MUS 3735a. Songwriting: Lyrics

What we call “lyric writing” comprises a peculiar kind of poetry. Composed to be heard, and usually accompanied by some sort of music, lyrics don’t appear (written down on the page) as they are typically experienced (voiced and heard). As such, lyric writing requires a separate pedagogy.

In this course, we explore lyric writing tools and techniques meant specifically for “pop” songs. But don’t let the term “pop” worry you: I use a very broad definition of “pop,” which includes everything from the Dead Kennedys, to Kanye, to Radiohead, to Kraftwerk, to Rosemary Clooney, and so on. We will start, however, by briefly considering harmony in “pop,” so we have some music we can write lyrics for.

In this class, we focus specifically on the so-called “Berklee Method” of lyric writing. The “Berklee Method” is an extremely versatile toolbox, with no prescriptive elements. The method is as useful for hip hop as it is for, say, Norwegian black metal, techno, “art song” lieder, et cetera. It is designed to help you develop a technique for writing lyrics beyond just trying to rhyme in as meaningful a manner as possible. And it has come in handy many times for the likes of John Mayer, Usher, Gillian Welch, and many others.

Students who engage conscientiously with the course materials will, by December, graduate equipped with a fully functional, flexible technique for writing the lyrics (and chords) to “pop” songs. In short, they will develop a professional lyric writing technique in this class, for writing broadly marketable song lyrics.

Please note that the pace of this course is intentionally measured to allow students plenty of time to experiment with the techniques we examine in class in the context of their own creative practice. Over the course of the semester, I fully expect students will integrate course materials into their songwriting, and produce numerous rough sketches of songs that will provide material for their final projects. Students will be asked to document this work, and bring it to class periodically.

Required Materials
ISBN: 0793511801
ISBN: 0876391501

Course Structure
Each week will begin with a one hour group lecture. Then we will break off for 15 or 20 minute 1-on-1 “lessons” (depending on enrolments and student availability), where students will receive personalized guidance as they explore and develop the Berkee Method in relation to their own personal creative practice. This will allow you to concretize the general topics we consider as a class according to your own unique creative priorities and values.

Evaluation
Weekly Work (40%)
Final Project (60%)
14 sept 2016  
week one: what makes a “great” song great?

21 sept 2016  
week two: power progressions, variations & generating harmonic ideas

— — unit one: lyric writing, song structure & form — —

28 sept 2016: LF&S, chaps 1&2  
week three: All About Phrasing: Phrases, Phrase Length & Number of Phrases

5 oct 2016: LF&S, chaps 3&4  
week four: Rhythm & Rhyme: Setting Up, Shutting Down, Taking Total Control

12 oct 2016: LF&S, chap 5  
week five: Rhyme As Structural Device: Form

19 oct 2016: LF&S, chaps 6&7  
week six: Form, Hook & Focus: Formal Design & Hook Placement

— — unit two: focus on rhyme — —

26 oct 2016: EGR, chaps 1,2&3  
week seven: Kinds of Rhymes, Rhyme for Spotlighting & Motion, Rhyme Worksheet

2 nov 2016: EGR, chap 4  
week eight: Expanding Rhyme Possibilities

9 nov 2016: EGR, chaps 5&6  
week nine: Rhyme Variations: From Additive to Assonance Rhyme

16 nov 2016: EGR, chaps 7&8  
week ten: Sonic Bonding: Rhyme Other Than At The Ends of Places

23 nov 2016  
week eleven: no class

30 nov 2016  
week twelve: Some Legal & Professional Considerations

7 dec 2016  
week thirteen: open workshop

12 dec 2016  
final projects due, as electronic submissions (details tba), to jhodgs5@uwo.ca  
please request confirmation of receipt
Submission Policy
I do not accept late assignments nor do I grant extensions. If students miss a deadline without prior approval and/or medical documentation — or, in the case of an emergency, without documentation and approval obtained from me within one week of the initial due date — a failing grade is automatically applied. To be fair to everyone in this class, and to ensure that your final grade accurately represents the level of studentship displayed in my class, I make absolutely no exceptions to this policy.

Expectations for Final Grades
Students should have realistic expectations for final grades. Given the cumulative nature of this class, and the labor intensive nature of course work, class averages for a typical offering of this course range from 71% to 76% at the very highest. A final grade of 80%+ is difficult to achieve but not entirely uncommon. A final grade of 90% is extremely rare and can account for anywhere from 0% to 5% of total grades.

Letter Grades and Percentage Points
At the University of Western Ontario, letter grades correspond to the following percentages:
A+ ........ 90% A.............80% B............. 70% C............. 60% F............. 00%

Missed Classes
I am available to answer questions about course materials from students who have missed a lecture for legitimate and documented reasons. However, I do not give private lessons. Students should rely on their peers to gather, and acquire, information from the lessons they miss. Only once you have done your due diligence in this regard, and continue to experience difficulty acquiring the material, should you contact me for extra help.