

Columbia University
English
Fall 2007

JAZZ AND AMERICAN CULTURE

INSTRUCTOR: Professor Robert O’Meally

In this course we start with Ralph Ellison’s suggestive proposition that many aspects of American life are “jazz-shaped.” How, to begin with, do we define the music called *jazz*? What are its aesthetic ingredients or forms? What have been its characteristic sounds? How can we move towards a definition that sufficiently complicates the usual formulas of call-response, improvisation, and swing (or polyrhythmical complexity with an Afro-beat)--to encompass musical styles that really are quite different but which nonetheless are typically classified as jazz? With this ongoing problem of musical definition in mind, we will examine works in literature, painting, photography, film, and choreography which may be defined as “jazz works” or ones that are “jazz-shaped.” What is jazzlike about these works? What’s jazzlike about the ways they were produced? And how, to get to the other problem in the course’s title--is jazz *American*? What is the relationship of art to nation? What is the logic of American exceptionalism? What do we make of the many international dimensions of jazz music—of, for instance, its many non-American practitioners? What is (or was) a jazz culture? What are (or were) its dates?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Responses to readings (bi-weekly): Through the term, each undergraduate is required to submit five short responses (1 to 2-pages each) to the readings. Use these as occasions not to “cover” “everything” (which of course is not possible) but instead to meditate on aspects of the readings that interest and/or trouble you. You may regard these as first scratchings—mini-essays or essays-in-progress--toward the final essay. Please turn these in in class, (not via email), approximately every other week, one at a time. Above all, do not turn them in as clusters, or as last-ditch flourishes.

Midterm: A 4-page essay plus bibliography and recording. Every student is required to select a favorite jazz artist at the beginning of the term. For the mid-term, the student is required to have listened to a minimum of 10 individual pieces performed by that artist, and to write an essay that offers close, detailed readings of at least two of that artist’s works. With this mid-term essay, include a recording of your 10 works and a bibliography indicating the best sources for learning about his or her art (and perhaps its sources and/or influences). Let Professor O’Meally know the name of your jazz artist by September 19th. All choices must be approved by that date.

Final Project: A 10-12 page essay defining a literary, visual, or choreographic work as a jazz work. Here the best projects will offer close, detailed readings of specific works using the readings of the course. Here it may be appropriate to use the definition

sharpened in the mid-term to make your case. Remember that a successful essay is an *argument*: use the form to think freshly about jazz and its impact on forms of art that are not, strictly speaking, musical—but which are influenced by the forms and functions of jazz.

Final Exam: As scheduled by the registrar. Covers all written and audio-visual assignments.

Grading:

Class Participation (attendance and 5 responses):	20%
Mid-term:	20
Paper	40
Final Exam	<u>20</u>

WEEKLY TOPICS AND READINGS

Week 1: Getting Started

Read Ellison, *Living With Music*: “A Coupla Scalped Indians” and “This Music Demanded Action.”

Online, listen to Armstrong’s “What Did I Do (To be So Black and Blue)?” and to an excerpt from Ellison’s lecture, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate”

Week 2: Armstrong: Who You Are And What You Represent?

Read *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*.

Online, read Murray, “The Armstrong Continuum.”

Online, see images of Armstrong and listen to “West End Blues,” “Potato Head Blues,” “Weather Bird,” “Lazy River,” “St. James Infirmary,” “That’s What we Call Cultural Exchange,” “Remember Who You Are.”

Week 3: Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, and (Some of) The Sources of Jazz

In packet, read Sidney Bechet, “Omar.”

Online, read Martin Williams, “Sidney.”

In *Jazz Cadence*, read Murray, “Improvisation” and “Heroic Image.”

Online, listen to Bechet, “Blue Horizon,” “Cake-Walking Babies,” and “I Had It (But it’s All Gone Now)”; watch clips of Bechet in performance; listen to selections by Jelly Roll Morton; and to Mahalia Jackson’s “The Holy Babe.”

Week 4: Jazz Novels

Read Albert Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar*.

In packet, read Mackey, excerpts from *Bedouin Hornbook*.

Online, listen to Elmore James's "Sunnyland Blues."

Week 5: Cartooning Jazz: The Hip of Betty Boop

In *Jazz Cadence*, read Kouwenhoven, "What's American about America?"

In *Uptown Conversation*, read O'Meally, "Checking Our Balances."

Online, see video clips of Betty Boop and Cab Calloway; listen to audio clips of Calloway.

Week 6: Jazz is a Dance

Read Malone, *Class Act*.

In packet, read article by John Szwed and Morton Marks.

Online, read "King Tap."

Online, watch clips of Baby Laurence, Jimmy Slyde, and Chuck Green; listen to audio clips of Slyde interviews.

Week 7: Focus on Duke Ellington: Duke on Film

In packet, read Boyer's "The Hot Bach."

In *Jazz Cadence*, read Marsalis.

In *Living with Music*, read "Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday."

In *Uptown Conversation*, read Edwards.

Online, listen to "Come Sunday," "Black and Tan Fantasy," "East St. Louis Toodle-oo," "Azure," "What Am I Here For?" "Heaven," "T.G.T.T.," "Lotus Blossom," "The Clothed Woman," "Summertime," and "La Plus Belle Africaine."

Mid-term papers due

Week 8: Jazz Fiction, Gender, and the Music

Read Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*.

In packet, read interviews with Jones; Donia Allen essay; excerpt from Nathaniel Mackey's *Djabot Baghostus's Run*.

Online, listen to selections by Bessie Smith.

Week 9: Lady Day and Her Daughters

In packet, read O'Meally, *Lady Day* (excerpt); Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* (excerpt); Gayl Jones, "Deep Song"; Leroi Jones, "Dark Lady of the Sonnets."

In *Jazz Cadence*, read Carby.

Online, see and hear the clips of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

Week 10: Visual Equivalents of the Music: Focus on Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis

In *Jazz Cadence*, read the "Jazz Lines and Colors" section.

In *Uptown Conversation*, read Harris-Kelley.

Online, read Ellison (on Bearden); read interview with Lewis.

Online, listen to audio selections by Earl Hines and Ellington; see visual selections by Bearden and Sorrells-Adewale; and the lecture by Toni Morrison.

Week 11: Working on the Scene and in the Studio: Photographing Jazz—Focus on Roy DeCarava, Chuck Stewart, and Gerald Cyrus

In *Jazz Cadence*, read essays by DeCarava and Jaffe.

In packet, read excerpts from *Seeing Jazz* and interview with Chuck Stewart.

Online, see images by DeCarava, Stewart, and Cyrus.

Week 12: Thelonious Monk and Dexter Gordon as Jazz Icons

In *Living with Music*, read "Golden Age, Time Past."

In *Jazz Cadence*, read Troupe and Riley.

Online, listen to selections by Monk and Gordon.

Week 13: Jazz and the Community

*Read Horace Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung*.

*In packet, read Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), “The Screamers.”

*Online, listen to Miles Davis, “So What?”; John Coltrane (with Duke Ellington), “My Little Brown Book”; Coltrane, “I Want to Talk About You.”

Week 14: The Computer as Jazz Instrument: Focus on George Lewis

*In packet, read Lewis, “Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in *Voyager*.”

*Online, listen to selections by Lewis.

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