

Rock'n'Roll & American Society

AMST 399 Fall 2026

Course Foreword

This course examines the role of popular music in American culture. It is not a music course, but more of an examination of the effects of recorded sound on popular culture.

We will study the origin and growth of the recording industry in the United States, but focus most of our energies on tracing the threads of mainstream music during the 20th century.

We will attempt to integrate the general social and intellectual history of the country into the story of popular music.

There will be a special emphasis on rock 'n' roll and its impact on America in the last 50 years, especially the 1954-1970 era.

Although this course is a lot of fun, it is not easy. There is a lot of work.



Ersel Hickey, the quintessence of early rock'n'roll.

Professor **William McKeen**

Note: I am not a full-time faculty member, and do not have an office at BSU. But I am free to meet after class on Thursdays for as long as you want. We can meet in a lounge elsewhere in the building. Also available on Zoom. **Email:** wmckeen@bridgew.edu.

Readings

• Required

William McKeen, *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (W.W. Norton, 2000)

• Recommended (for music geeks)

Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (Da Capo Press, 1996; second edition)

Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train* (Plume, 2015; sixth edition).

Grading and related issues

You will create a major project on an artist of your choice. Pages 8-9 of this outline are all about this assignment. We will also have weekly journal entries about music and social issues. There are two exams, both multiple choice.

Your grade is derived from these elements.

The project is 50 percent of your grade. The tests are each a fourth of your grades. The journal entries are not graded, but are required.

Since there is no traditional textbook, you should conclude that attendance at the lectures is vital to success in the course.

It should go without saying that I expect you not to talk, dance or make rude noises while I am trying to lecture. Any sort of disruptive behavior will be damaging to your grade.

We follow the standard grading scale:

•	93 and up	A
•	90 to 92.99	A-
•	87 to 89.99	B+
•	83 to 86.99	B
•	80 to 82.99	B-
•	77 to 79.99	C+
•	73 to 76.99	C
•	70 to 72.99	C-
•	67 to 69.99	D+
•	60 to 66.99	D
•	0 to 59.99	F

Attendance

Attendance is critical. Come to class fully prepared. Be caught up on the readings. Be well informed.

If you don't show up, the quality of class is diminished. Remember your John Donne (and, of course, remove the gender bias from this centuries-old quote):

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less... (A)ny man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

In short, don't be a clod. But do be polite. There's no excuse for rudeness.

You will not be allowed to make up any missed work unless the reason for your absence is extremely grave (a death in the family or perhaps the contraction of some loathsome disease), and you call or email me *before* the class period to be missed.

I have strong feelings about attendance. It would be stupid to walk into Trader Joe's, fill your cart with yummy groceries, pay for the stuff, then tell the cashier, "Naw, you keep it." Yet that's what we often do in college.

As Herman B (no period) Wells, chancellor of Indiana University (my beloved alma mater) once said: "Education is the one thing people pay for then do not insist upon receiving."

Learning objectives

Students will:

Develop an awareness and appreciation of the role of music and dissent in a free society.

Develop an awareness of the the role of popular culture in shaping attitudes.

Develop an appreciation of key artists, musical works and institutions in our history.

Develop an understanding of music's legacy in a free society.

Course outline Oh, the places we'll go



Aretha Franklin was a gifted singer who found her style when Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler took her to Muscle Shoals, Ala., in 1966, to record. From left, Franklin, pianist Spooner Oldham, guitarist Jimmy Johnson and engineer Tom Dowd.

We will do our best to stick to this outline.

We might deviate from this list of lecture topics, but this ought to give you some idea of the material we plan to cover.

Readings from *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* are listed in the outline below, *Mystery Train* and *The Sound of the City*—the books that might turn you into rock'n'roll geeks—are on reserve at the library.

