Words in Music, Words as Music: Analyzing Pop Lyrics, Voices, and Vocal Rhythm

MW 10:00 a.m.–11:20 a.m.                             Musi 295

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Office: Musi 114          office hrs Tue 1:00–2:00 p.m., Thu 1:00–2:00 p.m.

Course Objectives

How does a pop song use the sound of words—its rhymes, alliterations, and stresses—to create a musical texture? How does the natural rhythm of language fit with musical meter and flow? How does a musical setting in a popular song reinforce the song’s meaning? How do singers’ voice, accent, and production influence how we interpret the track?
In this seminar we will answer these questions through readings, discussion, roundtables where we analyze and discuss songs, and a final paper and presentation. By the end of this class, you will be better prepared to hear, analyze, and discuss lyrics, vocal rhythm, and vocal production in a pop track.

**Attendance and Communication Expectations**

Because much of the learning in this course will result from in-class discussion of readings and songs, you are expected to attend every class having completed the assigned work. You may be excused from a class meeting due to illness; medical emergency; professional audition, interview, performance, or presentation; or religious observance. If you must be absent from class, please contact me as soon as possible.

According to UNT Policy, you may not schedule your end-of-semester jury during class time.

I will post assignments to Canvas and communicate with you through your unt.edu e-mail. I will try to respond to an e-mail from you within 24 hours during the week. If you e-mail me on Friday or during the weekend, I may not be able to respond until Monday.

**Assignments, Reading, and Listening**

Assignments are due at the beginning of class time on the due date. Because we will spend class time discussing them, extensions will be granted only if you e-mail me ahead of time to ask for permission. Assignments will consist of these types:

1. *Reading responses* will involve brief written responses to readings, based on questions provided. Whenever you are quoting or reproducing information from an article, you must give the author and the year of publication and page numbers in parentheses, as in, “BaileyShea claims that the sentence structure is analogous to the poetic structure of the limerick (2021, 78),” or, “The sentence structure is analogous to the poetic structure of the limerick (BaileyShea 2021, 78).”

   **Guidelines for reading**: Read with a pen or pencil in your hand to take notes. Write down important points in your own words in a separate notebook or copy down particularly elegant phrases that move you. For each section of your notes, write down the page number so that you can find the original passage or reference the article later.

   If you disagree with the author or their interpretation of a song, or if their ideas spark further ideas of your own, write this down in your notes and find a way of indicate that these ideas are your own and not the authors. For example, you can put the text in brackets, or write “I say” next to it.

   If you are not familiar with the songs mentioned in an article or chapter, listen to them while conducting or tapping the meter and following the transcription so that you can be sure you understand the points being made. Once it took me an entire afternoon to read a few pages because I was listening to all the examples cited. We live in an age where music is more readily available than ever before—take advantage of these riches!

2. *Analytical assignments* will involve transcription and brief discussion of an assigned song or excerpt. The contents of your transcription will vary, depending on the nature of the assignment. In some cases, it will be sufficient to draw barlines on the song lyrics, showing how the text falls into the
different measures. In other cases, it will involve typing the lyrics and using visual placement to show where they fall in a measure and, potentially, transcribing chords. In other cases, it will involve transcribing the complete rhythm of the lyrics, as well as, potentially, analysis of stress patterns, rhymes, and melody. Read the assignment carefully and figure out what information that helps you make insightful analytical observations on the song.

Guidelines for transcription: Make sure you are listening to the official album version (available on Spotify, Apple Music, or another streaming service). Listen to the song several times while conducting. Most popular songs are in four, but there are exceptions. After you are familiar with the meter, conducting a second time while showing the hypermeter with your other hand and note any irregularities. When you have become familiar with the song, write down the transcription, and listen to the song again while conducting and following the transcription to check it.

During class, we will discuss the articles, and you will take turns presenting your analyses of your song to your classmates.

3. An article report will be a presentation on an article assigned to you. In your article report, you will make a 10-minute presentation that summarizes the article by stating the main problem or problems the author is solving, discussing the method the author uses to solve it, discuss the article’s major findings or arguments, and present discussion questions to the class. You will then lead the class in around 25–30 minutes of discussion.

