

# “Can good people like bad music?” and other questions

## PHIL 13N – Syllabus

Instructor: Willie Costello

Autumn Quarter. Prerequisites: None (Introductory Seminar). WAYS Certification: AII.

Lectures on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 15:00 to 16:20 in Bldg 70 Rm 72A1. Office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 14:00 to 15:00 in Bldg 100 Rm 102M, or by appointment (email [williec@stanford.edu](mailto:williec@stanford.edu)). Course website available through [coursework.stanford.edu](http://coursework.stanford.edu) (please check regularly for updates).

### *Course description*

Think of a musical artist you just can't stand to listen to. Chances are this artist has thousands, if not millions, of adoring fans. That is, what's "bad music" to you is "good music" to others. This fact is not shocking: we all know that people have different tastes in music, and in art more generally. But what does this fact tell us about art, other people, and ourselves? Are some of us right and others of us wrong about what's good and bad music? Is there reason to think that some music is "objectively" better than other music? Can we say that those who like "bad music" are missing something, or mistaken in their tastes? If so, why not think it's *us* that are mistaken? How much are our own tastes bound up with "who we are"? And what might this mean for our capacity to appreciate tastes which are not our own?

This seminar is an investigation into these and other questions. Through the specific lens of music, we will explore the nature of artistic taste more generally. Our main course text will be Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, a popular introduction to our topic. We will also look at and discuss actual album reviews, pieces of music journalism, and news stories. Class meetings will be heavily discussion-based, and students should come to class ready to share, debate, and scrutinize their own musical tastes. Outside of class, students will develop their understanding through a variety of informal and creative writing assignments, such as exploratory journal entries and mock fan letters. Your taste in music may very well change as a result of this seminar, but this is not its aim. The goal is to understand what it means to disagree

about art, through which you will learn how to respond more intelligently and empathetically to such disagreements as they come up in your everyday life.

### *Course learning objectives*

By the end of this course, you should be able to...

- dissect your own and others' ideas and intuitions about music
- identify the implicit assumptions and presuppositions being made in others' appraisals of music
- evaluate the merits of different assumptions about music vis-à-vis one another, both in the abstract and with respect to particular works of music
- define and explain the major philosophical theories of taste we have discussed, and apply these theories to real-life discussions and disagreements
- express your own thoughts and feelings about music more effectively
- construct and defend a personal conception of "good music"

### *Course contract*

This course is a collaboration between me, you, and your classmates. You will be regularly called upon to actively participate in class discussions and other activities, and your contributions will directly influence what we cover in seminar. **It is not necessary that you agree with everything I or anyone else says in this class, but it is necessary that you always listen and respond with respect.** With this in mind, I put forth the following "course contract", applying to everyone in the class (students and instructor alike):

- we have the responsibility to **contribute** to the collective learning process (which includes asking questions when we're not understanding something)
- we have the responsibility to **be receptive** to other points of view than our own
- we have the right to **dissent or differ** from the instructor and from others in the class
- we have the responsibility to **welcome challenges** to our own opinions, and be willing to support our claims with further reasons (or be honest when we don't have any)
- we have the right to **personal dignity**, which at no point should be infringed upon in any way by the conduct of others

### *Texts*

You will need a copy of the following book, available for purchase at the Stanford Bookstore:

- Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (Bloomsbury Academic / Continuum, 978-0826427885) – approx. \$14.95

## *Evaluation*

Your grade for the course will be determined by the following components: in-class participation (in seminar activities and discussions); weekly micro-assignments (informal writing exercises, done at home before class); and four papers, spaced out across the term. The full grade breakdown is as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
In-class participation	20%	N/A
Micro-assignments	30%	Tuesday of each week
First paper: philosophical reflection	10%	October 11
Second paper: critical evaluation	15%	November 1
Third paper: sociological analysis	10%	November 23
Fourth paper: position paper	15%	December 11

### *More information on assignments*

The four papers are intended to evaluate your analytical writing abilities while at the same time allowing you to develop your own thoughts on the issues we will be discussing in the course. Each paper will ask you to investigate the concept of taste from a different angle.

- » Your first paper will be a **philosophical reflection** on the negative feelings you have towards some particular musical artist or genre. This will develop your ability to think abstractly and generally about matters of art and taste. (750 words)
- » Your second paper will be a **critical evaluation** of two actual album reviews of your choosing, one positive and one negative. This will develop your ability to identify the implicit assumptions which others make in their discussions of art. (1000 words)
- » Your third paper will be a **sociological analysis** of a particular musical fanbase. This will develop your ability to understand others' tastes from a human perspective. (1000 words)
- » Your fourth paper will be a **position paper** asking you to construct and defend a personal conception of "good music". This will develop your ability to synthesize the various ideas about taste we've looked at, so as to form a positive position. (1000 words)

The micro-assignments and in-class activities are intended to prepare you for the papers, and help you develop the skills they require. A preview of micro-assignment topics is provided on the course schedule below.

