Harmonic and Tonal Systems of Pop/Rock (Muth 5680/6680)
David Heetderks (David.Heetderks@unt.edu)

WF 2:00–3:20 P.M.  
Classroom: Musi 322
Office hours: Tu 9:00–11:00 A.M., Th 1:00–3:00 P.M.  
Office: Musi 114

Course description

“Now it might well be said that popular music has its own set of harmonic conventions, and that we commit an analytic error in construing pop harmony in terms of common-practice chord grammar.”

Justin London (1990), p. 112.

“Notes and chords don’t mean a thing. Listen to the rhythm, listen to us sing.”


Since the 1960s, pop and rock have developed their own systems of harmony and tonality that are related to, but not congruent with, common-practice harmony. These systems stem not only from Tin Pan Alley pop songs from the previous era, but also the blues, the college folk-music scene, guitar voicing, musicians’ experiments with chord substitution and chromaticism, infusions from other styles, and, more recently, manipulation of audio loops with computer software.

Recognizing that pop/rock uses a separate system of tonality leads to several questions, such as: is there a pop/rock system of harmony, or are there multiple systems? How can we identify a tonic in a pop/rock song? To what extent are there harmonic functions or goal-seeking behavior in rock’s chord progressions? In what ways do melody, voice leading, and form influence a harmonic progression? How does chromaticism function in pop/rock?

In this class, we will introduce ourselves to several recent approaches to analyzing tonality and harmony in rock through reading, discussion, transcription, and analysis.

Pop/rock, in this class, will be broadly construed to mean, primarily, English-language popular song from the 1960s to the present, which divides into layers of vocal melody, chord progression, bass line, and an explicit beat. Traditionally, these layers are played by the lead vocals, guitars, bass, and drum set, but more recent styles have used other instruments, including keyboards and synthesizers. The term includes not only quintessential “rock” artists (such as the Chuck Berry and the Rolling Stones), but also artists in related genres such as country, soul, R&B, and modern dance styles. We will not have time to examine every “offshoot” style (such as metal styles, singer/songwriter, etc.), but you may certainly examine one for your final project.

Expectations and prerequisites

You can expect me to guide the discussions when needed, meet with you if you need help with a topic, set the agenda for each class, and create a classroom environment that fosters learning and collaboration.
You are expected to complete the assignments before each deadline and come to class prepared to discuss your reading or song analysis. I encourage you to read actively, listening to the examples cited in each article, imagining counter-arguments or questions you have for the author, and thinking of further issues for study.

To succeed in this class, a thorough fluency in common-practice tonal theory will be necessary. Familiarity with Schenkerian reduction and set-class theory is also helpful. If you need to review rock’s basic formal and textural schemas, you can read these two sources:


**Required Texts**

There is one required text for this course:


**Assignments**

7 **Response essays (2–3 pages):** Write a brief essay in which you respond to some aspect of the readings assigned for that week’s class. There is no set format for these essays, but they should show that you have read and engaged with each of the readings. For example, you can compare the approaches to harmony given in each week’s reading, you can summarize each reading and end with a list of discussion questions, or you can point out where you disagree with or do not understand the author. Each reading should, preferably, involve some brief original analysis of music of your choice. Accompanying examples are encouraged, but do not count towards the page length.

In order to help me prepare for each class, your analyses are due on Monday by 5 P.M., two days before our class meeting. I will use it to shape our class discussion for the week. You may submit your essay in hard copy at my office or upload them to Canvas in .pdf, .doc, or .docx format.

3 **Analytical roundtables (transcription and 1–2 paragraph essay for each song):** Three weeks will contain analytical roundtables, where we compare our findings about specific songs. I have selected songs that intersect in illuminating or provocative ways with the readings from the previous few weeks, and I have attempted to cover a diversity of genres and time periods, without any claim to being exhaustive. I will assign each of you one to three songs to analyze—depending on the length and harmonic complexity of the song.

In order to help me prepare for each class, your analyses are due on Monday by 5 P.M., two days before our class meeting. Submit your work in hardcopy at my office or upload a .pdf to Canvas. Your analysis should consist of a transcription and accompanying brief essay. The brief essay
does not have a set format, but it might show how the concepts from our reading illuminate its harmonic structure, it might point out problematic features of the song, or it might discuss how the song’s harmony and tonality either support or undercut the lead singer and lyrics.

