



MUS 210: SONGWRITING
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
FALL 2014

MW, 6:00pm–7:50pm
Music Practice Building 219 (Mondays)
Music Building 145 (Wednesdays)

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COURSE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the course is to develop and refine the ability of class members to express themselves through songwriting. Songs are one of the most powerful means for personal expression, incorporating aspects of culture, individuality, poetry, and music.

The four strands of the course are as follows:

1. understanding artistic characteristics of existing songs through the critical analysis of lyrics, harmony, melody, rhythm, form, and arrangement,
2. developing compositional ability through the writing and performing of at least six songs throughout the semester,
3. critiquing the songs of other class members in a constructive manner, demonstrating an understanding of various viewpoints and compositional styles,
4. reflecting on one's own personal journey as a songwriter through maintaining a composer's journal.

The approach to teaching and learning in this course is quite *constructivist*. There is no body of information to be transmitted, memorized, or recalled on a test. Rather, each individual student will *construct* knowledge about songwriting in his/her individual way via exposure to new songs and ideas, analysis of the process of songwriting, giving and receiving feedback, engaging in the trial and error of composing and revising, etc. The knowledge to be constructed emanates not from a single source (like a textbook or readings) or a single person (like the instructor), but from the shared and varied backgrounds and experiences of class members. Understanding and embracing this approach—especially if it stands in sharp contrast to many of your previous learning experiences—may be helpful in supporting an optimal experience in this class.

OVERVIEW OF COURSE ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

EACH CLASS	Listen to a song, presented either by the instructor or a classmate (see below), and engage in class discussion about what makes that song “tick” Listen to performances by fellow class members and offer constructive feedback
EACH WEEK	Perform either a completed song, a revised song, or a work in progress for the class Write approximately 200 words in your songwriting journal
TWICE/ SEMESTER	Submit your journal for review (first check Wednesday, October 1; second check unannounced) Perform a song in a public venue other than our class (an open mic event or similar)
ONCE/ SEMESTER	Present in class a song that you admire and engage class members in a discussion of what makes that song “tick” (assigned dates to be determined) Write a four-page analysis of a song you admire (due Wednesday, November 19) Complete (and perform in class) at least 6 songs Record and post to SoundCloud an “EP” of your songs (15–20 minutes/4–5 songs)

COURSE “MATERIALS”

There are no traditional required “materials” (like textbooks) for this class; however, the following items are critical for your success in this course:

- *The ability to accompany yourself in some way.* Many options are possible—guitar, piano, ukulele, autoharp, GarageBand track, or something else—but some form of accompaniment is expected.
- *The ability to record yourself in some way.* For our purposes, the on-board microphone that many laptops have is sufficient, as is pre-installed recording software (such as GarageBand)—or something more sophisticated, if you prefer. If you need help accessing or using recording equipment/software, please be in touch.
- *An account on Edmodo.* I will use Edmodo, an education-oriented social media platform, to share announcements, important documents, and so forth. Please go to edmodo.com, create an account (if you do not have one already), and **join our group using the code [msb2hu](#)**.
- *An account on SoundCloud.* By semester’s end, you must record and upload to SoundCloud an “EP” of your original music (15–20 minutes/4–5 songs). We will also have a group on SoundCloud via which you can share your music with classmates.

ASSIGNMENTS EXPLAINED (AND GRADING PERCENTAGES)

Composition, performance, and recording of songs (30% in-class performances; 15% final “EP” project)

Each class member will perform about once per week (more details on performance rotation to come). You may perform a completed song, a portion of a work in progress, or a previous song that you have revised/improved in some way. Following your performance, class members will offer constructive feedback about your performance. *By the end of the semester, you must compose at least six complete songs and perform them in class.* These “complete” songs will be graded on a four-point scale; works in progress will receive narrative feedback only. You are also required to post an “EP” of recorded songs to SoundCloud by semester’s end. This should contain about 15–20 minutes of music, or 4–5 songs.

Public performances outside of class (15%)

You are expected to give at least two public performances of your work outside of class. There are several open mic events to be found in East Lansing and the surrounding area, so it should not be difficult to find a venue. To document a performance, send me an email within 48 hours of its occurrence with details about where/when it took place, what song(s) you performed, and a few thoughts about what went well and what you might like to improve.

Mini-presentation of a song you admire (10%)

Each class member, at some point in the semester, will give a brief “mini-presentation” (5–8 minutes) on a song he/she admires and lead the class in a discussion of what makes that song “tick.” During the course of your presentation, you will play a recording of the song, offer some analytical thoughts about what makes the song “tick,” and invite class members to join in discussion with you. The idea is to discover what is unique and effective about the given song in a relaxed, collaborative fashion. You will sign up for your day to present within the first few class meetings.

