

## Is childhood stardom a gift or a curse?

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fsimon@tulane.edu

It isn't your typical English class. Sanda Spicmiller-Lewis stands in front of a screen, upon which is projected iconic pop star Michael Jackson in *Moonwalker*. She lectures on Jackson's use of children in his “autobiographical cautionary tale” in her special-topics course, Short Film and Music Video: Cultural Landscape of Child Stardom.



“Michael Jackson's body of work invites an ongoing conversation about the concept of safe childhood as a human right in light of practices such as working or sexualized children in entertainment,” says Sanda Spicmiller-Lewis. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Spicmiller-Lewis, academic services coordinator and instructor in the Tulane University [School of Continuing Studies](#), has created this course to encourage students to think critically and synthesize ideas across media and disciplines. Students examine the legacy of performing children and consider whether special talent exhibited at a young age is a curse or a gift.

“We examine the legacy of American performing children, from Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan, to Baby Peggy, Shirley Temple and Michael Jackson,” says Spicmiller-Lewis.

The influence of Chaplin's cinematography can be seen in the music videos of Michael Jackson in terms of cinematography, choreography and musical composition

as well as the idea of pathos in the narrative, she says. Students read and write about *Whatever Happened to Baby Peggy?* by Diana Serra Cary.

Spicmiller-Lewis has been researching child abuse in narrative for more than a decade as part of her doctoral dissertation. This led to her study of “Jackson's engagement and agency on behalf of children and childhood in the context of blurred definitions of child abuse and how survivors cope with it through writing, art and unique forms of activism.”

She also addresses the phenomenon of child stars being silenced or demonized when they reach adulthood.

In her class, Spicmiller-Lewis discusses the Croatian cellist duo 2CELLOS (Stjepan Hauser and Luka Sulic), who reached worldwide stardom after their rendition of Jackson's “Smooth Criminal” went viral. In her [blog](#), Spicmiller-Lewis has posted an interview she conducted with the young duo when 2CELLOS performed in New Orleans.