

21M.296: Hip-Hop
(Studies in Jazz and Popular Music)
TR 11am-12.30pm, 4-162
Fall 2024

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(office hours by appointment)

Course Description

This course surveys 50 years of hip-hop, from humble beginnings as Bronx party practice to 21st century global pop lingua franca. While emphasizing the music's social and cultural context, we will focus on the aesthetics and craft of hip-hop, examining core conventions and regional accents in the arts of DJing and beat-making, rapping and dancing, DIY media production and spectacular acts of self-fashioning.

Probing hip-hop's vast archive – from recordings and visual media to scholarship, oral history, and contemporary journalism – we will take a generally chronological approach, from roots to branches, working to understand the interplay between tradition and innovation, durable forms and new developments. Students will come away with a firm orientation on hip-hop's particular history and aesthetics, as well as how hip-hop relates to the broader formations of American popular culture, African-American history, and global media circulation.

Course Requirements

The core of this course consists of lectures, in-class listening and discussion, and outside reading and listening assignments. All assigned readings and associated media will be available [via Canvas](#). Regular attendance is required, and students will be expected to actively participate in discussions and in-class activities. If you need to miss class due to illness or for personal reasons, please email the instructor to explain your absence. (After two unexcused absences, each additional unexcused absence will result in the loss of half a grade from one's final grade.)

Assignments take the form of short, weekly responses to readings, due before class, a few experiments in composing raps and beats, and an in-class presentation helping to flesh out one of our weekly topics in the second half of the semester. There will be no exams; my hope is that your love of learning, interest in the subject matter and desire to be part of our classroom community will be enough motivation to do the work and participate.

Classroom etiquette

Your full attention should be on the class during the entire class period; this means no checking emails, texts, surfing the web, etc. during class.

Academic Integrity

Please remember that plagiarism in writing papers or presentations is a serious academic offense, and includes any use of unacknowledged outside sources, either scholarly or by fellow students. This includes any unattributed use of AI tools such as ChatGPT. For further information regarding MIT's Academic Integrity policies, visit: <http://web.mit.edu/academicintegrity/index.html>

Student Support Services

Personal and medical issues can make it hard to focus on academics. If you find that something is getting in the way of your ability to attend class, complete work, or take an exam, you should contact a dean in Student Support Services (S3). The deans will provide you with support and help you work with us to determine next steps. We ask that you go to S3 so we know you have had a chance to talk through your situation with someone and to connect with any resources you might need. You can reach out to a dean you have worked with in the past, join their virtual help queue (<https://sicp-s3.mit.edu/queue>), or [e-mail s3-support@mit.edu](mailto:s3-support@mit.edu).

Grading Distribution

Weekly Reading/Listening Posts

50%

Our readings are full of references to particular artists, particular songs and live performances, music videos, and other audio-visual media. Each week, either before our Tuesday or Thursday meeting, please select an artist and a song *from the reading for that day* to bring into greater focus and to place into the context of that week's topic. For full credit, posts should include a quotation from the reading that cites the artist/song/performance in question (including author and page #), an embedded/linked piece of media for the song in question (e.g., YouTube, Spotify), and 2-3 sentences of *your own reaction* to the music (and visuals if applicable) -- and what it tells us about the topic in question. Please compose your own responses in your own voice; do not use ChatGPT or other AI.

Beats & Bars

30%

On three occasions during the semester – old school, golden age, and contemporary – students will compose brief rap verses (4 bars) and beat sketches (1 minute) inspired by the conventions of the day. These will be posted to Canvas in advance of our class sessions where will devote a little time to “passing the mic” around the “cypher.”

In-Class Presentation

20%

Beginning in Week 8, we will spend the rest of the semester reviewing different regional histories and hip-hop accents. Most of the literature on these scenes falls short of more recent trends and developments. Students will select a particular week and present a ~5 minute overview of a key artist, record label, beat-style or flow, etc., from that city/region. The aim is to bring our study up to the present day and for you, with some research, to figure out how to connect contemporary artists with the local histories and scenes from which they emerge. Can you hear connections? Are today's artists faithful torchbearers or agents of change? What's that say about the city's scene?

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions

9/5 Intro discussion & syllabus review

Week 2: A Bird's Eye View: 50 Years in Perspective

9/10 Wesley Morris (2023) on hip-hop at 50 &

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/magazine/hip-hop-50-anniversary.html>

9/12 Greg Tate on hip-hop at 30 (2004) and 15 (1988)

<https://www.villagevoice.com/hiphop-turns-30/>

<https://www.villagevoice.com/hiphop-nation-its-like-this-yall/>

Week 3: Roots: Rap, Reggae, Disco

- 9/17 Archives of African American Music and Culture, "Golden Age of Black Radio: Deejays" <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/golden-age-of-black-radio-part-2-deejays-archives-of-african-american-music-and-culture/KQWBWDGh2AvJJw?hl=en>
Heather Augustyn, "Spinning Wheels: The Circular Evolution of Jive, Toasting, and Rap," *Caribbean Quarterly* (2015)
- 9/19 Tim Lawrence, "'Disco Madness: Walter Gibbons and the Legacy of Turntablism and Remixology,'" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (2008)
<https://www.timlawrence.info/articles2/2013/7/16/disco-madness-walter-gibbons-and-the-legacy-of-turntablism-and-remixology-journal-of-popular-music-studies-20-3-2008-276-329>
Mark Skillz, "DJ Hollywood: The Original King of New York"
<https://medium.com/cuepoint/dj-hollywood-the-original-king-of-new-york-41b131b966ee>

