

# ROMANTICISM TODAY: THE SINGER/SONGWRITER-PARADIGM

*This course of lectures will discuss the systematic contours of the specifically modern 'cultural idiom [...] of being in the world' (James Chandler) that was established in the period of Romanticism (c. 1770-1832) and has continued to be operative until today. One of the most influential sites of this cultural idiom has been the work of singer/songwriters in the context of rock and pop music from the 1960s onwards. The combination of lyrical expression with musical composition and performance established a paradigmatic core for rock music as the artistically and aesthetically ambitious variety of pop music, so much so, in fact, that the critical engagement with pop music has until recently been biased by what has been called 'rockism', i.e. the dismissal of pop music which does not fit this particular framework of evaluation and is thus deemed commercial and 'inauthentic'. The lectures will try to chart and disentangle this complex field by drawing on examples ranging from the classics (Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman, Van Morrison, Jackson Browne, John Hiatt ...) to more obscure (Bill Fay, anybody?) and recent examples (Björk, P.J. Harvey, Jake Bugg, Ed Sheeran, Sophie Hunger, Ben Drew/Plan B ...). They will also address songwriting in various 'decentered' group contexts, from John Fogerty's Creedence Clearwater Revival and Ray Davies' The Kinks to Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter in the Grateful Dead and on to Mark Oliver Everett's Eels and Jeff Tweedy's Wilco.*

## Lecture 1: What's (In) a Song? An Introduction

- 1) Why Teach Songs?
- 2) Course Overview
- 3) Some Systematic Coordinates

### Important Note:

There will be no written exam for this lecture course. For those who will not make the lecture course part of their oral exam in combination with a seminar (as is frequent practice in the English Department), the 'written exam' option can be fulfilled by handing in a 3-page essay (11pt, 1.5-spaced, including bibliography) on a song of your choice (an outline for these brief essays will be introduced in Lectures 1-3). The deadline for these essays is July 21<sup>st</sup>, i.e. the last session in the last week of term. Exchange students can also opt for an oral exam.

# 1) Why Teach Songs?

## a) the personal dimension

- Growing up with songs,  
key artists: Creedence Clearwater Revival (John Fogerty)  
Grateful Dead (Jerry Garcia/Robert Hunter;  
Bob Weir/John Perry Barlow)  
Jackson Browne
- Academic engagement (Reinfandt 2003)

## b) the historical dimension

- Era, end of?
- 1965: The Birth of Rock  
(Dylan at Newport, *Bringing It All Back Home*, “Like a Rolling Stone”)
- 2015: Fare Thee Well: Celebrating 50 Years of the Grateful Dead
- Canonisation (Sarlin 1992, DiMartino 1994, Hamilton/Williams 2016)
- Rock vs. Pop
- Romantic continuities/Modernity vs. ‘the Postmodern’

## c) the systematic/theoretical dimension

- Lyrics vs. poetry (cf. Eckstein 2010)
- Interpreting popular music (cf. Brackett 2000)
- Analysing and interpreting *recorded popular song* (Moore 2012)
- “Texture” (Reinfandt 2013) vs. “Musicking” (Small 1998)

texture [message]	structure ('prose core') [information]	meaning [understanding]
	reference (world)	[objective]
↪ 'work'	↺	↑
mediality ↪ writing/print	----->	[reflexive]
▲ ↪ form	↻	↓
▲	experience (voice)	[subjective]
▲	↪ orality in writing	
	↪ authorship	
	↪ staging the modern subject	

▲ text ▲  
↑ [interpretation]  
reader

The Texture of Modern Literary Texts  
(cf. Reinfandt 2009, 175; 2011, 75; 2013, 17)

