

# Professor Barry Shank Says Musical Beauty Builds Community

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## SPEAKERS

David Staley, Eva Dale, Barry Shank

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- B** Barry Shank 00:00  
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics, and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32  
Barry Shank is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. His books include "The Political Force of Musical Beauty, A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture, and Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Shank.
- B** Barry Shank 00:54  
Hello, David, how are you?
- D** David Staley 00:55  
Fine, thanks. I want to discuss your research with you here, soon enough, but I wonder if you first might tell us what are comparative studies, or what are the comparative studies?



**B****Barry Shank 01:04**

Comparative studies is a unit that began really about 55 years ago at Ohio State University. It grew out of the national movement towards the developing comparative literature, which was born out of the experience of World War II, of course, in the effort to try to understand how the most civilized countries as they understood it, at the time in the world, devolved into this horrible, horrible war with each other. And the survivors of that, the intellectual survivors of that, many of them came to the United States, and you would find yourself with one French professor, one German professor, one Italian professor, etc, in these different literature departments across the country. And they decided to try to get together and form comparative literature, something like that happened here at Ohio State and rapidly expanded, and expanded to include comparative religions, and eventually within a few years folklore, and then by the time I got here, that was science and technology studies, ethnic and American studies, and a range of interests in initiatives like that. But the whole point of the department is to maintain the kind of comparative focus that's always been there in comparative literature, as well as that intensive investigation of the content areas that have come under our purview. So we have a few basic principles that tie the unit together, which is important to have because our range of specializations is so broad and our curriculum has to somehow be coherent. So, our curriculum revolves around four basic principles. Fundamentally interdisciplinary, we have to be interdisciplinary, and we teach interdisciplinary methods of thought, and ways of approaching problems that I happen to think are absolutely fundamental to the future, the humanities, in a complex world like we have now. We have unpredictable problems that appear unpredictable relationships between human populations, and every one of those problems requires a new set of approaches a new set of questions. And what we train our students, both undergraduates and graduates to be able to do, is to be able to approach a problem, understand it in its complexity, develop the interdisciplinary means of conceptualizing approaches to understanding those problems, and put those interdisciplinary approaches into play in a particular constellation for each individual problem. So interdisciplinarity, and then comparison is the second, you know, because no problem can be understood in isolation from similar and different problems, you know, that you have learned to understand and comprehend the individual uniqueness of the particular issue that you're looking at. So comparison is second. Third is our commitment to a kind of global citizenship, global awareness. No nation exists apart from all of the others, no community exists apart from all of the others, and really to understand any particular community, you have to understand what they're in relationship with, well beyond the national boundaries that you might think of, as used to be thought of as the realms of humanities inquiry. We you require our students to develop a familiarity with aspects of the world, beyond Ohio, beyond the United States of America and understand some kind of the complexity of international relations. And then finally, social justice, we are committed to social justice, but we also insist that you can't know what the just result is of a situation before you investigate it, right? So this is not social justice with a preconceived notion of what is the just and what is the true; you investigate, you find out what is the justice, what is the true and you maintain your commitment to those principles as you do your investigation. So social justice, global citizenship, comparison, and interdisciplinarity and the four principles that hold the department together.

**D****David Staley 04:26**

So interdisciplinarity is a word that we're using quite a lot at Ohio State. What is particularly interdisciplinary about comparative studies, what are the disciplines that are involved?

B

Barry Shank 04:35

Well, I've already mentioned the five content areas, all of which are interdisciplinary in themselves. I resist the idea that you can somehow reduce the fundamental principle of interdisciplinarity down to a set of basic disciplines that you bring together, I think that that's a mistake. I think that's the an old way of thinking about interdisciplinary, which is kind of a multidisciplinary approach, you know. Interdisciplinary really is the situation where you have to see a problem, you have to identify a problem, an issue that you are interested in that is compelling, that is of major significance. And then you start to think, what do I have to know in order to be able to say something useful, valuable, significant about this issue. And then you build your interdisciplinary toolbox, that's what we teach our students how to do, is how to look at a problem and recognize what kinds of knowledges they're going to have to bring to bear in order to be helpful, in order to be able to make a contribution that will be meaningful to the solving of that problem. Not that the problems get solved, because as we know, in humanities, really, the problems don't ever get solved, they just get transformed, and hopefully, in that transformation, you produce a slightly more just, a slightly more global aware universe.

