

History 213: Jews and American Popular Culture
Spring 2025
Tu/Th 4-5:15pm, 1641 Humanities

Dr. Erin Faigin
faigin@wisc.edu

OH: Thursday 3-4 Humanities 5265 or by appointment

Teaching Assistant	301 W 8:50-9:40
Michael Kaelin	302 W 9:55-10:45
mpkaelin@wisc.edu	303 W 11-11:50
OH: Wednesday 2:30-4:30 Humanities 4268	304 W 1:20-2:10

This course is designed to explore the role that Jews have played in the development of American popular culture, and you might say, the role that American popular culture has played in the development of the American Jewish community. The history of Jews and American popular culture is at once a history of the Jewish community but also a history of the relationship between Jews and other racial and ethnic groups. This course is especially interested in the relationship—both real and imagined—between Jews and African Americans and the significance of that relationship to the production of American popular culture. We will examine many forms of popular culture, including prose and poetry, theater, both musical and dramatic, comedy, popular music, graphic arts, film and television. The history of Jews and American popular culture is crucial to understanding not only the production of popular culture in America, but the history of immigration, the development of modern American politics, and prevailing articulations of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Learning Goals

- Develop familiarity with major developments, figures, and moments in the history of American Jewish popular culture
- Appreciate the complex position of Jews in American society, their relationship with other ethnic and racial groups, and the implications of those relationships in the development of American popular culture
- Produce written assignments that demonstrate attentive revision, thoughtful analysis, clarity of thought, historical accuracy, and logical consistency.
- Develop clear communication skills both inside and outside of the classroom.
- Become familiar with the Wisconsin Center for Film and Television Research and the Wisconsin Historical Society.
- Appreciate the historical contingencies of the world that we live in, particularly as they relate to the media we consume.

Credit Statement

The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include in class seminars, reading, and writing as described in the syllabus.

Assignments

30%	Attendance and Participation
5%	Archival Visits and Worksheet
5%	Annotated Bibliography
5%	Draft and Peer Review Comments
25%	Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research Paper (1500 words)
15%	Exam #1
15%	Exam #2

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is a key component of your success in this class. You may have one excused absence from section—no questions asked. Beyond this absence, absences may affect your attendance and participation grade. Showing up isn't quite enough. For full credit, you should come to class having completed the readings, with paper copies of the primary sources, and ready to answer (and ask!) questions. Part of this grade may include in-class assignments. More information on section will be given to you by your TA.

Archival Visit and Worksheet

During Week 7 and 8, you will visit the Wisconsin Historical Society in section. While there, you will have the chance to look through a small selection of archival sources from the WCFTR (you will be broken into small groups, each group will look at a different collection of sources). You should identify 1-2 archival sources that you will use in your term paper. I will provide you with a worksheet to guide you through the archival process. You must submit a completed Archival Visit Worksheet along with your annotated bibliography.

It is very important that you attend section during Weeks 7 and 8. If you are unable to attend section these weeks—please contact me ASAP so that alternative arrangements at WHS can be made.

Annotated Bibliography

Along with your Archival Visit Worksheet, you will turn in an annotated bibliography, in which you identify an additional (non-archival) primary source and two secondary sources which you will use in your final paper. Along with a properly formatted citation, you should include a brief (around 150 words) description of the source along with some thoughts on the source's relevance or significance to your project.

Draft and Peer Review Comments

By the end of Week 11, you should submit a draft of your final paper to Canvas for Peer Review. Drafts should be at least 75% complete and written in paragraphs (an outline *will not* suffice). You will then be given a fellow peer's draft to review, which you must complete by the end of the following week. Peer Review Comments should be substantial and thoughtful. For best practices on Peer Review, see [this guide](#) from the Writing Center.

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research Paper

To culminate the research you conduct throughout the semester, you will submit a final draft of your paper on Canvas by the end of Week 13. A rubric will be provided on Canvas, to which you should pay close attention. Final papers should be 1,500 words (~6 pages, double spaced), in Times New Roman Font, 1" margins. Citations should be formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style.

Grade Scale

93-100	A
87-92	AB
83-87	B
82-77	BC
77-70	C
60-70	D
0-59	F

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.

