

Beyond the Narrative: Considering the Larger Pedagogical Toolbox for the Popular Music Survey

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In his introduction and contribution to this roundtable, David Blake offers a compelling case for challenging the dominant discourses that arise in rock-focused popular music survey courses and texts. I share Blake's opinion that the changing state of the field warrants a new curriculum. I find his call to re-focus the pedagogy and make the roles of materialism and technology the central narrative insightful and worthwhile. His approach not only opens a space to include other similarly (if not more) prominent popular musics and their audiences, but it ultimately connects better with the experiences, ideologies, and interests of our newest undergraduate generation.

In defending this new methodology, Blake argues that the field's immense growth has allowed popular music scholars to think beyond the mere need for justification. I agree that we are indebted to pioneering rock courses and texts for laying important methodological groundwork and for persuading universities to allow for the serious study of popular music in our classrooms. However, I think he is also correct in pointing out that the need for justification is no longer foremost among our concerns. The rock narrative that at one time appeared central to the "collective" pop cultural memory (which is in itself debatable) has become less useful and relevant to the current state of the field. Indeed, we have come a long way in the sixteen years since Robert Fink and the other "New Musicologists" fought battles both within and outside of US music departments to create a safe and productive space for popular music to be studied as "Music with-a-capital-M" (the designation previously only given to canonic "classical" music).¹ This is not to say that former approaches to studying rock are without benefit; but they do become problematic when used as *the* cultural, historical, and ideological lens through which we examine *all* popular musical styles, media, and reception. Similar reservations would certainly apply to a rationale for examining nineteenth-century French Opera

1. Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music, Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 139.

through the lens of eighteenth-century Viennese string quartets simply because of their similar historical grouping under the Western art music umbrella. Most musicologists would agree that such an account would be reductive because it neglects important aspects of each genre's compositional processes, performing forces, aesthetics, production, technologies, and audiences.

Our current need to re-evaluate popular music pedagogy points to something positive: it indicates just how expansive the academic study of popular music has become. This is reflected not only in the proliferation of twenty-first century scholarship, but also in the recent academic job market as more university announcements specifically name popular music as a (or *the*) desired area of expertise. This, in turn, mirrors a measurable surge in popular music courses being offered. Today, many universities do not just teach American Popular Music or History of Rock courses, but offer classes on specialized topics and genres. Recent course offerings by the musicology department at the University of California, Los Angeles exemplify this trend. Diverse faculty interests, a sizable population of graduate student teaching assistants, and the university's unique location at the heart of the entertainment industry allow the department to offer a remarkable variety of classes on popular music. In addition to running a "standard" History of Rock and Roll course, UCLA's general education offerings over the past five years have included the History of Electronic Dance Music, The Blues, Motown and Soul, the Beatles, the History of Jazz, 1968, LGBT Perspectives in Pop Music, Film and Music, Music in Los Angeles, the American Musical, and Dancehall Rap and Reggae. It is equally impressive that from the fall of 2008 to the fall of 2013 the department taught 5,000 students in these classes.² In light of growing popular music curricula at this and other leading US institutions, it is obvious that discourses surrounding popular music narratives and how we teach them are not only pressing but also *evolving*. This surely speaks to the timeliness and importance of Blake's proposal.

Much like Blake, I too have been frustrated in my attempts to include influential genres like soul, disco, and hip-hop within rock-centered discourses. I therefore appreciate Blake's initiative in responding to Tricia Rose and Houston A. Baker's now two-decades-old call for a new, post-hip-hop "pedagogical toolkit."³ But if we seriously intend to revamp university popular music curricula, finding a new pedagogical narrative is just one discussion in a larger series of conversations that need to take place. Sound pedagogy involves much more than mediating information and ideas: it requires an investigation of all of the

2. I want to thank Barbara Van Nostrand, Raymond Knapp, and the UCLA Musicology department for providing me with this information.

3. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994) and Houston A. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

internal practices and external forces that determine the success of a course. A recent article in the *Oxford Review of Education* corroborates this claim: “[t]he concept of pedagogy is commonly regarded as encompassing the overall *theoretical, historical, and practical* aspects of teaching.”⁴ In this essay, Yotam Hotam and Linor Lea Hadar point out that since at least the late 1960s, pedagogy scholars have recognized that there are often substantial differences between the theoretical and practical aspects of classroom life—namely the potential disconnect between the ideal of a “teachers ‘plan’ and what they eventually ‘do’” when faced with day-to-day realities.⁵

In what follows, I reflect on recent pedagogical scholarship to propose ways to expand our discussion to encompass a more holistic examination of popular music curricula. More specifically, I consider external factors that affect our instructional choices and, in light of these factors, I examine how specific course objectives and assessments might look within Blake’s proposed materialist discourse. Space limitations as well as a sincere desire to initiate further conversation prevent me from fully unpacking the points I address below. My responses are in no way complete or prescriptive, but instead attempt to illuminate issues within the larger pedagogical picture.