4. The final project will be a paper (12–20 pages, not including examples or the Works Cited section) on a topic of your choosing that somehow relates to the issues we brought up in class. Here are the due dates related to your final paper:

- Proposal: due Monday, 30-Oct
- Annotated bibliography: due Monday, 6-Nov
- Analytical fragment: due Monday, 13-Nov
- Presentation: Final two weeks of class (27-Nov to 6-Dec)
- Final paper: Due Thursday, 14-Dec, 5 p.m.

Your final paper should use parenthetical citation as outlined in the Chicago Manual of Style and include a Works Cited section at the end that includes bibliographic information for all sources cited. I also recommend including a discography. The assignment sheet will give the full guidelines for citation.

You can expect to receive your assignments back with grades and comments within a maximum of two weeks. If you wish to receive your final papers back with my comments, you can expect to receive them by the end of December 2023.

Your Grade

Each assignment will be given a letter grade, which will be converted into a number using this system:

\[
\begin{align*}
A &= 4.0 \\
A- &= 3.7 \\
B+ &= 3.3 \\
B &= 3.0 \\
B- &= 2.7 \\
C+ &= 2.3 \\
C &= 2.0 \\
C- &= 1.7 \\
D &= 1.0 \\
F \text{ or no submission} &= 0
\end{align*}
\]
Assignments will be graded on their accuracy, relevance, clarity of writing, and demonstrated understanding of our readings. Your final grade will be calculated based on the following proportions:

**Reading responses and analyses** 35%

**Article report** 5%

**Participation in class discussions** 15%

**Preparation for final project** 15%

**Final presentation** 10%

**Final paper** 20%

**Total** 100%

**Course Content**

In this course, we will study English-language popular-song from approximately 1960 to today. We will primarily focus on songs that have demonstrated mainstream commercial success (through Billboard chart positions, e.g.) and/or are recorded by artists that have received critical acclaim or extensive analytical engagement. The time limits of our class will prevent us from making a representative survey all popular styles. While we will not have time to explore every subgenre, I hope that the course will give you valuable tools for analyzing them.

While I have attempted to find a diverse group of songs for analysis, my selections are limited by my listening experience and tastes (think dad rock). I welcome suggestions of songs that are relevant to our topics of study!

The songs we study in class may occasionally include language or content that you might find objectionable or upsetting. If you ever believe 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, no questions asked. If you do not wish to recite a lyric during a class presentation, you can refer the class to your transcription.

**Required Text**

This text is required:


This text is recommended:

Other texts can be found through the UNT Library’s website.

**Software Resources**


*Sonic Visualizer* ([https://www.sonicvisualiser.org/download.html](https://www.sonicvisualiser.org/download.html)) provides visual representations of sound-file analyses, including waveforms and spectrograms.

*Audacity* ([https://www.audacityteam.org/download/](https://www.audacityteam.org/download/)) allows you to edit sound files and perform simple effects such as adding reverb, distortion, echoes, or fades, and changing the equalization.

*Splitter.ai* ([https://splitter.ai/](https://splitter.ai/)) extracts specific audio tracks (e.g., the vocals or drums) from a sound file.

**Course Schedule (Subject to Change)**

**Week 1: Introduction**

*Due Monday, 21-Aug-2023:* No assignment due.

*Due Wednesday, 23-Aug-2023:* Analytical exercise. Select one popular song where you believe that the words are heard differently because of how they are set musically. Submit a 500-word paper where you (1) print the lyrics, (2) discuss the lyrics' meaning. Who is speaking in the song, what is their situation, and what is their attitude? (3) discuss how your interpretation of the lyrics is influenced by the musical setting. Does the music enhance or intensify the lyrics’ meaning? Does it add meaning that would not otherwise be there? Is it a neutral backdrop that gives more information about the band’s overall brand rather than the specific content of the song? Does it contradict the lyrics? Discuss musical features such as timbre, harmony, rhythm, meter, metric placement, and melody.