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. Any extensions should be discussed with the TA.

History Lab

Students are encouraged to use the History Department's own writing center, The History Lab. The History Lab is staffed by graduate students in the History Department, available to help you with brainstorming, research, revisions, and even those pesky citations. In addition to in person services, they have several helpful [writing guides](#), many of which we will be interacting with throughout the semester. To schedule an appointment at the History Lab, click [here](#).

Accessibility

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

The University of Wisconsin-Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform me of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. I will work either directly with the you or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

The McBurney Disability Resource Center
Phone: (608) 263-2741
Address: 702 W. Johnson Street, Suite 2104
Email: mcburney@studentlife.wisc.edu

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

By virtue of enrollment, you agree to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

The use of generative AI in the production of course assignments is not allowed. Suspicion of will be treated in the same manner as plagiarism.

For detailed information, please see <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>

Course Schedule

Note: readings subject, but unlikely, to change

Week 1. What is *Jewish* Popular Culture?

- (Tu, 1/21) Culture 101
- (W, 1/22) Section

Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 1-29.

Week 2. Immigrant Yiddish Culture

- (Th, 1/23) Yiddish Print Culture
- (Tu, 1/28) Yiddish Stage and Song
- (W, 1/29) Section

“The Yiddish Theatre” in Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. (Open Road Integrated Media: 1989)

Morris Rosenfeld, “The Nightingale to the Workman” (1897) <https://poets.org/poem/nightingale-workman>

Abraham Cahan, “Should Jewish Children Play Baseball” (1903)
<https://forward.com/culture/133029/should-children-play-baseball/>

Week 3. Taste Makers

- (Th, 1/30) Jewish Movie Moguls
- (Tu, 2/4) Jews and Fashion
- (W, 2/5) Section

May, Lary and May, Elaine Tyler. “Why Jewish Movie Moguls: An Exploration in American Culture.” *American Jewish History* 72, no. 1 (September 1982).

Dixon, Winston. “‘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 Bernardi, Daniel, Pomerance, Murray, and Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava, eds. *Hollywood's Chosen People: The Jewish Experience in American Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012.

Week 4. Jazz Singer

- (Th, 2/6) IN CLASS SCREENING – *THE JAZZ SINGER*
- (Tu, 2/11) The Politics of Blackface in the Vaudeville Era
- (W, 2/12) Section

Rogin, Michael. “Making America Home: Racial Masquerade and Ethnic Assimilation in the Transition to Talking Picture.” *Journal of American History* (December 1992).

Musser, Charles. “Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and the Jazz Singer?: Melodrama, Blackface, and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture.” *Film History* 23, no. 2 (January 2011).

Week 5. Jazz, Race Music, Rhythm and Blues

- (Th, 2/13) Big Band
- (Tu, 2/18) Rock and Roll
- (W, 2/19) Section

Hersch, Charles. “‘Every Time I Try to Play Black, It Comes Out Sounding Jewish’: Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity.” *American Jewish History* 97, no. 3 (2013): 259–82.

Karp, Jonathan. “Blacks, Jews, and the Business of Race Music, 1945-1955.” In Kobrin, Rebecca, ed. *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Week 6. Popular Culture Becomes Political

- (Th, 2/20) The Hollywood Blacklist
- (Tu, 2/25) Comics, Superheroes and the American Dream
- (W, 2/26) Section

Suber, Howard. "Politics and Popular Culture: Hollywood at Bay, 1933–1953." *American Jewish History* 68, no. 4 (1979): 517–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23881853>.

Caplan, Jennifer. "Public Heroes, Secret Jews: Jewish Identity and Comic Books." *Journal of Jewish Identities* 14, no. 1 (January 2021)

Week 7. Mid Century Splendor?

- (Th, 2/27) The Goldbergs
- (Tu, 3/4) Rogers and Hammerstein
- (W, 3/5) SECTIONS VISIT WHS

Lipsitz, George. "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television." In *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1990. 39–76.

Most, Andrea. "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught: The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific." *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3 (October 2000).