>>> Individual songs <> paradigm as the focus of the lecture course

## 2) Course Overview

- 4<sup>th</sup> April**      **Lecture 1**      **What's (In) a Song? An Introduction**  
(Trey Anastasio, Loudon Wainwright, Sturgill Simpson,  
P.J. Harvey)
- 28<sup>th</sup> April**      **Lecture 2**      **Romantic Continuities**  
(Neil Hannon, Billy Bragg, Jackson Browne)
- [5<sup>th</sup> May**      **no class (Ascension Day)]**
- 12<sup>th</sup> May**      **Lecture 3**      **9/11 Songs**  
(Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen, Loudon Wainwright,  
John Hiatt, Richard Thompson, [The Eagles])
- [19<sup>th</sup> May**      **no class (Whitsun holidays)]**  
**[26<sup>th</sup> May**      **no class (Corpus Christi)]**
- 2<sup>nd</sup> June**      **Lecture 4**      **The Aesthetics of Rock**  
(Bob Dylan, Van Morrison)
- 9<sup>th</sup> June**      **Lecture 5**      **'Classic' Singer/Songwriters**  
(Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Leonhard Cohen,  
Paul Simon, ...)
- 16<sup>th</sup> June**      **Lecture 6**      **Satire/Irony/Politics**  
(Randy Newman, Warren Zevon, Loudon Wainwright,  
Billy Bragg, ...)
- 23<sup>rd</sup> June**      **Lecture 7**      **Female Voices**  
(Aimee Mann, Leslie Feist, Fiona Apple, P.J. Harvey, ...)
- 30<sup>th</sup> June**      **Lecture 8**      **Roots Rock/Folk Rock/Pop Rock/Prog Rock**  
(John Hiatt, Richard Thompson, Badly Drawn Boy,  
Gerry Rafferty, Steven Wilson, ...)
- 7<sup>th</sup> July**      **Lecture 9**      **Lost Ca(u)ses and Ventriloquism**  
(Sixto Rodriguez, Bill Fay,  
Woody Guthrie channelled through Wilco/Billy Bragg)
- [14<sup>th</sup> July**      **no class]**
- 21<sup>st</sup> July**      **Lecture 10**      **De-Centrings**  
(Ed Sheeran, Plan B, Sophie Hunger, Björk, ...)

### 3) Some Systematic Coordinates

#### Trey Anastasio, "The Song" (*Paper Wheels*, 2015)

Sometimes it's hard to keep track  
Of all the places we've been  
Next thing you know  
The night is creeping in

It all changes quickly,  
In the blink of an eye  
You hop that train  
Before it rolled on by

And the hands on the clock keep ticking  
Just rolling along  
In the end all that's left is the song  
Try to keep the fire burning  
But it didn't last too long  
In the end all that's left is the song

While we were sleeping  
A lot went down  
Now it's the same old place  
But it's a brand new town

I wake up in the morning  
But where you laid your head  
There's an empty space  
Instead

And the hands...

You hit me like a hurricane  
I did not detect  
Blindsided when I least expected  
Where it goes from here  
I guess that all depends  
If this is how the story ends

And the hands...

(> solo g)

And the hands of the clock keep ticking  
Just rolling along [repeat solo voc + backup voc]  
(Round and round and round and round and round and round...)

Ooooooh!

All that's left is the song

Ooooooh!

All that's left is the

Round and round and round and round and round and round and round.  
(Ooooooh!  
All that's left is the song)

**Genre?** Pop rock (retro?)

**Mood?** Happy

**Voice?** Individual

**Structure?**

Intro – verse 1 – verse 2 – chorus – verse 3 – verse 4 – chorus – bridge – chorus –  
instrumental interlude – chorus outro

**Subject Position?** My baby left me (verse 4), but... (tense structure!)

**Texture?** Crystal clear production, striking background vocals, joyous intermingling  
of vocal lines towards the end

**Musicking?** Recorded live in the studio, no overdubs

### **Loudon Wainwright, "A Song" (*Little Ship*, 1997)**

Here's a song for someone else to sing  
With a universal and generic ring  
It's all about the same old stuff  
That you like and can't get enough of  
How about a minor chord right here  
Wasn't that rather pleasant in your ear?

And here's a song with not a lot to say  
But when you see it it'll sound okay  
You bet there'll be a video  
We'll flesh it out for radio  
Now it's high time that I play that change again  
It's haunting you like an annoying friend

It's true that you like what you get  
You get what you're given  
God knows what the hell you'll like  
That's why he's up in heaven

Here's a song I didn't even write  
It came to me one rainy April night  
I had been drinking I was bored  
Next to me our fat gray cat snored  
I'm afraid it's time for you know what  
The cat's awake, I fear I woke him up  
So that's enough of that now I'll shut up

**Genre?** Folk (banjo!)

**Mood?** Reflective > satirical

**Voice?** Conversational, individual

**Structure?**

Intro – verse 1 – verse 2 – bridge (+ violin) – verse 3 (+ strings) [= AABA!]

