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"To Be a Rock and Not to Roll: Promoting Political Literacy through Music and Mixtapes"

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CHAPTER SEVEN

To be a rock and not to roll: Promoting political literacy through music and mixtapes

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*It has to start somewhere, it has to start some time/
What better place than here? What better time than now?*

"GUERRILLA RADIO" BY RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE (1999)

Popular music meets popular politics

During the 2008 presidential campaign, both the Democrat and Republican challengers used popular music to a large degree in their campaigns. The idea of theme music is not a new one to American politics; Schacter noted that presidential candidates as early as George Washington used music to generate popular support.² Yet, in the last few election cycles, there has been a more pervasive use of music to accompany public appearances of candidates and a larger role played by the artists themselves, so much so that the parties and candidates have claimed a sort of "issue ownership" with certain songs. Heart's "Barracuda" became Governor Sarah Palin's theme song and was played when she was introduced at the RNC's convention and also after Senator John McCain's acceptance of the GOP nomination.³ In a similar fashion, two very different songs accompanied then-Senator Barack Obama's introduction and exit at the DNC convention—U2's "City of Blinding Lights" and Brooks and Dunn's "Only in America," respectively.⁴

All of these might simply be attempts at creative campaigning by using popular music, but the truth of the matter is that music is as important as ever in how people, especially young people, identify themselves, that is, it is not just a political thing. Although the method of obtaining popular music might have drastically changed—LPs to tapes to CDs to iTunes—music still forms an integral part of how people identify themselves and their interests.

Research has shown the hugely important role music plays in the lives of youth the world over. In a 2007 New American Media survey of 16- to 22-year-olds in California, 27 percent of those surveyed said that music and/or fashion defined their identity more than religion, or race.⁵ In a similar study conducted in the United Kingdom, the authors found that those surveyed listened to music an average of 2.45 hours daily and preferred listening to music over all other indoor activities.⁶ What was even more interesting was why the respondents listened to pop music in the first place. The most popular reasons were “to enjoy the music;” “to be creative/use his/her imagination;” “to relieve boredom;” “to help get through difficult times;” “to relieve tension/stress;” “to express his/her feelings/emotions;” and “to reduce loneliness.”⁷

If politicians and candidates are using music to reach new audiences and if young people are identifying with music more and more, then is it not plausible to suggest that music can be used to teach politics or at the very least, used as a medium to *write* about it? The question is how. Academics have been working on creative ideas to use music as a vehicle of instruction and as a way to stimulate debate. Yet, they continue to have the same challenges in teaching students to appreciate politics. Notes Deets, “I have found it challenging to teach students to truly see different sides of contentious issues, appreciate how political science insights can illuminate many aspects of the world around us and really delve into issues of political culture and the power of identity.”⁸ He notes two particular challenges. Students either bring too much of their own biases and passions to class or conversely, are simply overwhelmed by the unknown, unwilling to understand how politics happens. Echoing a similar sentiment, Soper had this to say:

There are several challenges to teaching an introductory American politics course . . . Chief among these obstacles are a growing indifference to or cynicism about politics among our students, a pervasive feeling that politics does not relate to their lives, a lack of passion for the study and practice of politics.⁹

But, what if an assignment could be crafted that did both? Allow students to bring their individual passions to class, but also make them confront the unknown by having them question the very selection of these passions? What about a writing assignment on music *and* politics? The “mixtape”

essay is a unique and stimulating take-home essay that I incorporate in three different classes I teach at Georgia Perimeter College—POLS 1101, “American Government;” HEDS 1011, “Guide to College Success;” and GPCS 1010, “First Year Seminar.” Students are challenged to pick five songs from any genre of music—or language for that matter—and write their version of liner notes, but emphasizing the political significance or symbolism of the music they have chosen. Choosing the songs is moderately difficult, but writing about the political significance of each selection is far harder. This assignment is one for critical thinking, listening, reading, and writing.

A unique assignment melding music and politics could be especially consequential for international students who face particular challenges related to critical thinking and writing in the American classroom. A key point brought up by Centellas is how too often, international students are at a gross disadvantage during in-class discussions and with writing assignments.¹⁰ The disadvantage is evident when students are expected to have some basic understanding of American politics before even stepping into the classroom.