In general, your transcriptions should have three staves. The two lowest should show a rhythmic reduction of the chords and bass line. Simplify the chords (e.g., eliminate doublings and eliminate arpeggiations and non-chord tones in the bass part) when appropriate. The highest staff should show the lead vocalist’s notes in each measure, without rhythm, in stemless black noteheads. Underneath the bass line, you may write analytical annotations (e.g., Roman numerals or functional symbols). You are not required to transcribe the vocalist’s text, but if you wish to discuss text/music relations in your paper, writing down some or all of the text might be appropriate. A sample transcription of the beginning of The Supreme’s “Where Did Our Love Go?” is shown below.

![Sample transcription of the opening of The Supremes’ “Where Did Our Love Go?”](image)

You may use repeat signs to show that a progression repeats several times over the course of a section. Please precisely indicate the number of repeats on your transcription.

For each song, I will ask one student to share their analysis with the rest of the class. We will then discuss the similarities or differences among our analyses.

**1 empirical study presentation (given in class):** During one week, you (possibly pairing with a partner, depending on the class’s enrollment) will study an article about an empirical approach to rock harmony and tonality. You will give a presentation to the class that explains what question the study aimed to answer, what method the study used to investigate the answer, the significance of the results, and the potential broader significance or drawbacks of the approach.

**Final Paper:** Write a scholarly essay of about 12–20 pages, plus appropriate accompanying examples, bibliography, etc. The topic may be repertory-based (e.g., a close reading of a song, album, artist, or sub-genre) or theory-driven (e.g., an application of a theoretical model to a variety of pop/rock music). A proposal (200–250 words, plus preliminary bibliography and list of recordings) is due at the beginning of class on Week 10.

**Final Presentation (25 minutes):** Provide a summary of your final paper in progress. Include a handout with analytical examples or transcriptions. The 25-minute length includes the time necessary to play recordings and allow for question and answers. The presentation may be
formal (conference-style) or informal. Presentations will take place in the final two and a half weeks of class.

Your grade will be recorded as a number ranging from 0.55 to 0.95 according to the following system:

\[
\text{A} = \frac{0.95}{4} \quad \text{B} = \frac{0.85}{4} \quad \text{C} = \frac{0.75}{4}
\]

\[
\text{A-} = \frac{0.925}{4} \quad \text{B-} = \frac{0.825}{4} \quad \text{C-} = \frac{0.725}{4}
\]

\[
\text{B+} = \frac{0.875}{4} \quad \text{C+} = \frac{0.775}{4} \quad \text{F/no work submitted} = \frac{0.55}{4}
\]

Your grade will be broken down as follows:

- Response essays and empirical study presentation: 40%
- Analytical Roundtable assignments: 25%
- Participation: 15%
- Final paper and presentation: 20%

**Content note**

Some of the songs we will study touch one topics that you may occasionally find upsetting or objectionable. These topics may include violence, misogyny, commoditization of the human body, dysfunctional relationships, mental disability, heavy drug use, and attacks on social or religious institutions. I have not sought out egregious examples, but if you ever feel that a song’s content prevents you from discussing it fully in class, please (1) contact me before class time so we find an alternative way for you to participate, or (2) temporarily excuse yourself from class during an upsetting discussion, with no questions asked.

**Accommodations**

I want to ensure that this class offers a rewarding learning experience for everyone who wishes to participate. If accommodations are necessary for your participation, please inform me at your earliest convenience.

**Gadgetry**

During class time, gadgets with screens should be put away.

**Other Course Guidelines**

Academic integrity ([http://vpaa.unt.edu/dcgcover/resources/integrity](http://vpaa.unt.edu/dcgcover/resources/integrity))

**Takeaway points:** complete your own work without help from others, and don’t submit the same assignment for two classes. Otherwise, you will receive a “0” grade, and I will report the incident to the dean of students.

