

Mayhem: Pop Music and Writing in Perilous Times

March 12 - 14 2026

Presented by the USC Thornton School of Music, Los Angeles

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2026 Thematic Considerations

At this pivotal moment in cultural history, when pop music confronts extraordinary creative and existential challenges, when journalism battles for its autonomy and survival, when the nation experiences profound social and political upheaval, and when higher education faces ongoing pressure to shift its foundational principles, we invite papers about the ways music and writing has always led us back from, or toward, precariousness and the edge—the very *brink* of despair, meaning, performance conventions, community, change.

Participants might situate their work amidst any number of seismic shifts, historical or contemporary. Those may include the death of local radio and the consolidation of cultural gatekeeping (echoing the decline of community-based stations and the earlier monopolies of

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network-era broadcasting); the hegemony of a handful of producers dominating the charts (connected to earlier eras of concentration of power, from Tin Pan Alley to the Brill Building); the ideological battles within and around country music stretching back to the culture wars of the 1960s and controversies over artists like The Chicks; the rise of AI-generated content flooding streaming platforms (a disruption resonant with earlier technological upheavals such as the player piano, the phonograph, or Napster).

There is also the nostalgic resurgence of vinyl and tactile music culture; the reckoning with hip-hop's legacy as its founding generation passes from the scene, paralleling how jazz, blues, and rock were canonized only after their pioneers aged or died); and resource and programmatic/curricula challenges in music and journalistic education, recalling earlier crises of legitimacy in conservatories and journalism schools during times of cultural transition).

Other spaces of exploration include the ongoing vitality of marginalized communities creating music despite displacement and erasure, as has occurred across the Great Migration, diasporic movements, and other historical dislocations. There's also the vanishing infrastructure for music criticism — from profiles to reviews to the training and mentorship of neophytes to the very definition of what constitutes “criticism” in 2025 and beyond, following earlier transformations in cultural authority from the rise of mass-market magazines to the blog era.

We seek proposals that confront these challenges with scholarly rigor, journalistic urgency, cultural insight, and outside-the-box thinking. Below is a partial list of big ideas that Pop Conference presentations might address. Your submissions needn't explicitly answer these questions, nor do they need to be as sweeping in scope. Consider them guiding concepts:

- Music as an escape from or into “mayhem” (with thanks to Lady Gaga).
- Musical expression or arts coverage that skirts the edges of convention or propriety.
- Country music's battlegrounds, from the Nashville Sound to Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter to BigXthaPlug.
- Protest music across ruptures: Depression, Civil Rights, AIDS crisis, and today's movements.
- Artists exploring the outer reaches of vocal, instrumental, or performative possibility.
- The intricacies and aftershocks of women's impact on pop from Rosetta Tharpe to Lilith Fair to Janet Jackson to Chappell Roan.
- Pandemic/quarantine music and how 2020-23 disrupted music creation, music touring, and music culture across genres.
- The viability and essentiality of “fringe” or subaltern communities.
- The meaning of critical discourse in an age of algorithmic curation.
- The meaning of authenticity in an era of manufactured sound.
- The continued dominance of digital media and its profound impact on journalistic design and the visual storytelling of pop and its tangents.

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- The stakes of agency and resistance in a moment of radical disenfranchisement.
- The faceless gatekeepers of a no-gatekeeping era: Apple Music, TIDAL, Spotify, Amazon Music and YouTube Music.
- Historical precedents for music on the brink, from the Harlem Renaissance to punk.
- The politics of sonic censorship, from “obscene” jazz and rock to TikTok bans to incomplete catalogs at streaming services.
- What we lose when we lose liner notes and other contextual and factual materials.
- The shifting infrastructures of music history, news and criticism, from Rolling Stone, Behind the Music, and VIBE to reviews and storytelling via Instagram Reels, Substack newsletters, and defunct and vibrant social spaces from MySpace to Tumblr to Bluesky.
- Cycles of disruption, from the phonograph to Napster to AI.
- Music as diasporic resistance, from spirituals to reggaeton to drill.
- Nostalgia as critique: vinyl, analog, and retro revivals across eras.
- Global experimentation at the edge: Japanese noise, South African gqom, Mexican son jarocho and beyond.
- And more...

About Pop Conference 2026 | Proposals Due October 22, 2025

Pop Conference is the premiere music writing and pop music studies conference. Held every spring, the conference features the world's leading scholars, journalists, writers, musicians, as they come together for a long weekend to present papers, roundtables, discussions, and performances about popular music. The Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California returns as host of this year's 24th annual Pop Conference. All events, with the exception of a few remote ones, are scheduled to be held on USC's Los Angeles University Park campus. Please note the event will be held in March.

This year's streamlined gathering will feature a Thursday March 12 evening keynote followed by two focused days of engaging panels, roundtables, and presentations. There will be no official Sunday events. While this smaller format means fewer presentation spots than our previous three or four-day conferences, it creates opportunities for more concentrated, meaningful discussions.

We especially welcome submissions from newcomers: fresh perspectives strengthen our community.

Submission Guidelines:

- Submissions accepted via the online platform Sched.
- One proposal per person (roundtable participation doesn't count toward this limit)
- Include a brief description of your presentation style/format
- Uploads accepted include RTF or Word Documents; no PDFs, please.

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Proposal Requirements:

- **Individual:** Presentations not to exceed 300 words, plus 75-word bio
- **Multi-person:** One-paragraph presentation overview plus individual 300-word statements and 75-word bios for each participant
- **Roundtables:** 500-word subject outline, plus 75-word bio and email for each participant
- **Experimental:** Presentations/performance proposals not to exceed 500-words, plus 75-word bios for each participant. May include hybrid lecture/performances, multimedia storytelling, interdisciplinary collaborations, or other inventive formats. Please note that the committee prefers self-contained proposals that can manage their own technical needs. If additional resources are required, attach a proposed budget and a detailed list of equipment, tech support, or special venue requirements.; self-funded projects will be given priority.

We look forward to reviewing your proposals and creating another memorable gathering together.

Questions?

Send them to wearethepopconference@gmail.com