Hope you enjoy these terrific readings

Introduction

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Salman Rushdie, "A World Worthy of Our Yearning"; Levon Helm, Martin Scorsese and Robbie Robertson, "And if it Dances"; Nick Hornby, "Looter"

The Art of the Music Business

Suggested reading: Ken Emerson. *Doo-Dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (Simon and Schuster, 1997); James Kaplan. *Frank Sinatra: The Voice* (Doubleday, 2010)

The Ghost of Robert Johnson

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Robert Johnson, "Me and the Devil"; Bob Dylan, "Blind Willie McTell"; James Miller, "King of the Delta Blues"; Suggested reading: Peter Guralnick. *Searching for Robert Johnson* (Dutton, 1989); Alan Lomax. *The Land Where Blues Began* (Pantheon, 1993) John Fahey, *Charley Patton* (Little Hampton, 1970)

continued

Course outline continued

The Sound of the City, Part 1: New Orleans

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Grace Lichtenstein and Laura Dankner, "The Fat Man"; Greil Marcus, "The Myth of Staggerlee"; Recommended reading: Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950); John Broven, *Rhythm and Blues in New Orleans* (Pelican, 1978); Jeff Hannusch, *I Hear You Knockin': The Sound of New Orleans Rhythm and Blues* (Swallow, 1985)

The Sound of the City, Part 2: Chicago

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Robert Palmer, "From the Delta to Chicago"; Charlie Gillett, "From the introduction to The Sound of the City"; Suggested reading: Charles Shaar Murray, *Boogie Man: The Adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American 20th Century* (St. Martin's, 2000); James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight: The Life and Times of Howlin' Wolf* (Pantheon, 2004); Willie Dixon, with Don Snowden. *I Am the Blues: The Willie Dixon Story* (DaCapo, 1990)

The Sound of the City, Part 3: Memphis

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, "706 Union Avenue"; Suggested reading: Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis* (Faber and Faber, 1992); Stanley Booth, *Rythm [cq] Oil: A Journey Through the Music of the American South* (Pantheon, 1992); James L. Dickerson, *Goin' Back to Memphis: A Century of Blues, Rock 'n' Roll, and Glorious Soul* (Schirmer, 1996)

Elvis, Part 1: The Hillbilly Cat

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Peter Guralnick, "Elvis, Scotty and Bill"; Doc Pomus, "Treatise on the Blues"; Suggested reading: Peter Guralnick, *Last Train From Memphis* (Little, Brown, 1994); Dave Marsh, *Elvis* (Warner Books, 1983)

Elvis, Part 2: Down at the End of Lonely Street

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Peter Guralnick, "Return of the King"; Lester Bangs, "Where Were You When Elvis Died?"; Suggested reading: Peter Guralnick. *Careless Love* (Little, Brown, 1997)

He Played Guitar Like Ringing a Bell

Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Chuck Berry, "Got to Be Rock'n'Roll Music."
Suggested reading: Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography* (Harmony, 1989).

The Ronettes Nedra Talley, Veronica Bennett and Estelle Bennett.

continued



Course outline continued

After Chuck, the Deluge. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Bumps Blackwell, "Up Against the Wall with Little Richard"; Suggested reading: Grace Lichtenstein and Laura Dankner, *Musical Gumbo* (W.W. Norton, 1995)

The Sun Also Rises. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Nick Tosches, "Jerry Lee Lewis Sees the Bright Lights of Memphis" ; Suggested reading: Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll* (St. Martin's, 1991)

The Day the Music Died. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Unknown, "The Plane Crash"; Suggested reading: Ellis Amburn, *Buddy Holly: The Biography* (St. Martins, 1996)

The Five Styles of Rock'n'Roll. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Charlie Gillett, "The Five Styles of Rock'n'Roll"

Rock'n'Roll, Inc. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Doc Pomus, "Treatise on the Blues"; Mae Boren Axton, "Testimony in the Payola Hearings"; Suggested reading: Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air* (Viking, 2005)

The Wall of Sound, Part 1: Teenage Symphonies. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Phil Spector, "Save the Last Dance for Me"; Lucy O'Brien, "Girl Groups"; Suggested reading: Mick Brown, *Tearing Down the Wall of Sound* (Knopf, 2007)

The Wall of Sound, Part 2: Spectacles. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Ronnie Spector, "Inflatable Phil"; Tina Turner, "A Fool in Love"

Can't Forget the Motor City. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Patricia Smith, "Life According to Motown"; David Ritz, "What's Going On"; Suggested reading: Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?* (St. Martins, 1986)

