

History 213: Jews and American Popular Culture

University of Wisconsin, Madison
Spring 2026
Tuesday-Thursday, 11:00-12:15
Humanities 1111

Prof. Tony Michels
Office: Humanities 4103
Office Hours: by appointment
Office phone: (608) 265-2521
E-mail: aemichels@wisc.edu

Teaching Assistant

James Cameron Meadows

Email: jcmeadows@wisc.edu

Office: Humanities 4266

Office hours: Tuesdays 1:30 to 3:30 and Thursdays 9:30 to 10:30

Description

This course explores the interplay between Jews and popular culture, covering such subjects as early 20th century vaudeville, the Golden Age of Hollywood, rhythm and blues music, television, and stand-up comedy. It uses lectures, films, music, and texts to explore the development of American popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries through the experiences of Jews, as performers, writers, and businesspeople. Using Jews as the primary, though not only, case, the course examines themes in the history of immigration, race, Americanization, youth culture, and business. By examining processes of cultural integration and differentiation of Jews in the US, the course attempts to address broad questions of American national identity.

Learning Outcomes

A major objective of this course is the development of critical analytical skills, that is, the ability to formulate and examine questions as they relate to the course topics. As students of American culture, we will *not* ask whether any given form of entertainment—film, music, theatre, comedy, etc.—is good or bad, funny or offensive, enjoyable or dull. These considerations are surely relevant questions in determining personal preferences, but they do not necessarily help us understand culture as an historical phenomenon. Instead, we will ask why forms of culture arose when they did, how people responded to them, and how they help us understand the development of American culture, and the role of Jews and other minority groups in that process.

Culture, by its nature, does not lend itself to objective measurement. For that reason, rigorous analysis is all the more necessary. Our premise is that culture requires serious examination, no less than science, business, politics, or any other aspect of human civilization. Indeed, as we

will see, culture is often intertwined with any number of other realms of society. To understand culture in relation to society is an objective of this course.

The departure point for this course is a single premise: that for a host of historical reasons Jews played central roles (in both the creative and commercial realms) in the development of American culture but did so in conjunction with members of other minority groups, African Americans most significantly. This course will explore how minority groups infused what is known as American culture, even in ways that are not readily apparent.

In short, these are the following learning outcomes:

1. Describe major trends in American popular entertainment.
2. Explain the ways in which Jews shaped realms of American culture, such as, comedy, music, film, and television.
3. Discuss the ways in which Jews and African-Americans interacted in the cultural arena.
4. Describe public controversies around popular culture and how they were driven by or intermixed with antisemitism.

Course Policies

Technology Policy

The use of electronic devices—computers, tablets, phones—is forbidden during class. If I notice you using your phone during class, I will deduct points from your participation grade. You must bring paper copies of the readings (either purchase the assigned texts or make photocopies). Please take notes with pen or pencil and paper. Scientific literature suggests that we learn better when we take notes by hand—if you wish, you may type your notes after class for your own records.¹ If you have an accessibility need that requires the use of electronic devices, please discuss your accommodation with me as soon as possible. Exceptions are always made when accessibility needs require them.

Late Policy

Assignments that are turned in late will lose 1/3 grade for every day that they are late: An A becomes an A- if it is one day late, an A becomes a C if it is six days late. Extensions are usually readily given but must be requested at least twenty-four hours before the assignment is due and students must specify the desired length of the extension in their request. Extensions will not be granted for the in-class exams, extraordinary circumstances notwithstanding.

Academic Integrity Policy

In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others must be appropriately acknowledged and work of a student that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. Faculty, students and administrative staff all share the responsibility of ensuring the honesty and fairness of the intellectual environment at Washington University in St. Louis.

Violations of this policy include, but are not limited to:

1. **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism consists of taking someone else's ideas, words or other types of work

¹ "Writing vs. Typing Debate," Oxford Learning, published May 12, 2022.
<https://www.oxfordlearning.com/writing-vs-typing-debate/>

- product and presenting them as one's own. To avoid plagiarism, students are expected to be attentive to proper methods of documentation and acknowledgement.
2. **Cheating on an examination**
A student must not receive or provide any unauthorized assistance on an examination. During an examination a student may use only materials authorized by the faculty.
 3. **Copying or collaborating on assignments without permission**
When a student submits work with his/her name on it, this is a written statement that credit for the work belongs to that student alone. If the work was a product of collaboration, each student is expected to clearly acknowledge in writing all persons who contributed to its completion.
 4. **Fabrication or falsification of data or records**
It is dishonest to fabricate or falsify data in laboratory experiments, research papers, reports or in any other circumstances; to fabricate source material in a bibliography or "works cited" list; or to provide false information on a résumé or other document in connection with academic efforts. It is also dishonest to take data developed by someone else and present them as one's own.
 5. **Other forms of deceit, dishonesty or inappropriate conduct**

Course Requirements

You are required to attend lectures and discussion sections. Failure to participate *actively* in each and every discussion section will result in a failing grade for participation (see below). The assigned reading should be completed in time for your discussion section. The Teaching Assistant will give you a separate sheet explaining the requirements (which may include brief assignments) for sections. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please speak with the Teaching Assistant or me. Finally, computers or any other electronic devices are not permitted during lectures.

