

**University of Colorado Boulder, College of Music**  
**The American Film Musical**

**Professor:** Michael W. Harris

**Course Time:** MWF 12-12:50PM (Lecture), M 6-8:50PM (Film Screening)  
**Locations:** Imig Music C199 (Lecture), Eaton Humanities 150 (Film Screening)

**Course Description:** Examines the development of filmed musicals from the beginning of sound movies through the Golden Age of Musicals to the present. Emphasizes analysis and relationships of characters, songs, and incidental music.

**Course Goals:** Understand and be able to place into context film musicals using correct terminology and facts. Also grasp the film musical's place in the history of both music and film in American culture. Be able to think critically about film and use correct terminology in its assessment.

**Texts:**

Required:

Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1987)

Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford University Press, 2010)

On Reserve in the Music Library:

Steven Cohan, ed., *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader* (Routledge, 2002)

William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Thomas Hischak, *Film It With Music* (Greenwood Press, 2001)

E-Reserve:

There will also be supplemental articles that will be placed on D2L.

**Grading:**

Group Project: 50 points

Final Essays: 50 points

Final Project: 100 points

Film Essays: 60 points

Class Participation: 20 points

Attendance: 20 points

Total: 300 points

**Attendance Policy:** Success in the course will rely heavily on regular attendance as there are no exams or quizzes. As such, a component of your grade will be attendance based. All students have two unexcused absences for lectures and one unexcused absence to film screenings will be allowed. After that, you will lose one point from your attendance grade of which there are 20 total. Reasons for excused absences include: medical reasons (with a doctor's note), family emergencies (death of family member, etc.), or school related activities (with a note from a University official). This does not include sorority/fraternity events, death of pets, or any appointments, jobs, etc. that you had the ability to schedule at a different time.

**Classroom Participation:** This class is built around group work and participation of the students in discussion of the films, as such everyone is expected to be able to ask and answer questions within the classroom, both when called upon or offer their thoughts on remarks made by both the professor and fellow students. To this end, there is also a classroom participation component of your grade (20 points), and full credit is dependent upon a high level of engagement in classroom discussions.

**Class Organization:** A normal week in class will have the following format: Monday lecture (in which I'll set up the large points that will be seen and discussed in that week's film and readings), Monday evening screening, Wednesday discussion (in which you will discuss as a group questions that I will provide for the first 10-15 minutes of class and then we will have class discussion for the remainder of the time), and Friday group presentations (more on these below).

**Readings:** There will be a lot of reading to be done every week. I expect you have this reading done by the Wednesday class period as it will be critical to the group and classroom discussion that you are prepared each week. A normal week will have roughly 50 to 60 pages of readings (this number could be higher or lower, though). I would recommend taking notes as you read each assignment, along with writing down thoughts during or after the film screenings.

**Schedule** (Subject to Change at a Moment's Notice):

***Unit One – Foundations of Aesthetic and Critical Analysis***

Week 1 – Screening: *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along-Blog* (2008) w/Commentary! The Musical  
Readings: Wood – “Analytical Approaches” and Altman Chapters I and II (pp 1-27)

Week 2 – Screening: None (Labor Day), watch clips of *West Side Story* on own  
Readings: Altman Chapters III and IV (pp 28-89)

Week 3 – Screening: *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)  
Readings: Altman Chapter V (pp 90-128) and Barrios Chapter 1 (pp 15-42)

***Unit Two – Origins of the American Film Musical***

Week 4 – Screening: *The Broadway Melody* (1929)  
Readings: Barrios Chapters 2-4 (pp 43-100)

Week 5 – Screening: *Love Me Tonight* (1932)  
Readings: Barrios Chapters 14-15 (pp 313-357)

**Essay 1 Due**

Week 6 – Screening: *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933)  
Readings: Barrios Chapters 8 and 16 (pp 183-214, 359-393)

Week 7 – Screening: *Top Hat* (1935)  
Readings: Barrios Chapters 10-11 and 17-Finale (pp 237-267, 395-424)

**Essay 2 Due**

### ***Unit Three – Genre and Style Theories of Film Musicals***

Week 8 – Screening: Fairy Tale Musical – *An American in Paris* (1951)

Readings: Altman Chapter VI (pp 129-199)

Week 9 – Screening: Show Musical – *Cabaret* (1972)

Readings: Altman Chapter VII (pp 200-271)

#### **Essay 3 Due**

Week 10 – Screening: Animated Musical – *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993)

Readings: Smith – “The Animated Film Musical,” Dahl – “Notes on Cartoon Music,” and Halfyard – “Everybody Scream!”

