

The University of Western Ontario
Department of History
2132A: History of American Popular Culture
Fall 2025

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 12:30-1:30, in Lawson Hall 1221

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

Course Description

This course explores the history of American popular culture since the middle decades of the nineteenth century. It locates the roots of popular culture in the world of Vaudeville theatre and Burlesque; considers the meaning of Jazz, Blues, and Rock & Roll music; looks at the Folk revival of the 1950s as well as world of the Beatniks; and assesses the rise of the radio, movies, and television. It will consider the idea of popular culture in our own moment, too, when the internet has fractured the media landscape in ways that have challenged the notion that popular culture depends on mass produced material that appeals to a large audience with increasingly homogenized tastes.

Throughout the semester, we will spend some time attempting to come to terms with what the term *popular culture* actually means. We will treat popular culture as something that is more than merely something that appeals to a mass audience. We will also treat it as something that is more than simply a reaction to what one might call “high” culture. It is not necessarily the case that popular culture has mass appeal. Nor is popular culture always easily distinguishable from “high” culture.

We will approach the history of popular culture through the lens of urbanization and industrialization in the United States. We will treat it as something that was first experienced in urban settings that were altered by technological innovations that made indoor and nighttime entertainment possible and that also led to the dissemination of culture to large audiences.

It has often been said that popular culture is closely tied to commercial interests and also dependent on mass dissemination for its appeal. If this is true, then we might ask who controls the means of dissemination and who profits from this control. And if we are to think of popular culture in this way then we might also wonder whether popular culture represents the yearnings of the masses who produce this culture or the interests of those who control the means of disseminating this culture.

By the end of the course, students should have acquired a good sense of the broad outline of the history of American popular culture since the late nineteenth century, become familiar with the theoretical underpinnings of the field, and gained some insights into the manner in which culture is produced, disseminated, and consumed. In addition, students should have developed

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a fuller understanding of how power is exercised in a democratic and capitalist society. They should also have come to terms with how they experience culture in their own lives.

Antirequisite: History 3307E

Methods of Evaluation

Midterm Examination (Oct. 8)	30%
First assignment (due Oct. 29)	35%
Second Assignment (due Nov. 26)	35%

The expectation will be that students attend the lectures and complete all the weekly readings. In addition, students will write a **midterm examination** in class on **October 8**. Students will also complete **two assignments**, each of which will be four pages in length. At least one week before each assignment's due date, students will receive the question that they will answer in essay format. The first assignment is **due October 29** and the second is **due November 26**. All of the material that students will need to write these two short assignments will be found in the course readings and slides. No outside research will be permitted.

Assignments are to be four pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and use 12-point font. They should be well-written, provide sound analysis, draw upon the appropriate course material, follow proper scholarly conventions (including Chicago Style footnotes), and include a title page and a bibliography (which are to be in addition to the four-page length). You will upload the completed assignments to the course web page on owl, where they will also be subject to turnitin review. Assignments submitted after the due dates will be subject to a late penalty of five percent the first day and one percent for every day thereafter (including weekends).

A note on academic integrity: You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course. Any use of such tools for assignments in this course may be considered a form of academic misconduct. It is expected that students produce work that is written using their own words and that relies on research that they have conducted themselves. Submitting work that is not your own is considered dishonest. It is thus not permitted to copy other peoples' work, copy from published or unpublished texts, or to present artificially generated text (i.e. ChatGPT or other AI content generators) as your own. Nor would it be permitted to submit an essay or a response to an exam question using ChatGPT or any other AI content generator even if you acknowledge that you have done so with proper source attribution.

Please note: In this course, your written assignments have a 3-day grace period. This means that you can submit either of these assignments up to 3 days past the posted deadline without penalty. As such, requests for academic consideration without supporting documentation will be denied. No assignments will be accepted after the last day of classes. Any accommodation for the midterm examination will require supporting documentation.

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

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Course Materials

The following books have been ordered and will be available at the university bookstore (prices are included in parentheses below; second-hand or other editions of these books are fine). All other readings will be made available on the course page on owl or on reserve at the Weldon Library. All course readings are intended to supplement the lectures and to serve as the source material for the two short assignments and the midterm examination.

- David Nasaw. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. (\$51.00)
- John Leland. *Hip: The History*. New York: Harper, 2004. (\$24.99)
- Peter Biskind. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. New York: Touchstone, 1999. (\$30.00)

Course Schedule and Readings

Sept. 10: Introduction

Sept. 17: American Culture

- John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Harper, 2004), 4-16; 39-56.
- Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13-48.

Sept. 24: Leisure and Consumerism

- David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-18, 62-95.

Oct. 1: Cheap Amusements

- Nasaw, *Going Out*, 19-61; 104-119.
- Leland, *Hip: The History*, 17-38.

Oct. 8: Midterm Examination

Oct. 15: Recorded Entertainment

- Nasaw, *Going Out*, 120-256.
- Leland, *Hip: The History*, 87-110, 186-222.

Oct. 22: The Jazz Age

- Nasaw, *Going Out*, 96-103.
- Leland, *Hip: The History*, 57-86, 111-136.

Oct. 29: Culture and Rebellion

- Leland, *Hip: The History*, 137-185, 223-338.
- Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 49-131.

Nov. 5: Fall Break

Nov. 12: The New Hollywood

- Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 13-345.

Nov. 19: The Eighties

- Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 346-439.
- Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 1-19; 167-209; 313-369.

Nov. 26: American Popular Culture

- Leland, *Hip: The History*, 339-356.

Dec. 3: Conclusion**Additional Statements**

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.