

Rock Narratives and Teaching Popular Music: Audiences and Critical Issues

ANDREW FLORY

The role of rock in musical and cultural life has changed drastically over the last sixty years. Once at the vanguard of youth culture in the wake of a devastating World War, rock occupies a very different place in modern life. Rock is at once historic and contemporary, and its artists and fans are grandparents and pre-teens alike. Rock's impact is global, felt substantially in often-cited places like Tennessee, California, and New York, but also in locales that receive much less attention from English-speaking populations such as Russia, Brazil, Japan, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia.

For academics working in fields pertaining to music, the place of rock has also changed. Rock music became important in the 1970s and 1980s for helping to challenge the centrality of Western art music in scholarly discourse and teaching. Paralleling widespread interest in rock as a musical form, however, student and faculty engagement with rock as a subject of study has grown dramatically during the last several decades. Now rock is so prominent in college teaching that we need to question its place. Isn't it fitting that a style of music once associated with transgression might later play the role of oppressor? Once revolutionary, rock is now hegemonic. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

David Blake's essay raises powerful ideas about the place and content of rock courses in the modern academic environment. His argument hinges on three interrelated claims that merit further discussion: (1) rock courses are problematically at the core of contemporary efforts to teach "popular music," (2) critical issues derived from the study of rock are not wholly applicable to genres that emerged after 1980 such as hip-hop and EDM, and (3) a frame of technology can be helpful in shifting away from an out-of-step rock-centered approach to teaching courses in popular music. In the spirit of this *Journal*, Blake should be lauded for calling to task our perspective on pedagogical approaches to popular music. The "why" and the "how" of rock pedagogy are worthy topics for debate, and the role of rock history within studies of popular music, broader music-related disciplines, and fields outside of music should be ongoing topics of critical

debate among those dedicated to furthering the study of all forms of popular music through college teaching.

I should start by addressing my stake in this discussion. I am the co-author, with John Covach, of *What's That Sound?*, one of the rock history textbooks cited in Blake's piece.¹ Covach first developed this text (which he revised for one subsequent edition) after teaching courses on the topic for a decade at the University of North Texas and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and I began to contribute to the project in 2010. In my own teaching, I have led courses on the history of rock in various environments. I have taught about rock at a music-centered conservatory, led an online course at a large state institution, run a continuing education session for students mostly above the age of fifty, and taught many iterations of a non-major course at my current liberal arts-oriented institution. Also important to my perspective on teaching about rock is my teaching on other popular music topics, including courses on rhythm and blues, Motown, the Beatles, and various jazz topics.

I view the rock's place in the university environment as more nuanced than Blake's depiction. To be sure, there have been notable instances since the 1960s in which rock was used as synecdoche for popular music. But those with long institutional memories will remember that the emergence of jazz in academic teaching was largely under the umbrella of popular music, and many non-specialists still view such varied topics as jazz, rock, and hip-hop singularly as "popular music." From the perspective of a textbook author, I see an especially strict division between pedagogical materials that follow a rock trajectory, such as *What's That Sound?*, and those that seek to cover a much broader scope of "American popular music."² Within the former, there are challenges from the author's perspective about how to frame "rock." Rock itself as a "market" was closely intertwined with the mainstream before the rise of Album-Oriented Rock radio formats in the 1970s, and was less structured at the time from a business perspective than black pop (race, rhythm and blues, and later soul) or country and western. Contextualizing rock within other forms of popular music, despite a lack of clear stylistic or economic boundaries, can be quite dif-

1. John Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's That Sound?: An Introduction to Rock and its History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

2. Christopher Waterman and Larry Starr offer a clear example of this with two discreet texts, a larger popular music volume and a more directed rock text that also includes co-author Joe Schloss. Christopher Waterman and Larry Starr, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford, 2014) and Joseph G. Schloss, Larry Starr, and Christopher Waterman, *Rock: Music, Culture, and Business* (New York: Oxford, 2012). Other rock-oriented texts include Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 7th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2013) and David P. Szatmary, *Rockin' In Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll*, 8th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2014). Some texts, such as Reebee Garofalo and Steve Waxman, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.*, 6th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2014), include some coverage of American popular music before 1950 but focus mostly on rock traditions.

difficult. Of course, erecting “borders” around styles and markets is a notoriously challenging task for any textbook author or instructor, regardless of the topic at hand.