D

David Staley 05:44

You said that comparative studies is 55 years old, what were the particular circumstances to forming comparative studies here?

B

Barry Shank 05:52

The unit has a history that reaches back 55 years. For many, many decades, it existed as what was then called a center, which is not the same as the centers we have now. It was called the Center for Comparative Studies, and it had an M.A. in Liberal Arts, that began, I think, in the 60s and lasted up through the 80s. And as it's true now, the big bulk of the undergraduate enrollments came through general education requirements. So fundamental training and literary studies, fundamental training in sort of religious awareness, those kinds of things happen through this unit. I don't know who the persons were who were centrally involved in that, up until Marilyn Waldman, who was the person who took the first steps towards consolidating it into a degree offering unit. Comparative Studies had a B.A., and then the M.A. in Liberal Studies became an M.A. in Comparative Studies under Marilyn Wallman's leadership. She brought Tom Kasulis here who really solidified the religious studies aspect of it, Tom be one of the leading scholars in Japanese religious and philosophical thought. And from that point, I think, you could see the really rather steady progression of the department through the hiring of David Horne, a hiring of Julia Watson, the hiring of Jean Holland, you know, you can just see that, you know, the sort of... and these names won't mean much to our listeners, but these were major figures in their separate fields, who really had a commitment to comparison and a commitment to comparative studies. And that's really what's important about our department is that, even though we bring in people who are definitely experts in particular areas, Isaac Weiner, who's an expert in American religious sounds, and Noah Tamarkin and who's an expert in sort of genetics and rights in South Africa - these are people who benefit from talking to others, smart people like each other, who have a curiosity about broad questions and a curiosity about how to explore those broad questions through precise, intricate investigation of specific conditions. And then we talk to each other about it, and it's in that departmental cross specialization conversation that two new approaches develop and get promulgated, right? So

what makes comparative studies a particularly unique and special department that Ohio State is really lucky to have is this kind of ongoing, constant conversation where we're questioning each other's assumptions, we're responding to those questions in trusting comfortable ways because we know each other, we know we're committed to the same sort of overall project, and in those conversations, we push each other towards examining what it means to be doing significant major humanities research at this moment, in this place. And that's what we do.

**D** David Staley 08:37

Well, let's talk about your research in that context, then. And so your most recent book is titled *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*. Tell us about the main argument in this book.

**B** Barry Shank 08:45

The main argument in this book is that musical pleasure is a way of simultaneously experiencing the individuality of yourself, but also it's communion with others.

**D** David Staley 08:58

Okay.

**B** Barry Shank 08:59

A musical... the true experience of musical beauty is fundamentally an experience of a community. It's an experience of being with others, being with the musicians, being with the others in the audience, being with... imagine others as you're listening to a recording, you know, through headphones like these. And so what I'm interested in is how that experience of pleasure has a transformative effect on the kinds of persons you can imagine yourself in community with. And it's important to understand that by community, I mean, a political community that is not a community of sameness, but a community of difference. All political communities are made up of people who disagree with each other, right? That fundamental willingness to recognize each other as the kind of people you can have a disagreement with, a legitimate disagreement with, is what makes a political community. If you cannot have a legitimate disagreement with people, the people you disagree with become your enemies and become people that you fight with, right. And so the political community is those you recognize as being able to disagree with you, okay? That experience itself is one of the ways that you understand what happens when you go to a show. When you go to a show, and everybody there is like, thrilled, it's Taylor Swift, it's Beyonce, its...

**D** David Staley 10:14

I was gonna say, give us an example.

