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College Courses On Tupac, Lil' Kim Put The 'G' In Grades

Professors giving hip-hop, rock serious scholarly attention.

By Angela Lu



Lil' Kim

Photo: Paul Hawthorne/ Getty Images

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Imagine that your homework was to, say, watch "American Idol."

It may sound like some sort of utopia, but at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte last spring, that was reality.

Unfortunately, "Examining 'American Idol' Through Musical Critique" is no longer offered, but college students around the country can still spend their semesters studying the likes of Jay-Z, the Beatles and Bono. Some may even get to meet Lil' Kim.

As high school students check out colleges, they may want to keep these cool classes in mind:

"Hip-Hop Eshu: Queen Bitch 101"

- English and Textual Studies 350
- Syracuse University
- Description: Students in Professor Greg Thomas' class analyze how Lil' Kim's rhymes challenge male chauvinism and homophobia in the rap world, as well as transcend old standards of sexual politics. The Queen B herself paid the class a visit in November 2004, but naysayers have criticized the course for undermining a serious college curriculum. Unfazed, Thomas also teaches a graduate-level version called "Hip-Hop's Queen Bitch Writings."

"The Beatles"

- Music History 4
- University of California, Los Angeles
- Description: Professor Tamara Levitz debunks the many myths surrounding the most famous band of all time. Did Yoko Ono break up the Fab Four? Is "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" about LSD? Was "A Hard Day's Night" an accurate depiction of a typical day in the life of the Beatles? Other courses offered at UCLA include "Motown and Soul: African American Popular Music of 1960s" and "Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical."

"Hip-Hop Culture"

- African American Studies 160
- University of California, Irvine
- Description: Students examine how jazz cats and blues players have influenced the hip-hop world. Jay-Z, Mos Def and the Wu-Tang Clan are among the artists referenced by Professor Sohail Daultazai, who also teaches a hip-hop cinema class. The syllabus covers sampling, graffiti, the debate between the mainstream and the underground, black nationalism in hip-hop, sexual and gender politics, and the white appropriation of hip-hop.

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"2Pac"

- Comparative History of Ideas 270
- University of Washington
- Description: For their final projects, students in Teaching Assistant Georgia Roberts' course have written and performed their own rhymes for class, interviewed former Black Panthers and written a play about Tupac and Nietzsche chatting it up in a bar. Some of Roberts' students have also helped form a reading group at the Seattle Public Library, where they read Hamlet and Malcolm X along with Tupac's published poems. In class, Shakur's work is analyzed next to the literature that inspired it, including Machiavelli's "The Prince" and Sun Tzu's "The Art of War."

"Bob Dylan: The Lyrics in Their Literary, Cultural, and Musical Contexts"

- English S-37u Summer Seminar
- Harvard University
- Description: Topics include the legend's varying genres — folk, protest, country and gospel music — his famous transition from acoustic to electric guitar and career highlights like *Blonde on Blonde*. Students also study Dylan in other forms, including his autobiography, "Chronicles, Vol. 1," and the 2003 movie "Masked and Anonymous," which he starred in and co-wrote.

"Perfectly Frank: A Celebration of the Music of Frank Sinatra"

- Humanities 041
- Brookdale Community College
- Description: If you get a kick out of Ol' Blue Eyes, then this course is for you. Instructor Mike Barris provides his own input as a music writer and longtime Sinatra enthusiast to explain why Sinatra is "the greatest popular singer in history." Barris says some of his students are even greater Sinatra-philes than he is: One man who took the class twice says he saw Sinatra in concert 85 times, while another man drove more than 500 miles just to take the three-day course.

"Kicking at the Darkness: Social Justice, Spiritual Longing and U2"

- Interdisciplinary 27
- Calvin College
- Description: Assistant Professor Mark Mulder's class at the conservative Christian college analyzes Bono's lyrics and studies the band's social activism to fight AIDS and poverty, along with political morality, liberation theology and current social inequality.

"Walk Tall: Beauty, Meaning and Politics in the Lyrics of Bruce Springsteen"

- Politics 195
- State University of New York, Potsdam
- Description: From Springsteen's Jersey childhood to his growth into an icon, this course follows the Boss' life and lyrics to analyze themes of power in America. Professor John Massaro's class also covers the themes that permeate Springsteen's lyrics, like populism, the American dream and patriotism, and he says the class is "set up for college kids overwhelmed by life." In their daily journals for the course, students are encouraged to apply Springsteen's songs to their own lives.

"Rock Flashpoints"

- University Honors Program 351F
- Southern Illinois University
- Description: Professor Kevin Dettmar's students analyze rock's most infamous moments, including Jimi Hendrix lighting his guitar on fire at the Monterey Pop Festival, Sinéad O'Connor tearing up the Pope's picture on "Saturday Night Live" and Milli Vanilli getting busted for lip-synching.

"Groove Writing"

- Contemporary Writing 171
- Berklee College of Music
- Description: This class is all about — in the words of the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown — making people get on up and shake their moneymakers. Students learn how to write funk, hip-hop, rock, reggae, ska, techno and Euro-pop. The course also offers a historical look at the great rhythm sections that played on

classic Motown recordings.

"Marvin Gaye"

- Religious Studies 113
- University of Pennsylvania
- Description: Gaye's music may be best known for its ability to set the mood for the most intimate of affairs, but it also fused religious beliefs and social criticism, especially on his groundbreaking album *What's Going On*. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson's course examines the complexities of Gaye's art and life, his battle with drug addiction and childhood abuse, his Pentecostal background and his impact on contemporary pop music and black artistic expression.

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Lil' Kim

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