**Week 2: Verbal Space and Social Register**


Write a ca. 300-word response that addresses these questions:

1. What is verbal space? How can the use of verbal space influence how we understand the meaning of a song?
2. What is the distinction between lyric and anti-lyric song texts, according to Griffiths?

Next, choose *one* of these songs and create a verbal-space diagram similar to those shown in the article. Be prepared to share your diagram with your classmates. What sorts of contrasts in types of verbal space do the songs create? Consider elements such as the relation of words to the hypermetric downbeat (the
“pillar,” in Griffith’s parlance), the number of syllables per measure and hypermeter, and the use of silence.

John Lennon, “Aisumasen (I’m Sorry)”

Tracy Chapman, “Fast Car”

Charli XCX, “Baby”

Gracie Abrams, “Where Do We Go Now?”


Write a 500-word response to the two authors. What claims do they make that are similar? What claims are different? What analytical approach is suggested by each?

Week 3: Metric Dissonance

No Class Monday, 4-Sep-2023 (Labor Day)


Write a 300–500-word response that addresses this question:

What is metric dissonance? What makes a passage consonant or dissonant? Are metric consonance and dissonance absolute or fuzzy categories? Does the use of the term “dissonance” make sense to you?

Next, make a metric transcription of one of these songs. Conduct while listening, write barlines in the text, and indicate the hypermeter underneath the staff. Write in time-signature changes as needed:

Dusty Springfield, “Anyone Who Had a Heart”

Pavement, “Gold Soundz”

Shania Twain, “Learning to Love”

Rolling Stones, “Street Fightin’ Man”

Kate Bush, “Cloudbusting”

Seal, “Kiss from a Rose”
Week 4: Phrases and Syntax

Due Monday, 11-Sep-2023: Read BaileyShea, Chapter 4 (“Lines and Syntax”) pp. 96–104.


Make a metric transcription of one of the verses or verse/chorus units of one of these songs. Along with the transcription, write 250–300 words discussing these questions: How are phrases and melodic groups defined, and is there ever tension between different ways that phrases are created? How do the ideas from BaileyShea and Attas inform your analysis? Cite specific page numbers when discussing their ideas.

Jackson Browne, “These Days”

The Supremes, “Breathtaking Guy”

The Beatles, “Strawberry Fields Forever”

The Highwaymen, “Highwayman”

R.E.M., “It’s the End of the World as We Know It”


Write a 500-word essay that addresses this question:

What are some of the primary differences between how Adams and Attas define a phrase? Does this difference result from the difference in stylistic features of hip hop and pop/rock, or does it result from other factors?

Week 5: metric hierarchy


Write a 300-word essay that explains Murphy’s concept of the different levels of engagement with the metric hierarchy. Are there types of music that are not effectively modeled by Murphy’s different levels?

Choose one of the songs below and explain how your hearing engages with different levels of metric hierarchy:

Jackson Browne, “These Days”

The Supremes, “Breathtaking Guy”

The Beatles, “Strawberry Fields Forever”

The Highwaymen, “Highwayman”

R.E.M., “It’s the End of the World as We Know It”
Tori Amos, “Carbon”

Neutral Milk Hotel, “The King of Carrot Flowers Pts. 2–3”

Sufjan Stevens, “Oh God, Where Are You Now?”

Angel Olsen, “Hi-Five”

Due Wednesday, 20-Sep-2023: Read BaileyShea, Lines and Lyrics, Chapter 2, pp. 32–57.


Write 500 words that addresses this question:

What are different types of accent described by the authors? Can the accents occur at different levels of hierarchy? Are there ways that accent is created that is not addressed by the authors?

Week 6: vocal stress and rhyme


Make a rhythmic transcription of a significant part of one of these songs. Write ca. 100–200 words discussing how scansion interacts with form and/or meter:

The Rascals, “Groovin’”

The Supremes, “Can’t Hurry Love”

Lauryn Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing)”

The Smiths, “The Boy with the Thorn in His Side”

Steely Dan, “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number”

Lorde, “Solar Power”


Write a 500-word summary that addresses these questions:

1. What are different forms of rhyme?
2. What uses does rhyme have in a song?
3. What further discussion questions do you have about the readings?
Week 7: rhyme and form


Write ca. 500 words that addresses these questions:

What is a “chorus,” according to Temperley? Is it a section, a category, a formal function, or something else? What are examples of formal ambiguity, and how might they influence how we interpret the meaning of a song?