Written analysis of a song you admire (10%)

The idea behind this assignment is similar in spirit to the mini-presentation described above, but requires you to engage in slightly deeper analysis and to explain your thoughts in cogent prose. Your analysis should be approximately four pages in length, though more is always acceptable. You should not use the same song you used in your mini-presentation. I will grade you on the sophistication of your analysis, the organization of your thoughts, and the quality of your writing. Naturally, I will take your musical background/experience into account: music majors, for example, are likely to use different terminology than those who have less formal instruction (with obvious exceptions). Your analysis will be due on **Wednesday, November, 19** (by 11:59pm).

Songwriting journal (20%)

Each class member will keep a songwriting journal in which he/she will be expected to write about 200 words each week. The idea here is to introduce an intentional practice of reflection to your songwriting process. The contents need not be particularly formal—your journal might contain prose reflection, annotated lyrics, extended bullet points, poetry, etc. It does not matter whether your journal is in hard copy or electronic form. There will be two “journal checks” in the course of the semester: the first will take place on **Wednesday, October 1**; the second will take place on an unannounced date later in the semester. Grades will be given on the basis of completion *only*.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Class members are expected to attend all classes and to be prepared with that day's performance assignments. All students are also expected to participate fully in all class discussions/activities. Students have two "free passes" to miss class during the semester. This includes all but the most serious illnesses or personal emergencies. For every absence beyond these two "free" absences, the final grade will be lowered by 0.3.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS/ASSIGNMENTS/ETC.

WEEK 1	W 8/27	<u>Prepare/perform</u> : Introductory performance (original song or cover) <u>Discuss</u> : Syllabus/overview, logistical details (Edmodo, SoundCloud, etc.)
WEEK 2	M 9/1	No class! (Happy Labor Day!)
	W 9/3	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Stuart <u>Prepare/perform</u> : A new verse to an existing song that you admire. <u>Discuss</u> : Singing for songwriters <u>Complete</u> : By today, you should have Edmodo and SoundCloud accounts set up.
WEEK 3	M 9/8	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Stuart <u>Prepare/perform</u> : An original song using pre-existing text <u>Discuss</u> : Singing, part 2 (if needed); assign performing rotation, mini-presentations
	W 9/10	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Stuart <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group B
WEEK 4	M 9/15	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Stuart <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group A <u>Discuss</u> : Chord progressions; 12-bar blues
	W 9/17	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Stuart <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group B
WEEK 5	M 9/22	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Amber ¹ <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group A <u>Discuss</u> : Understanding and manipulating form
	W 9/24	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Megan <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group B
WEEK 6	M 9/29	<u>Mini-presentation</u> : Jake <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group A <u>Discuss</u> : Songs that describe people and places
	W 10/1	<u>Submit</u> : Songwriting journal (due by 11:59pm) <u>Mini-presentation</u> : Adam <u>Prepare/perform</u> : Group B

¹ For this version of the syllabus that is freely available on the Internet, all student names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

WEEK 7	M 10/6	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Rick <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u>
	W 10/8	No class! (Stuart away at a conference)
WEEK 8	M 10/13	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Beth <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Word play, rhyme, imagery
	W 10/15	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Madison <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B
WEEK 9	M 10/20	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Charlotte <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Beat production (guest presenter: Dr. Adam Kruse, University of Illinois)
	W 10/22	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Derrick <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B
WEEK 10	M 10/27	No class! (Stuart away at a conference)
	W 10/29	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Wei <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B (different day!)
WEEK 11	M 11/3	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Jasmine <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Songwriting and production value
	W 11/5	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Alex <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B
WEEK 12	M 11/10	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Sonia <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Recording technology
	W 11/12	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Dylan <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B
WEEK 13	M 11/17	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Jalen <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Songs that tell a story
	W 11/19	<u>Submit:</u> Song analysis paper (due by 11:59pm) <u>Mini-presentation:</u> Stuart/open <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group B

WEEK 14	M 11/24	<u>Mini-presentation:</u> Stuart/open <u>Prepare/perform:</u> Group A <u>Discuss:</u> Promotion and logistics for final concert on 12/3
	W 11/26	No class! (Happy Thanksgiving!)
WEEK 15	M 12/1	<u>Prepare/perform:</u> Open
	W 12/3	[tentative] Final class concert, MSU Union, 7pm–9pm (please make arrangements now)
WEEK 16	M 12/8	Class exam time, 8–10pm: Stuart will be available to hold a final class for any students needing an extra performance to complete their 6 performances for the semester.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Article 2.3.3 of the Academic Freedom Report states: “The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards.” In addition, the College of Music adheres to the policies on academic honesty specified in General Student Regulation 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades; the all-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations.

Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments, including homework, lab work, quizzes, tests and exams, without assistance from any source. You are expected to develop original work for this course; therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course. Plagiarism in written work is not allowed and will be dealt with severely. Students who violate MSU rules may receive a penalty grade, including but not limited to a failing grade on the assignment or in the course.