Confronting the Rusty Toolbox

As I thought through Blake’s essay, I was careful to consider expanding university popular music course offerings, proliferating scholarship, and my own classroom experiences and challenges. I soon realized that my concerns with the current state of pedagogy stemmed from issues larger than the ideological pitfalls caused by grouping all popular music under the “rock” umbrella. It was obvious that they arose from a more fundamental problem: many institutions still operate under an outdated expectation that all popular music can be taught in one course, in a semester or (worse) a quarter-long, large, undergraduate, general-education survey. As a result, I, like many of my colleagues, find that the *practical* quandaries of these classes are equally as pressing as theoretical ones. And regardless of whether we like to acknowledge it, practical concerns typically dictate and sometimes supersede our classroom approaches. Hotam and Hadar summarize and concur with Philip W. Jackson’s pioneering arguments on this very issue, stating that: “[w]hat teachers eventually teach (‘interactive teaching’) may not be the direct consequence of their overall pedagogic approach

4. Yotam Hotam and Linor Lea Hadar, “Pedagogy in Practice: The Pedagogy of a Learning Setting As Students Experience It,” *Oxford Review of Education* 39, no. 3 (2013): 387. My italics. Their research focuses on secondary classrooms, but I find it applicable to higher education.

5. Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), cited in Hotam and Harder, “Pedagogy in Practice,” 387–88.

(‘preactive teaching’) but rather may be more intermediately connected with ‘classroom life’ and ‘daily work.’”⁶ In her article about pedagogical approaches to teaching music, Estelle R. Jorgensen uses similar reasoning to re-envision performance curricula. Although Jorgensen’s agenda is different from Blake’s, her historical perspective on theories that encompass both general curricula designs and musically focused ones prove useful for consideration here. She writes: “[c]urriculum design involves a movement from philosophical premise to *practical reality*, a quantum leap from higher order to a lower order of generality, and a corresponding increase in the number of practical options that reflect this generality.”⁷ Taking these ideas together, I find it useful to list some of the “practical realities” that we as university popular music educators factor into our day-to-day “interactive teaching” processes. These include:

Institution type: Public and/or large research universities often permit larger class sizes and promote different student expectations than private liberal arts colleges. Large institutions also generally have more resources and often provide teaching assistants to aid with classroom duties.

Class size: Paired with institution type, this has the greatest impact on how we teach. It determines the opportunities for student involvement and creativity both in class and on assignments. It also influences how much time we spend preparing and grading, which in turn affects the content of assignments and exams. Cognitive research confirms that students do best when they “authentically” participate in their learning.⁸ Unfortunately, a 300-person rock class allows few options for individualized or in-class contributions and puts limitations on assessment possibilities.

Time: The amount of material covered is dictated by how many minutes instructors get with their students. Surveys prove more manageable for both the instructor and his/her students in a fifteen-week semester than a ten-week quarter or a six-week summer school session. Consequently, the same course looks radically different in each of these situations.

Student ability: The student population in general education courses varies from class to class, institution to institution. A class full of juniors and seniors well versed in either music or the humanities will make the course run much differently than those primarily consisting of ESL, first-year science and/or business majors.

6. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, 151–52, cited in Hotam and Hadar, “Pedagogy in Practice,” 388.

7. Estelle R. Jorgensen, “The Curriculum Design Process in Music,” *College Music Symposium* 28 (1988): 94. My emphasis.

8. Fred M. Newmann, Helen M. Marks, and Adam Gamoran, “Authentic Pedagogy and Student Performance,” *American Journal of Education* 104, no. 4 (August 1996): 281–84. For application of this to teaching music history at the college level, see Jessie Fillerup, “Cage and the Chaotic Classroom: Pedagogy for the Avant-garde,” in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. James Briscoe (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2010), 179–80.

Resources: The availability of materials needed to run and instruct survey courses can make or break the success of teaching certain topics, especially when teaching *about* technology (as Blake proposes). Success is dependent on adequate technological infrastructure (course websites, streaming audio, and in-class AV systems), the availability of multimedia and proper playback devices (i.e., not just for CDs, but records, tapes, DVDs, MP4s, etc.), and useful library collections and databases. Some institutions even place limitations on the type or availability of texts, readers, and multimedia.