Due Wednesday, 4-Oct-2023: Make a transcription of at least one verse/chorus unit of one of these songs and write 100–200 words that discuss how rhyme interacts with meter and form. Where relevant, reference the readings you have completed so far.

The Smiths, “Handsome Devil”
Joni Mitchell, “Little Green”
Bob Dylan, “Just Like a Woman”
Courtney Barnett, “Pedestrian at Best”
Phoebe Bridgers, “Motion Sickness”
R.E.M., “Talk about the Passion”
Kate Bush, “Hounds of Love”

Week 8: rhyme and accent in hip hop

Due Monday, 9-Oct-2023: Read Ohriner, Flow, Chapter 3

Write 500 words that addresses this question:

How does Ohriner’s model of accent and rhyme differ from the other authors you have read? How is it similar? What scholarly motivations might Ohriner have for the differences?

Due Wednesday, 11-Oct-2023: Read Ohriner, Flow, Chapter 4

Write 100–200 words that discusses the vocal groove in one of these songs:

Tupac Shakur, “I Get Around”
Kendrick Lamar, “Money Trees”
Eminem, “The Way I Am”
Week 9: vocal timbre and production


Choose two of these songs and write 200–300 words describing how the vocal timbre changes, using Heidemann’s terminology. Be as precise as possible, and use time stamps to refer to different points in a track:

Candlemass, “Solitude”
Kate Bush, “Suspended in Gaffa”
Beatles, “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away”
Slint, “Good Morning, Captain”
Rihanna, “FourFive Seconds”
John Lennon, “Gimme Some Truth”
Drive Like Jehu, “Atom Jack” (RIP Rick Froberg)
The Cranberries, “Zombie”

https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.22.28.4/mto.22.28.4.duguay.html

Choose one of these songs and write 200–300 words discussing how the vocal placement in the recorded space changes. How do these changes reinforce the song’s form, persona, or message? Be as precise as possible, and use time stamps to refer to different points in a track:

PJ Harvey, “Big Exit”
The 1975, “Somebody Else”
FKA Twigs, “Closer”
Harry Styles, “Satellite”
Pink Pantheress, “Boy’s a Liar”
Week 10: address


This chapter is packed with useful ideas and examples that are (in my opinion) uneven in their clarity. Write 500 words that addresses this question:

1. What are the three levels of the identity of a singing voice? How are they distinguished?
2. What is the distinction between protagonist and environment? Can they be separated?
3. What is the standard situation and level of address in a song?
4. What are proxemic zones?
5. Do these concepts help provide further insight into the songs we have studied so far? Do the songs have features that you believe are not modeled comfortably by the concepts Moore describes?


Write 200–300 words that define these concepts in your own words: shift in discourse, addresser/addressee relationship, clarification vs. substitution, double address, distant-to-intimate template.

Choose a song that engages in these ideas in an interesting or complex way and briefly discuss the lyrics. If you cannot think of one, try “Sunday Bloody Sunday” by U2, “Waterloo Sunset” by the Kinks, or “Life on Mars” by David Bowie.

Week 11: narrative and text painting


Submit your final project proposal


Write 500 words that address this question:
The authors you read this week show connections between harmony, tonal centers, form, and voice leading and a song’s lyrical content. Which types of connections are most persuasive? What kinds of evidence can the authors bring to support their claims?