This chapter outlines my experiences using the political mixtape assignment over the last 4 years at Georgia Perimeter College, a multicampus, 2-year access institution in the State of Georgia (24,000 students at last estimate). Over 600 students have completed the assignment and chosen music by almost 800 different artists representing a myriad of languages and 34 countries. This chapter explores similar pedagogical techniques used in political science and other disciplines, trends in popular music, and the powerful way students are able to break out of their shell and write about politics in a cogent and articulate manner. I feel strongly that this “experiment” in music-focused literacy can be adapted for a myriad of academic disciplines, as well as student populations.

What are mixtapes?

A standby from the 1970s, “mixtapes” were cassettes with multiple songs from different artists recorded on them. There is some dispute about the origins of mixtapes—and even the name, with some suggesting “mix tapes” and “mix-tapes”—with many hip hop purists arguing that the tapes grew out of the New York disco culture where early rap pioneers like Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa put together “party tapes” that included hard-to-find music, sampling, shout outs and allowed the consumer to recreate the party and club atmosphere, albeit at home.¹¹

Mixtapes have gradually evolved with the advent of file sharing and disc burning software, into CDs, ushering in, what Gallagher, has called “the golden age of the mix CD.”¹² As Sante eloquently put it in *The New York*

Review of Books, "The maker dubs onto cassette or burns onto CD a group of songs by other hands, the selection and sequence intended to compose a billet-doux . . . It is a natural outcome of home-recording technology, and represents a back-porch, scaled-down amateur version of the highly competitive art of the DJ."¹³ According to Schantz¹⁴ and Ciccariello-Maher,¹⁵ mixtapes have a particular significance for fans of hip hop and rap as anyone with the simplest software and CD duplication hardware can produce cheap CDs with demos, unreleased material, radio edits, or just music for the masses.

An alternative theory is that mixtapes grew out of the "bootleg 8-track" era and "were largely found for sale at truck stops and flea markets in the 1960s."¹⁶ This gave way to the exhaustive, do it yourself (DIY) ethic of the 1970s and 1980s where billions of songs were copied from LPs, radio, live records, and other tapes onto new compilation cassettes, which came to be known as mixtapes.¹⁷ For Jansen, "Mix taping became a widespread practice between the late 1970s and early 1990s, after which its popularity declined, gradually giving way to digital forms of rerecording."¹⁸

Mixed media in the classroom: The research so far

In the following section, I outline some of the scholarship on using multimedia in the classroom to teach concepts and issues relating to the social sciences. Although it is not an exhaustive list, it is encouraging to read about faculty experimentation with using media and popular culture ranging from *The Daily Show* to graphic novels to make the subject matter more palatable for students. Deets has referred to the power of novels and films that force students to ponder questions about "complex power relationships, tensions over communal identity, issues of responsibility and institutional behavior."¹⁹ Yet, he also laments the incredible "disservice" that educators do to students by not bringing popular culture more in to the teaching space. As Soper has similarly noted, educators must "make an effort to understand the world from the standpoint of our students, attempt to increase the cultural relevance of our courses and explore the benefits of using music to make students feel more engaged in the study of politics."²⁰

To be fair, there have been several attempts by political scientists in the last decade to harness popular culture as a pedagogical tool. Film has achieved particular success as a medium for teaching political topics. Brozek notes that film-related politics courses have been offered at the University of Texas, the University of Connecticut, New York University, Duquesne University, and the University of Pittsburgh.²¹ Certain films have also achieved widespread use as teaching tools—particularly Stanley Kubrick's

1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove (Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb)*.²² Lindley suggest that this "black comedy" can be used to discuss key concepts in US foreign policy and international relations including "deterrence, mutually assured destruction, preemption, the security dilemma, arms races, relative versus absolute gains concerns, Cold War miscalculations and paranoia and civil-military relations (in this order)."²³ *Dr. Strangelove* was also used in a political science class by Garcia Iommi who discussed its portrayal of deterrence, in conjunction with her use of the films *Paradise Now* to discuss Alexander Wendt's social constructivist international relations theory and *Syriana* on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.²⁴ "Our students learn in an increasingly visual culture," writes Garcia Iommi, "of which, they are sophisticated consumers, which makes film a comfortable medium for them to reflect on the artifice of these ideas."²⁵

