

[Listen to the music, learn the American story](#)

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“For the American experience, in particular, I think you can learn as much about our history from the popular music as from the literature,” says Joel Dinerstein. This statement may seem odd coming from an associate professor of English, but he is leading a new coordinate major in Musical Cultures of the Gulf South.



Joel Dinerstein operates the soundboard at WWOZ radio station during his Monday morning jazz show. Dinerstein, director of a new coordinate major, Musical Cultures of the Gulf South, moonlights as a volunteer disc jockey at the station. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Dinerstein is director of the [new major](#) and also serves as director of the [New Orleans Center for the Gulf South](#).

To understand America and its people at a given time, “just listen to the music,” he says. You might start with two genres that have their origins in this region ? jazz and blues.

Spurred by a grant from [Music Rising](#), a philanthropic organization dedicated to preserving the musical heritage of the Gulf South, Dinerstein wrote the curriculum of the new interdisciplinary major that brings together courses in anthropology, music,

history, theater and dance, English, communication and French.

New Orleans music may well be the richest vein of American music, says Dinerstein, who is a jazz scholar. "New Orleans has an ongoing musical tradition that keeps intersecting every new music form that arises because that's how music works and lives here."

Music scholars who have not lived here usually do not understand this organic quality of New Orleans music, says Dinerstein.

"New Orleans has a dynamic music scene that is always working, expanding, experimenting, influencing other musicians," he says. "In every generation and for nearly every genre, New Orleans musicians have been a major national influence."

Bringing New Orleans music into the American narrative is one of the primary objectives of the new coordinate major and of the Center for the Gulf South, says Dinerstein.

"We are creating a field of study that doesn't really exist yet," he adds.