**Week 12: article reports and discussion, part 1**

_Due Monday, 6-Nov-2023_: article reports from two students

Submit your final project bibliography

_Due Wednesday, 8-Nov-2023_: article reports from two students

**Week 13: article reports and discussion, part 2**

_Due Monday, 13-Nov-2023_: Article reports

Submit your analytical fragment from your final project

_Due Wednesday, 15-Nov-2023_: article reports from two students

**Articles for reports:**


**No class 20-Nov-2023 and 22-Nov-2023 (Thanksgiving Break)**

**Week 14: student presentations**

*Monday, 27-Nov-2023: assigned student presentations*

*Wednesday, 29-Nov-2023: assigned student presentations*

**Week 15: student presentations**

*Monday, 4-Dec-2023: assigned student presentations*

*Wednesday, 6-Dec-2023: assigned student presentations*

Thursday, December 14, 5 p.m.: Final Paper Due

**Other Course Policies**

**Academic Integrity**

Students caught cheating or plagiarizing will receive a “0” for that particular assignment or exam [or specify alternative sanction, such as course failure]. Additionally, the incident will be reported to the Dean of Students (Office of Academic Integrity), 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.

See: Academic Integrity (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003)

LINK: https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003

Student Behavior

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 classrooms, labs, discussion groups, field trips,
etc.

See: Student Code of Conduct (https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct)

Link: https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct

Access to Information – Eagle Connect

Your access point for business and academic services at UNT occurs at my.unt.edu (http://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.

See: Eagle Connect (http://eagleconnect.unt.edu/)

LINK: eagleconnect.unt.edu/ (http://eagleconnect.unt.edu/)

ODA Statement

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities.
Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify
their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with an accommodation letter. You
can now request your Letters of Accommodation ONLINE and ODA will mail your Letters of
Accommodation to your instructors. You may wish to begin a private discussion with your professors
regarding your specific needs in a course. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester. For additional information see the Office of Disability Access.

See: ODA (https://disability.unt.edu/)

LINK: disability.unt.edu (http://disability.unt.edu/) (Phone: (940) 565-4323)

Diversity and Belonging

UNT values diversity and individuality as part of advancing ideals of human worth, dignity, and academic excellence. Diverse viewpoints enrich open discussion, foster the examination of values and exposure of biases, help educate people in rational conflict resolution and responsive leadership, and prepare us for the complexities of a pluralistic society. As such, UNT is committed to maintaining an open, welcoming atmosphere that attracts qualified students, staff, and faculty from all groups to support their success. UNT does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, or veteran status in its application and admission process, educational programs and activities, employment policies, and use of university facilities.

Health and Safety Information

Students can access information about health and safety at: https://music.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness (https://music.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness)

Registration Information for Students

See: Registration Information (https://registrar.unt.edu/students)

Link: https://registrar.unt.edu/students (https://registrar.unt.edu/students)

Academic Calendar, Fall 2023

See: Fall 2023 Academic Calendar (https://registrar.unt.edu/registration/fall-registration-guide)


Final Exam Schedule, Fall 2023

See above

Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress

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 hours registered. 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 schedule a meeting with an academic advisor in your college or visit the Student Financial Aid and Scholarships office to discuss dropping a course before doing so.

See: Financial Aid (http://financialaid.unt.edu/sap)
LINK: http://financialaid.unt.edu/sap

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.

See: Financial Aid (http://financialaid.unt.edu/sap)
LINK: http://financialaid.unt.edu/sap

RETENTION OF STUDENT RECORDS

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 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.

See: FERPA (http://ferpa.unt.edu/)
COUNSELING AND TESTING

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. Please visit the Center’s website for further information:

See: Counseling and Testing

For more information on mental health issues, please visit:

See: Mental Health Issues

The counselor for music students is:

Myriam Reynolds
Chestnut Hall, Suite 311
(940) 565-2741
Myriam.reynolds@unt.edu

Add/Drop Policy

Please be reminded that dropping classes or failing to complete and pass registered hours may make you ineligible for financial aid. In addition, if you drop below half-time enrollment you may be required to begin paying back your student loans. See Academic Calendar (listed above) for additional add/drop Information.

Drop Information: registrar.unt.edu/registration/fall-registration-guide

Student Resources

The University of North Texas has many resources available to students. For a complete list, go to:

See: Student Resources

(Care Team)