Political scientists have also looked at other media for enhancing learning on politics including competition-based reality shows like *Survivor*²⁶ and *American Idol*;²⁷ the *Harry Potter* films and books;²⁸ and *The West Wing*.²⁹ The use of reality television can achieve different goals based on the educators' expectations. Centellas used *American Idol* as a basis for allowing students to think critically about Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx.³⁰ Since "students rarely deconstruct their own social context," when asked to do so through the material of a popular social experience like *American Idol*, students were able to unscramble political scenarios more easily, which made it easier for the educator to engage them on political theory.³¹

Arguing that the current crop of American college students are far more likely to watch and be engaged in shows like *Rock of Love Bus* and *I Love Money* than hard news, Dreyer has suggested an alternative technique for teaching political concepts.³² Why not channel this new form of reality television programming into the classroom? According to the author:

I am not suggesting that the reading of academic texts should be replaced with television viewing. Nor do I believe that students can learn everything they need to know about politics through watching reality shows. Nonetheless, popular culture can at times be references in discussions of course material, providing students with alternative ways to think about certain concepts, thereby facilitating learning.³³

He suggests that reality shows like *Survivor: Cook Islands*, *Survivor: The Australian Outback* and *Wife Swap* can be used to teach a variety of political science concepts including strategic behavior, balancing power, bandwagoning, alliance behaviour, and the prisoner's dilemma.

Three additional essays also look at the use of comic television as a teaching tool by building on the research about the significant effect of

comedy-news shows on political efficacy.³⁴ In a similar project, though aimed at a decidedly younger population, Allen and Brewer³⁵ examined portrayals of Governor Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* and its effects on high school students' opinions of the candidate and about government. More recently, Beavers incorporated *The Daily Show* in her classes using a two-step process: comedy clips were screened in class to contextualize current events and then, students were given related assignments using the comic material to engage critical thinking and writing.³⁶ She asks, "Could comedians such as Jon Stewart, Tina Fey and Stephen Colbert succeed where generations of political science professors and high school civics teachers have often struggled? Could such figures make it [politics] 'cool' (or perhaps even 'sweet' as my own young nephew might say)?"³⁷

Another unexplored medium for teaching politics is through comics and graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, and the titles published by India's Amar Chitra Katha publishing house. Brozek has suggested that understanding and appreciating comics is an acquirable skill like critical thinking and listening and one that can make students more perceptive consumers of graphic novels, particularly when they have applicable political content.³⁸ He writes, "Artists and authors start with a blank, white sheet of paper, which means there are an infinite number of ways to fill the page. Unlike a film or written work, there are virtually no limitations on the artist's imagination."³⁹ A recent work by Sriram has looked at the titles on religious figures and national heroes in India published by Amar Chitra Katha and how these comics frame Hindu-Muslim tensions through retellings of history, politics, and culture.⁴⁰ For a much more detailed discussion of the usage of graphic novels and comics in the classroom, please see Chapter 5 by Kent Worcester in this book.

When it comes to using music to teach concepts in social sciences classes, the research pickings are even slimmer. I was only able to locate three political science papers in the area. In one experiment, Soper conducted an extra-credit project with students choosing songs and videos that complement the class material for the day.⁴¹ Students were given extra credit to suggest a song to begin every lecture with and asked to mail the educator the song title, the complete lyrics, and one paragraph of liner notes. The student whose song is chosen receives a very small amount of extra credit, but as the author points out, that's not the point—he wants students to feel like they have individually set the tone for the class. Soper explains, "I believe that the assignment is a way to engage students in learning about politics, and that it can ultimately help them become better political scientists . . . I have no intention of abandoning textbooks, but music can often be a successful way to highlight topics to which students only give a cursory glance in the book."⁴²

In another experiment, Burgess used popular music in the classroom to raise awareness of and educate about potentially controversial topics like domestic violence, racism, and inequality.⁴³ Some of the songs used were Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog," and the Chrystals' "He Hit Me (Felt Like a Kiss)." Lastly, Stein offered an innovative approach to tackling racial identity and white privilege in the political science classroom through a music video by hip hop group, the dead prez.⁴⁴ The author did a pretest first to examine students' knowledge about rap music and their thoughts about rap lyrics. Then the instructor screened the video, "Hell Yeah," and allowed students to reflect on what they had seen. After a moderated discussion, students were asked to complete a post-test questionnaire which gauged their ideas on white privilege and whether those ideas had changed after seeing the video. All of these assignments show great promise, as well as ingenuity, in their use of music as mechanisms for teaching and learning. Whether used as extra credit or vehicles of social change, each experiment allowed students to utilize their interest in popular music as a form of experiential learning.

