

**Entertaining America: Popular Culture from Blackface to Broadcast**  
**Instructor: Samuel Backer ([Sbacker2@jhu.edu](mailto:Sbacker2@jhu.edu))**

**Course Description:**

*We live in a world saturated by entertainment—in this course, we will explore the history of how we got there*

“Entertaining America” traces the evolution of popular culture in the United States, starting in the 1830s, when blackface minstrelsy initiated a new wave of commercial performance, and ending in the 1920s, when records, films, and radio ushered in the era of mass culture. In particular, the course will examine how entertainment gradually developed from a *local* practice tied to the specific communities that produced it, into a *national* commodity, produced for sale by for-profit businesses. More importantly, we’ll ask what that change did: to individual life, to community, and to society. Tightly tied to issues of race, gender and class, popular culture was a critical venue for social conflict and transformation as the United States grew from a rural nation dominated by agriculture to an industrialized world power. The cultural forms that emerged from these changes lay the groundwork for our modern life.

*The best way to learn history is to do it.*

Over the past decade, new types of historical research have developed around a set of increasingly accessible digital tools and sources. A primary goal of this course is to introduce you to some of these innovative approaches. Using a combination of mapping tools and digitized documents, we will work together on a shared research project. All historical writing is provisional—this semester, we are going to do some revising of our own, creating new knowledge by jumping into some significant gaps in our existing understanding.

Class time in “Entertaining America” will be split into two distinct settings. On Tuesdays (“Lecture Days”) we have a lecture/discussion of the weeks reading. On Thursdays, we will have Lab days. During these, we will work on a digital mapping project that tracks the changing style of entertainment being performed in small cities during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Combining ArcGIS with searchable online databases and workflow tools like Slack will allow us—as a class—to easily gather and collate information about the past, researching together to build a brand-new understanding of the history of entertainment in America.

**Learning Objectives:**

By the end of this course, students should:

- a) Have a basic familiarity with mapping and workflow tools such as slack and ArcGIS
- b) Have an understanding of the history of popular entertainment in the US from 1830-1920, and its relationship to broader cultural trends.
- c) Have refined their ability to analyze primary source documents

- d) Be able to connect, compare, and contrast these documents to existing historiographical narratives.

**Grading:**

Evaluation 1—20%

Evaluation 2—20%

Evaluation 3—20 %

Final Project Rough Draft—10%

Final Project—30%

Because of the course's focus on a lab-based research process conducted in close collaboration with the instructor, much of the grading will be based on a continued process of in-class evaluation. This evaluation is broken up into three periods of 20% each (starting during the third week of class), and will be graded based on a performance rubric. The grade for each of these evaluation periods will be determined independently of the other periods.

The final project, the details of which will be distributed in class during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of the semester, will allow each student to focus on a specific element of the group project that interests them. It will be split into a rough draft, due in the second to last week of class, and a final presentation/report, due during an exam period (exact date still TBD).

S/US – Please let me know if you intend to opt out of S/US by Oct 1st. I will adjust grading accordingly.

Covid-19: These are unprecedented times. Your health, both mental and physical, is the single most important thing. Given that, my goal is to create an environment in which we can best collaborate and learn together. Anything else is secondary. To make this course work, communication will be key. I am more than prepared to be flexible in any way possible in order to further your learning experience. However, I can only do that if you are willing to let me know the ways in which I can better fit my plans to your needs. Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions, concerns, or suggestions you may have. I will do my best to adjust my teaching style in response.

Attendance: Because the class is based on close research collaboration between students and instructors, attendance is crucial. However, these are obviously difficult times, and I understand that issues may arise. If you know that you will miss class, please notify me in advance—no excuse is necessary. However, I urge you to discuss potential avenues for make-up work with me in order to make sure you get as much out of the course as possible.

Lateness: Because a majority of your grade in this class will result from instructor evaluation of your lab/home work, you will have relatively few opportunities to be specifically late for something (final projects withstanding). However, because evaluation is ongoing and based on your ability to grasp and implement the historical insights of the readings in class, it will be difficult to excel if you have not completed assignments in a timely manner.

Academic Integrity: All students must conduct themselves in accordance with the Johns Hopkins code of conduct and the Undergraduate Ethics handbook. Cheating or plagiarizing will be subject to the full penalties applicable under that code. If you are in doubt about the ethical nature of an action, PLEASE consult an instructor first. No penalty will be enforced for a question.

