



COVER YOUR EARS!: EXPLICIT LYRICS IN POPULAR MUSIC AND THEIR AFFECT ON YOUTH

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PRESENTED BY THE PINK KAMIKAZES

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSIC CENSORSHIP

Oh wondrous, beautiful music, the food of life. The world wouldn't be quite the same without it: not only does music have the potential to be therapeutic; it actually documents the cultural backdrop it is set against. To add on to that, almost everyone I know is passionate about at least one or two musical artists. So it's obvious that music is a massively important cultural medium. But what happens when the medium is tampered with, or just banned altogether? And how does it affect people of different age groups? Those are two of the main questions this group aims to make sense of.

Music has been around for as long as there have been humans roaming the earth. However, recorded music has only been around for a relatively short period of time. Thomas Edison first recorded a human voice on Dec. 6th, 1877 (Schoenherr, 2004). It took nearly 75 years for censorship to follow. One of the earliest known displays of censorship took place in 1951, when radio stations across the country banned two rather tame (by today's standards) songs: Dean Martin's "Wham Bam, Thank You Ma'am" and Dottie O'Brien's "Four or Five Times" (Nuzum, 2004). The songs were thought to be suggestive.



It certainly did not end in 1951. Music censorship is still a hot topic among civilians and legislators alike. One of the most substantial leaders in regulating recorded music is the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), founded in 1985 by Tipper Gore and other wives of federal politicians (Wikipedia, 2004). The group essentially prompted the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) to place the ever-recognizable black and white parental advisory stickers on albums that are determined to be too vulgar and/or explicit. The placement of these stickers is meant to deter impressionable young children from purchasing the albums in question. And more recently, Clear Channel Communications, a corporate radio giant, banned over 150 songs from radio airplay by its stations, including every single Rage Against the Machine song ever recorded (Nuzum, 2004). This was in response to the sensitivity of the public in the wake of the tragic September 11th attack.



The true aim of our group project is to attempt to find out exactly how necessary censorship is, and to hear both sides of the debate. By gaining true accounts of people's perceptions and reactions to explicit popular music lyrics, we might be able to answer even more questions: Is music censorship really effective? Do explicit lyrics actually attract young people, due to their rebellious nature? If the youth of America (as well as the rest of the world) are truly affected, should censorship be broadened? Or will it just lead to more rebellion? Essentially, is it really worth all the trouble?

PARENTAL ADVISORY

As the concern over explicit material in music continues to grow, concerned consumers are looking for ways to buffer children and young adults against the sometimes harsh and violent recordings of today. With the heavy bombardment of marketing geared towards young adults today, there has been a common call for the use of parental advisory labels on music recordings that contain explicit lyrics.



The use of explicit content labels is the music industry's way to self regulate its product. The music industry had long been under pressure by parent groups such as the National Parent-Teacher Association and the Parents Music Resource Center, under the leadership of Tipper Gore, to impose government regulations on music. So in 1985, to escape pressure from these groups, and to avoid any impending government imposed regulations, the music industry agreed to voluntarily sticker recordings that contain violent or sexually explicit lyrics (Dahir, 1995). The purpose of labeling music is to inform parents about the type of content found in the recordings, and to help them decide what music may not be suitable for children (Trotter, 2001).

While the use of advisory labels may help to inform consumers about the content of recordings, it isn't the "cure" for the problems that may arise from being exposed to an

environment of explicit material in music. Mark Kuranz, a counselor a former president of the American School Counselors Association offers that, “Lots of parents just aren’t aware, they don’t listen to the music their kids listen to.” (Trotter, 2001) The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has suggested that parents and educators should join in coalitions to discuss the effects of music lyrics on children and adolescents, and to become educated about the media (Palumbo, 1997).

The AAP also states that the concerns over explicit lyrics should be taken to the music industry. The Academy recommends that performers should be encouraged to serve as positive role models, and that music producers should be encouraged to exercise sensitivity in what they depict. Also, the music industry should produce videos and public service messages with positive themes. It is also added that the music industry should develop a system for specific content-labeling of music in regards to themes such as; sex, violence, drugs, and offensive lyrics. The Academy also advises that research should be conducted on the impact that music lyrics and videos has on the behavior of children and adolescents (Palumbo, 1997).

This reaffirms the idea that parents can’t simply sit back and hope that a label will shield their children from explicit content. Such “non-action” is like pretending that there isn’t a problem. Parents should take an active role in monitoring the music that their children are being exposed to. Parents need to be watching and listening with their children, and discussing the content with them. There needs to be an understanding of the problem if there is to be any hope of successfully dealing with it.

DRAWBACKS TO LABELING

In 1990, the Recording Industry Association of America introduced a system of Parental Advisory labels to identify music containing explicit lyrics, including depictions of violence and sex.