Clarkston: "Small Town, Big Heart"⁴⁵

I carried out my political mixtape project on the Clarkston campus, unique among all the Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) campuses as well as a location for a college. Since the 1980s, the majority of refugees in Georgia have been resettled in Clarkston, a small city in DeKalb County, approximately 11 miles east of Atlanta. According to St. John,⁴⁶ Clarkston's biggest selling point was an over-abundance of affordable housing built in the 1970s to accommodate middle-class workers. Coupled with easy access to MARTA, Atlanta's public transportation system, and the presence of several refugee aid agencies like the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Refugee Family Services (RFS), and World Relief, Clarkston became a refugee resettlement hub for the Southeast United States. This incredible diversity—it is more common to hear Amharic, Somali, and Dzongkha sometimes than English—has also affected the student population of the Clarkston campus of GPC. Most classes have at least one refugee student, across all majors—some have more.

The 2010 Census estimates that Clarkston is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Georgia. The United States Census Bureau estimated that 2,301 of Clarkston's 7,231 residents (or 33.7 percent) were foreign-born, compared to 11.1 percent for the entire United States. Forty-one percent of Clarkston's residents also speak a language other than English at home, compared to 17.9 percent for the entire United States.

The assignment

The inspiration for this assignment came to me while I was in graduate school at Georgia State University and supplementing my assistantship stipend by spinning records at bars and parties around town and working at the student-run college radio station, WRAS-Atlanta, 88.5 FM.⁴⁷ Music and politics formed such a big part of my life and music seemed to be such an integral part of my students' existence that the mixtape assignment seemed to come almost naturally. What if students made mixtapes for me with their favorite political songs? That might be a fun and creative way to get their minds chugging about politics in song. But how was that generating critical thinking and writing on their part? The answer, I thought, was in the lost tradition of the record/tape/CD liner notes that accompanied most music until the twenty-first century. What if students were challenged to write liner notes about their favorite political music for a hypothetical mixed tape? Thus, the mixtape essay was born!

There are three components to the assignment—the in-class discussion; the mixtape essay; and the mixtape presentation. For the introduction to the assignment, I spend about 30 minutes of class time going over the idea behind this paper; the broad types of music, students can choose from (countries, languages, cultures, genres, etc.); and some samples so they get a better idea of what I expect. Borrowing an idea from Soper, I show two music videos in class to get students in the correct mindset for this assignment and to make them really think about what makes music political, and also to showcase some the diversity of musical genres.⁴⁸ The two videos I screen are “Ekhtelaaf” by Hichkas, an Iranian artist who raps in Farsi (with English subtitles) and Bruce Springsteen’s “Streets of Philadelphia.” “Ekhtelaaf” is from the 2010 Iranian film, *No One Dreams About Persian Cats*. The choice of a foreign song seems to matter a great deal for my Non-Native English Speakers (NNES) who seem to light up when they see an artist on the screen, singing in a language other than English.⁴⁹ In this case, the song also features gritty lyrics and footage of life in Tehran, the capital of Iran. The latter, a hit song from the film *Philadelphia* (1993), allows younger students to think about how music can showcase important political and cultural issues, and make them understand that political music does *not* have to include references to politicians or war, but can, as in this case, touch on socio-political issues like HIV and AIDS.

After a detailed in-class discussion of the assignment, I post more directions online. These include an introductory paragraph on the relationship between music and politics; formatting guidelines (font, page numbers, citations, etc.); and due dates. I also share *my* five favorite political songs with them so they understand how much this assignment means to their instructor on a personal level. I include the countries of origin to make students, especially the international ones, feel comfortable with international

music so that they are encouraged to draw from diverse sources: the Rolling Stones’ “Paint It Black” (UK); Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’ “Empire State of Mind” (USA); the Procuissions’ “Little People” (USA); Hichkas’s “Ekhtelaaf” (Iran); and A. R. Rahman’s “Kanaaalinae” (India).