Bob Dylan, Part 1: Gather 'Round People. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Bob Dylan, "Bringing it All Back Home" and "Blind Willie McTell"; Suggested reading: Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Vol. 1* (Simon and Schuster, 2006)

The Beach Boys, Part 1: All-American Boys. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Brian Wilson, "Do You Remember?"; Suggested reading: Steven Gaines. *Heroes and Villains* (New American Library, 1986)

The Beach Boys, Part 2: All-American Boys on Drugs. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Jules Siegel, "A Teen-Age Hymn to God"; Suggested reading: Brian Wilson, *Wouldn't it Be Nice?* (Harper, 1991)

The Beatles, Part 1: Moptops. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Philip Norman, "A Good Stomping Band"; Suggested reading: Philip Norman, *Shout!* (Simon and Schuster, 1981)

Course outline continued

The Beatles, Part 2: Turning Left at Greenland. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Tom Wolfe, "Words to the Wild"; Suggested reading: Bob Spitz, *The Beatles* (Little, Brown, 2005)

The Beatles, Part 3: More Popular Than Jesus. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Maureen Cleave, "More Popular Than Jesus"; Suggested reading: Hunter Davies, *The Beatles: The Authorized Biography* (revised, W.W. Norton, 2010)

The Beatles, Part 4: Twilight of the Gods. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: John Lennon, "The Ballad of John and Yoko"; Yoko Ono, "Statement to the Press"; Suggested reading: The Beatles, *The Beatles Anthology* (Chronicle, 1996)

The British are Coming! Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Patti Smith, "Rise of the Sacred Monsters"

Bob Dylan, Part 2: Going Electric. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Al Kooper, "How Does it Feel?"; Jon Pareles, "Precious Oddball"; Suggested reading: Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric* (Dey Street, 2015)

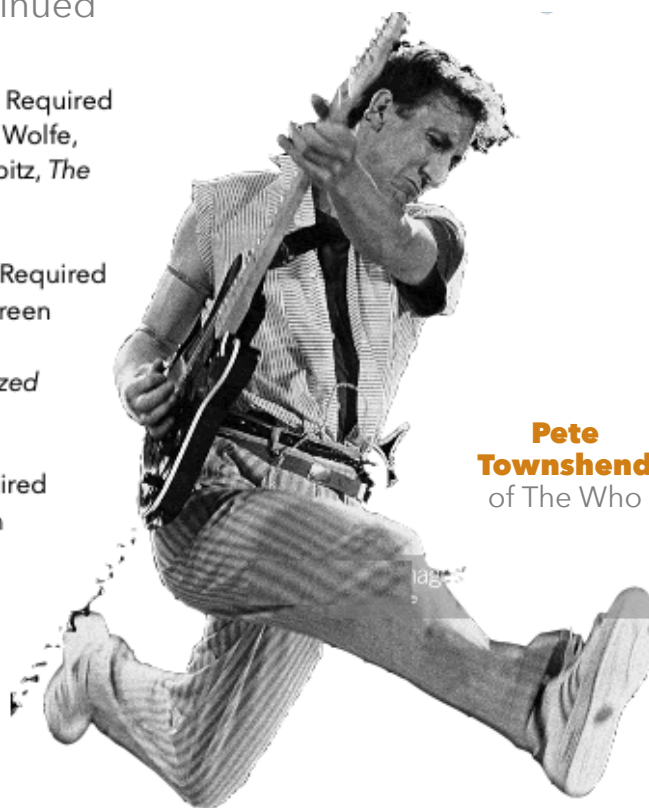
The Godfather of Soul. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: James Brown, "The TAMM Show"; Nelson George, "The Godfather of Soul"; Suggested reading: James Sullivan, *The Hardest Working Man* (Gotham, 2009)

The Sound of the City, Part 4: Los Angeles and San Francisco. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Joan Didion, "Waiting for Morrison"; Suggested reading: Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun* (St. Martin's, 1996)