Students caught cheating or plagiarizing will receive a “0” for that particular assignment or exam. Additionally, the incident will be reported to the Dean of Students, who may impose further penalty. According to the UNT catalog, the term “cheating” includes, but is not limited to: a. use of any unauthorized assistance in taking quizzes, tests, or examinations; b. dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems, or carrying out other assignments; c. the acquisition, without
permission, of tests or other academic material belonging to a faculty or staff member of the university; d. dual submission of a paper or project, or resubmission of a paper or project to a different class without express permission from the instructor(s); or e. any other act designed to give a student an unfair advantage. The term “plagiarism” includes, but is not limited to: a. the knowing or negligent use by paraphrase or direct quotation of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment; and b. the knowing or negligent unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic materials.

Student behavior (https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct)

Takeaway point: behave in a way so that everyone can learn.

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor’s ability to conduct a class or other students’ opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student’s conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university’s expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc.

Access to information (eagleconnect.unt.edu/)

Your access point for business and academic services at UNT occurs at my.unt.edu. All official communication from the university will be delivered to your Eagle Connect account. For more information, please visit the website that explains Eagle Connect.

Financial Aid and Satisfactory Progress (http://financialaid.unt.edu/sap)

Takeaway point: You must maintain a sufficient GPA to keep financial aid and music scholarship. If you wish to drop the course, it’s a good idea to meet with an advisor first.

Undergraduates: A student must maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) to continue to receive financial aid. Students must maintain a minimum 2.0 cumulative GPA in addition to successfully completing a required number of credit hours based on total registered hours per term. Students cannot exceed attempted credit hours above 150% of their required degree plan. If a student does not maintain the required standards, the student may lose their financial aid eligibility.

Students holding music scholarships must maintain a minimum 2.5 overall cumulative GPA and 3.0 cumulative GPA in music courses.

If at any point you consider dropping this or any other course, please be advised that the decision to do so may have the potential to affect your current and future financial aid eligibility. It is recommended that you to schedule a meeting with an academic advisor in your college or visit the Student Financial Aid and Scholarships office to discuss dropping a course being doing so.

Graduates: A student must maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) to continue to receive financial aid. Students must maintain a minimum 3.0 cumulative GPA in addition to successfully completing a required number of credit hours based on total registered hours per term. Music scholarships require a 3.5 cumulative GPA. Students cannot exceed maximum
timeframes established based on the published length of the graduate program. If a student does not maintain the required standards, the student may lose their financial aid eligibility.

If at any point you consider dropping this or any other course, please be advised that the decision to do so may have the potential to affect your current and future financial aid eligibility. It is recommended you schedule a meeting with an academic advisor in your college, an advisor in UNT-International or visit the Student Financial Aid and Scholarships office to discuss dropping a course.

Retention of Student Records (http://ferpa.unt.edu)
Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Blackboard/Canvas online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. You have a right to view your individual record; however, information about your records will not be divulged to other individuals without the proper written consent. You are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the university’s policy in accordance with those mandates.

Counseling and Testing (http://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services)
UNT’s Center for Counseling and Testing has an available counselor whose position includes 16 hours per week of dedicated service to students in the College of Music and the College of Visual Arts and Design. For more information on mental health issues, please visit: https://speakout.unt.edu.

The counselor for music students is:
Myriam Reynolds
Chestnut Hall, Suite 311
(940) 565-2741
Myriam.reynolds@unt.edu
Course topics outline

A course schedule, with weekly topics, is shown below. Please contact me if you are having difficulty keeping up with the assigned work.

**Week 1: Introduction: Rock harmony ≠ common-practice harmony**

No homework due

**Class on 1/16 and 1/18**

_In-class introduction to several unique features of rock harmony, including new means of tonic finding, the expanded use of IV, the blues progression, the cadential tonic, parallel-motion passing chords, “irregular” resolutions of chromatically altered triads, and layered textures_


Brief Transcription due 1/8: Brandi Carlile, “Fulton County Jane Doe”

*Reading assignment for the following week:*


**Week 2. Modes, Blues, and Pentatonicism**

**Response Essay #1 due Tuesday, 1/22**

**Class meetings on 1/23 and 1/25**

*Reading assignment for the following week:*


Week 3. Special Chords in Rock Harmony
Response Essay #2 due Monday, 1/28
Class meetings on 1/30 and 2/1

Reading (and viewing) assignment for the following week:


Week 4. Divorced Textures in Rock Harmony
Response Essay #3 due Monday, 2/4
Class meetings on 2/6 and 2/8