I also provide a sample paragraph of my own and let my students know that this is what I would submit if I was doing this assignment. For example, this is the sample paragraph I post about Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’ “Empire State of Mind”:

I first heard this song in 2009 when my sister, who used to live in NYC, started raving about it and how it was her anthem. It is definitely a New Yorker’s song and in the purest sense, an homage to the Big Apple. But, it is also very political. Specifically, I think of the lyrics, “And since I made it here/I can make it anywhere/yeah they love me everywhere.” New York has always represented the successes—and downsides—of the American Dream and these lyrics point to that. Jay-Z represents success and he is inviting other people to share in his dream. But, he also mentions that New York can be too tough, too competitive for some. He raps, “Eight million stories out there/ And they’re naked/Cities is a pity/ Half of y’all won’t make it.” I think this contradiction makes the song political because he is letting folks know that New York is the place to be, but also cautioning that not everyone survives or attains their dream.

Students are asked to write at least 100 words per song, in a similar format to what I provided. They are encouraged to include sample lyrics and some history about the first time they heard their musical selections. The emphasis is on how these songs make them feel. Some students also burn CDs for me, but it is not required and students do not receive extra credit for making CDs in conjunction with their liner notes. Non-English songs must be translated into English.

The third and final component of this assignment is an in-class presentation of any one song from the students’ mixtapes. After grading their essays and returning them, I ask each student to email me one song they would like to present in class and I assign songs on a first-come-first-serve basis to avoid artists being represented more than once and in general, to diversify the song selection. The presentation is usually not graded as strictly (or for as many points) as the essay, but since it is a graded component of their overall class grade, students know they have to take it seriously. Since one of my foci is making sure students improve their critical thinking and speaking skills—an expectation I make very clear on the first day of the semester—this final component of the political mixtape assignment ensures those learning outcomes by forcing students to adapt their writings into a short, but cogent presentation on why they chose that certain song

and why it is political. On a side note, the presentation part of the assignment is a recent addition and was added on the suggestion of a conference discussant. However, it has become an enjoyable part of the assignment for my students, as well as myself, because the students are able to personalize their song selections even more during their presentations and add material that did not make it to the essay. I have seen some genuine emotion in these presentations—even tears—as students from Nepal to Nebraska have bared their souls in class while discussing songs that mean so much to them.

What has been interesting to observe are the trends in students' song choices. Though the average age of my students is 23 years, the most popular artists continue to be older artists like Marvin Gaye (1st) and Bob Marley (2nd). Second, rap and hip hop artists have the most appeal for students with acts like Tupac Shakur, Young Jeezy, Eminem and Lil' Wayne in the top ten. Lastly, the most common songs chosen were "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye; "Buffalo Soldier" by Bob Marley; "Changes" by Tupac Shakur; "Man in the Mirror" by Michael Jackson; and "Where is the Love" by the Black Eyed Peas.

One presentation that really stood out to me was made by a student who had served two tours of duty as a Marine sniper in Afghanistan. His song was "Rooster" by Alice in Chains. I had enjoyed reading his written material on the song in his mixtape essay, but it was his presentation that really shook the roof for the other students and me. He recounted how the song was a homage to the father of one of the band members who had gone by the nickname "Rooster" during Vietnam. My student said that during one of his tours, his squad had come under attack during a routine reconnaissance mission. In that moment, as he was being pinned down by gunfire, the student mentioned that the only thing going through his head was this song and that he started whispering it to the other Marines—"Here they come to snuff the rooster/Yeah, here come the rooster, yeah/You know he ain't gonna die." In that moment, that student made the class and American foreign policy real for the rest of us and justified to me why the mixtape assignment "works" so well in class.

The real power of this assignment is, of course, in the students' responses and statements about the power of music. It is clear to see that if students are taught to *think* critically then those skills can be transferred to *write* critically as well. In the following four samples, my students are able to write about military service and foreign policy; government accountability and natural disasters; the internment of Asian Americans; and refugee reflections on genocide, in a way that I believe is unique and refreshing and perhaps, *only* possible through the mixtape assignment:

He [John Fogerty] is talking about politicians who often use the flag to hide behind it. As a 10 year veteran of the United States Marine Corps,

this touches a deep nerve in me. I often question politicians who are in a position to send troops into harm's way without any military service . . . I expect this as a minimum from my superiors and my troops look at me for the same, so why would I expect nothing else from the suits on Capitol Hill? (a student writing about Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son").

"This song is personal to being a victim of Hurricane Katrina. When I think back to the events of that time period, the lyrics touch a sensitive spot . . . This song just shows that as poor people, we don't count, but as a people we matter to each other. Tie my hands, I can't do anything, so I need help and that is what we didn't get. Relying on each other is how we made it (a student writing about Lil Wayne's "Tie My Hands").