Week 11 – Screening: Folk Musical – *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971)

Readings: Altman Chapter VIII (pp 272-327)

#### **Essay 4 Due**

Week 12 – Screening: Disney Musical – *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

Readings: Sickels – “Disney” and Miller – “Of Tunes and Toons”

Week 14 – Screening: Rock Opera – *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973)

Readings: Elickler – “Rock Opera,” Grant – “Musicals and the Problem of Rock,” Warfield – “Is Rock a Four-letter Word?”

#### **Essay 5 Due**

### **Week 14 – No Class (Fall Break)**

Week 15 – Screening: Genre/Culture/Parody – *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999)

Readings: Altman Chapter IX and Conclusion (pp 328-364)

Week 16 – Screening: Student Selected Film w/Cinema Interruptus

#### **Essay 6 Due**

Final Exam – See Below

### **Assignments:**

*Film Essays:* These are short essays that will be submitted on-line using the blogging site Storify. They are to be no less than 700 words in length (and 1000 words should be a better goal), and you will e-mail me a link to the post. These essays are basic response papers to our weekly viewings and discussions. You should write about how the songs function within the film’s plot, interesting points relating to the film’s production, reception, etc. that are discussed by the professor and in the Friday group presentations. Moreover, though, you should think of these essays as also part criticism. What did you like or dislike and, most importantly, why? The ability to think critically about film musicals, and film in general, is an important goal of this class. You are required to write **SIX** of these essays. The musical screened as part of the final cannot be used for one of these essays. Each essay is worth 10 points and will be evaluated based on engagement with material (film screening and class discussions), writing style (grammar, flow, etc.), and use of on-line format (you should integrate photos and videos into the post, I will discuss this more in class). **Essays are due by the Friday of the week indicated above.**

*Group Project:* Each group, which will be determined in the first week of class, will select one of the musicals and present on it the Friday of the viewing. Each member of the group will select one of the following aspects and present a short talk (approx. 5 minutes) on it.

Each member will also prepare a short blog post and submit a link for class discussion on D2L. Possible topics include: reception history (both contemporary and current views), production history, relationship between song and plot (can be done on a single or multiple songs), cultural history and background, underscore music and connections with songs, or musical styles (of either the songs themselves or performance style). Should the group wish to, they can also incorporate a live musical performance to go along with the presentation (you will need to coordinate with the professor if a pianist will be required). Projects will be graded based on the quality of research presented, organization (staying within allotted time), and group cohesion.

*Final Project:* Selecting a new musical not viewed in class (either regular viewings or final “exam” film), each member of the group will write a short, 5 page essay about a single aspect of the film. After each student has finished their essay, the group will come together to compile the essays into a formal paper and write an introduction and conclusion as a group. You will also need to compile a group bibliography and use proper citations (in Chicago/Turabian style) Grading for this project will be as follows:

100 points total:

60 points are based on your individual essays (40 points for content/10 points for correct citations in your portion/10 points for grammar and style)

20 points for the group bibliography (15 for having at least 5-7 sources, 5 points for correctly formatting the citations)

A Note on Sources: While internet sources can be consulted and cited if you evaluate them and determine if they are reliable; do not cite Wikipedia! You can use Wikipedia to find other sources via bibliography and citations, but Wikipedia is like a dictionary or encyclopedia, it is not cited. I will post a link to a guide for evaluating web sources.