The Guitar Gods. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Anthony DeCurtis, "A Life at the Crossroads"; Ellen Sander, "Inside the Cages of the Zoo"; Pamela des Barres, "Every Inch of My Life"; Peter Townshend, "Meaty, Beaty, Big and Bouncy"; Charles Shaar Murray, "Hendrix in Black and White"; Suggested reading: Eric Clapton, *The Autobiography* (Broadway, 2007)

Sweet Soul Music. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Daniel Wolff, "Change is Gonna Come"; Jon Landau, "Otis Redding, King of Them All"; Jerry Wexler, "Queen of Soul"; Suggested reading: Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music* (Harper and Row, 1986);

The Sound of the City, Part 5: Memphis (Again) and Muscle Shoals. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Robert Gordon, "Dan and Spooner"; Suggested reading: Robert Gordon, *It Came from Memphis* (Faber and Faber, 1995)



Pete Townshend
of The Who

continued

Course outline continued

The World's Greatest Rock'n'Roll Band. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Terry Southern, "Riding the Lapping Tongue"; Suggested reading: Keith Richards, *Life* (Little, Brown, 2010)

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly. Required reading: From *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay*: Bill Graham, "Woodstock Nation"; Lewis Shiner, "Saving Jimi"; Stanley Booth, "Altamont"

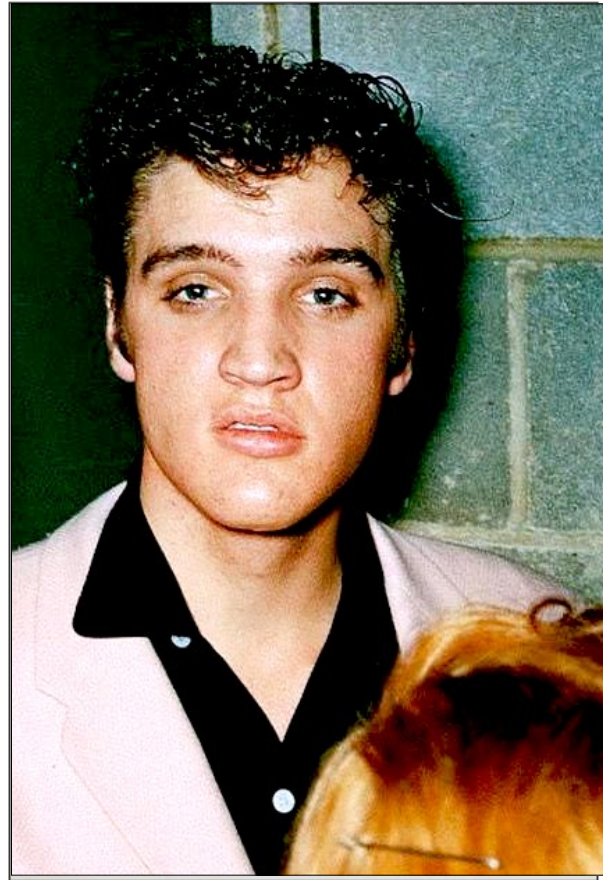
Bibliography

You will find an extensive rock'n'roll bibliography on my website, williammckeen.com, under the courses tab.

So many books on rock are published each year that it's easiest to keep the bibliography online, for frequent changes. It's an ever-growing thing, so be sure to help me add to it.

The purpose of the bibliography is to help you – should you be interested – in building a library of great writing about rock'n'roll.

Get to know these writers: Greil Marcus, Peter Guralnick, Lester Bangs, Jaan Uleski, Dave Marsh, Gerri Hirshey, Cameron Crowe, Alan Lomax, Ralph J. Gleason and Ellen Sander. You'll thank me.



Elvis Presley is the King of Rock'n'Roll

"(It is) the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear – naturally I refer to the bulk of rock 'n' roll."

Frank Sinatra 1957

continued

About your project

This semester, we ask you to adopt a rock'n'roll artist. Can be an individual, can be a band, can be a performer, can be a producer or engineer or songwriter. Just adopt someone from the world of rock'n'roll.

Learn everything you can about your subject and let us know their importance in this musical saga.

Your project can be in many forms:

- A traditional research paper
- A website
- A slide show
- An audio project
- Something else

No matter what form you choose, you will prepare a biographical/discographical report about a figure in popular music.

