

History 221: Jews and American Popular Culture

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Spring 2015
Tuesday-Thursday, 4:00-5:15
Humanities 1131
Prof. Tony Michels
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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 history. 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.

Readings

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

On the syllabus, readings are identified by the following symbols:

= articles and book chapters in course packet

* = primary documents in course packet

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.

Note: we will show several films on Wed. nights at 7:00. Attendance is mandatory. Check dates below.

You will have three assignments due on the following dates:

Feb. 24: Midterm exam

March 26: First Assignment

May 11: final assignment

We reserve the right to give pop quizzes.

The breakdown of final grades is as follows:

Participation and attendance: 20%

Midterm: 25%

First assignment (5 pages): 25%

Final assignment (10 pages): 30%

Week 1 (Jan. 20-22) Introductions

Week 2 (Jan. 27-29) Jews in American Culture: Connections and Questions

#Leora Auslander, "The Boundaries of Jewishness, or When Is a Cultural Practice Jewish?"
Journal of Modern Jewish Studies vol. 8, no. 1 (March 2009): pp. 47-64.

Week 3 (Feb. 3-5): The Yiddish Word: Poetry as Popular Culture

Feb. 4: film: "The Forward: From Immigrants to Americans" (1989)

Feb. 5: no class

#Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (Harcourt Brace, 1976), pp. 417-459, 518-551.

*Morris Rosenfeld, "The Millionaire of Tears," "The Sweatshop."

*Dovid Edelshtat, "The Jewish Proletarian," "Wake Up!" "To the Working Women."

Week 4 (Feb 10-12): From Stage to Screen: Yiddish Cinema

Feb. 11: Film: "Uncle Moses" (1932)

Feb. 12: no class

J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (Temple Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 3-11, 25-37, 151-167.

Week 5 (Feb. 17-19): The Jews of Hollywood

#Larry May, and Elain Tyler May, "Why Jewish Movie Moguls? An Exploration in American Culture," *American Jewish History* (Sept. 1982): 6-25.

#Judith Thissen, "Film and Vaudeville on New York's Lower East Side" in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, pp. 42-56.

*Henry Ford, "The Jewish Aspect of the 'Movie' Problem," *The Dearborn Independent*, (Feb. 12, 1921): 51-52.

Week 6 (Feb. 24-26): The Jazz Age

Midterm: Feb 24

#Maria Damon, "Jazz-Jews, Jive, and Gender: The Ethnic Politics of Jazz Argot," in Boyarin and Boyarin, *Jews and Other Differences* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 150-175.

*Mezz Mezzrow, *Really the Blues* (Random House, 1948) pp. 3-56.

Jazz Argot

Week 7 (March 3-5): The Jazz Singer

March 4: Film: "The Jazz Singer" (1927)

#Michael Rogin, "Black Sacrifice, Jewish Redemption," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century*, eds. V. P. Franklin, et. al. (Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998), pp. 87-101.

#Charles Musser, "Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture," *Film History* vol. 23, no. 2 (2011): 196-222.

*Samson Raphaelson, "How I Came to Write 'The Jazz Singer'" (1927).

Week 8 (March 10-12): Jews and Jazz

#Ann Douglass, "Siblings and Mongrels: The Tensions and Triumphs of Black-Jewish Musical Mixing," *CommonQuest* (Summer 1997): 6-15.

#Jonathan Karp, "Of Maestros and Minstrels: American Jewish Composers between Black Vernacular and European Art Music," in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, pp. 57-78.

#Charles Hersch, "'Every Time I Try to Play Black, It Comes out Sounding Jewish': Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity," *American Jewish History*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (July 2013): 259-282.

Week 9 (March 17-19): Rhythm & Blues

#Mark Lisher, "Rhythm-and-Jews," *CommonQuest* (Summer 1997): 20-33.

#Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomp and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era* (Viking, 2005), pp. ix-xvi, 1-91, 121-140.

Week 10 (March 24-26): From Rock & Roll to Rock

NOTE: First assignment Due March 26

#David Kaufman, *Jewhooing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 155-211.

#Ellen Willis, "Velvet Underground" in *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope, and Rock-and-Roll* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press edition, 2012 [1982]), pp. 110-124.

Week 11 (March 31-April 2): Spring Break

Week 12 (April 7-April 9): The Romance of Israel

April 8: film: "Exodus" (1960)

April 9: class cancelled

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

Week 13 (April 14-16): Nostalgia

April 15: Film: "Fiddler on the Roof" (1971).

April 16 class cancelled

#Seth L. Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish *Mayflower*," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1988): 514-536.

#Donald Weber, "Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle, and Mickey Katz," *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (Autumn 1998-Winter 1999): 124-153.

Week 14 (April 21-23): In Search of Jewish Humor

#Elliot Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct. 1983): 261-271.

#David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 99-154.

Week 15 (April 28-30): Woody Allen

#Peter Bailey, *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 101-111.

#Mark E. Bleiweiss, "Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen," in *Perspectives on Woody Allen: Critical Essays* (London: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 199-217.

*Woody Allen, "No Kaddish for Weinstein," *Without Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1975 [1972]), pp. 194-199.

Week 16 (May 5-May 7): The Jews of Prime Time

#Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got Berg-larized in the Process)," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer, 1999): 45-67.

#David Zurawick, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 201-217.

#Kevin Zanelotti, "Judaism, Where Are You?" in *Curb Your Enthusiasm and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Ralkowski (Chicago: Open Court, 2012), pp. 89-104.

Week 17 (May 11): final assignment due