

Reading Popular Music – A Special Session with Visiting Artist Jean Rohe
AMS/HST 335, Spring 2009, Professor Lavender

To start with, what exactly is meant by the term “popular music”? “Popular music” is music that has a wide appeal and that is accessible to the general public without any special training or elite access. Popular music is distributed via mass media outlets, such as radio, television, or the record industry. The term “popular” differentiates popular music from both “classical music,” which expects a certain familiarity in listeners of musical forms and languages, and “traditional (or folk) music,” which is disseminated orally.

One of the main challenges of studying “popular music” is separating it cleanly from both classical and folk/traditional music; the lines between each category are notoriously fuzzy. Indeed, music critic Richard Middleton wrote in *Studying Popular Music* in 1990 that,

Neat divisions between ‘folk’ and ‘popular,’ and ‘popular’ and ‘art,’ are impossible to find.... [A]rbitrary criteria ... define the complement of ‘popular.’ ‘Art’ music, for example, is generally regarded as by nature complex, difficult, demanding; ‘popular’ music then has to be defined as ‘simple,’ ‘accessible,’ ‘facile.’ But many pieces commonly thought of as ‘art’ (Handel’s ‘Hallelujah Chorus,’ many Schubert songs, many Verdi arias) have qualities of simplicity; conversely, it is by no means obvious that the Sex Pistols’ records were ‘accessible,’ Frank Zappa’s work ‘simple,’ or Billie Holiday’s ‘facile.’”

Popular music can be divided into a vast number of musical genres (see below for some of these), although formally, most popular music conforms to a narrow structure of verse, chorus/refrain, and bridge. Sometimes, popular music is associated with social dancing, and it is often connected to specific generations of fans.

While many studies of popular music have focused on a specific song, a specific artist, or a specific genre, newer research has begun to focus on the ways that popular music transcends borders, travels between different nations and cultures, and is transformed and given new meaning in transit. Jean Rohe, a musician who is a visiting artist at CSI this semester, has devoted herself to tracing the influences of popular musics brought to America by immigrants on American popular music.

We will interview Ms. Rohe about her methodology in reconstructing these stories of transit, and discover what she has learned about the ways that immigrant cultures shape the society which they join. In examining these interactions, think back over the other stories of immigrant cultural innovation we have discussed through the semester – the painters, poets, folk musicians, and artists who have brought with them memories of home and made new cultures in America as they work their way from the outside in.



About Jean Rohe:

Jean Rohe was born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1984. As a youngster, Jean grew up singing and performing folk music with her family. A graduate of the New School Jazz program and its undergrad liberal arts division, Eugene Lang College, Jean has sung in venues throughout New York City, including the Birdland, Sweet Rhythm, the 55 Bar, the Cornelia Street Café, Barbés, and others, as well as venues on the west coast, in Canada, Cuba, and Brazil. In July 2006 she won 2nd place as well as the audience choice award in the Shure Vocal Competition at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. In addition to playing her own music, Jean makes up a part of David Moore’s Bing and Ruth and Hector Morales’s Afrodita. She teaches and performs music for young children at public schools on the Lower East Side through the Third Street Music School Settlement and at other places throughout the city. Jean resides in Brooklyn, NY but she considers herself a world citizen (jeanrohe.com).

Extra Credit Event: The Portuguese Influence in American Popular Music

Singer/songwriter Jean Rohe, artist in residency at CSI, and her five-piece ensemble will present a performance/workshop entitled "The Portuguese Influence in American Popular Music." A reception will follow this free event, which is open to the public. This is a PG CLUE event.

April 23, 2009, 2:30 PM – 3:45 PM, Springer Concert hall, Center for the Arts, CSI/CUNY

Some Popular Music Genres:

Disco, disco music - popular dance music (especially in the late 1970s); melodic with a regular bass beat; intended mainly for dancing at discotheques

Macumba - popular dance music of Brazil; derived from the practices of the macumba religious movement

Pop music, pop - music of general appeal to teenagers; a bland watered-down version of rock'n'roll with more rhythm and harmony and an emphasis on romantic love

Ethnic music, folk music, folk - the traditional and typically anonymous music that is an expression of the life of people in a community

Ballroom music, dance music, danceroom music - a genre of popular music composed for ballroom dancing

Jazz - a genre of popular music that originated in New Orleans around 1900 and developed through increasingly complex styles

Ragtime - a dance music from the 1890s in which ragged rhythms and backbeats influenced dances like the "Cakewalk"

Rap music, hip-hop, rap - genre of African-American music of the 1980s and 1990s in which rhyming lyrics are chanted to a musical accompaniment; several forms of rap have emerged

R&B, rhythm and blues - a combination of blues and jazz that was developed in the United States by Black musicians; an important precursor of rock 'n' roll

Rockabilly - a fusion of black music and country music that was popular in the 1950s; sometimes described as blues with a country beat

Rock 'N' Roll, rock and roll, rock music, rock'n'roll, rock-and-roll, rock - a genre of popular music originating in the 1950s; a blend of black rhythm-and-blues with white country-and-western; "rock is a generic term for the range of styles that evolved out of rock'n'roll."

Reggae - popular music originating in the West Indies; repetitive bass riffs and regular chords played on the off beat by a guitar

Ska - a mixture of reggae and rock to produce a lilting and rhythmic music, often political and urban-oriented

Skiffle - a style of popular music in the 1950s; based on American folk music and played on guitars and improvised percussion instruments

Recommended Reading:

Walter Everett, *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979).

Adam Krims, "What Does it Mean to Analyse Popular Music?" *Music Analysis*, 22/1-2 (2003): 181-209.

Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Key Journal: *Popular Music* (Volume 1, January 1981-present).