Blake cites the paradox of incorporating narrative topics more relevant to music rarely considered under the rock aegis (especially after 1980) into texts and teaching about rock. Because rock sets the narrative agenda, he argues, it is difficult to attend to matters more pressing in regard to the study of post-rock forms of popular music. This is a concern facing instructors who wish to tell a broad story about popular music but teach courses nominally about “rock history.” For courses and texts that *do* hope to follow a rock-oriented trajectory, however, losing focus on rock traditions can decentralize the very subject that is the purported course topic. Rock’s destabilization as the dominant strain of mainstream pop during this period is a strong motivation for this change of emphasis. But is there no place to simply study rock as it experienced a mainstream denouement during the 1990s and 2000s? In the context of a course about rock, following this tradition as it became less popular (along with critical issues relevant to earlier narratives) can be quite profitable rather than studying dominant mainstream styles and calling them rock, or looking at these styles solely through the framework of rock to try and maintain a sense of “relevance.”

While working on *What’s That Sound?*, I was fascinated to learn more about the manner in which authors, publishers, and communities of instructors help to develop and maintain textbooks. Categories of available textbooks, in addition to much of the context within these works that change in each revised edition, reflect a more user-oriented vantage point than peer-reviewed academic publishing. Many instructors offer courses about the history of rock, which drives the market and content of accompanying commercial texts. In the case of new texts that focus on styles emerging within the pedagogical discourse, publishers often find it difficult to support a book that doesn’t already have a market. This invokes a problematic circularity: less-experienced instructors are more likely to offer courses for which there is an available text and they often follow the parameters of a prescribed text dutifully, which establishes courses more deeply into various curricula.

Textbooks should not drive curricula, however, and, as Blake rightly argues, our latitude to teach about topics for which no suitable text exists, or to teach topics in new and inventive ways, should be widespread in the enterprise of higher education pedagogy. I know of many forward-thinking people who do not use standard texts in courses on rock; indeed, based on information about people who use *What’s That Sound?* in their teaching, I see textbooks as necessarily reflective of current attitudes toward teaching. In periods of development between editions of our book, the publisher solicits user reviews (not “peer” reviews) along with suggestions from people who use other standard texts and

experts who have designed their own courses of study in the history of rock in order to gain a wide range of ideas for change. During these discussions, Covach and I find that many adopters use our book in inventive ways, adapting the text to their own needs and incorporating outside materials. (Covach and I both do this as well.) These adaptations often inspire changes to the text, a process that is usually mediated by the views of current adopters. Still, as any textbook author knows, consensus on matters of revision can be quite difficult, and books of this type need to negotiate a wide range of approaches.

Blake's perspective as a graduate student asked to teach a course on popular music with a nominal title that includes rock offers an important viewpoint on the ways in which texts and curricula can dictate conflation between "rock" and "popular music." While perhaps common, and certainly worthy of attention, his situation is surely not entirely representative, and more detailed empirical data might help us all better understand the multiplicity of contexts in which courses on rock and popular music appear in the higher-education teaching environment. Who teaches courses on popular music? How do these fit into various curricula? And what types of students enroll in these courses? Even without specific answers to these questions we can imagine a hypothetical range of teaching that popular music courses might need to accommodate.

Popular music courses targeted toward music majors are growing rapidly in popularity. These kinds of classes can offer opportunities for repertoire-oriented teaching meant to expose students to varied styles. Pop-oriented performance practice can serve as a model for music majors, and pop songs might serve as fodder for teaching analytical techniques that either complement or fall outside of Western traditions. Divergent foci of schools and programs might dictate very different approaches toward the study of popular music for majors. I have seen that conservatories (and schools of music) usually have more ardently prescribed programs than typical liberal arts colleges and, thus, the manner in which popular music fits into the varying music major curricula at these types of schools usually differs. Courses about popular music are also common in professional schools and programs catering to students studying audio production, music therapy, and many other fields, which also dictate different teaching goals.³ Furthermore, many instructors continue to teach courses on popular music outside of music departments within the contexts of a variety of different fields of study.