These points cover a few of many possible external factors that precede and sometimes *trump* pedagogical content. As our field considers new approaches, we need to make these practices flexible for various learning environments. Thinking realistically about how these structures affect our colleagues and ourselves in multiple scenarios will prove essential for successfully restructuring curricula, especially as technology is increasingly becoming central to what and how we teach. Potential problems in Blake's proposed emphasis on materialist technological discourses therefore include the limitations of existing, often-antiquated resources that, for many institutions, are still limited to clunky class websites, marginally working AV systems, and printed textbooks. Consequently, we must consider how existing course materials will change and how new ones can be accessible for thousands of students, with differing abilities, across hundreds of campuses with variable resources.

My second point here addresses the issues of "preactive teaching": in this case, the pedagogical complications caused by the scope of the survey structure itself.⁹ Musicologists are not strangers to surveys: our Western art music curriculums have long been subject to this constraint. Teaching monophonic chant through John Adams in two or three semesters caused heart palpitations decades before popular music was even considered a viable academic field of study. Similar to the ways in which the anthology to Burkholder's *A History of Western Music* text has expanded to three volumes as it evolved to reflect the field's growth beyond the traditional European, male, and instrumental canons, an equally limited discourse cannot contain proliferating popular music scholarship.¹⁰ Prominent American popular music and rock texts have reflected these growing pains as each new edition scrambles to add chapters and re-focus others to accommodate quickly expanding perspectives in the discipline.¹¹ So

9. As cited above, "preactive teaching" refers to the planned curricular and pedagogical approaches educators intend to take in the classroom. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, 151–52, cited in Hotam and Hadar, "Pedagogy in Practice," 388.

10. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012) and J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, eds., *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 7th ed., 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

11. Examples include: Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: Minstrelsy to MP3*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Covach and Andrew

like those in the trenches with the Western art music surveys, those of us faced with the popular music survey also agonize over what to include, what to leave out, and how to organize it all.

Blake's materialist approach certainly offers one possible framework for making these difficult decisions responsibly. But like any methodology that attempts to cover an entire field, his is not without pitfalls. For instance, how do we treat musics that operate outside cutting-edge technology or wholly reject that technology? Do we leave out D.I.Y. punk and new wave? Excluding Patti Smith and the B-52s cuts down on course material, but it also ignores essential genres and their audiences. On the other hand, if these musics are taught within the materialist frame, they risk becoming essentialized as anti-technological. While it was true that an anti-technological ideology proved essential to the aesthetics of punk and some new wave artists, that was a fraction of what made them relevant for contemporary audiences and influential on future musical styles. Furthermore, there is a risk of (unintentionally) elevating those who have embraced technology and used it in innovative ways as aesthetically, creatively, intellectually, or ideologically superior to those who did not. As a result, we are faced with a similar dilemma as with the existing rock canon: individual instructors are left figuring out how to fit certain musics into the limitations of a ruling discourse. My point here is that we are not going to find one answer to this problem because it is rooted in the constraints of the *survey structure itself*. No matter what methodological, historical, or cultural frame we choose—discourses on technology, rebellion and controversies, number-one albums, African-American musical tropes, dance cultures, or even baby-boomer rock ideologies—something has to be left out. Blake's solution thus provides a means to cope with the reality.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that universities throw out popular music survey courses altogether. Eliminating what (for many) is the bread and butter of popular music studies programs during a time of tight university budgets has the potential to harm departments and threaten job security. What I do suggest is that future conversations include recognizing the limitations of our attempts to be *comprehensive*. In addressing this problem, we should look to successful approaches used across the hall in Western art music surveys. Recent books like *Vitalizing Music History Teaching* have already done considerable work to address problems with survey structures. In fact, Douglass Seaton's essay "Teaching Music History: Principles, Problems and Proposals" pinpoints scope itself as the first fundamental problem with survey courses. He writes: "There is too much music and historical information about music for our students to

Flory, *What's that Sound?: An Introduction to Rock and its History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); and David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

assimilate in their curricula . . . One of our greatest challenges is to decide what *not* to teach.”¹² If this dilemma sounds familiar (and it should), his chapter is definitely worth the read.

Hardware and Power Tools

I find Seaton’s ideas directly applicable to popular music pedagogy in a variety of ways. In particular, he stresses the importance of refocusing survey courses to make them *purposeful*. Among his suggestions are these three: (1) “Do not try to teach the content of music history comprehensively”; (2) “Be clear that there are reasons for learning information”; (3) “Challenge students with complex questions. How? Why? So What?”¹³ I have already addressed the topic of comprehensiveness above, but items two and three in Seaton’s list bring me to my final point: we need to include conversations about objectives and assessment in our plans for revised popular music curricula. Clearly defined objectives and quality means of assessment provide both students and professors with tangible end goals by giving a course a defined direction and purpose. Objectives and assessments are the essential hardware and power tools that complete our pedagogical toolbox.

