History 213: Jews and American Popular Culture

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Spring 2017
Tuesday-Thursday, 1:00-2:15
Humanities 1641

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Description
This course explores the interplay between Jews and U.S. popular culture, covering such subjects as early 20th century vaudeville, the "golden age" of Hollywood, rhythm and blues music, television, and stand-up comedy. It uses lectures, films, music, and readings to explore the development of American popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries through the experiences of Jews, as performers, writers, and businesspeople. Using Jews as the primary, though not only, case, the course examines themes in the history of immigration, race, Americanization, youth culture, and business. By examining processes of cultural integration and differentiation of Jews in US society, the course attempts to address broad questions about the nature of American national identity.

Learning Outcomes
A major objective of this course is the development of critical analytical skills, that is, the ability to formulate and examine questions as they relate to the course topics. As students of American culture, we will not ask whether any given form of entertainment—film, music, theatre, comedy, etc.—is good or bad, funny or offensive, enjoyable or dull. These considerations are surely relevant questions in determining personal preferences, but they do not necessarily help us understand culture as a phenomenon. Instead, we will ask why forms of culture arose when they did, how people responded to them, and how they help us understand the development of American culture, and the role of Jews and other minority groups, especially African Americans, in that process.

Culture, by its nature, does not lend itself to objective measurement; for this reason, rigorous analysis is all the more necessary in order to understand it. Our goal is to learn how to use evidence and logical argumentation to understand culture. Our premise is that culture requires serious consideration, no less than science, business, politics, or any
other aspect of human civilization. Indeed, as we will see, culture is intertwined with these other realms of society. How to understand culture in relation to society is an objective of this course.

Finally, attainment of knowledge is a central goal of this course. This requires mastery of the information in the readings, lectures, and other course materials, in addition to the concepts that help us understand that information. The departure point for this course is a single premise: that for a host of historical reasons Jews played central roles (in both the creative and commercial realms) in the development of American culture, but did so in conjunction with members of other minority groups, African Americans most significantly. Thus, a main purpose of the course is to explore how multiple cultures infused what was known as American culture, even in ways that were not readily apparent.

**Readings**
The course packet will be available for purchase from the Social Science Copy Center (Sewell Hall, Room 6120, 1180 Observatory Drive)

**Course Requirements**
You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate actively in each and every discussion section will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed in time for your discussion section. The Teaching Assistant will give you a separate sheet explaining the requirements (which may include brief assignments) for sections. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please speak with the Teaching Assistant or me. Finally, computers or any other electronic devices are not permitted during lectures and discussions.

You will have three assignments due on the following dates:
Midterm exam: Feb. 23
First Assignment: March 16
Final assignment: May 9

Warning: we reserve the right to give pop quizzes.

Note: Prior to your discussion sections on March 15, you are required to watch the film “Gentleman’s Agreement” (1947) outside of class. See Week 9 below for more information.

The breakdown of grades is as follows:
Participation and attendance: 20%
Midterm: 25%
First assignment (5 pages): 25%
Final assignment (10 pages): 30%
Unit 1: From Stage to Screen

Week 1 (Jan. 17-19): Jews in American Culture: Connections and Questions

Week 2 (Jan. 24-26): The Yiddish Word

Week 3 (Jan 31-Feb. 2): The Yiddish Stage

Week 4 (Feb. 7-9): The Hollywood Question

Week 5: (Feb. 14-16) The Jazz Singer

Unit 2: Between Black and White: Jews and American Popular Music

Week 6 (Feb. 21-23): The Jazz Age
Midterm: Feb 23


Week 7 (Feb. 28-March 2): From Rhythm & Blues to Rock & Roll
Jonathan Karp, “Brokering a Rock & Roll International: Jewish Record Men in America

**Week 8 (March 7-9): The Rock Revolution**

**Unit 3: Into the Mainstream**

**Week 9 (March 14-16): Post-War Film**
Assignment due: March 16
Note: You are required to watch the film “Gentleman’s Agreement” (1947) outside of class. Check the State Historical Society for availability. Video rental stores, such as Four Star Video might have it. You may also view it for $2.99 via You Tube, iTunes, and Amazon Video. The film is 2 hours long, so make sure you leave sufficient time to watch it in advance of your discussion sections.

Matthew Silver, Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel’s Founding Story (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 109-149.

**Week 10 (March 21-23): Spring Break**

**Week 11 (March 28-30): Funny Girls**

**Week 12 (April 4-6): Stand-Up Comedy**

**Week 13 (April 11-13): The Schlemiel as Filmmaker**
Abrams, The New Jew in Film, pp. 19-42.
Mark Schechner, "Woody Allen: The Failure of the Therapeutic,” in From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen
(Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 231-244.

Unit 4: The Multi-Cultural Era
Week 14 (April 18-20): “Will It Play in Peoria?”

Week 15 (April 25-27): The Jewish Return to Television

Week 16 (May 2-4): Jews and Difference in the Twenty-First Century

Final assignment due: May 9.