

HISTORY 2144B
“Anarchy in the UK”:
Postwar Britain through Popular Music
Winter 2025

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This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description:

British history after 1945 is explored through the lens of popular music, from the Who and the Kinks to the Clash and the Slits. Themes to be examined include the Empire and decolonization, Northern Ireland, urban decay, immigration and racism, gender identities, class divisions, consumerism, and economic inequalities.

These years saw a number of profound transformations in Britain: the nation’s decline as an imperial and world power; the deindustrialization of the birthplace of industrialism; massive social change as a result of immigration, particularly from former British colonies; unprecedented challenges to the class and gender status quo; the emergence of youth as a powerful economic and social demographic; and the reconfiguring of popular music as their means of expression.

Beginning in the 1950s, that new kind of popular music provided a commentary on the nature of postwar Britain, offering trenchant and sometimes bitter critiques of its failings. By focusing on musicians and singers from a variety of genres – including Mod, Punk, Ska, New Wave, and Post-Punk – who embodied this determination to use their music as a force for change, the course provides an opportunity to understand this period of history through some of its most perceptive observers – and to listen to some great music at the same time.

Prerequisite(s): none

Antirequisite(s): none

Course Materials:

There is no textbook required for the course – occasional readings will be available on the course OWL site.

Methods of Evaluation:

Term test #1 (written answer)	35%
Term test #2 (written answer)	35%
Final examination (written answer)	30%

For the two term tests (which will be written on-line, through the course OWL site, in the week indicated on the syllabus), you will be asked to comment on the historical content and significance of the lyrics from a song. The final examination (which will be written in-person during the final exam period) will consist of short-answer and essay questions, and will cover the entire term's work. Examples of both formats will be provided in due course.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for any assignments in this course.

You do not need to complete all of these components to pass the course. For example, if you are doing the course as a Discovery Credit and score at least 50 points out of a possible 70 on the first two tests, you are not required to write the final exam.

Learning outcomes:

By the end of this course, students should:

- understand the central themes of British history in the last half of the twentieth century
- be able to identify continuities and changes in Britain after the Second World War
- appreciate how popular music offered powerful commentaries on the challenges facing British society during that period
- be aware of the generational differences in how these challenges were interpreted

Lecture Schedule:

7 January – Introduction - “Something About England”: The Postwar World

In 1945, Britain emerged from the Second World War as the world's biggest debtor, reliant on massive US loans to stay afloat. Government cutbacks, the dismantling of an empire that Britain could no longer afford, rationing – this was the Age of Austerity.

14 January – “Rock Island Line” (Lonnie Donegan): Rock ‘n’ Roll, Skiffle, and the Invention of Youth

Despite the postwar gloom, in 1957 prime minister Harold Macmillan announced that Britons “had never had it so good.” Shrewd governance under Labour administrations paved the way for the end of rationing, low unemployment, prosperity, the benefits of Britain's newly transformed social safety net, and optimism. At the same time, new youth cultures emerged that reflected different understandings of the relationship between young people and society.

21 January – “My Generation” (The Who): Mods, Rockers, and Youth Ascendent

The conflict between youth cultures was evident in the much publicized battles between rival Mods and Rockers on Britain's streets and beaches in the early 1960s. The two groups were divided by fashion and music, but more fundamentally by opposing visions of British society and the nation's place in the world. Meanwhile, the moral panic spawned by the conflict between the groups said less about Mods and Rockers than about those who were panicking.

28 January – “Waterloo Sunset” (The Kinks): The British Identity

Postwar Britain also struggled to redefine what it meant to be British. How much of the old Britishness could or should be saved, and how much would persist only in nostalgia? Two albums by the Kinks – *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* and *Arthur, or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire* – explored this renegotiation of identity in which a sense of possibility shared space with a sense of loss.

4 February – “God Save the Queen” (The Sex Pistols): The Underclasses

At the extreme, Britain saw the growth of an ideology that rejected all institutions and social constructs inherited from the past. The underclasses had always existed but now their leading voices (such as the Sex Pistols and Crass) were able to carry their message to a national, indeed international, audience. They were determined to provoke, to confuse, to anger, to scandalize, all while revealing some uncomfortable truths about postwar Britain.

Term test #1 will be written this week

11 February – “Bristol and Miami” (The Selecter): Decolonization and Immigration

In June 1948, the first large group of Caribbean immigrants arrived in the UK, a migration that would grow as the old British colonies became independent. The tide of British subjects from the Caribbean, Africa, and south Asia would transform British cities as formerly white, working-class neighbourhoods became ethnic enclaves. Some welcomed the resultant social and cultural mixing as vibrant and invigorating, while others saw it as the death of old Britain.

18 February – Reading Week – no lecture

25 February – “The Guns of Brixton” (The Clash): Race and Racism

The tensions created by this migration were quick to emerge, first in the Notting Hill race riots of 1958. They were followed by similar outbreaks of varying intensity in major British cities – Chapeltown (Leeds), Toxteth (Liverpool), Handsworth (Birmingham), Brixton (London). The perils of being black or Asian in Britain galvanized new musicians, most notably in the Rock Against Racism movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

4 March – “Ghost Town” (The Specials): Urban Decay

Britain’s cities suffered significant damage from German bombing during the Second World War, and the postwar decades were no kinder to them. Deindustrialization, slum clearance, the erosion of property values, pollution, crime, and the erection of large and deeply unpleasant public-housing projects (council estates) conspired to make urban decay an apparently intractable social, political, and economic problem.

11 March – “Typical Girls” (The Slits): Renegotiating Gender

Most of the gains made by women in wartime were rolled back after 1945 in what was posited as a universal desire for “business as usual.” Women were all too aware that the permissiveness of the 1960s seemed to apply largely to men. They struggled to regain lost ground and secure new rights, mobilizing behind nuclear disarmament, equal pay legislation, reproductive rights, equity in education – in short, fighting against the stereotype that, as the Slits savagely lampooned, “Typical girls don’t create, don’t rebel.”

Term test #2 will be written this week

18 March – “The Day the World Turned Day-Glo” (X-Ray Spex): Consumer Society

A defining feature of modern British society was consumerism. Success came to be demonstrated by the acquisition of material goods – the newer, the shinier, the more disposable, the better. Need became less significant than desire, function less important than form, and the only true road to personal fulfillment was through purchasing. But not everyone embraced a world in which a person’s value was judged by their possessions and the environment was sacrificed to the lust for consumer goods. Surely there was more to life.

25 March – “Alternative Ulster” (Stiff Little Fingers): The Irish Problem

In February 1971 a British soldier was killed in Northern Ireland to bring into the spotlight what became known as The Troubles. This decades-long period of sectarian violence was rooted in the Irish question, the problem of how to govern the six counties of Ulster. Until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought a kind of calm to Northern Island, The Troubles saw bombings and assassinations, murders and kidnappings, Bloody Sunday and hunger strikes.

1 April – “A Town Called Malice” (The Jam): Day-to-Day Britain – Cool Britannia or Cruel Britannia?

Along with all of these weighty issues was the basic matter of living. The songs of the Jam revealed the daily lives of millions of Britons who worked in unrewarding, low-paying jobs, lived in dreary terraced housing where conformity was a cardinal virtue, passed the time the same way their parents had (and their children would), and learned by hard experience that nothing came of dreaming about a better life. Theirs were “wallpaper lives” – the pattern simply kept repeating.

Please review the Department of History’s shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.