Week 4: Old School, Part 1: Party Practice

- 9/24 Marc McCord, "DJ Kool Herc Vs. Pete DJ Jones," *Wax Poetics* (2020)
<https://magazine.waxpoetics.com/connections/ultimate-breaks-and-beats/article/kool-dj-herc-vs-pete-dj-jones/>
Mark Katz, "Mix and Scratch—The Turntable Becomes a Musical Instrument: 1975-1978." In *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-hop DJ*, 43-69. (Oxford, 2012).
- 9/26 Joseph Schloss, "From Rocking to B-Boying: History and Mystery." In *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-hop Culture in New York*, 125-54. (Oxford, 2009); Olympics readings.

Week 5: Old School, Part 2: Early Rap Records // Leaders of the New: Def Jam Records

- 10/1 Jeff Chang, "The World Is Ours: The Survival and Transformation of Bronx Style." In *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 127-39
Various, "Rapper's Delight: Hip-Hop Goes Commercial." In *Yes Yes Y'all: Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*, 177-97.
Stretch Armstrong, "How the Latin Rascals Mastered the Megamix"
- 10/3 Jeff Chang, "What We Got to Say: Black Suburbia, Segregation, and Utopia in the Late 1980s." In *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 231-61.
Beats and Bars, Take 1: Old School

Week 6: Golden Age, Part 1: BEATS: Sampling and the Return of the Breaks

- 10/8 Joseph Schloss, "Elements of Style"; Mark Katz, "Music in 1s and 0s"
- 10/10 Dan Charnas, "Sample Time" (78-91) and "Dilla Time" (140-53), In *Dilla Time: The Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm*; and "Hip-Hop Is the Music of Vinyl Librarians," 15 September 2023, *New York Times*.

Week 7: Golden Age, Part 2: RHYMES: New Participants, New Perspectives, New Flows

- ~~10/15~~ holiday
- 10/17 Adam Bradley, "Introduction" to *The Anthology of Rap*; Kyle Adams, "On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music," *Music Theory Online*, 2009.
<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.adams.html>

Week 8: Regionalization 1: West Coast (Gangsta to Hyphy)

- 10/22 Jeff Weiss, "How LA proved hip-hop could go global—by staying thoroughly local"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/10/1192466118/hip-hop-50-los-angeles>

Jeff Chang, "The Culture Assassins: Geography, Generation and Gangsta Rap." In *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 299-329.

Beats and Bars, Take 2: Golden Age

10/24 Andrew Nosnitsky, "How the Bay Area became a rap incubator with a chip on its shoulder"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/09/1192465852/hip-hop-50-bay-area>

Week 9: Regionalization 2: Miami (Bass) & New Orleans (Bounce)

10/29 Sheldon Pearce, "How Miami rap made overindulgence the new baseline"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/05/1191679451/hip-hop-50-miami>

10/31 Steven Kears, "How New Orleans soldiered through struggle and gave rap its bounce"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/04/1191678922/hip-hop-50-new-orleans>

Week 10: Regionalization 3: Atlanta (Organized Noise to Trap)

11/5 Jewel Wicker, "How Atlanta became the center of the rap universe"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/07/19/1188417703/hip-hop-50-atlanta>

Kiese Laymon, "Da Art of Storytelling' (A Prequel)"

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160329044634/https://oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/702-da-art-of-storytelling>

11/7 Jesse McCarthy, "Notes on Trap"

<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-32/essays/notes-on-trap/>

Week 11: Regionalization 4: Houston (Screw), Virginia, & Chicago (Drill)

11/12 Kiana Fitzgerald, "How Houston became the self-sustaining heart of Texas rap"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/01/1191059697/hip-hop-50-houston>

Sheldon Pearce, "How the DMV and Virginia Beach made rap safe (and profitable) for eccentrics"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/07/17/1187520698/hip-hop-50-dmv-virginia-beach>

11/14 Meaghan Garvey, "How Chicago rap became a home for controversial, visionary stars"

<https://www.npr.org/2023/07/24/1189040805/hip-hop-50-chicago>

Week 12: Regionalization 5: London (Road Rap, Grime, UK-NY Drill)

11/19 Jesse Bernard, "The 40 Year History of UK Hip-Hop and Rap"

<https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/uk-hip-hop-artists-rap-90s-music.html>

11/21 Wayne Marshall, "What Is the Sound of Drill?" *New York*, August 2022.

Jody Rosen, "The Despair of Generation 'Notty Bop'" *The New Yorker*, 7 December 2022.

Beats and Bars, Take 3: Contemporary

Week 13: Regionalization 6: How Boston Rap Remained Underground

11/26 Pacey Foster, "Hip-Hop in the Hub: How Boston Rap Remained Underground." In *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, edited by Mickey Hess, 195-224. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009.

~~11/28~~ holiday

Week 14: Regionalization 7: Puerto Rico in the Hip-Hop Zone: Rap to Reggaeton

12/3 Raquel Z. Rivera, "Hip-Hop, Puerto Ricans, and Ethnoracial Identities in New York." In *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City*, 235-61.

12/5 Wayne Marshall, "Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino." In *Reggaeton*, 19-76.

Week 15: Conclusions

12/10 Wayne Marshall, "Hip-hop's Irrepressible Refashionability" (2015)