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PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT LYRICS:
A CASE STUDY OF MUSIC CENSORSHIP AND SUPPRESSION IN AMERICA, 1980-1989

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PARENTAL ADVISORY: EXPLICIT LYRICS
THE PMRC AND MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN AMERICA: 1980-1989

The story of music censorship in America is a long one. The first documented instance of music censorship was after the Civil War. Pro-southern songs were banned during Reconstruction because the US government thought that they would stir up revolution and pro-Southern feelings.¹ After that, the menace was jazz, whose swinging beat was thought to be corrupting to white youth. The efforts to suppress jazz were mainly local and limited to city governments wanting to ban young people from going to jazz shows.² When rock n' roll became popular in the 1950s, and Elvis became famous nationwide, music censorship started becoming a national issue. Elvis was famously filmed from the waist up during his appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1958.³ Parents were worried about what their children were listening to, and as the counterculture of the 1960s developed and Rock music became a dominant force in American culture, the so-called Establishment was worried. Parents and church leaders organized demonstrations against the “evils” of popular music, but their efforts yielded little success. In the 1970s their efforts died down, but as the 1980s rolled around, the opposition to rock music became more organized and powerful.

¹Eric Nuzum, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing Inc., 2001), 211.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 220.

The stylistic changes that were happening in rock music, and the emergence of the Christian Right with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, set the stage for the debate over popular music and its effect on American society. The debate that had been festering for many years, exploded; soon a media firestorm began and an organization was started that had a big effect on the music scene in America.

In the early 1980s, rock music was changing. Heavy metal rock broke into the mainstream and became a popular musical style. Heavy metal, an extreme subgenre of rock music, features loud, distorted guitars, pounding bass, anthemic or gruff vocals, and powerful drumming. The first heavy metal album was released in 1969 by the British band Black Sabbath, but there had been albums before that were considered proto-metal. Heavy metal regularly uses the tritone, a musical interval that was banned in the Middle Ages because it was considered to be “the devil in music.” Lyrical themes in heavy metal include violence, sex, rebellion, death, fantasy, and sociopolitical commentary. Heavy metal also has an intense subculture of fans, for many of them the metal subculture is a lifestyle. The metal subculture is primarily made up of white, blue-collar, males and they expect metal performers to be authentic and loyal to the subculture. “Metalheads,” as they were known, primarily dressed in jeans, t-shirts with band logos, and many wore a denim jacket with band patches. When heavy metal became a popular musical style, and the metal subculture began to grow, many people became concerned.

By the early 1980s, bands such as Van Halen and Judas Priest had major followings in America. Van Halen became popular by becoming the pioneers of a new style of heavy metal known as “hair metal.” Hair metal combined pop sensibilities with metal riffs. It was a popular style of music in the 1980s and was commercially successful, with many albums going platinum. The lyrical content of most hair metal songs was about partying, girls, and drugs. One critic

wrote that all Van Halen sung about was “sex, partying, and cars.”⁴ As hair metal became popular, a lot of teenagers started listening to other types of metal and soon heavy metal became one of the most popular musical styles in America. Many metal bands had platinum records and heavy metal videos were played constantly on MTV. The popularity of heavy metal also led to increased notoriety from parents and religious leaders.

In the 1980s, religious leaders and parents became concerned about the growing popularity of heavy metal. Across the nation, churches organized record burnings as a way to protest the growing style of music. One student at a Florida school run by Southern Baptists described a record burning in 1982:

One Thursday we were taken to where a man gave a sermon on the evils that were assaulting our youth. He spoke mainly about rock music. After several minutes of whipping the crowd into a frenzy, he said we should ‘purge’ our lives of this evil, just as he was about to do. He then began to hold up record albums, say a few things about each one—either a line from the lyrics or a statement of condemnation—and break it, throwing the album into a raging fire... Many albums later, he held up the Pat Benatar single ‘Hell is for Children.’ He said, ‘This song openly promotes devil-worship among our youth!’ He had lied about many records, but this was the worst. We started shouting things like ‘that’s bullshit!’ and ‘you never even read the lyrics!’ Without a moment’s hesitation he said, ‘See how the Devil despises His work! His evil is deeply ingrained. Don’t be surprised if your children are as intolerant!’ One of the old men beside him asked, ‘Are they possessed!’ I couldn’t hear what he replied. The crowd went wild.⁵

Stories like this were typical during the early-to-mid-1980s as more people became concerned about popular music. Many books came out about the dangers of rock music and churches began preaching about the evils of the music. By 1985, enough parents had begun to

⁴http://www.classicvanhalen.com/albums_1984.shtml, 5-28-12.

⁵ Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 248.

raise concerns about the lyrical content of rock and metal music and soon the greatest music suppression effort was being organized.