**B** Barry Shank 10:15

**B** Barry Shank 10:13

I don't, I don't care who it is, right? It doesn't matter who it is. But you walk out of there and you think, god, that was so great, and you're smiling with everybody else's smiling. And then you hear somebody, as you're walking out, say something that you can't believe they said, it doesn't matter what it is, you're just like, oh my god, I can't believe it. So that sense that you were all one, that you were all brought together as one, dissipates instantly. But still, a kind of community exists, a kind of community that comes out of that experience of musical beauty. That's the central thing I'm interested in. I'm interested in the way that musical experiences, where the music feels like it's right. And what is music after all, but music is a set of relational differences, you know? That's what pitches are, that's what harmonies are, that's what rhythms are, that's what beats are: they're relational differences. And so when they come together in a way that feels right, like this is the way it's supposed to be, which is what happens when your body goes, yes, in a song, right? You just go, yes, and it's because you know what's going to happen, even though you don't know what's gonna happen, even though I haven't heard it before. And it happens it exactly the way or it teases you a little bit, and it delays that satisfaction, and then it gets you and then it's even better, right? But that kind of experience is an experience of right relations coming together in the way that feels - it's not something that you do cognitively, it's not an intellectual work- it's something that your body recognizes. And so it's a fundamental experience of political community, of the possibilities of political community, and listening, getting new kinds of pleasures, listening to the kinds of music that you don't think of as your music but as someone else's music, is a way of expanding that concept, that experience of what might be a legitimate political community of difference.

**D** David Staley 11:56

Is this a book of case studies? I mean, do you look at Beyonce and Taylor Swift or Bach?

**B** Barry Shank 12:02

I do not look at any of those particular musicians, but yes, it's based on recordings. It's an analysis of recordings and it puts those recordings in their historical perspective and timeframe. It talks about the kinds of differences that these recordings made and what made those recordings possible. And then-

**D** David Staley 12:18

So, for instance...?

**B** Barry Shank 12:19

So for instance, the Velvet Underground's first album, for instance, Patti Smith's first album, for instance, the development of the concept of the anthem, which was really a 19th century development that emerges more with greater force in the early 20th century. What counts as an anthem? Yeah, yeah, well, right. But I'm really talking about things like "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "The Star Spangled Banner", you know. The battle over "The Star Spangled Banner" that happens in the first like, couple of decades of the 20th century, when did this become a

national anthem, and it really sort of happens through sports more than anything else. But one of the things that I like about "The Star Spangled Banner" is that it's impossible to sing, and so the good experience-

D

David Staley 12:38

Freebird. You mean musically, because of its range?

B

Barry Shank 13:05

I mean musically, because of its high range, right, cause of the range, right. So one of the things that that song does, the experience of failing to sing that song with a whole crowd at a baseball park, for instance, is to recognize the aspirational nature of democracy, you know, is to recognize that democracy is something you have to always struggle for, and that you always fall a little bit short of. Now, what we've done lately is we hand that singing over to great virtuoso singers who actually can sing it well, and then it turns into something else, it becomes a spectacle. And that, I think, destroys the beauty of "The Star Spangled Banner".

D

David Staley 13:39

This sounds, given what we were talking about earlier, this sounds very interdisciplinary. And I assume that's what you brought to this study, I mean, it sounds like - it sounds like phenomenology, it sounds like the study of experience, it sounds like history, it sounds like cultural studies.

B

Barry Shank 13:52

Yes, all of those things are true. I think of it as a work in popular music studies, combined with contemporary political theory. Political theory tends not to talk about popular culture. I think it's important, I think it's a mistake, a blind spot in political theory to not talk about the kinds of pleasures that people in a democracy find and take in their popular culture. I also think that popular music studies needs to think really seriously about the political ramifications of what we argue for, what we think is important and significant and understand it in a meaningful, deep way, not just in terms of the lyrics of particular songs. The typical approach in popular music studies and really, you know, almost any kind of music studies that focuses on current or relatively recent events, we talk about lyrics, you know, most of us are trained as literary scholars, and we've talked about words and really - it's the music that changes us, right? Words will confirm, I mean, if we listen to we shall overcome them, we're already hip to the civil rights movement, we'll sing along, we shall overcome and everything will be groovy, right? But it's when a song like "This Little Light of Mine", which seems not to have any lyrical significance, catches you up and you're singing it in a group of, you know, of predominantly minority individuals, that you feel the true force of what the civil rights movement was about. I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for the Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as

top 25 programs with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of the Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at [artsandsciences.osu.edu](https://artsandsciences.osu.edu).