You will have three assignments due on the following dates:

Midterm exam: Feb. 26

First Assignment (5 pages): March 26

Final assignment (10 pages): May 9

Please note: We reserve the right to give pop quizzes.

The breakdown of grades is as follows:

Participation and attendance: 20%

Midterm: 25%

First assignment: 25%

Final assignment: 30%

Readings

The reading assignments will be made available to you. The first week's assignments are available through the links provided in this syllabus. The second week's will be sent to you by email.

Unit 1: Introducing American Jews

Week 1 (Jan. 20-22): Jews in American Culture: Connections and Questions

*Tatiana Siegel, “‘Where Are the Jews?’ Scandal Erupts at the Academy Museum’,” *Rolling Stone*, Jan. 13, 2022

<https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-news/academy-museum-motion-pictures-jewish-representation-1283537/>

*Mireille Silcoff, “There Is Something Missing in Films about Jewish Cultural Figures,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 31, 2025

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/31/magazine/jewish-people-movies-neil-diamond.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

Week 2 (Jan. 27-29): What Are Jews?

Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 1-7, 86-137

Unit 2: Staging the Jews

Week 3 (Feb. 3-5): The Yiddish Theater

Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 91-163

Week 4 (Feb. 10-12): The Melting Pot

Edna Nahshon, “From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot,” *The Jewish Quarterly* (Autumn 1999), pp. 53-60

Israel Zangwill, “The Melting Pot” (1908)

Unit 3: Motion Pictures

Week 5 (Feb. 17-19): The Rise of Hollywood

Larry May and Elain Tyler May, “Why Jewish Movie Moguls? An Exploration in American Culture,” *American Jewish History* (Sept. 1982), pp. 6-25

Winston Dixon, “‘A Rotten Bunch of Vile People with No Respect for Anything Beyond the Making of Money’: Joseph Breen, the Hollywood Production Code, and Institutionalized Anti-Semitism in Hollywood” in Daniel Bernardi, Murray Pomerance, and Hava Tirosh-Samuels, eds. *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 53-72

Week 6 (Feb. 24-26): Jewish Identity on the Big Screen

Midterm: Feb. 26

Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2021), pp. 127-179

Charles Musser, “Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture,” *Film History* vol. 23, no. 2 (2011), pp. 196-222

Week 7 (March 3-5): Confronting Anti-Semitism

Rachel Gordan, *Postwar Stories: How Books Made Judaism American* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2024), pp. 48-80

Week 8 (March 10-12): Depicting the Jewish Past

Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (Metropolitan Books, 2013), pp. 9-140

Week 9 (March 17-19): Becoming “Sexy”

Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 86-106

Neal Gabler, *Barbara Streisand: Redefining Beauty, Femininity, and Power* (Yale Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 1-30, 60-83, 103-167

Unit 4: Television

First Assignment due (March 26)

Week 10 (March 24-26): Laughter on the Little Screen

Elliot Oring, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct. 1983), pp. 261-271

Donald Weber, “Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle, and Mickey Katz,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (Autumn 1998-Winter 1999), pp. 124-153

Vincent Brook, “The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got Berg-larized in the Process),” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer, 1999), pp. 45-67

Week 11 (March 28-April 5): Spring Break

Week 12 (April 7-9): The Multi-Cultural Era

Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 85-109

Stephen Vider, “Sanford Versus Steinberg: Black Sitcoms, Jewish Writers, and the 1970s Ethnic Revival,” *Transition* no. 105 (2011), pp. 21-29

David Isaacs, “Comedy and Corned Beef: The Genesis of the Sitcom Writing Room,” in *From Shtetl to Stardom: Jews and Hollywood*, edited by Steven J. Ross, Michael Renov, Vincent Brook, and Lisa Ansell (Purdue Univ. Press, 2017), pp. 127–136

Week 13 (April 14-16): Return of the Jews

Jerrold Tanny, “Decoding Seinfeld’s Jewishness,” in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World. Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Eds, Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel Finder (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 53-74

Evan Cooper, “‘You Know, Support the Team’: Representations of Gentile Masculinity on *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*,” *Jewish Film & New Media* (Fall 2019), pp. 187-213

Unit 5: Music

Week 14 (April 21-23): Black-Jewish Mixings

Charles Hersch, “‘Every Time I Try to Play Black, It Comes out Sounding Jewish’: Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity,” *American Jewish History* (July 2013), pp. 259-282

Jonathan Karp, "Blacks, Jews, and the Business of Race Music, 1945-1955," in *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*, ed. Rebecca Kobrin, (Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 141-167

Week 15 (April 28-30): From Rock & Roll to Rock

David Kaufman, *Jewhooping the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 155-211

Final Assignment Due: May 9