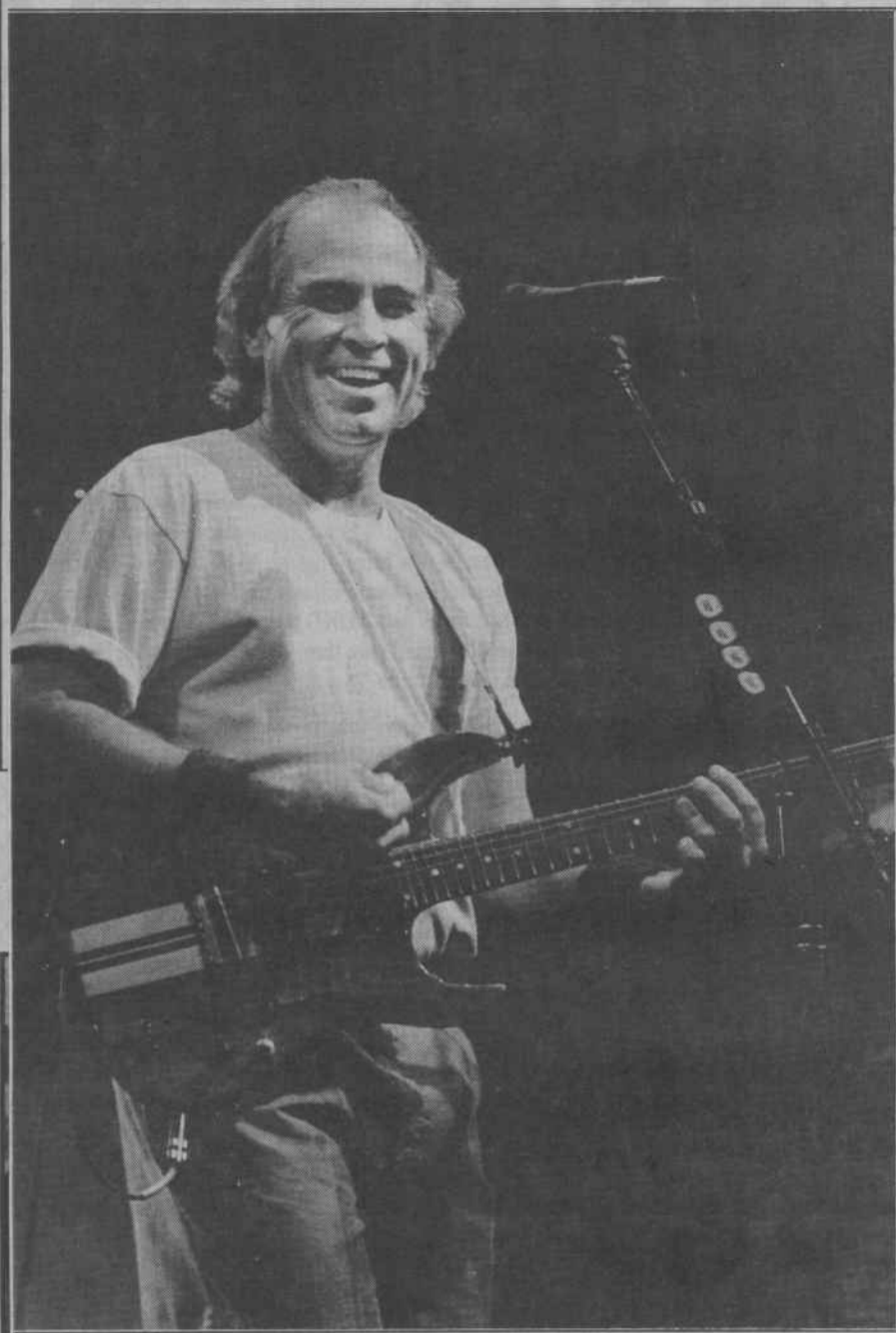


musician looks at 40



KIM TRUETT The Gamecock

at beach comber Jimmy Buffet entertains a crowd in Charleston Friday night.

# Murder

## Amherst class takes a look at assassination

College Press Service

Amherst College junior Jim Scharff didn't have any reservations about taking professor Austin Sarat's class this semester, despite the fact that everyone told him it was murder.

The role of murder in society is exactly what Sarat is teaching. "Murder is basically a hook for teaching great books, very complex legal ideas and popular culture to students who might not have had an opportunity to be exposed to it," said Sarat, a professor in the newly developed department of law, jurisprudence and social thought.

"I'm taking my students on a journey from the familiar to the strange," Sarat said. "I'm showing them that you can't understand O.J. until you read Dostoyevsky."

Although Sarat envisioned the material would interest students studying law, students from all areas of study are taking "Murder," which is being offered this spring for the first time. In fact, more than 270 students enrolled in the class, making it one of the most popular courses in Amherst history.

"The content definitely drew me to the course," Scharff said, a biology major. "You see and hear about murder all the time, but you rarely get to examine it. I wanted to view murder in a different perspective."

Required reading for the class includes "Crime and Punishment" and other literary classics, as well as dozens of law cases. In addition, students have watched films by Alfred Hitchcock, videos by Snoop Dogg and episodes of "Gerald."

"Everything we read or watch in the class is great," Scharff, 21, said. "It's outstanding material."

But whether it's the case of Macbeth or the Menedez brothers, students find that defining what is or isn't murder can be - well, a killer.

"When you look at all this material, you realize the line between what is and isn't murder is constantly blurred," Scharff said. "A lot of what we do in class looks at those distinction."

Instead of lecturing students, Sarat lets class discussions run their course.

"The students are very active, so that makes the discussions flow fairly easily," Sarat said. "They confront the reality that murder is an important theme in the 1990s."

Yet despite constant reminders of death and destruction in the media, Sarat realizes that the students aren't always comfortable with the course's content.

"It's a difficult subject to have to cover twice a week," Sarat said. "It's not a pretty picture. There's really nothing uplifting or reassuring about it."

Alicia Kahn, a freshman enrolled in Sarat's class, acknowledges that the material can be difficult to take time, but is able to keep it all in perspective.

"This is something that we have to deal with," Kahn said. "The whole notion of murder is upsetting, especially to women, considering the battering cases we have studied. But it's important to examine. Just because something might make you uncomfortable doesn't mean you should avoid it."

Scharff agrees. "Murder definitely makes me feel uncomfortable," he said. "What makes it the most frightening is that you could identify yourself with the victim or the murderer. That's not something most classes pull out of you."

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