

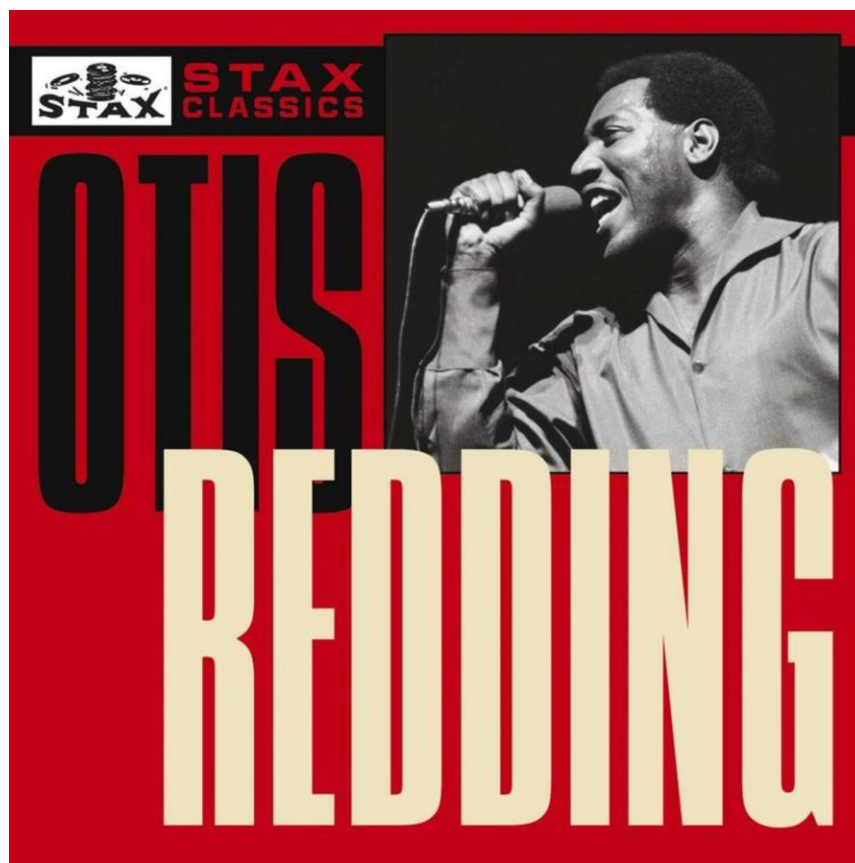
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

White Christmas and Otis: The Definitive Otis Redding

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by Andrew Tonkovich



THE DEFINITIVE OTIS REDDING (CD, COMPILATION, REMASTERED) ALBUM COVER.

White Christmas. Delta Records.
Otis: The Definitive Otis Redding. Rhino Records.

How, then, to be the kind of teacher who uses popular culture as a classroom teaching tool and yet not seem to be exactly that cartoon hippie instructor who tries, lamely, to be hip with his reluctant students, as on "Beavis and Butthead"? I am a UC Lecturer teaching lower-division composition classes to talented, bright, and bored undergraduates there mostly against their will, who locate "composition" and writing somewhere near dental work. Lucky them (!) when they encounter a middle-aged pony-tailed socialist with a goatee wearing his "No Nukes" t-shirt and exercising a predilection for writing on the board such phrases as "the social construction of reality" -- exactly as the Sociology teacher in the famous back-to-school episode of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." (I am not making either of us up.)

Yes, pop culture pedagogy is, indeed, one way to funnily distract students from the mandatory, often punitive-seeming (to both students and teachers) experience of comp class. But using film, television, and recorded music to get students to see the value of analysis, interpretation, and essay writing as skills which might empower them beyond the classroom is also potentially risky. I failed with the Sex Pistols, for instance, and Loudon Wainwright III, two of my own favorites. Go figure.

Johnny Cash's "Boy Named Sue" worked well enough. Students "got it": the rhetorical flourish, the cornball humor, the necessarily instructive bit of redemption at the end. But they really hated the music.

Yet listening to songs and even reading their lyrics at the same time helps students to trust their instincts, to build confidence by thinking things out loud -- and, importantly, writing them down. Listening to music also lets them imagine that exercising a cultural critique -- even about pop culture -- is one way of becoming a literate, active, engaged citizen intellectual.

While instructors at the University of California are given lots of leeway to teach creatively, up against not only a strict and impossibly ambitious syllabus, but a ten-week schedule, they may need --especially new teachers -- "tried and true" thirty-minute exercises in, say, models of inter-textual interpretation. With a finite number of shopping days till Christmas, I share this "application analysis" exercise because it consistently works, helping to teach students to go beyond only comparison and contrast and see how understanding one "text" helps us see another.

And, yes, it's fun.

Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" is, you'll recall, a heartwarming, even cloying nostalgia bouquet, though not

without its melodic appeal and, yes, that beautiful voice. Of course, many students do not recognize this 1940s era holiday classic. Otis Redding's version is even less familiar. Perfect.

I first play the Der Bingle version, using as questions for discussion the four topics in Jack Rawlin's chapter in *The Writer's Way*: "Thesis, purpose, audience and tone." We go through this short list in reverse order, ending with the thesis -- "intellectual or emotional argument" as I call it -- of the song. With its opening of Christmassy bells, strings, and background chorus (tone), students of course recognize the nostalgia theme, guessing that the likely audience is their -- or somebody's -- grandparents, a student or two further speculating that this might involve World War II and being far away from home. "Purpose" is easy, as is "thesis": the idealization of a particular kind of snowy old-time Christmas, despite perhaps never having seen it, makes people love family, hearth, and home.

Not surprisingly, nobody mentions race, class, ethnicity, or sex.

Then I play the Otis version, with its obviously joyful, sexual but also slyly ironic response to the old fogey standard in which, as the liner notes indicate, "[Otis] can't quite bring himself to say 'May all your Christmases be white' the first time through, so he gently stammers and ad-libs his way around it in a clever, horn-spurred turnaround until he can make his hidden agenda perfectly clear."

And, yes, here some clever student guesses at "audience," which leads to a short digression on "genre," in which their teacher discusses briefly rhythm and blues, soul, and Motown.

And when we try to answer, together, the question of how our "reading" (or "listening") to Otis says something about how we now hear and understand Bing, things really get rockin'.

What, exactly, is Der Bingle saying? To whom? What is Otis saying, especially when he seems now to be talking to Bing and those folks from twenty-five years earlier? And why does he seem to have turned a benign carol into either a sexy song or a political song or a Black song or...?

And, my favorite question: How might those old 1940s folks respond to the Redding version? And, yes, well, how do you suppose they did, class, when the Otis version appeared at the height of the Civil Rights and rock and roll and anti-war movements?

That's when I turn down the music and let them write for twenty minutes, responding to the above. May your teaching be merry and bright. And may all your Christmases be, well, not exactly white.



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