3. Contrary to the idea of rock as central to the study of popular music, the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) does not use the term "rock" among its accreditation standards. Instead, the term "popular" appears in several instances in ways that allude to its use as an umbrella word covering a number of styles. National Association of Schools of Music, *Handbook 2013–14* (Reston, VA, 2013), 115, 119, and 187.

The most common context for courses about popular music, both within and outside of music departments, is for non-majors as a form of music appreciation. The goals of this larger genre of music teaching are also wide ranging, a topic that has been addressed in the pages of this *Journal*.⁴ Size matters, and large state schools and small private colleges often approach non-major study quite differently, creating the need for different tools, topics, and teaching styles. Region also can be an important consideration when approaching popular music courses for the non-major. Instructors working at public institutions in Southern California, for example, might want more material relating to Hispanic involvement in mainstream popular styles or consideration of the “Latin” market, while those working in urban environments such as New York or Los Angeles may want to focus on the notable contributions of their respective cities to pop history. It is also quite common for adopters working in other areas to view their local scenes as central to historical narratives despite falling outside of canonic appreciation. All of this is to say that, despite generational differences that might exist, we should be careful about broadly stereotyping our students. Students and teaching goals can differ greatly depending on context.

In my rock courses, which are mostly targeted at traditional-age non-majors at a liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest, I am sometimes torn between various approaches of pedagogical goals. Representative repertoire and style identification are certainly important, and those familiar with *What’s That Sound?* will not be shocked to learn that I often try to convey methods for understanding basic elements of instrumentation and formal construction in a variety of rock songs. Developing students’ facility with primary sources is another important goal of my rock courses, and representative writings in this area often include mainstream newspapers, popular press, historic media, autobiographical writings, and historically important academic works.

I frame my rock courses through a series of critical lenses, giving students the opportunity to gain experience with analyzing larger musical and social issues present in rock’s history. In concert with Blake’s suggestion, I often use technology as a theme for viewing changes in popular music production and consumption since the 1950s, but I also use many other critical topics to focus my courses about rock history. Depending on in-class discussion and the directions that a course takes, analytical lenses might include issues of race, gender, migration, generation, region, virtuosity and ambition, politics, market division, and appropriation. Perhaps I am blinded by my proximity to the topic, but I do not find these topics particularly unique to rock’s history and, with

4. Edward Hafer, “The Pedagogy of the Pedagogy of Music Appreciation,” this *Journal* 3, no. 1 (2012), <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/34/100> and Scott Dirkse, “Encouraging Empirical Research: Findings from the Music Appreciation Classroom,” this *Journal* 2, no. 1 (2011) <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/21/61>.

some variation, I find similar issues to be relevant in my courses on rhythm and blues and jazz and can imagine how they would be equally as relevant within courses that focus on hip-hop styles or EDM. In the end, I am not wedded to covering any of these particular ideas in my teaching. Rather, my goal is to give students the perspective to understand the ways in which repertoire might be read using critical perspectives, and I encourage students to find ways to engage with popular music on their own terms, using critical lenses that speak to their interests and understanding.

Blake's apprehension concerning the hegemony of rock over "popular music" is an important topic, and it raises many questions about historical and cultural power as it translates into college teaching and textbook authorship. In the spirit of his suggestion to adopt technology as a meaningful frame, I would like to reflect on several issues within dominant rock narratives (including the one I help to maintain) that I see as particularly limiting. Rather than dominating other forms of popular music, and obscuring specific viewpoints most applicable to non-rock, I see these perspectives as potentially enlightening to a wide variety of popular music outside of rock culture.

One issue relates to nationalism, and focusing on musical production and consumption in the United States. Rock as a syncretic musical form emerged out of North American culture during the 1950s, but quickly spread to many international sites. We see in the music of the British Invasion a fascinating transatlantic dialogue in rock styles, but most of our teaching and writing treats this period as anomalous, and discussion of rock on an international stage is rarely revisited in any substantial manner at later points in rock narratives. In fact, beginning in the 1960s rock styles proliferated all over the world, and music created in Brazil, Scandinavia, Japan, Eastern Europe, Africa, and many other locales was in dialogue with rock in the United States, forming intriguing connections. In spite of the fluidity by which these musics interacted, our pedagogical materials frequently place borders around music created outside of the United States and label it under the rubric of "global pop." In rock and larger popular music studies, considering this larger repertoire, in addition to the musicians who created it, listeners who supported it, and the cultural formations from which it came could add great depth to courses that appear to focus solely on the music of North America.