1. You can build a website

If you've never built a website, it's no big deal. An advantage of this approach: down the road, when you're interviewing for a job, you can say, "And oh yeah, I build websites."

Go to wordpress.com and follow the instructions. You can do this without spending money.

For example, there are several templates you can choose from. Choose a free one. For your tabs at the top of your site, use categories like these:

- Bio
- Analysis
- What the Critics Say
- Discography
- Examples (videos, for example)
- Sources

You don't have to keep those categories, but it's a start.

2. You can write a research paper

Here are answers to questions you might ask about the research-paper approach:

- **Style.** Consistency is what matters most to me. Historical papers generally follow the style outlined in *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* by Kate Turabian. This is a recommended guide. But as long as you are consistent and give me bibliographical information, I will be delighted. Don't stress about this.

continued

About your project continued

- **Attribution.** Follow the simple practice of indicating a citation with a superior number. Then, put all your notes at the end. I prefer that book citations follow the format under the required-texts section of this syllabus. Cite interviews with a superior number and include all relevant information in the endnote. Thus: 47. Wanda Jackson, telephone interview, Dec. 8, 2027.
- **Errors.** Errors of fact seriously damage your grade. Spelling and grammar errors also hurt. Work carefully.
- **General Quality.** One last, vital thing: Do not think of this as "another boring term project." It must be interesting.

The paper should be somewhere in the 8-12 page range.

3. You can do a slide show

Using Keynote or Power Point, present your work in a series of slides. Generally, you're following the same approach as the website approach. This is kind of like what I do in class.

Embed video and audio and use as many pictures as you can. Imagine that you are presenting this to your local rock'n'roll society.



Chuck Berry is a founding father of rock'n'roll.

4. You can do an audio presentation

Present you're doing an episode for a rock'n'roll history podcast. This is the episode (20-30 minutes) devoted to your artist.

5. You can do something else

Got an idea? Make a suggestion.

Academic Honesty

The university has a student honor code. Take this pledge: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing the assignment."

I will not tolerate cheating. If I discover that you have violated the honor code, I will do everything I can to boot you from the class and from the college.

The Boston University academic conduct code is here: www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/

Familiarize yourself with the school's policy about reporting sexual harassment and sexual misconduct.



Janis Joplin was a misfit in her Texas hometown, but she found her style and excelled when she moved to San Francisco in the mid-1960s.



The Beatles perform for the luntime crowd at the Cavern Club in Liverpool in 1962, a year before they became famous.

A thought

Consider this syllabus a contract. I've made promises I intend to keep. By not dropping the class, I assume you accept the conditions.

There are two guiding philosophers in my life:

- **Elvis Presley**, who said, "If this ceases to be fun, we will cease to do it."
- **My Late Sainted Mother**, who said, "If we all liked the same thng, it would be a pretty dull world."

Those two great thinkers shape my approach to this course.

I hope this course deepens your interest in popular music and helps you understand the legacies of these artists.

Six things to know

1. Sexual misconduct.

Bridgewater State University is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. Title IX and our school policy prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, which regards sexual misconduct - including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. We understand that sexual violence can undermine students' academic success and we encourage students who have experienced some form of sexual misconduct to talk to someone about their experience, so they can get the support they need.



Sister Rosetta Tharpe was a guitar god.

2. Equal opportunity. The university has guidelines on classroom behavior and practices when it comes to treatment of students and guests on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, mental or physical disability, genetic information, military service, national origin, or due to marital, parental, or veteran status. Discrimination for any of these reasons is prohibited. Please refer to the university's Equal Opportunity policy for details.

3. A positive classroom. At your discretion, please alert me to anything related to preferred pronouns, preferred name or nickname, or any extenuating circumstances or trigger warnings (personal, medical, etc.) that might impact your classroom experience. I want to make sure you have the most positive experience in the classroom as possible. If work that gets shown in this class, professional or student-generated, offends you in anyway, please mention it in class or talk to us privately about it so that we can all learn from each other. This is not to say we will ever restrict freedom of speech or water down an aggressive or edgy idea, but we want to discuss anything that someone deems troublesome or offensive.

continued

Six things to know continued

4. Disability and access services. If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability and Access Services.

5. Student athletes. All student-athletes should be provided with a sheet from Student-Athlete Support Services regarding absences throughout the semester. These sheets should be handed in as soon as possible to avoid potential conflicts and so arrangements can be made to provide for missed lecture notes, classwork, or discussion.