Disabilities: If you are a student with a registered accommodation for a disability, please let me know. If you believe you might require accommodations, please contact Student Disability Services ([studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu](mailto:studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu), 410-516-4720) or in-person at 385 Garland Hall.

Communication/Office Hours: There will be no set office hours for this course. However, an appointment can be made by emailing me at [sbacker2@jhu.edu](mailto:sbacker2@jhu.edu). In addition, please feel free to email about any and all questions. I will respond within 24 hours.

Readings: All readings will be made available via blackboard.

## **Week 1**

*Sept 1<sup>st</sup>—Introduction to the class.*

*Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>—What is spatial history? What is cultural history? What is urban history?*

Richard White, “What is Spatial History” → <https://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub.php?id=29>

Lawrence Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society”

## **Week 2**

*Sept 8<sup>th</sup>—Theater in Jacksonian America*

Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 32-65.

Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 51-61

*Sept 10<sup>th</sup>—Blackface and Race in American Culture*

Robert Toll, *Blackening Up*, 23-57.

## **Week 3**

*Sept 15<sup>th</sup> – Variety shows, concert saloons, and museums*

Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 66-80, 95-108.

Bruce McConachie – *Museum Theater and the Problem of Respectability for Midcentury Urban Americans*.

*Sept 17<sup>th</sup> — An Introduction to ArcGIS/Slack – Spatial history*

arcGIS at home training -- <https://learn.arcgis.com/en/projects/fight-child-poverty-with-demographic-analysis/> (parts 1-3 only)

#### **Week 4-**

*Sept 22<sup>nd</sup>— Civil War and Industrialization*

Robert Weibe—*The Search for Order*, 1-43.

Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age*, 38-78.

*Sept 24<sup>th</sup>— Social History Lab*

#### **Week 5-**

*Sept 29<sup>th</sup> – Touring Entertainment*

Robert Toll — *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*, 134-155.

LeRoy Ashby—*With Amusement for All*, 73-107

*Oct 1<sup>st</sup>—Lab Day*

#### **Week 6—**

*Oct 6<sup>th</sup>– Local Tensions*

Sharon Wood, *Freedom of the Streets*, 14-30

Gillian Rodger – *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* 158-189.

Oct 8<sup>th</sup> - Lab Day

### **Week 7**

Oct 13<sup>th</sup> — *Opera Houses and Respectability*

Lawrence Levine — *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, 105-146.

Holly George — *Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest*, 17-48

Oct 15<sup>th</sup> – Lab day

### **Week 8-**

Oct 20<sup>th</sup> — *Popular Song: The Birth of Tin Pan Alley*

Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop in the Age of Jim Crow*, 23-50

David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in Music*, 19-32, 57-86.

Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> — Fall Break

### **Week 9**

Oct 27<sup>th</sup> — *The Rise of Vaudeville*

Butsch – *Making American Audiences*, 108-139

Alison Kibler — *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, 23-54.

Oct 29<sup>th</sup> — Lab Day

### **Week 10**

Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> — *Dancehalls & Nickelodeons: The New Amusements*

Kathy Peiss—*Cheap amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-Of-The-Century New York*, 88-114, 145-162.

Butsch, *Making American Audiences* 139-158

Nov 5<sup>th</sup>—*Lab Day*

### **Week 11-**

Nov 10<sup>th</sup>—*Popular song II: Coon Songs, Ragtime, and Records*

David Gilbert—*The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace*, 16-46

Seroff and Abbott —*Ragged But Right 11-80*. (To skim)

Nov 12<sup>th</sup>—*Lab Day*

***(end of evaluation period 3)***

### **Week 12**

Nov 17<sup>th</sup>—*Movie Palaces*

Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 158-173

LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 176-213

Nov 19<sup>th</sup> – *Project Rough Draft Due*.

**Nov 23/25 – No Class. Thanksgiving Break**

### **Week 13,**

Dec 1<sup>st</sup>—*Mechanical Media II—The rise of Radio and the Fall of Vaudeville*

Richard Butsch, *The making of American Audiences*, 173-219

Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>—*Final Projects Review*

## **Week 14**

Dec 8 – Final Review Discussion.

*Michael Kammen—“Popular Culture in Transition—and in its Prime”*

**Final Projects will be due at a poster session held during finals week.**