

## 2008 JANUARY TERM COURSE SYLLABUS

### A. Course Identification

Division of Communication and Fine Arts/Media Studies Program  
COM 375

*Roots: Discovering the Birthplace of the Blues and Rock & Roll*

M-F 9:30-12, 2-4:30, Academic Resource Center 402

No prerequisites

Course Fee: \$550 (final determination by business office if program fee applies)

Class will travel to Memphis, Tennessee, and the Mississippi Delta from Sunday, January 13, to Thursday, January 17. We will stay at the Heartbreak Hotel in Memphis and visit the following: Graceland, Sun Studios, National Civil Rights Museum, Delta Blues Museum.

### B. Instructor Information

Dr. Paul Kohl

430 Hoffmann Hall

Office Phone: 588-7233

e-mail: [paul.kohl@loras.edu](mailto:paul.kohl@loras.edu)

The best way to reach me outside of class time: e-mail or home phone (583-0653)

### C. Course Materials and Resources

#### Required Texts:

*Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* by Elijah Wald

*The Elvis Reader: Texts and Sources on the King of Rock 'N' Roll* Edited by Kevin Quain

#### Available on e-learn:

“Stop, Look, and Listen at the Cross Road” by Gayle Dean Wardlow (From *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues*)

“Heartbreak Hotel: The Art and Artifice of Elvis Presley” (Chapter Four of *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* by Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor)

“What We Talk About When We Talk About Elvis” by William McKeen (*American History* August 2007)

Robert Johnson: *The Complete Recordings*

Selected recordings by Elvis Presley

Selected relevant blues, country, and rock & roll recordings

#### To be viewed in class:

*Crossroads* (film), An Elvis Presley film

## **D. Course Objectives**

This course focuses on the following objectives:

### 1. Understanding the nature and purpose of the blues and rock & roll

This course investigates relationships between the blues and rock & roll by focusing on two of the most significant figures in that development, Robert Johnson and Elvis Presley, and the region that influenced them, Memphis and the Mississippi Delta. Students will learn the nature of the blues and its origins, its development, and the manner in which the music reflected the daily lives of black Southerners, both realistically and metaphorically. Students will learn how that music influenced rock & roll, especially through the figure of Elvis Presley, and the importance of Presley as a figure who broke down racial, musical, and sexual barriers.

### 2. Understanding in depth the cultural and artistic complexities of Johnson and Presley

Robert Johnson and Elvis Presley are two of the most fascinating figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose contributions to music and culture are vast. Yet the differences between each are enormous. Johnson is a figure of mystery, with a recorded musical history of two years and 41 works; Presley is possibly the most famous celebrity of all time with hundreds of recordings in his 23-year career. Johnson recorded at a time (1930s) when recordings were segregated by race while Presley helped break those barriers down in the 1950s. Johnson was known only to a few in his time, but his rediscovery in the 1960s by such influential rock and folk artists as Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton made him the first icon of the rock & roll lifestyle. Presley, whose early career epitomized rock & roll, fell into mediocrity and stardom in a series of cookie-cutter Hollywood films during the same decade. Yet both figures, in all their complex histories, tell a crucial story about race in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. By studying these artists in depth, students should begin to understand the complex nature of art and culture.

## **E. Learning Outcomes, Assessment, and Grading**

### A. Outcomes

Students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the nature, purposes, and origins of the blues and rock & roll, especially as reflected in the work of Johnson and Presley.

Students should demonstrate knowledge of the lives and musical legacy of Johnson and Presley.

Students should demonstrate an understanding as to why the Mississippi Delta region and the city of Memphis are crucial to the development of American musical culture.

Students should demonstrate an ability to critically analyze aspects of Johnson's and Presley's lives, music, and legacy in order to reflect on race and other important aspects of American culture, such as segregation, materialism, sexuality, fame, the American Dream, regionalism, historical revisionism, art, etc.

B. Assessment

Student understanding and knowledge will be assessed in the following ways:

Classroom discussion of readings, recordings, films, and relevant topics. Discussions will generally be prefaced by small group discussions and informal writing.

An exam on relevant factual material and readings.

Reaction papers to readings, recordings, and film. These will generally be prompted by specific questions.

A journal to be kept while travelling to Memphis and the Mississippi Delta detailing student impressions and connections to course content and final course project.

A major course project focusing on some topic relevant to both Johnson and Presley. The project may contain a major non-written component, such as video, photography, and web design, or may be fictional, interpretive, or research-based in nature.

