

Popular music studies

with Professor Lori Burns

Talking points

Knowledge & Comprehension

1. How does music circulate in contemporary culture?
2. What is gatekeeping, and what does it mean for the music industry?
3. What are 'disruptive divas', and what effect do they have on their genres?
4. Which sonic features does Lori 'look at' when analysing a spectrogram?

Analysis & Application

5. What is your favourite musical genre? Who are the dominant artists? What characteristics of their identities do these artists appear to share? What cultural values shape this genre? What aspects of cultural identity are not represented?
6. How might your favourite genre be opened up to become more inclusive? Who should it be including more?

Synthesis

7. What problems might arise as people try to make musical genres more inclusive? How could these problems be tackled?

Evaluation

8. Choose a musical artist who conveys a strong and unique identity. What messages are they sending through musical style, genre category, song lyrics, video images, etc.? To what extent do they meet genre norms? In what way is their identity challenging genre expectations?
9. Why is it important for musical genres to be inclusive of artists from all kinds of different backgrounds?
10. Why do you think some genres have become exclusionary?

Activity

Analyse a song

When Lori analyses a song, she considers not only the lyrics and the music but also any videos or images that relate to the song, as well as live performances. She looks at each aspect of the song in detail and then thinks about how they intersect and relate to one another. "Sometimes, the words of a song promote one message, while the music is in contradiction; sometimes, the video images communicate a narrative that reinforces the words and/or music of a song," explains Lori.

Choose a song that you like and analyse it using Lori's technique. Start by thinking about each aspect of the song: the lyrics, the music, the visual imagery and the live performance (you can find music videos and live versions of songs on YouTube).

Use the following questions to guide you:

Lyrics: What are the lyrics about? Are they telling a story? Are there any particular topics and themes that the lyrics focus on? Are the lyrics from a first or third person perspective? Do the lyrics include slang words?

Music: How does the music make you feel? What instruments are used? How are the instruments played? Is the music fast or slow, quiet or loud, soft or heavy? What structure does the song follow? Do any parts of the song repeat? Do any musical themes return throughout the song?

Visual Imagery: What is shown in the imagery? What colours are used? Are the images literal or abstract? Do the images tell a story? What have the images been taken/recorded on? From who's point of view is the imagery taken from?

Live Performances: How are the musicians playing their instruments? What are the musicians wearing? How are the musicians moving? Is there any set design or are there any props? How are the musicians interacting with the audience?

How do these four aspects interact? For example, does the visual imagery relate to the lyrics? Does the music sound different when it is performed live? Does the emotional feeling of the music match the content of the lyrics? Are themes and styles from the visual imagery recreated in the live performance?

You could record your thoughts in the form of a spider diagram. By exploring these intersections, you can gain a much deeper understanding of your chosen song.

More resources

- Visit Lori's profile on the University of Ottawa website to find out more about her research, publications and videos: uniweb.uottawa.ca/members/424
- Lori has authored and co-authored a number of books including: *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music*, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, *The Pop Palimpsest: Intertextuality in Recorded Popular Music*, and *Analyzing Recorded Music*.
- Go to YouTube and listen and watch performances from some of the women heavy metal artists Lori writes about: Tatiana Shmayluk of Jinjer, Cammie Gilbert of Oceans of Slumber, and Floor Jansen of After Forever, ReVamp, and Nightwish.
- Lori recommends The Charismatic Voice, a YouTube channel hosted by a professional vocalist who offers interesting, analytical comments on many rock and metal singers: www.youtube.com/@TheCharismaticVoice