

Black Atlantic Music Syllabus
Jonathan Henderson

Description:

This course examines the constitution of the African diaspora and its diverse musical cultures. Students will work to understand how histories of slavery, colonialism, diasporic imagination, social movement struggle, and networks of cultural exchange have formed this region by attending to their sounded, musical manifestations. By tracing musical and political histories through a series of case studies routed throughout the diaspora, this course will work to develop a theory of “the Black Atlantic” as a sonic geography.

After establishing a foundation in the key historical forces leading to the construction of the African diaspora, students will explore case studies related to the development of local and transnational musical styles. We will turn next to the key role that the international music industry plays in creating racialized categories for sound, and for generating new musical forms across the Atlantic. Middle weeks of the semester will be concerned with flows of political solidarity and music throughout the diaspora, from New York to Havana to Kinshasa and Dakar. Later weeks will focus on carnival traditions in the Caribbean, and the emergence of hip-hop as a global force.

Equal weight in the course will be given to reading, listening and writing as valuable modes of interacting with music. Thus, students will engage closely with reading and listening assignments, and will keep an ongoing journal of their reflections. Each student will be expected to attend two black Atlantic concerts throughout the course of the semester and will research musical examples on specific topics to bring into class for discussion. At the close of the semester each student will produce a podcast exploring the music, culture, politics and histories of a particular black Atlantic musical system or artist of their choice. Each student will write a narrative that will accompany recorded sound examples in the finished podcast. Throughout the course of the semester, students will learn to listen more closely to sound, and will develop a critical capacity for relating these sounds to the political and social worlds from which they emerge. Turning our attention back and forth between the local and the global, *Black Atlantic Music* is a window into how music takes shape in the context of culture, politics and history.

Grading:

Class Participation: 20%

Final Podcast Project: 30%

Weekly Reading and Listening Journals: 30% (10 journals at 3% each)

Concert Responses: 20% (10% each)

Class Attendance: Two absences without a dean’s excuse for extenuating circumstances drops your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade.

Journals:

In preparation for each class EACH MONDAY, please write a paragraph (at least) addressing the reading or listening for that Monday’s class as well as the previous Wednesday’s. The first journal will be due the second week of class. There are 11 journal assignments, but I will only grade you on 10. That means you may skip 1 during the semester. Please submit these by midnight on the Sunday before they are due. In your journal entries, you may choose to 1) synthesize that week’s reading/listening; 2)

list questions that they raised for you; 3) put the material in conversation with other material we've covered (or that you draw from elsewhere); 4) describe what you find useful or interesting about that week's reading/listening; 5) write poetry or creative prose inspired by it, or 6) blow our minds with a creative take on the material that none of us would have expected. It's up to you how you decide to approach each entry. They will be posted in the forum page on the Sakai site, and will be freely visible to other students. The goal of these journals is to encourage your ongoing reflection on the material and engagement with your fellow students.

Concert Attendance: Each student will be expected to attend two (2) black Atlantic concerts over the course of the semester. Please write a brief response about each. I will make you aware of concert opportunities at the beginning of the semester. Responses should be one to two pages each, and may focus on any of your observations of the concert. They may be turned in at any time before our final class meeting. Write the response shortly after attending the concert so that your impressions are fresh.

Reading Exercises:

All readings will be posted in the lessons section of Sakai for the day they are due. I will try not to assign too much reading, so please read closely what is assigned for that day and come prepared to contribute to a lively discussion.

Listening Exercises:

I will post playlists on Spotify and will link them from the lessons page for the day the listening is due. When listening to assigned recordings, I require that you listen on headphones, shelf speakers, car audio systems, or other comparable systems. That means no listening on computer or phone speakers (you may of course do this *in addition* to your focused listening). I will encourage you to develop a listening practice that is as focused as your reading practice. You may want to listen to the playlist more than once, but at least one listen should be given to the tracks when you are not multi-tasking. Take notes. Listen for how the instruments are recorded, processed and presented. Notice how the music makes you feel. Listening is an acquired skill, and we will work together this semester to make you a better listener.

Final Project: Black Atlantic Music Podcast:

The final project of the semester will be to produce a podcast exploring the music, culture, politics and history of a black Atlantic musical system or artist of your choice. Podcasting is an ideal format for this project as the process of creating one will allow you to write a narrative that engages closely with recorded sound. Students will be expected to make use of musical examples that illustrate the points they wish to draw out in their narrative. Narratives will be due a few weeks before the end of the semester (see below) so that students may receive feedback and improve the narrative before beginning to put the podcast together. One class period towards the end of the semester will be focused on acquiring the necessary technical skills to complete the podcast. The narrative should be 12-20 double-spaced pages in length.

Policy on Electronic Devices

For this class I have a policy that laptop computers or any electronic devices will not be used during our active class time. That means you are required to have all reading materials in print form. The same goes for notes or anything else you will need to consult during the class: you must print out a copy and bring it to class. I will explain this policy in more detail on the first day of class, but the bottom line is that this policy aims to guarantee that we take maximum advantage of the time we have together in class.