**Subject Position?** Song writing / performing short-circuited

**Texture?** Natural, recorded as played

**Musicking?** Recorded live in the studio, string overdubs

**Sturgill Simpson, “Welcome to Earth (Pollywog)”**  
**(*A Sailor’s Guide to Earth*, 2016)**

Hello, my son  
Welcome to earth  
You may not be my last  
But you'll always be my first  
Wish I'd done this ten years ago  
But how could I know  
How could I know  
That the answer was so easy  
I've been told you measure a man  
By how much he loves  
When I hold you  
I treasure each moment I spend  
On this earth, under heaven above  
Grandfather always said God's a fisherman  
And now I know the reason why

And if some times daddy has to go away  
Oh please don't think it means I don't love you  
Oh, how I wish I could be there everyday  
Cause when I'm gone it makes me so sad and blue  
And holding you is the greatest love I've ever known  
When I get home it breaks my heart  
Seeing how much you've grown  
All on your own

Oh, to hear you cry  
Makes me cry  
It made me cry  
Hear me cry  
From a thousand miles away  
Hear me cry  
(greatest love I've ever known)

**Genre?** Pop balladry (Roy Orbison) > Soul/Motown

**Mood?** Reflective > celebratory

**Voice?** Individual <> generic

**Structure?**

Part 1: ambient intro (sea/ship/bell) / piano intro – verse (addressing the son directly)

Part 2: hard driving soul-inflected

**Subject Position?** Private going public

**Texture?** 1: Piano/strings/tympani/steel guitar (classical evocations, pathos)  
2: typical Motown/Stax textures (rhythm section, horns, call and response)

**Musicking?** Studio conconction, but energetically performed

**P.J. Harvey, “Dollar, Dollar” (*The Hope Six Demolition Project*, 2016)**

The boy stares through the glass

He's saying “Dollar, dollar”

Three lines of traffic pass

We're trapped inside our car

His voice says “Dollar, dollar”

I turn to you and ask (dollar!)

For something we can offer (dollar!)

Three lines of traffic pass

We pull away so fast

All my words get swallowed

In the mirror glass

A face pock-marked and hollow

Saying “Dollar, dollar”

I can't look through or past

A face saying “Dollar, dollar”

A face pock-marked and hollow

Staring from the glass

**Genre?** Alternative rock

**Mood?** Documentary

**Structure?**

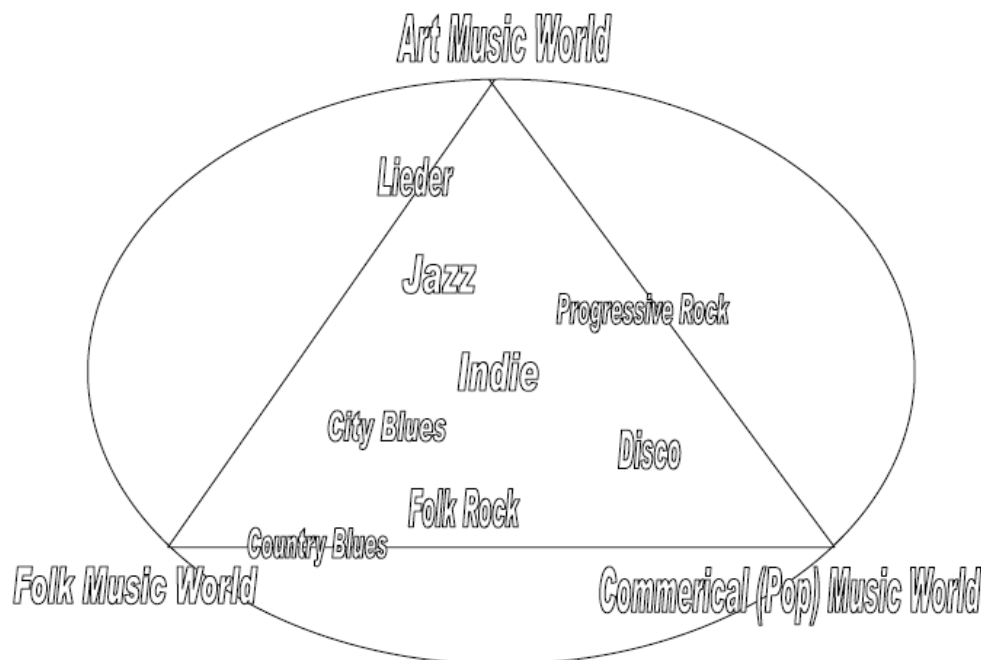
ambient intro (Kabul field recordings) – percussion seguing into verse 1 – verse 2 –  
verse 3 – saxophone outro

**Subject Position?** Situated in car in Kabul

**Texture?** Field recording – ambient (drone, sax, chorus) – saxophone deconstruction

**Musicking?** Sound sculpture created in studio, but evoking world music/jazz

Based on Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (1998, 35-42)



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