

Course Rationale

Music surrounds us – we share our listening with people we have never met in supermarkets and restaurants, we listen to music with friends, when watching films or television adverts, and we listen to music by ourselves, when walking or in cars and buses using earphones on the way to school. Today, we can create playlists, watch music videos online and download albums without having to leave the house, connecting with people from places we have never visited.

Similarly, American culture surrounds us – just think of how many songs in the charts right now are by American artists, yet America popular music has itself been influenced by other cultures. In this course, we'll be looking back in American history to when music was not as easily accessible as it is now but still had huge effects on American people and further abroad, including here in Britain. Music, of all different types, plays a central role in cultures across the world which influence one another, and as we'll see, it can be interpreted (and misinterpreted) in different ways.

Through examining the relationship between American history and American music, this course will highlight major issues in American history, including themes of race, gender and class (someone's perceived social or economic status). By analysing a range of different musical genres (styles), students will identify changes and continuity in American popular music and develop an understanding of the importance of song as social protest, and to social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement.

Just as historians contextualise (put into its context) primary sources by placing documents (such as diaries, photographs and newspapers) within a specific time, place and culture, students will engage in historical thinking using music as a primary source that tells a story, asking how songs speak to a particular moment in history and beyond. The course also asks whose story is being told, questioning how music both does and does not reflect the American people.

In this course, students will practice skills in close reading to evaluate the use of language in popular American songs. Through dissecting (pulling apart) the language, tone, imagery and structure of songs, students will infer (work out) meanings. Critically analysing songs allows us to understand the past and the world we live in now, giving us greater understanding of world cultures that impact us all.