in the Classroom
UI is committed to making the classroom a respectful and inclusive space for all people irrespective of their gender, sexual, racial, religious or other identities. Toward this goal, students are invited to optionally share their preferred names and pronouns with their instructors and classmates. The University of Iowa prohibits discrimination and harassment against individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, and other identity categories set forth in the University's Human Rights policy. For more information, contact the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity (diversity.uiowa.edu).

Academic Integrity
All undergraduates enrolled in courses offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty. Misconduct is reported to the College, resulting in suspension or other sanctions, with sanctions communicated with the student through the UI email address (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/academic-fraud-honor-code).
CLAS Final Examination Policies
The final exam schedule for each semester is announced around the fifth week of classes; students are responsible for knowing the date, time, and place of a final exam. Students should not make travel plans until knowing this final exam information. No exams of any kind are allowed the week before finals (https://clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/teaching-policies-resources-examination-policies).

Making a Complaint
Students with a complaint should first visit with the instructor or course supervisor and then with the departmental executive officer (DEO), also known as the Chair. Students may then bring the concern to CLAS (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/student-rights-responsibilities).

Understanding Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment must be reported immediately. For assistance, definitions, and the full University policy, see https://osmrc.uiowa.edu/.

COURSE CALENDAR

Week one
Jan 15-17
Getting to know you. Now get to work.

Week two
Jan 22-24
A heated critical argument on the late Leonard Cohen, and we’ll sift through the best of all possible versions of “Hallelujah.”

Week three
Jan 29-31
Post and discuss NPR music capsule (deadline TBA)
Week four
Feb 5-7
The Grammys—who cares and why? Post your predictions before Sunday’s awards. File first review to be graded (deadline TBA)

Week five
Feb 12-14

Week six
Feb 19-21
Brainstorm personality profiles. Read the assigned ones. Discuss interviewing techniques. Review assignment.

Week seven
Feb 26-28
Midterm brainstorming and review assignment

Week eight
March 5-7: By now you should have your profile subject and even your interview done. Or your topic selected for the midterm writing assignment

Week nine
March 12-14 Workshop midterm writing assignment

Week ten: SPRING BREAK
March 16-24

Week eleven
March 26-28
Midterms due (by end of 12/26—no class Tuesday, writing day)

Week twelve
April 2-4
Profiles returned, revisions due in a week

Week thirteen
April 9-11
Brainstorm enterprise stories.
**Week fourteen**  
April 16-18  
Continue brainstorming. In class deadline review

**Week fifteen**  
April 23-25  
Workshop drafts for enterprise stories due

**Week sixteen**  
May 30-May 2  
Final features due and discussed. Graded assignments returned by the weekend.  
Discuss optional extra credit and the semester as a whole

**NO FINAL EXAM. HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!**