

1-10-2021

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Recommended Citation

Curtin, Meaghan (2021) "Censorship of Rock and Roll," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol3/iss1/11>

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First-Place Winner

Short Essay Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

Censorship of Rock and Roll

Music stands as an immensely influential element of entertainment, not only in American society, but far reaching all around the globe. Music represents more than just its lyrics; the musicality of songs creates a rhythm that millions of people identify with as the soundtrack of their lives. Different styles of music influence personalities, dress, political stances, and create a sense of identity for listeners when finding a genre of preference. However, Rock and Roll has become the genre with the most influential effect on American society in censorship requirements and fear of specific demographics. The brand of Rock and Roll inspired extraordinarily popular artists such as Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Kiss, and The Rolling Stones has had to defend its legitimacy in court multiple times, fuelled by concerned parents over a foreseen teenage rebellion. The fear that music has the power to cause an uprising of the younger generation, across multiple decades, illustrates the influence music has on society. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the content and presentation of Rock and Roll music, the censorship of such a powerful medium only serves to damage freedom of speech within the artistic expression, a value we hold very dear as citizens of these United States of America.

During the 1950s, the brisk winds of change seemed to be appearing across popular media. Author Ronald Cohen summarizes the era where the ideals of conservatism in the home, with strong adherence to tradition, were challenged with a new wave of teenage sex, drugs, drinking, and violence. These taboo concepts were now moving into mainstream

society (Cohen 252). These so-called rebels of their time were typically white suburban teenagers with the urge to break away from the confines of their parents' beliefs and rules into their futures. Magazines began to publish articles about sex, birth control, and the idea of delaying marriage for both young adult women and men. Additionally, young men returning post World War II felt liberated and emboldened to challenge parental authority and societal norms. James Gilbert, the author of "A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950's," stated, "Delinquency during the war years was in part the response of society to the immense cultural and social changes initiated in this period...delinquency rose and fell with the shifting argument about the nature of adolescence in American culture" (4). The outrage of war and the social restraints it created paved the way for the emergence of a new young adult culture, and the man leading the way was Elvis Presley.

Elvis Presley, known as "The King of Rock and Roll," dominated popular culture during the 1950s with his new style of music and highly controversial "mind of its own" pelvis. Television host Ed Sullivan gave Elvis his monumental debut in September of 1956. While his popularity among young audiences created high ratings for the show, when Elvis appeared again, a month later for a reprise, he could only be seen from the waist up on television (Cohen 268). It seems preposterous to think that Elvis' dance moves were seen as highly vulgar based on what is allowed on television in 2019, however, these moves changed the way popular media would become censored. Millions of teenagers attended "sock hops" and danced all night "vulgarily" to Elvis' music. The adult generation of the time was appalled at the rebellious nature of young adult behavior. Jesuit magazine, *America*, warned parents to "Beware Elvis Presley" (Cohen 268) as multiple radio stations began to refuse the distribution of Elvis' music. The societal censorship of Elvis Presley caused a rift to be formed between the new teenage ideals of fun with the freedom of

expression and the conservative values and morals of the older adult generation. That same rift was repeated generation after generation through multiple decades of Rock and Roll.

In the 1980s, Rock and Roll had transformed from Elvis' style of the sock hop, to the "free love" and Woodstock Festival of the 60s, to psychedelic and protest-driven rock in the 70s, into the new genre of heavy metal much to the concern of parents. Heavy metal was seen as the newest frontier in teenage rebellion and the violence-driven attitudes of the 80s young adults. What made this era different from the parent versus teen musical dilemma of prior generations, was the parental fear of satanic messages within the music, plaguing innocent children when listening to the records. Televangelists warned of "backwards masking" in records where, when a song was played backwards, satanic messages would be revealed and the true intention of "spreading Satan's gospel" would be revealed behind popular Rock and Roll bands (Nuzum, 250). Rock and Roll's societal influence was skyrocketed with the launch of MTV on cable television, allowing for mass distribution of heavy metal music videos for general audiences to view, 24 hours a day. This new saturation of the genre caused many fears to formulate within conservative suburban America.

Fears of Rock and Roll's potential for violent influence began to solidify into reality when in 1985, the parents of 19 year-old John McCollum were devastated over the suicide of their son. In searching for answers for his death, they ultimately pinned responsibility on Ozzy Osborne, filing a lawsuit, claiming that the lyrics to his song "Suicide Solution" encouraged their son to enter a depressive state and commit suicide (Nuzum, 246). Coming out of this event, multiple Rock and Roll artists of the 80s faced legal trials over the content of their music and their live performances. The most publicized case was the Parents Music Resource Center in 1986, which asserted that government action was needed to regulate explicit Rock and Roll albums as they were "a danger" to the youth of America. Musician

John Denver, when addressing the United States Senate in defense of his music claimed, “Discipline and self-restraint when practiced by an individual, a family, or a company is an effective way to deal with this issue. The same thing when forced on a people by their government or, worse, by a self-appointed watchdog of public morals, is suppression and will not be tolerated in a democratic society.” (Record Labeling: Hearing Before the Committee On Commerce, Science, And Transportation). His central argument was that government control over what is permissible is a form of censorship within an art form. The push back from multiple artists was not enough to halt the introduction of the required “Parental Advisory Explicit Content” sticker on albums. New regulations required the famous black and white sticker to become an advisory to Rock and Roll albums that were seen as “concerning” to the PMCR. The formulation of the Parental Advisory sticker transformed the distribution and sales of not only Rock and Roll albums, but all genres of music that were seen as undesirable by the PMCR. For the first time, retailers were able to censor cover artwork and tracks listed on an album, depending on what store management wanted its patrons to see. This shift caused the decline in explicit album sales, and they became more taboo in mainstream media.

Recently, the influence of the Parental Advisory labeling on album sales has dwindled as the emergence of multiple streaming platforms has once again changed how society accesses and consumes its music. Any banned music from the past is now available with the click of a button. In modern media, music displays itself as a political power when it is aligned with a movement or party. Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright” in the 2010s gave voice to the Black Lives Matter movement, as it constructs an audible moral within the movement, urging the need to fight for political freedom and equality (Hare, 1). Surprisingly, this extremely popular song is featured on a Parental Advisory labeled album. Kendrick Lamar’s album, if made in the 1980s, likely would have been placed on the

“Filthy 15” list written by the PMRC. Yet in the year 2018, Lamar’s album was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Music censorship in the United States has always been a prevalent issue. Rock and Roll as a genre has the ability to push parental and societal boundaries, generation after generation. This natural tension between tradition and emerging ideas tends to fuel the fears of parents and political leaders. Hampering freedom of expression and messages through art, over fear of its influence on teenagers, is an issue with which parents, grandparents and leaders continue to grapple. While acceptance of more socially challenging and controversial music is increasingly acknowledged, there will always be push back on artistic expression in some form or fashion. Times are changing and while Rock and Roll may not be the most dubious genre in today’s society, tomorrow it could be Rap or Hip-Hop. The silencing of artists’ voices only forces conformity and the regulation of differing opinions, which in itself is un-American. The importance of differing voices, views, stances, and opinions is what makes freedom of speech so important in the United States. Stripping away the messages and voices of musical artists only gives power to those who believe they can control the mindset of the general public, and “We’re not gonna take it, No, we’re not gonna take it” (Twisted Sister).

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