Authenticity has loomed large in American popular music at least as far back as the 19th century. However, in the last half-century critics and listeners alike have grown ever more invested in the “realness” of musicians and the music they make. Particularly in rap and punk, no sin is greater or more career-deflating than faking it, or being perceived as faking it. Even mainstream pop acts, including Milli Vanilli and Kelly Clarkson, have encountered problems. There is no single standard for authenticity, but critical variables include socio-economic background, anti-commercial posture, street credibility, proximity to audience, political affiliation, purity of sound, sincerity of emotion, and originality.

This class investigates our culture’s investment in the notion of musical authenticity. It explores the ways that musicians, who, after all, are performers, have negotiated the demands of “realness,” and how their negotiations have varied according to genre, gender, race, and historical period. To that end, we will focus on thirteen artists—Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, the Beatles, Billie Holiday, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jay-Z, James Brown, Kanye West, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Kurt Cobain, and the Sex Pistols—whose careers enrich our understanding of the ways in which authenticity operates. Take Dylan, for example. Even after the mainstream media revealed that Robert Zimmerman had fabricated the story of his background, Dylan’s audience continued to regard him as the genuine article. How did Dylan succeed in evading the charge of faking it?

This course is meant to sharpen students’ critical ability through the practice of close reading, which is employed here in relation to musical texts, biography, critical reviews, cultural histories, films and videos. It will also familiarize students with the exciting scholarship about popular music in American Studies, Cultural Studies, History, Anthropology, Musicology, and Gender Studies. Finally, although this class is large it requires active learning.

Course requirements include active participation in class discussion, in-class quizzes and Sakai assignments, an in-class midterm exam, and one 6-8 page typed paper based only upon course readings.