WATCH "The New Landlord," The Goldbergs, Season 1, Episode
<https://youtu.be/INSeVXfs1oE?si=IXvd2rZ6kOb6IKez>

WATCH Oscar Hammerstein Introduces "You've Got to be Taught."
https://youtu.be/AAls_gUhlQw?si=5zLbx4AhEWjPge1D

Week 8. You Are Entering the Twilight Zone

- (Th, 3/6) Midterm
- (Tu, 3/11) The Twilight Zone
- (W, 3/12) SECTIONS VISIT WHS

No reading for Week 8.

Week 9. Have I Got a Joke for You...

- (Th, 3/13) The Borscht Belt
- (Tu, 3/18) Greenwich Village
- (W, 3/19) Section
- (Th, 3/20) IN CLASS SCREENING

Nahshon, Edna. "ACT 10. Borscht Belt Entertainment" In *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* edited by Edna Nahshon, 256-275. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2016.

(F, 3/21) ARCHIVAL WORKSHEET AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

Week 10. Spring Break

Week 11. Myth and Memory

- (Tu, 4/1) Jewish History Gets the Hollywood Treatment (Exodus, FOTR)
- (W, 4/2) Section

Moore, Deborah Dash. "Exodus: Real to Reel to Real." In *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler and Michael Hoberman. New York: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Solomon, Alisa. "11. Tevye's Travels: From Yiddish Everyman to American Icon" In *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* edited by Edna Nahshon, 276-303. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2016.

(W, 4/2) DRAFT DUE

Week 12. New (Jewish) Hollywood

- (Th, 4/3) "We were two poor kids in Brooklyn...": Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond
- (Tu, 4/8) New (Jewish) Hollywood: Woody Allen and Elaine May
- (W, 4/9) Section

"Barbra Streisand: Hollywood Jew." In Kaufman, David. *Jewhooing the Sixites: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2012.

Brook, Vincent. "A Wave of Their Own: How Jewish Filmmakers Invented the New Hollywood," in *Jewish Film and New Media* 7, no.1 (Spring 2019).

AMERICA: The Jazz Singer (Finale) https://youtu.be/5A4E0rcJ7fE?si=cXL_KzqdRKoSPPnM

WATCH The Heartbreak Kid (1972) (available on Youtube)

(W, 4/9) PEER REVIEW COMMENTS DUE

Week 13. Commitment to the Past and the Future

- (Th, 4/10) Springtime for Hitler?
- (Tu, 4/15) Life is a Cabaret?
- (W, 4/16) Section

Readings for Week 13

Bial, Henry. "Welcome Back to Berlin: Lessons in Staging the Holocaust from 'Cabaret,' 1966 and 1998." In *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 15, no. 2 (April 2003). 61-70.

Fermaglich, Kirsten. "Mel Brooks' The Producers: Tracing American Culture Through Comedy, 1967-2007." In *American Studies* 48, no. 4 (December 2007). 59-87.

Grey, Joel. "I Starred in 'Cabaret.' We Need to Heed Its Warning." *New York Times*, November 24, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/24/opinion/cabaret-trump-joel-grey.html>

WATCH Springtime for Hitler (1968)
<https://youtu.be/ovCf9VRLnDY?si=sozOi5eMyvPY0OLH>

WATCH Cabaret (1972)

Week 14. Crypto-J.A.P.S. and Others

- (Th, 4/17) Jews on TV in the 90s
- (Tu, 4/22) Fer sure fer sure, she's a Valley Girl and there is No Cure
- (W, 4/23) Section

Isaacs, David. "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, 127-36. Purdue University Press, 2017.

"Seinfeld's Mailman" in Moss, Joshua Louis. *Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

WATCH "Fran Makes a Scene"

(F, 4/18) FINAL DRAFT DUE

Week 15. Millennial Jews

- (Th, 4/24) Heeb-Hop
- (Tu, 4/29) The New American Jewess
- (W, 4/30) Section

Stratton, Jon. "Sampling and Jewishness: a short history of Jewish sampling and its relationship with hip-hop." *Shofar* 34, no. 3 (2016)

Luzon, Danny. "'Exiled from Exile Itself': Jewish Privilege and the Feminist Afterlives of Yiddish in Crazy Ex-Girlfriend and Broad City" *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 41, no. 2 (September 2022).

Week 16. Conclusion

- (Th, 5/1) Exam #2

No Reading for Week 16!