6. Academic code of conduct. All students are bound by the Academic Conduct Code. Please review to ensure you are acting responsibly and ethically in regard to your academics.



Pete Townshend of the Who salutes the crowd at a rock festival with characteristic subtlety. At the end of the 1960s, Ringo Starr proclaimed the Who to be the “most together” band in the world. Years later, his son, Zak Starkey, became the Who’s drummer

Instructor biography

I worked for newspapers and magazines before I started teaching. My first job, at *The Courier-Tribune* in Bloomington, Ind., lasted until that fine little newspaper went out of business. I was at *The Palm Beach Post* briefly and then joined *The American Spectator*, then served two years at *The Saturday Evening Post*. While at the *Post*, I helped edit a couple of books, including an anthology called *The American Story*.

Since I started teaching, I've taken several short term jobs – sometimes in the summers, sometimes night work on the copy desk during the school year – on *The Norman* (Okla.) *Transcript*, *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Gainesville* (Fla.) *Sun*. I've written reviews and features for *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Tampa Bay Times* and *The Boston Globe* since 1989. (Note the beauty of Associated Press Style in this paragraph.)

I earned a bachelor's in history and a master's in journalism from Indiana University, writing a historical survey of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture. I earned my Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Oklahoma, though that was largely a history degree.

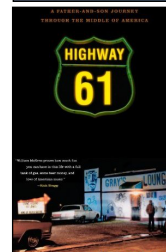
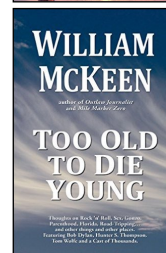
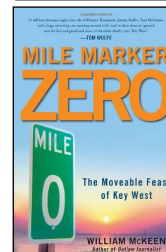
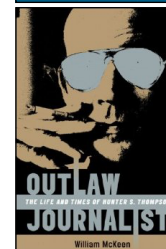
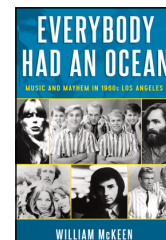
Some of my books:

- *Everybody Had an Ocean* (Chicago Review Press, 2017) tells the story of the intersection of music and crime in the Los Angeles rock'n'roll world of the 1960s.
- *Too Old to Die Young* (Dredger's Lane, 2015) is a collection of articles, short stories, reviews and other stuff.
- *Homegrown in Florida* (University Press of Florida, 2012) is a collection of stories about growing up in Florida.
- *Mile Marker Zero* (Crown Books, 2011) is about the writers, artists, actors and musicians who found their artistic identities in Key West.
- *Outlaw Journalist* (W.W. Norton, 2008) is a biography of Hunter S. Thompson.
- *Highway 61* (W.W. Norton, 2003) is a memoir of a 6,000-mile road trip with my eldest son.
- *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (W.W. Norton, 2000) is an anthology tracing the history of popular music.

I have seven children – Sarah, a designer in New York; Graham, environmental officer for the State of Indiana; Mary, who works for a non-profit in Chicago; Savannah, a nurse in Scituate; Jackson, an artist in residence at my residence; Travis, a young tech entrepreneur in Nashua, and Charley, a senior business major at Miami of Ohio. I also have seven magnificent grandchildren, Mabel, Pearl, Rose, Myer, Vivienne, Westley and Thomas..

Before becoming professor and chairman of the Boston University Department of Journalism, I taught at Western Kentucky University for five years, the University of Oklahoma for four years, and the University of Florida for 24 years, the last dozen as department chairman. I served 13 years as chairman at BU, for a grand total of 25 years in that job. (And I'm doing it again, on an acting basis.)

I hope you enjoy the course.

Shameless plug: I have seven children who'd like to go back to three meals a day. Feel free to purchase several copies to support this cause.