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The Beatles: Popular Music and Culture Course

Drake University offers a wide variety of unique courses that could be considered uncommon at other universities around the country.

One of these courses is ‘The Beatles: Popular Music and Culture’ taught by Todd Evans. Evans has been at Drake University since 1984 and recently announced his retirement. He has been teaching this Beatles course since the early 2000s.

“This course investigates the cultural phenomenon largely attributed to The Beatles, which of course includes popular culture of the late 50’s and 1960s,” Evans said. “Their music, of course, is examined album by album, and song by song. Being designed for non-music majors, there’s also a fair amount of basic music theory.”

This course was developed based on the very first ‘First Year Seminar’ course offered at Drake titled ‘The Politics, Economics and the Culture of Noise: The Life and Times of Rock and Roll.’ This course was taught by Micheal Cheney, the dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the time, and Evans.

“[It was a] way for us to stay engaged and energized in the classroom beyond our administrative responsibilities,” Evans said. “After a couple of years, we found that the students were universally more energized by the music and culture of the 1960’s than any other period of time.”

The course could be considered unique because of not only the topic, but also the way it is taught and how students learn from it.

“We learned a lot about the band, what instruments they used, how they made the music, information about its members, and did a lot of analysis on the progression of the Beatles’ music throughout the 60’s,” said Emma Brisbois, a first year who took this course in fall 2019.

There is also a Facebook group for every student who has taken this course, past and present to continue the conversation.

“Besides Todd, my favorite part of the Beatles class is the ‘Drake U. Beatles Class Cult’ Facebook page where everyone who’s taken the course can share memes, articles, videos, etc. about the Beatles and we have just been able to bond over an affinity for a rock group from the 1960s,” said Liz Emmert, a first year at Drake

Students that take this course come from a variety of backgrounds and knowledge of the Beatles. Some come from background where they had Beatles music playing throughout their childhood whereas some were always more casual fans. Either way, the course was engaging for practically every student.

“I’ve grown up listening to the Beatles and have quite a few of the original LPs from my uncle,” Emmert said. “I figured it would be interesting to learn a lot more about the band and all of Beatlemania. [But] even those not interested in the course ended up invested by the end of the semester.”

“I was always more of a casual Beatles fan, but this class made me super interested in how everything worked and how the Beatles got to be so popular,” Brisbois said.

With Evans retiring at the end of the semester, some are wondering what will happen with this course next fall.

“I have offered to teach it online, in coming semesters, but I don’t think anybody has made a decision about doing that yet,” Evans said. “This class is one of my children, it’s a part of who I am and a reflection of my rock and roll life.”

When students talk about this course, many of them mention how unique it is, but almost everyone mentions Evans and his impact on his students.

“Todd Evans, without a doubt is one of the most charismatic people I have ever met. He let us voice our opinions and validated our whole existence,” Emmert said. “I cannot say enough nice things about him.”

All first-year students are required to take an FYS course. They learn the basics of college writing and discussions, but they also get the chance to learn about simple college life and bond with people in the grade.

“Without this class, I don’t think my first year at Drake would have felt as complete,” Brisbois said.

While questions on this course feature are still unanswered, one can only thank Evans for all his years at Drake and listen to some Beatles music.