"The song features clips from an interview with the father and aunt of lead singer Mike Shinoda, who tell the vivid story of the life of Shinoda's family before, during and after World War II including their internment at Manzanar . . . Every time I listen to this interview, I can picture the insecurity, feeling and emotion of the Japanese people in the United States caused by bloody war and politics. Can you imagine when you waking up one morning and your family are told to be locked away in a camp?" (a student from Indonesia, writing about Fort Minor's "Kenji").

"As soon as I heard this song I felt like understood what he was feeling and he was trying to say. You can easily tell this song is political because of the lyrics: 'Ain't no way to explain the pain/ That I went through in the rain/ They tried to terminate my kind by putting babies in graves/Man the women got shot and their bodies decay/ They had us running for our lives, man hiding in caves/ Kurdistan I represent I'm from the land of the brave.' These lyrics talk about the Kurdish struggle and the oppression that is imposed on the Kurdish people by dictators to further achieve their political agendas. (Refugee student from Iraq writing about Brothas From Tha Gutta's "Life Story.")

Conclusion: Thoughts for the future

There is no denying the influence of popular music on American politics and vice versa, whether manifested in the election slogans or campaign efforts of candidates for higher office or the political messages conveyed by folk, rap, and rock artists in songs and videos. The question of course is how to channel this kinetic relationship into the classroom and create an

environment of learning where music opens doors toward a better understanding of politics. There are some exciting projects, courses, and pedagogical techniques being employed by educators to use music as a vehicle of expression for students, but clearly the subject area is wide open for further exploration and experimentation.

I believe that the mixtape assignment is enjoyed by my students because it is unusual, which brings a certain shock value, but more importantly because students actually feel like they can express more of themselves through frank discussion of music than any other writing assignment or class discussion. As one student recently said in an email, "I just wanted to let you know I'm super pumped about this writing assignment. I am very passionate about music and was so exciting [sic] to see a writing assignment allowing me to freely choose and write about songs that I like and can connect to politics." Looking back at the level of introspection and honesty that accompanies these assignments, I simply do not believe that this level of critical thinking can be manifested simply or in many other assignments.

With that said, however, there are still a couple of potential drawbacks to this assignment. The first is that like many classroom experiments, this one requires a lot of preparation work from educators. Most students will "get" the idea behind the assignment right away, but they will also need detailed instructions on how the assignment should be submitted, as well as the educator's expectation and grading rubric. The second is that because of the nature of this experiment, that is, a hybrid assignment that melds different learning objectives, determining if the assignment is a success may be difficult. It is really up to each educator to structure the mixtape project in a way that meets institutionally specific learning objectives.

It is also important to note that this particular assignment, though originally intended for political science educators, can easily be adapted to any number of disciplines. For example, a history professor could ask students to write and/or speak on songs from a certain era or that deal with specific events like the Civil War. Students might choose "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" by The Band, "Civil War" by Guns N' Roses, or "When the Roses Bloom Again" by Wilco and Billy Bragg. On the other hand, a professor of geography might utilize this assignment by having students choose two to three songs that deal specifically with place (like "Home" by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes or "Back to Memphis" by Chuck Berry). Students would have to locate the songs (promoting research skills); listen to them with an ear to lyrics (critical listening); analyze the lyrics and write creative liner notes tied to the specific theme (critical writing); and then present the material to class in a confident manner, while maintaining eye contact, and explaining the importance of the songs (public speaking).

In future semesters, I plan on controlling for the students' sex and age, to determine how that might affect the selection of certain songs. I might

also insist students provide me with the years of release for the songs to keep better track of generational shifts to look at potential correlations between students' age and that of the songs. I hope this research inspires my colleagues in disciplines across the board to embrace music as not just a teaching tool, but as a potential avenue for the development of critical reading and writing skills.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to my wife, Shahbana, for being supportive of my career; Robert King, Will Miller, and Chris Soper for their inspiration and direction; Matt Rosensweig, Farbod Kokabi, and Farzad Moghaddam at WRAS-Atlanta; and finally, Jim Henson, for creating "The Muppet Show" and populating my childhood with Kermit, Fozzy, Miss Piggy, and many musical memories.
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