**D** David Staley 15:39

So you say the book is as much about, sort of, feeling and emotion. As a scholar, how do you study that, how do you capture feeling and emotion?

**B** Barry Shank 15:45

Yeah, okay. Well, you know, there's the whole field of affect studies, right, and affect studies is something that I've learned a lot from, particularly the work of Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, who are both really brilliant at putting into words the specific, and again, I use this word intricate, interactivity of affect as it flows across bodies. And we start talking about it like this way, and it sounds kind of mystical and woowoo, but what affect studies really insists is that this is not something that is susceptible to traditional social scientific measures. We haven't learned or figured out how to do that yet, but what we do know is we have seen feeling sweep across crowds, we know that feeling isn't something that just happens to an individual, we have even felt ourselves moved by the feeling of others. And this is one of the great appeals of movies, right? You see an emotion depicted on the screen and you feel it yourself, right? So we know this happens. We don't know how it happens, but we know it happens, and what I'm interested in is how it happens musically, and how that music transforms the subjectivities of the people who are listening through enabling them to experience feelings they wouldn't feel otherwise.

**D** David Staley 16:55

So a lot of your work is on music and popular music, but I'm really struck by the title of your book, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture*. First of all, tell us about that book, and why greeting cards?

**B** Barry Shank 17:09

Okay. I grew up in Kansas City, I grew up in the suburbs of Kansas City, and Hallmark dominates the sort of public discourse about what are legitimate feelings in Kansas City.

**D** David Staley 17:21

So Hallmark is headquartered in Kansas City?

**B** Barry Shank 17:23

Hallmark is headquartered in Kansas City, it was established in Kansas City by Joyce Hall in

nineteen-twenty-something, I don't remember exactly at this point, maybe 1918. And Hallmark, like a lot of the great American industries, there were a bunch of competing companies that consolidated into basically five major greeting card companies by the beginning of World War Two. So, the 1920s and 30s is when the companies all sort of fought their way out and emerged into dominance, and Hallmark was very, very successful. Largely, they were regional companies, initially - Hallmark became national. Hallmark branched into television earlier than anybody else did, advocated its international work much earlier than anybody else did. But anyway, back to why I was interested in it. When I first started working on the project, I had the traditional cultural studies understanding that the corporations were the man and they were stopping real people from saying what they really thought, and then understanding what their real feelings were. And I really believe that that real feeling would be revealed and what people wrote on the... personally wrote on the cards, you know, the sort of individual personalizing messages that people wrote on cards, so that was my initial operating hypothesis. And I started looking around at used greeting card collections, and the largest used greeting card collection in the country that I could find is actually at Bowling Green, in the Bowling Green Popular Culture Library. It's not catalogued in any way, it's not organized. It's just a bunch of old cards, I mean, thousands of old cards, in large boxes that you can go through. And as I looked and looked and looked, and I spent a week there going through them rather methodically, and what I found was the most common writing on a card, aside from the person's name that you are dedicating it to and your own signature, was the underlining of key words in the pre-printed message. And this led me to recognize that people mean this. People mean what's on these cards, this is what they want to say, this is why people who buy cards - or used to buy cards, people don't really don't buy cards anymore - but when people bought cards, they would stand for hours in front of the card rack picking the exact right card. It's a combination of the image and the sentiment, but the words really matter, right? And so, I had to get rid of that idea that somehow the cardmakers did not know what people wanted. They spent decades researching figuring out what people want to say to each other, so what's there is what they want to say. And then I had to completely rethink my orientation towards this project. Alright, if that's true, if that's true, why is this what people want to say to each other? And then the turn came to, okay, well, what's historically coincident with this rise of the greeting card industry? What's historically coincident is the rise of the great American corporation, with its multiple layers of managers, with its national network of recruiting talent; moving managers from one location to another, moving their families with them, the development of the nuclear family as this concept of a totally self contained unit that can be moved from one community to another in order to accompany the rising manager in his, quote, movement up towards the top of the corporation. And what became clear is that greeting cards are a way of establishing and maintaining a social network before social networks, right, that can be both as stable as you need them to be, and as flexible and as fluid and changeable as you need them to be as you move from place to place. Then, if you look like, that the Ohio historical collection has a number of individual family collections of cards, and great corporate leaders use their greeting card list as a way of establishing huge business connections and social networks all the way across the country. So one of the great chocolatiers in central Ohio, his collection is here, and his wife maintained it, I mean, there are scrapbook, scrapbook, scrapbooks of their cards. And it's clear that this was an important business move on the part of families who were supporting the work of the business and the people who were participating, you know, if you've got a card from the CEO of the corporation, you are a significant player in the corporation. And this extended all the way into traditional politics, into mainstream Washington, D.C. politics. You can look at Richard Nixon's greeting card collection at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. So, the same kind of thing happens. And so, what I was interested in, is that need to have a language in corporate America that could be used to establish social connections, using the language of emotional connections, that were really about the maintenance of important