Transcription/Analysis assignment #1. Each of you will be assigned 1–3 songs from the following list:
—David Bowie, “Queen Bitch”
—Deep Purple, “Highway Star”
—Kate Bush, “Kite”
—Liz Phair, “Mesmerizing”
—R.E.M., “Shiny Happy People”
—The Animals, “Don’t Bring Me Down”
—The Talking Heads, “Mind”
—Jefferson Airplane, “Today”
—Ozzy Osbourne, “Crazy Train”
—B-52’s, “Roam”
—Yes, “Yours Is No Disgrace,” introduction (0:00–1:24)
—R.E.M., “The Wrong Child” [only recommended for ambitious students]

Week 5. Analytical Roundtable 1: modal/pentatonic systems and divorced textures
Transcription/Analysis #1 due Monday, 2/11
Class meetings on 2/13 and 2/15

Reading assignment for following week:

Week 6. Functional Approaches to Pop/Rock Harmony
Response Essay #4 due Monday, 2/18
Class meeting on 2/20. NO CLASS on Friday, 2/22 (TSMT conference)

Reading assignment for following week:


Week 7. Voice-leading Approaches to Pop/Rock Harmony
Response Essay #5 due Monday, 2/25
Class meetings on 2/27 and 3/1

Transcription/Analysis assignment #2 for following week. Each of you will be assigned 1–3 songs from the following list:
—Beach Boys, “Help Me, Rhonda”
—David Bowie, “Sons of the Silent Age”
—Grizzly Bear, “Half Gate”
—Nirvana, “Lithium”
—Stevie Wonder, “Overjoyed”
—The Supremes, “You Keep Me Hangin’ On”
—Grateful Dead, “Doin’ that Rag”
—John Lennon, “Remember”

Week 8. Analytical Roundtable 2: Harmonic Function and Voice Leading
Transcription/Analysis #2 due Monday, 3/4
Class meetings on 3/6 and 3/8

Reading assignment for following week (single articles will be assigned to students or student–pairs):


Spring Break: No class 3/13 or 3/15

Week 9. Empirical Approaches to Rock Harmony
Class meetings on 3/20 and 3/22:
Musicology Candidate Visit on Weds., 3/20
Written summary and presentations on different empirical approaches to rock harmony.

Reading assignment for following week:
Doll, Hearing Harmony, Chapters 5 and 6


Week 10. Ambiguity and Transformation in Rock Harmony
Response Essay #7 due Monday, 3/25
Class meetings on 3/27 and 3/29
Musicology Candidate Visits on 3/27 and 3/29
Proposal for final project due Friday, 3/29

Reading assignment for following week:

Heetderks, David. 2015. “Hipster Harmony: The Hybrid Syntax of Seventh Chords in Post-Millennial Rock.” Music Theory Online 21/2. http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.15.21.2/mto.15.21.2.heetderks.html [0.1]–[3.2.3], [3.3.1], [3.3.8]–[3.3.14]

**Week 11. Chromaticism in Rock Harmony**
Response Essay #8 due Monday, 4/1  
Class meetings on 4/3 and 4/5

*Transcription/Analysis assignment #3 for following week. Each student will transcribe one song from List A and one from List B.*

**List A: Examples of chromaticism:**  
Mew, “Carry Me to Safety”  
St. Vincent, “I Prefer Your Love”  
Beach House, “Dark Spring”  
My Bloody Valentine, “Wonder 2”  
David Bowie, “Life on Mars?”  
Supremes, “Love Is Here and Now You’re Gone”  
Soundgarden, “Black Hole Sun”

**List B: Examples of absent and emergent tonics:**  
The Spinners, “I’ll Be Around”  
War on Drugs, “Disappearing”  
nothing.nowhere, “Clarity in Kerosene”  
Bon Iver, 714.CREEKS  
Chainsmokers, “Something Just Like This”  
Robyn, “Missing U”

**Week 12. Analytical Roundtable 3: Chromaticism and Ambiguity in Rock Harmony**  
Transcription/Analysis #3 due Monday, 4/8  
Class meetings on 4/10 and 4/12

**Week 13. Student presentations**  
Class meetings on 4/17 and 4/19

**Week 14. Student presentations**  
Class meetings on 4/24 and 4/26

**Week 15. Student presentations**  
Class meeting on 5/1