Introduction: Towards a Critical Pedagogy for Undergraduate Popular Music History Courses in the Twenty-First Century

David K. Blake

How should teachers introduce today's undergraduates to popular music history?[1] The ability to replace the "why" of advocacy with the "how" of pedagogical practice speaks to the hard work done by musicologists to promote popular music as a valuable part of music history.[2] The rapid ascent of popular music courses in undergraduate music history curricula is a testament to the subject's interest among students and its ability to articulate issues central to music history and, more broadly, liberal arts education. However, the growth

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1. "Popular music" is a slippery term, no less so in a pedagogical context. Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman offer a useful definition of the term in the beginning of their textbook *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*: "It is difficult to come up with a satisfactory definition of 'popular music.' In many cases popular music is defined by its difference from other types of music, especially 'art music' or 'classical music,' on the one hand, and 'folk music,' on the other . . . . In this book we use the term 'popular music' broadly, to indicate music that is mass-reproduced and disseminated via the mass media; that has at various times been listened to by large numbers of Americans; and that typically draws upon a variety of preexisting musical traditions. It is our view that popular music must be seen in relation to a broader musical landscape, in which various styles, audiences, and institutions interact in complex ways. This musical map is not static—it is always in motion, always evolving." Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2. I would add only that popular music pedagogy tends to retain an Anglo-American orientation and typically excludes "light" versions of classical genres (e.g., Strauss waltzes or operettas).

2. Cf. the roundtable in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 9–10 (Summer 1997), which importantly advocated for greater coverage of popular music within undergraduate curricula.

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of these courses has coincided with vast technological, social, and economic changes which have transformed how popular music is composed, produced, circulated, and consumed. These developments necessitate a reevaluation of foundational approaches to undergraduate popular music history pedagogy, which are traditionally derived from the time in the late 1980s and 1990s when popular music first became featured in music department curricula.

Not coincidentally, these decades mark the point when the historical trajectories of popular music courses tend to fizzle out. If discussing hip-hop and contemporary rock through, say, Public Enemy and Nirvana has become standard, engaging with more recent artists and stylistic developments has often been treated collectively as an afterthought or epilogue to more pedagogically stable repertoire. Many reasons for this come to mind: the difficulty with keeping abreast of current developments; a belief among some teachers in the inherent inferiority of contemporary pop music; and the fact that, until the past two years, few popular music teaching materials discussed twenty-first-century music.[3] Yet inattention to recent popular music means that the discipline fails to grapple with two irrefutable truisms: popular music has been dramatically reshaped over the past two decades; and, for the first time, today's undergraduates have little to no memory of the twentieth-century popular music world from which our pedagogical practices have developed.[4] The modes of commodification and circulation prominent when popular music courses began in the 1990s—CDs, print zines, record stores, music video television—are increasingly marginal in our students' lives.[5]

This roundtable presents various pedagogical strategies for conceiving and structuring undergraduate popular music history courses for a twenty-first-century student populace. If motivated firstly by the need to better account

3. Recent textbooks that deeply engage with twenty-first-century developments include Theo Cateforis, *The Rock History Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012); John Covach and Andrew Flory, *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock and its History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); and Joseph Schloss, Larry Starr, and Christopher Waterman, *Rock: Music, Culture, and Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). More practically, prohibitive copyright restrictions and the rapid pace of technological growth as compared with the snail's pace of textbook publishing have contributed to the lack of contemporary music in popular music textbooks and readers.

4. Here I refer to traditional undergraduate students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, who for the 2014–15 school year were born between 1992 and 1996.

5. For example, Emily White, an intern at NPR, caused an uproar after publishing a blog entry that claimed that purchasing music was no longer part of her, or her generation's, popular music consumption. Emily White, "I Never Owned Any Music to Begin With," NPR.org, June 16, 2012, http://www.npr.org/blogs/allsongs/2012/06/16/154863819/i-never-owned-any-music-to-begin-with. This article spurred a brief online debate on the present and future of the music industry, summarized in Robin Hilton, "A Perpetual Debate: Owning Music in the Digital Age," NPR.org, June 19, 2012, http://www.npr.org/blogs/allsongs/2012/06/19/155313212/a-perpetual-debate-owning-music-in-the-digital-age.

for recent popular music within our courses, I propose that this repertory and its cultural context can provoke what Henry Giroux has called a "critical pedagogy." Giroux argues that a critical pedagogy must be "capable of contesting dominant forms of symbolic production."[6] Of course, popular music pedagogy has long been a site for critical approaches; its development contested the cultural hierarchies underpinning Western art music pedagogy by suggesting a more socially relevant and multicultural music curriculum. Yet just as rock, early hip-hop, and music videos served this purpose in the 1980s and 1990s, so now can greater attention to contemporary conditions of music-making challenge the "symbolic production" that has developed through the uncritical continuation of earlier pedagogical approaches. This roundtable does not ascribe an *a priori* liberatory politics to the teaching of recent popular music, though. Rather, the essays to follow are united in the belief that taking seriously the popular music practices of the past two decades within pedagogical practice can more relevantly and effectively communicate popular music *history* to our current undergraduate students. They both provide practical suggestions for fellow instructors and spur debate about the present and future directions of popular music history pedagogy.

The first three contributions focus on course design. My essay draws on my rock history classes to argue for greater attention to technological change in course structure. I contend that a materialist perspective on technology challenges certain mythologies of rock by framing the genre's conditions of music making as historically delimited. Loren Kajikawa uses his experience teaching a hip-hop survey to assess pedagogical approaches to the genre as it becomes increasingly legitimated as a part of music curricula. He insists that teachers must discuss hip-hop's musicianship and artistry on its own terms while also questioning representations of blackness within the genre in light of neoliberal assumptions of sociocultural "colorblindness." Justin Burton critiques the usual chronological structure of popular music surveys through envisioning a thematic, or "topological," organization. Using Rosi Braidotti's theories of the posthuman and the posthumanities, he illuminates how a topological structure can elicit productive connections across genres, time periods, and cultural contexts in a manner resonant with the shuffling, remixing, and reconfiguring of contemporary popular music practices.

The following two essays broaden out to consider the institutional contexts in which popular music survey courses are situated. Andrew Flory examines the relationship between "rock" and "popular music" in pedagogical practice from the dual perspective of course instructor and textbook author. He stresses the diverse range of course designs and student populations of rock courses,

6. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

as well as the multivalent interpretations of "rock" itself, in order to caution against homologizing either rock or rock music pedagogy. Finally, Joanna Love examines the relationship between popular music course designs, university resources, and undergraduate curricular frameworks and objectives. She draws on Douglass Seaton's principles for teaching survey courses to argue that popular music surveys must align class content with curricular goals and the acquisition of specific skill sets. Through her essay, she offers a fitting summation of two threads central to this roundtable: how specific curricular formations have influenced the frames and narratives of popular music pedagogy; and how closer attention to contemporary popular music practices within course design may indeed stimulate a broader reexamination of undergraduate music curricula.