**Instructions and guidelines for all assignments will be posted on the course website.**

### *Turning it in & late policies*

- » **Papers must be submitted via CourseWork by 11:59 P.M. on the day they are due.** Late papers will be docked 5% for each 24 hour period between the due date and when they are handed in (unless accompanied by valid medical documentation). Late papers may be submitted up to 7 days after the due date; any papers not received by this time will automatically receive a 0. Formatting guidelines will be provided along with assignment prompt.
- » **Micro-assignments must be completed and submitted on CourseWork by 3:00 P.M. on the day they are due** (Tuesday of each week, except where otherwise noted on the schedule). Micro-assignments submitted after this deadline will receive no credit. There will be ten micro-assignments in total over the course of the term, and each micro-assignment counts for 3% of your final grade. Full credit for micro-assignments is awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to respond intelligently to the assigned prompt(s). Determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.
- » **You have one “get out of micro-assignment free” card.** At the end of term I will give you full credit for one (and only one) micro-assignment which you did not submit. You do not need to tell me when you’re choosing not to submit a micro-assignment; the credit will be awarded automatically.

### *Technology in the classroom*

You should, if possible, bring some Wifi-enabled portable electronic device (laptop, smartphone, tablet) to each class meeting. This will allow me to coordinate certain in-class activities without having to waste a lot of paper on print-outs. If this will not be possible for you, just come talk with me and I’ll tell you what to do instead. (Also, note that, if your device ever breaks or gets stolen, you can borrow laptops from the Tech Desk at Lathrop Library.)

You should also feel encouraged to use your portable electronic device during class in order to enhance your learning experience (e.g., by checking the Wikipedia page of something we’re discussing that you’re not familiar with; to help you remember a particular example related to what we’re talking about; and so on). I trust you not to use your portable electronic device for anything unrelated to the class.

### *Honor Code*

One of the aims of this (and really, *any* university-level) course is to develop your ability to express yourself intelligently and responsibly. Part of what expressing yourself intelligently and responsibly involves is situating your own views in relation to others'. Plagiarizing others' views, or failing to acknowledge views you are responding to, run counter to this aim. Because of this, plagiarism and all other forms of academic dishonesty will be treated with the greatest severity in this course. You should make yourself familiar with the University's Honor Code; see [communitystandards.stanford.edu](http://communitystandards.stanford.edu).

### *Accessibility*

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: [studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oea](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oea)).

### *Academic Resources*

The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking offers support in any and all areas of both writing and speaking. Both scheduled appointments and drop-in tutoring are available and always encouraged. New, residence-based tutoring is also available in dorms.

- Writing Tutors: [undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing](http://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing)
- Speaking Tutors: [undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/speaking](http://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/speaking)
- Academic Skills Coaching: [adinag.youcanbook.me](http://adinag.youcanbook.me)

### *Email*

Questions should ideally be brought to me in person, either at lecture or during my office hours. If you would prefer to correspond via email, my email address is [williec@stanford.edu](mailto:williec@stanford.edu). I will respond to emails within two business days. And feel encouraged to forward me links to articles and videos you come across that seem related to our discussions! The issues we will be talking about are of more than just academic interest, and one of the goals of this course is to help you see how these issues relate to and arise in our everyday lives.

*Schedule of Readings and Assignments (Weeks 1–6)*

WEEKS 1–3	Thinking about taste		
9/22–9/24	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #1 REQUIRED READING	Why I hate [this musical artist] <i>LTAL</i> ch. 1: Let’s Talk About Hate	(DUE 9/24)
9/29–10/1	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #2 REQUIRED READING OPTIONAL READING OPTIONAL READING	Why I hate [this musical genre] <i>LTAL</i> ch. 2: Let’s Talk About Pop <i>LTAL</i> ch. 3: Let’s Talk in French <i>LTAL</i> ch. 4: Let’s Talk About World Conquest	
10/6–10/8	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #3 REQUIRED READING REQUIRED READING	Why I love [this musical artist/genre] <i>LTAL</i> ch. 5: Let’s Talk About Schmaltz <i>LTAL</i> ch. 6: Let’s Sing Really Loud	
10/11	<b>DUE BY MIDNIGHT</b>	First paper: philosophical reflection	
WEEKS 4–6	The philosophy of taste		
10/13–10/15	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #4 REQUIRED READING	A negative review of an album I love <i>LTAL</i> ch. 7: Let’s Talk About Taste	(DUE 10/15)
10/20–10/22	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #5 REQUIRED READING	A positive review of an album I hate <i>LTAL</i> ch. 7: Let’s Talk About Taste (reread)	
10/27–10/29	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #6 REQUIRED READING	Can good people like morally bad music? <i>LTAL</i> ch. 11: Let’s Talk About...	
11/1	<b>DUE BY MIDNIGHT</b>	Second paper: critical evaluation	

*Schedule of Readings and Assignments (Weeks 7–10)*

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WEEKS 7–9	The sociology of taste	
11/3–11/5	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #7	Who are the fans? (DUE 11/5)
	REQUIRED READING	<i>LTAL</i> ch. 8: Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste
11/10–11/12	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #8	Why are the fans fans?
	REQUIRED READING	<i>LTAL</i> ch. 9: Let's Talk with Some Fans
	<b>SECRET FIELD TRIP!</b>	(DATE & TIME TBA)
11/17–11/19	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #9	Fan letter to an artist
	REQUIRED READING	<i>LTAL</i> ch. 10: Let's Do a Punk Version...
11/23	<b>DUE BY MIDNIGHT</b>	Third paper: sociological analysis
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WEEK 10	Wrap-up	
12/1–12/3	MICRO-ASSIGNMENT #10	Closing reflection
	REQUIRED READING	<i>LTAL</i> ch. 12: Let's Talk About Love
12/11	<b>DUE BY MIDNIGHT</b>	Fourth paper: position paper