

REFLECTIONS ON POPULAR MUSIC AT SENECA COLLEGE

Michael Kearns

After teaching Popular Music since 2011 at Seneca College, I thought it was time to step-back and take account of what I have learned. When I started, Popular Music was not offered at the King Campus. I did not have a template to work from or any other "music" professors, to my knowledge, to consult. I was on my own and truly an island as the class was assigned to one of the pods by the parking lot. As I have found with many of my music classes, administration (or the "computer" system) feels that students will take popular (attractive) courses at any time so my courses are scheduled at the break of dawn or when the sun is setting. My first course at Seneca College started at 8 AM. The first bunch of sleep-deprived students stumbled in-and-around that early hour. At this time, I was still pretty intense and had the nerve to ask "Moose" and his cronies to see me after class when they shuffled in late. Moose (I forget his first name) would become my most outspoken student and would introduce me to the wonder of Tupac Shakur. He would also straighten me out on the realities of living at Jane and Finch; there is a sense of family/ community there. This man reinforced that every student brings a unique viewpoint to the classroom and each is an expert in some aspect of the curriculum. For instance, I asked the class to define hip hop and Moose replied, "I am hip hop." True that.

I am a jazz musician and am trained to be a jazz educator. The opportunity to be a popular music professor fell into my lap when I dropped off a resume at King Campus and it found its way to John Struthers in the School of English and Liberal Studies. He saw my musical expertise and the diversity of my experience and gave me a chance. Popular music quickly became my speciality. I am indebted to John for that. Often opportunity is not the fork in the road where you

choose your path. It is more like a railway switch that changes your path for you. I mention my footing at Seneca College because I was a nervous wreck that first class, but the energy was palpable. I learned that you can be forgiven for a lot of mistakes if you are passionate, hardworking and concerned for the students. This being said, you have to live with the fact that you cannot please all the students all the time. I still find this difficult, but I find consolation in the fact that we all have different perceptions of, say, the success of a class. They are not right or wrong, just different.

So, what have I learned? First, popular music does not have a "best before" stamp. Many courses teach this music up until a certain date and this can be unrewarding for the students. On the other hand, it is very difficult to fit all popular music into one course. Therefore, as a teacher, you must be selective with the material you teach. I think this is more authentic than offering a popular music course that covers music through the 1990s. Second, all courses and popular music in particular, should provide students with choice in their essay topics. This applies to exams as well. Students excel when they are allowed to explore topics of interest. Third, the students are a vital resource and should be *part* of the lecture. All students are experts in some aspect of music, so let them share what they know with the class. It is beneficial to everyone.

I have taught many students at Seneca College, at both the King and Newnham Campuses, and added Canadian Popular Music to the courses I teach. While I am not teaching this semester, I hope to be back. In the meantime, I will be teaching popular music, music history and brass methods at Western University, Laurentian University, Wilfrid Laurier University and Georgian College.

I have posted some Seneca College student quotations about Canadian artists and authenticity at <http://www.drkmusic.com> blog