networks in an incredibly fluid society that could also be disavowed. And one of the important reasons to use the words that somebody else wrote, so if you have say, well, that was somebody else's words, you can say, well, that was somebody else's words.

D

David Staley 17:51

Plausible deniability.

B

Barry Shank 19:14

Plausible deniability, yeah.

D

David Staley 20:33

Tell us what's next for your research.

B

Barry Shank 22:22

I'm working on... I'm working on a book about my parents. I'm really interested in... they were two very smart, top of their class, public high school in small towns in Kansas. My mom, from Emporia, Kansas, my dad from Salina, Kansas. They're both born in 1930, both graduated in the mid-late 40s in their high schools, they met each other through national debating circles. My mom was the head of the debating team in Emporia, my dad was the debating team in Salina, so they knew each other that way. My dad was a theatre drama guy who wrote plays and directed all the main plays and acted in most of the main plays in Salina, and that's sort of what he was known for. And so, his father ran a small kind of gift shop, quasi department store thing in Salina, Kansas, and was also significantly committed fundamentalist, Christian, lay preacher, and was very severe, uncertain about what were the right ways to live, and what were the not right ways to live. My mother's parents ran a plant store in Emporia, and my mother was kind of, like, rebellious all the way along the line. And, what was interesting for me is that sometime in the summer of 1948, I have...I'll tell you how I know this in a minute - sometime in the summer of 1948, my father had his first homosexual experience, and struggled the rest of his life to figure out how to make sense of that with who he thought he was supposed to be, who his father thought he was supposed to be. And, and, sort of... so what I'm interested in is the decisions that the two of them made, as they went forward in their life together and their lives together, about how to live as well as they could while keeping the secret. Not telling anybody that they couldn't tell, trying to figure out who they could tell, trying to figure out how to make lives for their children, which they had to have, of course, you know, my father had to have a wife and children. He was one of the first people to get an M.A. in Television Production in the country. There were two schools that had television production graduate programs, USC and Syracuse, he went to Syracuse. This was after going to a Bible college, of course, for his first degree, right, and fought with his father to go to Syracuse, fought with his father to marry my mother, fought with his father to live in Kansas City and not take over the family store, and lost a lot of his fights because he drank himself to death just after he turned 34.

**D** David Staley 25:28  
I'm sorry.

**B** Barry Shank 25:28  
And... that's alright, you know, like, that was a long time ago, right? And what I'm interested in is like, using a corpus of letters, that were letters that my father wrote to his father from the time he first went to college, very close up until he died. I have over 100, maybe 120 letters to trace what he doesn't say in those letters to his father, and try to make sense out of the world that they built together. So that's what I'm working on.

**D** David Staley 25:59  
How did you come to that decision, to write this book?

**B** Barry Shank 26:03  
I have these letters, I have an obligation to the world because I have these letters. They say things that don't get said.

**D** David Staley 26:12  
Is this scholarship or is this a son trying to understand his parents?

**B** Barry Shank 26:18  
Every work of scholarship is deeply personally connected to the lives and desires of the scholar, and anyone who says that's not true is lying.

**D** David Staley 26:30  
Barry Shank. Thank you.

**B** Barry Shank 26:31  
My pleasure, David. Happy to be here.

**E** Eva Dale 26:34  
Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer,

produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.