Course objectives provide the bridge between the materials and discourse (frameworks that supply information and teach concepts) and the assessments (the proof that students have acquired the necessary skills to complete the course). In order to fully realize what a new popular music curriculum would look like, we need to reconsider specifically *what* we want students to gain from our courses: what are our end *goals*, or as Seaton asks, what are “the reasons for learning information”?¹⁴ The end is how we justify the means. So what *skills* do we want students to have acquired by the end of the term? How will we determine if they meet course expectations: what “complex questions” will we ask?¹⁵ I advocate here for a larger discussion of the active, observable goals that begin with the phrase: “Students will be able to . . .” S.W.B.A.T. objectives lay out small-scale measureable skills that lead to the larger educational goals that we as musicians, scholars, and educators hope our students will gain. For instance, we might want students to become informed music consumers. To realize this, we must first figure out what specific proficiencies they need to make mindful, real-world decisions.

12. Douglass Seaton, “Teaching Music History, Principles, Problems and Proposals,” in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. James Briscoe (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2010), 60. Seaton’s italics.

13. Seaton, “Teaching Music History,” 62–63.

14. Seaton, “Teaching Music History,” 62.

15. Seaton, “Teaching Music History,” 63.

To take Blake's discussion of Arcade Fire's "Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)" as an example, I can imagine a situation where an in-class discussion (large or small group) or an individual writing prompt could heed Seaton's advice by meeting multiple predetermined, assessable objectives in which students would be "challenged" to unpack the following issues in the song: blurred genre boundaries, demographics and identity, and the logistics and ideologies of sampling and production vs. "live" instrumentation. Answers to these questions would have the potential to meet various action-oriented, observable objectives, including:

- Students will be able to identify differences among musical performances and styles, as well as interpret the meanings of such differences.
- Students will be able to interpret performances using correct terminology.
- Students will be able to describe how popular music reflects and influences gendered, sexual, racial, regional, and class-based identities and attitudes.
- Students will be able to describe and analyze historical changes in musical techniques, technological innovations, and social values.
- Students will be able to participate in a community of scholars by interacting productively in class discussions by asking and answering critical questions.

Considering these elements from multiple vantage points would determine the effectiveness and adaptability of this proposed topic, means of assessment, and list of objectives for various classroom situations. Pressing practical factors noted above (class size, institutional expectations, time constraints, etc.) would determine how best to execute the assignment in a particular classroom setting. Individual writing prompts given at the beginning of class might be used to encourage attendance and participation while simultaneously revealing strengths and weaknesses in a student's vocabulary and conceptual understanding. On the downside, these assignments could require significant grading time on the part of an instructor with no teaching assistant. If time and space allow for small-group discussions, students might benefit most from the opportunity to share ideas and learn from one another. Of course, there is always the danger that extroverts would shut shy students out of the discussion. We must also question if the objectives listed above meet worthwhile goals and are applicable to diverse musical topics beyond those considered in this particular example.

Obviously there is not a single right answer or method for assessing students' knowledge of Arcade Fire, much less any group, genre, song, or topic. These proposed considerations are only meant to initiate conversations about potential objectives and assessments in new popular music curricula. My point

here is that we as popular music pedagogues would benefit from thinking collectively about how new narratives can meet numerous possible course goals using multiple means of assessment. Our pedagogical toolbox is incomplete without stocking up on a variety of purposeful objectives and assessments (essential hardware and tools) that can be adapted to diverse teaching situations.

Closing Thoughts

I appreciate the enormous task David Blake has undertaken in re-imagining the possibilities for popular music curricula. Following his lead, I would encourage us to continue to ask big questions and re-evaluate the larger pedagogical picture. I would also hope that we continue to be resources for one another. The best advice I received in my first year as a music educator was to never reinvent “the wheel.” Teaching is a collaborative profession and there is always something useful that can be borrowed or adapted from someone else’s experiences. David Blake and my other colleagues in this roundtable have certainly provided me with tools to add to my own post-hip-hop pedagogical toolbox. I would further suggest looking, as I have, to insightful educational conversations between others in our discipline (on Western art music, performance, jazz, theory, and world musics), as well as those outside our departments (history and film, for example). As the field of popular music continues to grow, our discussions about pedagogy should similarly proliferate in order to keep not only our teaching, but also our scholarship, timely and relevant for rapidly changing student populations and university environments.