



Robert Brooke

“Rhetoric: The Essay”: Life Soundtrack

Core Assignment:

Craft a 5-10-section collage essay that renders and explains the significance of the songs (or other pieces of music) you select as your Life Soundtrack. While you should craft each section to do justice to the song and that moment in your life, each section should include the following four thinking moves:

- Identification and description of what the piece of music is
- Rendering of when you heard it (your life context or life stage)
- Analysis of what the song “means” – in its words/pop culture/reviews
- Connection of the song’s “meaning” to your life moment

Basic Guidelines:

- Length: 2000 words +
- Form: any collage form; multimodal presentation encouraged
- Research component:
 - Appropriate citation of musical material
 - Appropriate reference to historical material
 - Appropriate representation of others
- Playlist of selected songs required

Advice for Assignment:

- One challenge is the number of songs you select. Most people have way more than ten songs that matter to them – yet most people find they could write 2000 words on just one song, to do justice to their life moment where it matters. Consider carefully whether you want to do 10 songs briefly, 5 songs in depth, or shoot for the middle ground.
- As in any collage essay writing, the two kinds of thinking moves put pressure on each other. The analytic sections encourage us to offer readers clear and compelling insights; the rendering sections encourage us to engage readers’ emotions. Our challenge is to craft pieces that keep readers’ interests as we move between these.
- The project carries with it very difficult “issues of representation.” First, we need to make sure we handle intellectual property appropriately for college work – since the Napster decision, intellectual property for music is a robust and complicated legal area. Second, we need to make sure we are representing the real people we write about in our lives fairly, especially when the moments we describe are saturated in our own emotions.

Models:

In class, we’ll examine three excerpts of collage Life Soundtrack essays:

- “Cousins” Jo Ann Beard
- “Vengeance” Wayne Kostenbaum
- “The Christmas Music” Kathleen Norris.

We’ll also look at a clip from one of the Hollywood biopics of musicians (almost all of which are digital Life Soundtrack essays). Here’s a more extended list

- “De-Lovely” (2004): biopic of Cole Porter
- “Walk the Line” (2005): biopic of Johnny Cash
- “8 Mile” (2002): biopic of Eminem
- “Ray” (2004): biopic of Ray Charles
- “Across the Universe” (2007): fictional Beatles life soundtrack of Vietnam era

Those of you reading Kimberly Campbell and Kristi Latimer’s *Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay* may also want to look at the “Great Gatsby Soundtrack Assignment” which they use as a final exam for their unit on Fitzgerald, pp. 198-202.