20 points for Group Portions (10 points for the Introduction, 10 points for the Conclusion; will be graded on grammar/style and how well the essays are integrated into it)

**Paper Formatting Guidelines:** Have a cover page with your title and all group members name on it. Also include an indication of who wrote what section. All other pages should be formatted as follows: 12pt Times New Roman Font, double spaced, with 1 inch margins. Make sure that the option of “extra space between paragraphs” is turned off in Microsoft Word. The bibliography should be formatted single spaced with an extra space between entries.

*Final Essays:* In lieu of a final exam, this class will screen a musical during the final week of classes and during the final exam time using Roger Ebert’s “Cinema Interruptus” technique. The actual musical will be selected through by the class after the third week through a series of on-line votes—you will be, in a sense, writing your own final! The film in its entirety will be screened during the final Monday screening time, after which you will write a 2 ½-3 page essay discussing your own critical analysis of the film and any lingering questions you may have. This will be due in class on the Wednesday after. The remaining class time (Wednesday, Thursday, and the Final Exam time), will be devoted to re-watching the film

using Ebert's method in which anyone can call for the movie to be stopped and ask a question or bring up a point for discussion. As a class, we will analysis the film together. After we have completed this, you will submit a second 2 ½-3 page essay discussing how your thoughts might have changed and how your questions were answered, due to the class analysis and discussion. Each essay is worth 25 points and will be graded based on depth and thoughtfulness of analysis, overall writing style (grammar, flow, etc.), and use of analytical techniques developed in class.

Read more about this technique on Roger Ebert's blog at:  
[http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2008/08/how\\_to\\_read\\_a\\_movie.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2008/08/how_to_read_a_movie.html)

The first essay is due the Wednesday of the last week of class and the second essay is due by 5PM the day after the final exam time.

### **A Brief Note on Writing and Research:**

I am asking all students to conform to the Chicago/Turabian style manual or MLA in their papers and citations. You can find copies of these style guides, which governs how to format footnotes and bibliographies, along with other things, in the library or on-line. If you have any trouble with using the guide, please e-mail me or come see me during office hours. If you do not use this style guide, you will lose points on your papers.

I am also asking you to be careful in editing and writing your papers. When writing your short papers, feel free to develop a more casual/conversational style like you might find in journalistic or blog writing. Though, make sure to still edit and remain professional. My hope is that you learn to be versatile in your writing which is a useful skill to develop. I will discuss some good models and examples ahead of assigning the first short paper.

When researching for your papers, you may utilize a site like Wikipedia to do preliminary research and find other sources (a well written article will include a list of citations, a bibliography, along with external links), however, treat Wikipedia like any other Dictionary or Encyclopedia. Consult it, help it to direct your research, but it is neither a source one cites (it is considered "Common Knowledge"), nor the final word on a subject. It is a beginning, and sometimes, like any other source, it can sometimes be wrong or contradictory.

You will need to develop a keen sense for bad information with researching any subject, especially when consulting with on-line sources, though any source should be put through this scrutiny. Ask yourself three questions: does the author cite sources, are these sources credible (i.e. published by legitimate publishing houses or websites), and does the writing have multiple editorial mistakes (errors in grammar, spelling, etc.)? If the answer to any one of these questions is "Yes," then you might want to reconsider the information the source provides. Also, beware of any source (internet, print, or otherwise), that makes broad statements that seem to contradict established facts. With these tools, you will be well on your way to doing credible research.

Lastly, know the difference between "opinion" and "fact." Facts are things that you can back up with sources that are not susceptible to emotions and bias (of course, so much of history is always being reevaluated and rewritten because of long standing biases, but this is mostly due to interpretation of facts, but for now we'll ignore that prickly issue). Opinions, however, are something we deal with much more in music and other arts. We pass judgments on the quality of works of arts, if we like it or not, find it pleasing or not, etc. But a key part of this class is learning how to evaluate music free of the bias of opinion. Even if you don't like a particular

piece, it is important to understand it, its impact on our culture, and how the piece came to be. Your opinion is a separate, though still important, thing. It is always better to be able to cite specific things you don't like about a piece than to simply say "it's bad." This class will teach you to be able to say "it's bad because..." which is the beginning of a deeper knowledge and appreciation.