

It Wasn't Just Dylan and the Beatles!

LT/EN 159 Contemporary
American Literature

“It’s Only Rock ‘n’ Roll:” 1960s

Popular Music in Cultural Context



Spring 2018

Contrary to current mythology, most popular music during the decade of the 1960s was neither revolutionary nor particularly innovative. Mainstream radio was mostly AM and the music industry controlled what was played and created for the teen audiences. It was only in the later 1960s that innovations born of the rise of FM radio, national cultural politics, the confluence of several genres of music, and formerly underground publications began to change the shape of popular musical tastes. We will consider music from the entire decade, reading not only histories of the industry and its performers, but also cultural criticism developed first by the emerging “rock press” of the late sixties and contemporary cultural studies looking back at that period.

We will examine the roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll (including Blues, R&B, and Rockabilly), the musical streams of the decade (teen idols through surf music, the folk revival, the British Invasion, the San Francisco scene, guitar heroes, etc.), and also learn the economics of the industry and the major role played by record producers and songwriters. Moreover, the political and economic history that shaped the decade will be seen as profoundly influencing the evolution of popular music and its reception. Readings and listening will be combined with lectures and video material, and discussion will be highly encouraged in class. Assignments will include two papers (one an analysis of a song and the other a final research paper) and several in-class quizzes.