Of course, there are some drawbacks to this system. Unfortunately, this process allows companies and the musicians to voluntarily label their products, so customers can't assume that music without a label is appropriate for all ages. It would probably depend on the type of music. For example, if it's kid's music then there is no worry about any warning labels, but if it's Eminem's newest CD then it should be evident. If someone were to know a little something about the artist before buying the CD, then they would know what kind of content would be out at the stores. Another drawback is the retail industry: it is inconsistent in dealing with Parental Advisory labels. Some have policies forbidding kids younger than 18 of selling the labeled music. "A few retail chains, such as K-Mart and Wal-Mart, will not carry stickered products, while others have no restrictions to stop children of any age from purchasing CDs with advisory labels," (*Media Awareness*, 2004).

Music being prominent in teenagers' lives, it has caused researchers and parents alike to become concerned about the impact music may have. "Numerous studies indicate that a preference for heavy metal music may be a significant marker of alienation, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide risk,..."(*Media Awareness*, 2004). According to Christenson and Roberts, forty-seven percent of mothers with children in public schools believe that violent messages in rap music contribute to school violence, and sixty-six percent of 13- 17- year- olds believe violence in music is partly responsible for violent crimes like the 1999 Columbine High School shootings.

MIDDLE SCHOOLERS: TOO YOUNG TO COMPREHEND?

The parents of today are more concerned than ever with what their kids view on T.V., the friends they associate with and what music they listen to. Parents who are especially concerned are middle school parents. Obscene lyrics are frowned upon by many parents; with content in today's lyrics getting worse, parents, as well as many professionals, feel that it has a heavy and direct influence on today's middle school children.

Many parents feel that the music their children listen to have a direct influence on the decisions they make, the friends they are with, and what they make of their future. Many believe that the children who listen to obscene music and violent music, in turn become violent because of the music. However many studies have been done, more specifically by Dr. Donald Roberts, professor of communications at Stanford University, that found the ninety-five percent of white male "at-risk" teens listen to heavy metal music. He could not draw any conclusion on why this was, however.

When I had a verbal interview with a middle school student, I had asked him if he thought that the music he listens to would have an affect in the choices he makes. He replied by saying that he never really pays attention to the lyrics he listens to. Although this is only one instance of one middle school child's opinion, it's agreed that a lot of the middle school population feels the same way.

Parents have a right to be concerned about what kind of music their child listens to. However, parents are more aware of what the music is talking about, whereas middle school children mainly just listen to it because it's either popular or they like the sound of the music more than the actual lyrics. Children's perspective of things is much different than that of their parents, and a child's frame of reference pales in comparison to just about anyone older than

them. Therefore, they don't really comprehend the actual meaning behind what they are listening to.

Obscene language in music is a high concern of many parents today. However, in my opinion, neither the record companies, nor the RIAA, can censor music because of its content. I feel this violates an artist's freedom of speech. Therefore, it's up to the parents to deem whether the music their child listens to is good for that child or not, and to either let their child listen to the music, or not.

HIGH SCHOOL KIDS: HOW REBELLIOUS!

The youth of America, especially high school students, are very impressionable. Many kids at this age are still trying to find out who they are and what they want to be once they graduate. This is when a lot of things can affect how these kids grow up and who they will be for the rest of their life. One of the biggest things that can influence how a kid thinks is the role models they have. Most high school students have role models who are rock stars, or rappers, or folk heroes; it all depends on what type of music you listen to. Even though high school students are very impressionable, not all of them are going to take the music they listen to seriously.

A lot of kids are smart enough to know that the musicians who make their favorite music are just trying to entertain and aren't trying cause problems with the youth that are listening to them. Most of the artists are just making music and don't really know the affect that their songs have on a young impressionable mind. "I've listened to some (Manson) songs, and I don't get all, like, 'Oh yeah, I've gotta cut myself now,' " Davalos says. "I think it's kind of wrong sometimes to blame it on music. It's not the music that put the knife in his hand or the gun in his hand. It's the person himself."(Hebert 2001). This quote puts things in perspective because it comes from a high school student who firmly believes it's not the music's fault for causing violence in people. This student was in an attack that was at his school and he still doesn't feel that anyone should blame the people who make the music. This is a very open-minded (and healthy) way to look at it, but not everyone feels that music isn't to blame.

In a study that I conducted, I interviewed 33 males and 17 females; I found that 74 percent of students thought that music doesn't affect how a person behaves. This study was conducted over a week long period, where I asked random kids if they were in high school and then asked them the questions that I needed. This type of survey is a lot more affective because

you can get a more random sample: you won't get a group of people who might hang out together and feel the same way about the subject you are talking about. I also found that 60 percent of the high school students listen to explicit lyrics. This surprised me seeing that 74 percent feel that music doesn't affect the way a person behaves. This may be caused by some of the students not enjoying music with explicit lyrics, but still feeling that it doesn't cause people to become violent.

In all I don't feel that high school students are anymore affected by explicit lyrics than any other group. Even though high school students are more impressionable than some other groups of people, they are also more intelligent and can distinguish between entertainment and how people really are.

COLLEGE AGE: TOO OLD TOO CARE?

During the past 4 decades; music lyrics have become more increasingly explicit, particularly with reference to sex, drugs, and violence. I think the majority of teenagers are being influenced by these lyrics, but my main focus is on college students. I believe college students are being influenced by the content of lyrics in many aspects of their lives: their appearance is changing, conversations have gone to a different level, and students are being pressured by not only their peers, but by the music industry itself, to be something they're not.