C. Grading

Assignments will be graded based on depth, breadth, creativity, and lack of major factual or stylistic errors. Graded material will be broken down as follows:

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| Final project    | 50% |
| Journal          | 20% |
| Reaction Papers  | 15% |
| Exam             | 10% |
| Class Discussion | 5%  |

Final grades will be based upon the percentage of the final total:

|           |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 93-100%=A | 90-92%=A- | 87-89%=B+ |
| 84-86%=B  | 81-83%=B- | 78-80%=C+ |
| 74-76%=C  | 71-73%=C- | 68-70%=D+ |
| 65-67%=D  | 62-64%=D- | 0-64%=    |

## **F. Course Policies**

### *Expectations for Class Attendance*

Given the nature of the J-Term experience attendance at all class meetings is required. Only illness and family emergencies are acceptable excuses that will allow full make-up privileges. Missing class sessions, missed exams, and late assignments will result in reduction of grade. See College Policy on Absences Related to College Recognized Activity for more information.

### *Expectations for Student Conduct Off-Campus*

During the time that this class is away from campus, students are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the policies and guidelines put forth in the student handbook. Though the area we are going to is still in the United States there are major cultural differences that you should be aware of. Do not engage in any behavior which would be risky or misunderstood in the cultural context which we are entering. During our stay in Memphis we will stay together as group whenever we are away from the area surrounding our hotel, which is located across the street from Graceland. During free time you may engage in the hotel's activities or walk around the Graceland area as long as you let me know where you are going. You are not to travel to downtown Memphis apart from the group. This will result in immediate failure from the class.

### *Academic Dishonesty*

Loras College has recently instituted a new College Policy on Academic Honesty. Please read this document (link provided) and abide by its rules. Students discovered to have committed an act of academic dishonesty are subject to dismissal from the college.

### *Learning Disabilities*

If you have a documented learning disability requiring academic adjustments, please contact the Learning Disabilities Center at x7134 and make an appointment to review your documentation and to determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations. Let me know what arrangements you have made with the Learning Disabilities Center so I may accommodate your needs.

### *Counseling Center*

Remember that the Counseling Center is available to help you with any problems you may be having related to classes and other personal problems. See link for more information.

## G. Course Calendar

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| January 3  | Introduction to course. Origins of the blues; Robert Johnson as man and myth. Guest lecture on blues. View <i>Crossroads</i> . Read Wald 3-42, 70-82. |
| January 4  | The art and influence of Robert Johnson. The blues' influence on rock & roll's origins. Listening to Johnson's music. Read Wald 105-193, Wardlow.     |
| January 7  | The career and art of Elvis Presley. Guest lecture on Presley. Presley's music. View Presley film. Read Barker and Taylor, McKeen, Quain 29-91.       |
| January 8  | Comparing and connecting Johnson and Presley to questions of race and other aspects of American culture. Happy birthday, Elvis!                       |
| January 9  | Memphis, the Delta, and the South. Unique aspects of its history and Geography. What to expect on trip. Read Wald 83-105, Quain 91-173.               |
| January 10 | Discussion of potential topics and projects. Reflection papers due.   |
| January 11 | Getting started on projects. How to journal on trip. Exam.  |
| January 13 | Drive to Memphis. Arrive at Heartbreak Hotel.   |
| January 14 | Excursions in Memphis: Sun Studios, Memphis Music Hall of Fame, Beale Street Blues Museum, National Civil Rights Museum.                              |
| January 15 | Excursion to Clarksdale, Mississippi: Delta Blues Museum, Crossroads Other Johnson related sites.   |
| January 16 | Visit Graceland. Night in Memphis.  |
| January 17 | Return to Dubuque   |
| January 18 | Reflect on trip and discuss project ideas (no morning session, pm only)   |
| January 21 | Work on projects. Journal notes due.  |
| January 22 | Discuss and work on projects.   |
| January 23 | Present projects.   |

Students may have the possibility of presenting their projects in the spring at the Delta Blues Symposium in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

## H. Bibliography or Supplemental Material

Recommended Readings:

*Deep Blues* by Robert Palmer

*Blues People: Negro Music in White America* by Amiri Baraka

*Searching for Robert Johnson* by Peter Guralnick

*Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'N' Roll* by Colin Escott with Martin Hawkins

*Blues Fell This Morning* by Paul Oliver

*Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* by Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch  
*Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* by Peter Guralnick  
*Last Train to Memphis: Careless Love* by Peter Guralnick

Recommended Videos and Recordings:

*Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues*

*Elvis 1956*

*American Roots Music*

Robert Johnson: *The Complete Recordings*

Elvis Presley: *The King of Rock 'n' Roll: The Complete '50s Masters*

## **I. Disclaimer**

Assignments are subject to change by instructor. Changes will be announced at least two days in advance, circumstances permitting.