Amateur culture is another important element of rock history that is neglected in much of our teaching and scholarship. One of the defining characteristics of popular music is an egalitarian strain that supports a low entry level for participation at an amateur level. As teachers and scholars, we often focus on the most exceptional and skilled musicians, partly out of a subconscious or habitual need to justify the manner in which popular forms can achieve "greatness." Important areas of the music industry, however, such as massive

instrument retail chains, pro audio and project studio gear sales, and thriving lesson and instructional businesses, clearly point to amateurs as an equally valuable and crucial part of popular music as performance. And far from specific to rock, these businesses carry both guitars and turntables, sell acoustic and digital recording gear, and teach finger tapping and quick cuts alike. Incorporating themes of amateur consumption and creation, especially when students likely have personal experience in these areas, can greatly enhance narratives of our courses on popular music and engage areas of music making, business practices, and technological development that are thriving in modern life.

Most courses and texts that deal with popular music focus on recordings. Recorded works are central to modern music, of course, and the idea of the recording as text has been a crucial topic in popular music research during the last two decades. The practicality and excitement of using recordings, however, has in many cases shifted attention away from popular music as a performative art in live settings. In our written histories, we seldom mention critical aspects of performance practice, such as aural and written traditions, collaborative agents that design and maintain sound reinforcement, and performance venues as social spaces. Crucial to the history of rock, these forms of performance practice are also vital elements of post-1980s styles, and the ways in which music originates in live settings and is translated to recorded forms, or vice-versa, can be a fascinating fodder for teaching. Moreover, performance can be an effective tool in which students engage in basic elements of creating popular music within their coursework, helping to accompany narratives of popular music as a form of listening with wider practices of musicking.

In closing, I would like to discuss a little-known song called “Won’t Get Radioactive” as an example that introduces elements of amateurism, international reception, live performance, and technology within a piece that traverses styles of rock and EDM.⁵ “Won’t Get Radioactive” is a mashup by a German DJ called DJ LUP that incorporates four significant sources: “Supa-Dupa-Fly” by DJ 666; “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons; “Jump” by Van Halen; and “Won’t Get Fooled Again” by the Who. Like many mashups, “Won’t Get Radioactive” allows us to discuss the use of technology in creating new music out of existing sources and generating dialogue between very different songs. But there is a lot more to uncover in an example like this. The song’s relatively meager reception (fewer than four thousand plays on Soundcloud) points to DJ LUP as important representative of the thousands of amateur beat-makers active around the world who distribute their work digitally to small audiences. DJ LUP also provides free recordings of his live sets on various Internet sites, which allows us to

5. The recording can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/lupdj/wont-get-radioactive-lup-mashup>.

consider the manner in which a singles-oriented mashup artist also performs in a face-to-face environment.

In a significant vocal line within the piece, taken from the Who's 1971 single "Won't Get Fooled Again," singer Roger Daltry decries the empty revolutions of the late 1960s (a fascinating topic for discussion in its own right within courses on the history of rock). DJ LUP calls our attention to how this tension between youth revolt and co-option is constantly present but remarkably multivalent throughout the history of popular music. Far from the province of rock culture, tensions between new and old, or balance and instability, are central to discussions about popular music after World War II. Blake seizes on this issue from an academic perspective to argue that we usher in the "new" and resist the dominance of rock. I would caution against such a radical proposition, and urge those who teach popular music to look for commonalities and differences between musical styles and cultural reception of music, equally valuing students who enjoy listening to classic rock on vinyl as well as those who prefer to stream hip-hop. While negotiating the young perspective of our students, it is important to gauge their broad backgrounds and interests, discover what we have in common, and continually reflect on, and even ask why they take our classes on popular music topics. In the end, as we look to develop our narratives, it is crucial to remain grounded in a methodological dialogue that allows teachers and students to move flexibly into new areas of interest while maintaining the insight gained from previous explorations into uncharted territory.