Course Design:

Class 1: The Black Atlantic in Theory and Sound

- Discuss excerpts from Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* in class
- In class listening activity: sound mapping the black Atlantic

Class 2: The Transatlantic Slave Trade, Forming The Black Atlantic

- Read: W.E.B. Du Bois “Of the Sorrow Songs” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

Class 3: Debates on African Retentions in Music of the Americas

- Read: Introduction to Laurent Dubois, *Banjo: Americas First African Instrument* (2016)
- Journal entry #1 due
- In-class listening: Yoruba traditions in Nigeria and Cuba; string traditions in Gambia and the southern United States

Class 4: Music and Diasporic Imagination in Black Panther Pt. 1

- Listen: Baaba Maal and Senegal Playlist
- Begin screening of *Black Panther* (2018) in class

Class 5: Music and Diasporic Imagination in Black Panther Pt. 2

- Assignment: Complete *Black Panther* viewing before class
- Journal entry #2 due
- In-class screening: short film about the production of the film’s score

Class 6: The Victor Recording Company and International Gramophone Recording

- Read: excerpt on technology and sound production from David Byrne’s *How Music Works* (2012)
- In class - listen to Victor Recordings from the black Atlantic

Class 7: Colonialism and Coloniality

- Listen: Fela Kuti playlist for his critique of colonialism and coloniality
- Journal entry #3 due

Class 8: Decolonization and Nation Building in West Africa

- Read: Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture” from *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963)
- Post-colonial national-building: West African dance bands and Les Ballets Africains
- In class listening to Bembeya Jazz National and Orchestra Baobab playlist

Class 9: The Sonic Color Line in Early Twentieth-Century America

- Read: Excerpt of Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010)
- Journal entry #4 due
- Assignment: each student come with a piece of music to share that speaks to issues of race in America. Explain why you brought that particular piece of music to share with the class.

Class 10: Cultural Appropriation: The Case of Paul Simon’s *Graceland*

- Read: Louise Meintjes, “Paul Simon’s Graceland, South Africa and the Mediation of Musical Meaning” (1990)
- Screen clips from *Under African Skies* (2012) in class

Class 11: Hybridity

- Read: Timothy Taylor, “World Music Today” from *Music and Critical Encounters*, edited by Bob White (2012)
- Journal entry #5 due
- Jonathan on producing Diali Cissokho & Kaira Ba’s *Routes*

Class 12: Rhumba Routes: Havana - New York - Kinshasa - Dakar

- Listen: Global Rhumba playlist
- Listen and watch performance videos that describe the movement of rhumba sounds through the diaspora
- In-class journal takes care of entry #6

Class 13: The Invention of African Rhythm

- Read: Richard Waterman “Hot Rhythm in Negro Music” (1948)
- West African drumming traditions
- Journal entry #6 due (done in previous class)
- In-class rhythmic awareness exercises

Class 14: The Invention of African Rhythm Part 2

- Read: Kofi Agawu, “The Invention of African Rhythm” (1995)
- West African drumming traditions
- In class rhythmic awareness exercises

Class 15: Mande Music Pt. 1: Instrumental Traditions in the West African Sahel

- Listen: Mande music playlist
- Journal entry #7 due

Class 16: Mande Music Pt. 2: Contemporary Female Vocalists of Mali

- Listen: Wasulu Songbirds playlist

Class 17: Carnival in Brazil

- Read: Excerpt from Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995)
- Journal entry #8 due

Class 18: Mardi Gras in New Orleans

- Read: Excerpt from Matt Sakakeeny, *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (2013)
- In-class viewing: *The Whole Gritty City* (2013)

Class 19: Atlantic Routes: Soul and Afrobeat: James Brown and Fela Kuti

- Watch: Finish *The Whole Gritty City* (2013) before class
- Journal entry #9 due

Class 20: Afropolitanism in Jazz and Pop Music

- Read: Excerpt from Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana* (2012)
- Discuss Talking Heads and Angelique Kidjo's *Remain in Light*

Class 21: Dub, Detroit and Afrofuturism

- Read: Excerpt from Michael Veal's *Dub: Shattered Soundscapes* (2008)
- Journal entry #10 due
- A look at Detroit's North End neighborhood or visit to Blackspace Durham (TBD).

Class 22: Black Music in the White Body

- Read: Conclusion to Ronald Radano, *Livin' Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (2003)
- Johnny Clegg, white jazz musicians (Beiderbecke, Brubeck, Pepper, Evans), Muscle Shoals Sessions Players (Duck Dunn, Steve Cropper)
- Clip from "Muscle Shoals" (2013)
- Paul Gilroy's list of the white musicians who haunt black music

Class 23: Global Hip-Hop 1

- Read: Excerpt from Hishim Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (2014)
- Journal entry #11 due
- In class listening: global hip hop sound map

Class 24: Music Podcasting

- Assignment: Listen to one of the podcasts chosen from the list and come to class ready to share your critical assessment of it. Pick a 3-5-minute expert to share with the class along with your assessment.

Class 25: Global Hip-Hop 2

- Assignment: Begin work on your podcast narrative
- In-class screening of *African Underground: Democracy in Dakar* (2009)
- Ataya (Senegalese tea) and lunch in class

Class 26: Draft of Podcast Narrative Due

- Assignment: Submit a completed draft of your narrative, including links to musical examples by Sunday night. We will workshop drafts in groups of three.

Class 26: Podcasting Tech Workshop

- Bring a laptop computer to class

Class 27: Podcast Narrative Final draft due and Wrap Up

- Assignment: Submit final draft of your narrative by Sunday night.
- Discussion: developing a sonic theory of the black Atlantic

Exam Period:

- Assignment: Completed podcast due (uploaded to Sakai) by the start of the exam period.
- We will meet during the exam period to listen to each student's podcast, with a brief Q&A after each presentation. Popcorn will be supplied.