Appearance has become very diverse! Artists have been writing, singing, and rapping, about how you should wear clothes, how you should walk and talk, what you have to do to be labeled as "cool," and how to portray yourself as being "HARD." I wanted to find out some different views about how other students feel about explicit lyrics. I decided to give a survey to some college students from Bowling Green State University, to see if they could notice how society is changing. The survey consisted of five "true or false" questions:

1. I listen to explicit lyrics to help me define important and sub-cultural boundaries to identify myself.

2. Nowadays, there are more music videos that have a negative influence on teenagers rather than a positive influence.

3. Music lyrics are the driving force behind these things: dress codes of youth, thugs, murders, rapes, and suicides.

4. Music lyrics have undergone dramatic changes since the introduction of rock music more than 40 years ago.

5. No matter what style of lyrics, negative or positive, it will have some kind of affect on you, if you listen to it enough.

From the responses I received, I came to the conclusion that most college students have two opinions when it comes down to whether or not music lyrics have an affect on society. One side of the coin can be summed up like this:

Lyrics can be taken in many different ways, it depends on the person. You might hear something that is explicit, but the person sitting next to you might think it's positive. Who ever really defined what explicit lyrics are?

The other opinions went something like this:

We know right from wrong. Artists are just saying negative things sometimes because of publicity, though in some cases it might be a genuine reflection of their own culture or background. If you are not a follower you would likely not be influenced by what they say, because you know your own morals and background, just as they know theirs.

A seventeen year old female stated on "YOUTHORIA": "I love music but it's plain to see that today it has become too tacky. Most, if not all, artists are exploiting freedom of speech to the max, with lyrics that refer to women as "hos" and "bitches," how will the younger generation of boys treat the opposite sex in the future? Probably without respect, and girls might grow up thinking they are nothing more than those two disgusting words. Profanity is constantly used in lyrics and I'm afraid it's because they know kids will buy it just so they are seen as being rebellious. I think more strict control is needed in music today before it is too late". I, for one, agree with her: you can be walking down the street hearing people referring to guys as "niggas," and referring to girls as "bitches" and "hos." We seem to think that it's okay because the artists are saying these words in their own lyrics, and in the context of the music. But we're failing to

realize that this is a major sign of disrespect, mainly towards women, but also towards men (to a lesser extent).

It seems now that most conversations between college students are becoming unreal. For instance, you might have a group of students sitting at the table in the Union, eating lunch, and having a friendly conversation. There might be a girl that says something like, “Do you guys want to go out tonight to have some fun?” Automatically the other students might look at her funny or laugh at her, because she didn’t say it like Jay-Z (or someone along those lines) would have said it. “My niggas, ya’ll tryin’ to kick it tonight or what?” might be a more acceptable response these days. Students are trying to make sure they are saying the “right things”, so they can look “cool” or up-to-date on new slang.

But it doesn’t end with the words we say. For example, when the group Dem Franchise Boys made the song “I Bang in My White Tee,” many males started wearing white tees, because they knew they would be portrayed as “hardcore individuals.” Consequently, those individuals who choose to wear white tees are being stereotyped as ruthless thugs, all because of a song. Carrie P. Fried was right: “Based on pervious research, it was hypothesized that stereotypes of fans of rap music would focus on traits and behaviors that are threats to others.”

If lyrics are able to remain control the actions of the young individuals in our communities, I think we are in a terrible situation. Do you think we should allow these music artists to be able to produce music containing these explicit lyrics, if people are going to act upon what they say and do? Or does it just depend on the personality of the listener? Either way, since we are influenced by them in such a profound manner, musical artists should try to find ways to say more positive things to students.

Finally, to answer the title; too old to care? Hardly.

CONCLUSION

Music plays a crucial role in helping teens to create an identity, and it helps them to define important social and sub cultural boundaries. And music is ever present in an adolescent's life. One survey of 14-16 year olds found that this age group listens to music an average of 40 hours per week (Pediatrics, 1996). In the music recording industry, Heavy metal and rap lyrics have elicited the greatest concern, as they seem to compound the environment in which adolescents are increasingly confronted with pregnancy, drug use, aids and other sexually transmitted diseases, homicide, and suicide. While there is concern about the environment that young people are being put into, there is no documentation that shows a cause-and-effect relationship between sexually explicit or violent lyrics and adverse behavior effects. Listening to a song about killing people, so therefore I will go out and kill people, does not seem to be a link. However, there can be some influence (Palumbo, 1997).



Ultimately, concerned parents have to realize that sticker warnings are not a cover all defense against explicit material. Music surrounds us throughout our everyday lives, and a piece of adhesive paper isn't going to shelter you from it. It is the responsibility of the parents to be involved in their children's lives. They must take an interest in what their children are listening to, and to open a discussion with them about the themes presented in the music. It is by

becoming better educated about the media and educating their children, that parents can prepare their children do deal with explicit lyrics in music.

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