What is Country Music?

Nic McPhee

IS 1001 - First Year Seminar Human Diversity: American Roots Music

Following up on our discussions of “What is country music?”, I've put together a collection of seven songs which I've asked the library to put on electronic reserve:

- “Breathe” by Faith Hill from Breathe
- “Church” by Lyle Lovett from Joshua Judges Ruth
- “Fox chase” by DeFord Bailey from From where I stand
- “Ghost of Tom Joad” by Rage Against The Machine from Renegades
- “Jolene” by The White Stripes from a college radio EP
- “Midnight” by Ice-T from O.G. Original gangster
  - Warning: This is not PG-13 and includes loads of swearing and violence (but no sex), so think about where you are and who you're around before you start blasting it. (Going through these songs over and over in my office while I was building this list was an interesting experience...) Forewarned is forearmed.
- “Rusty cage” by Johnny Cash from Unchained

You should:

- Listen to each song (probably more than once)
- For each song write about the ways in which that song is/could be considered a “country song.”

Some notes:

- This is not a “formal” writing assignment, but it will be graded so you need to take it seriously and put thought into it. I want to see some analysis and wheels turning. Don't just scribble some stuff down and expect to do well.
- Some of these are pretty clearly not (traditional) country songs, but I didn't just pick them at random. Don't disregard a song because it's not what you expected; push past that initial reaction and think about what we put up as properties of country music and see which might still apply.
- It's equally important to note that while some of these are by well known country artists, we still need to think carefully about the ways in which these songs are (or aren't) country songs.
- You need to write specifically about these songs and not about “all country” or “all rap” or any other broad (and therefore typically unhelpful) category. What is it about these songs that specifically comes from or is similar to the traditions of country music as we've read about if and listened to it?
Feel free to do a little research on songs, musicians, or lyrics as seems appropriate.

This is not an index card assignment (because I don't know how you'd make it fit). Do this on normal paper; handwritten is OK, but using a computer will make it easier to make changes and refine your thoughts. You can put these on separate pieces of paper or all together (as long as they're clearly separated and labelled).

Part of this is due Tuesday, 24 Sep 2002. In particular I'd like you to have written on at least four of the seven songs by Tuesday and turn that in at the beginning of class. The writings on the other three songs are then due at the beginning of class Thursday, 26 Sep 2002. You can do more than four for Tuesday if you want.

I don't know when the songs will actually be up on e-reserves, but hopefully it will be sometime today (Friday) or tomorrow (Saturday). If that turns out to not be true, then we'll adjust the due dates. You are responsible for checking, though, and not just assuming that they're not up. If you do see them up and I haven't posted a note to that effect, feel free to send me an e-mail and I'll post a note.

If you're having trouble accessing the music on electronic reserve let me know so we can make sure you have access to the music since this is the largest assignment we've had so far. Remember that you can always use the public computers with headphones (listed on EReservesSystem), or see if a friend can lend a hand.

-- NicMcPhee - 20 Sep 2002