One day in 1984, Tipper Gore, the wife of then US Senator Al Gore, had returned from the mall with a record by Prince entitled “Purple Rain.” She had purchased the record for her oldest daughter, who was eleven at the time. The record was a soundtrack to an R-rated movie and when Tipper and her daughter sat and listened to the record they noticed some things that they did not like. There were graphic depictions of sex acts on the album and immediately Tipper decided to act. Instead of taking responsibility for not checking the lyrics to make sure they were appropriate before buying her daughter the soundtrack to an R-rated movie, Tipper decided to blame the record industry for releasing “Purple Rain” without any warning about the lyrical content of it. “Millions of Americans were buying ‘Purple Rain’ with no idea what to expect. Thousands of parents were giving the album to their children—many even younger than my daughter.”⁶ Tipper started watching MTV and watched Van Halen’s “Hot for Teacher” music video, along with others, and was appalled. “The images frightened my children; they frightened me! The graphic sex and the violence was too much for us to handle.”⁷

Tipper, and her friend Susan Baker, the wife of then Treasury Secretary James Baker, decided to form an organization to advocate for the labeling of musical records that they found offensive. Gore, Baker, and their friends Pam Howar and Sally Nevius, formed the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, and began to expand their membership. Eight other wives of influential politicians and businessman joined and

⁶ Nuzum, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

immediately sprang into action.⁸ They sent out press releases and released a list called the “Filthy Fifteen,”⁹ which were songs they found particularly objectionable. One of their first actions was pooling about two thousand names from their respective Christmas card lists and having a meeting. The speaker at the meeting was Jeff Ling, a former musician turned pastor. He railed against Rock music and denounced it as sinful and blasphemous. The only media attention the PMRC received was a brief mention in the *Washington Post*, but that was soon to change.¹⁰ The PMRC wanted media attention and they got it.

Once the PMRC began their media campaign they began to attract a lot of publicity. The controversy was all over the country; newspapers and TV shows could not get enough coverage. The PMRC sent a letter to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) calling for the recording industry to “exercise voluntary self-restraint perhaps by developing guidelines and/or a rating system, similar to that of the movie industry.”¹¹ But, the PMRC did not want to stop all sex and violence, only sex and violence that could be purchased or seen by teenagers. They did not include any country or opera artists, they only listed Rock and pop music. The letter was signed by twenty wives of Washington politicians and businessmen.¹² Within five months after

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ The Filthy Fifteen consisted of “Eat Me Alive” by Judas Priest, “Bastard” by Motley Crue, “Darling Nikki” by Prince, “Sugar Wall” by Sheena Easton, “Animal (F-U-C-K Like a Beast)” by W.A.S.P., “Into the Coven” by Mercyful Fate, “Strap on Robby Baby” by Vanity, “High N’ Dry” by Def Leppard, “We’re Not Gonna Take It” by Twisted Sister, “Dress You Up” by Madonna, “She Bop” by Cyndi Lauper, “Let Me Put My Love Into You” by AC/DC, “Trashed” by Black Sabbath, “My House” by Mary Jane Girls, and “Possessed” by Venom. *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19-20.

the PMRC's letter to the RIAA, the controversy exploded. Hundreds of newspaper editorials were written on the topic of explicit music. Magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* put the controversy on the front page. Representatives from the PMRC appeared on the morning and evening news shows on all major networks.¹³ They wanted to get attention so they could "educate parents of this alarming trend...towards lyrics that are sexually explicit, violent, or glorify the use of drugs and alcohol."¹⁴

The PMRC's media blitz was everywhere. In the *New York Times*, multiple editorials and letters were printed on the topic of explicit music. In an editorial written by Tipper Gore, she explained:

I can't even count the times in the last three years, since I began to express my concern about violence and sexuality in rock music, that I have been called a prude, a censor, a music hater, even a book burner. So let me be perfectly clear: I detest censorship. I'm not advocating censorship but rather a candid and vigorous debate about the dangers posed for our children by what I call the 'exploitation industry.' We don't need to put a childproof cap on the world, but we do need to remind the nation that children live in it, too, and deserve respect and sensitive treatment.¹⁵

She continued, "This resistance and hostility has convinced me of the need for a two-pronged campaign, with equal effort from the entertainment industry and concerned parents. Entertainment producers must take the first step, by labeling sexually explicit material."¹⁶

The PMRC's media blitz worked. Parents around the country wanted a warning label on albums with explicit content. Before the controversy, only 22 percent of adults wanted warning

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ "Curbing the Sexploitation Industry," *New York Times*, 138:46943 (March 14, 1988), sec. II, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

labels to be placed on records. But, in 1991, after six years of PMRC lobbying, the number had risen to 53 percent.¹⁷ Throughout their media campaign, Tipper and the other members of the PMRC defended their proposals as simply education for parents. Baker wrote in a letter, “Tipper and I co-founded the Parents' Music Resource Center because we shared a concern about the violent and sexually explicit lyrics being made available to young children. Our focus is educational and we do not support censorship.”¹⁸ Though the PMRC said they only wanted to educate parents, they also wanted to force the record industry to protect children from explicit music.

The PMRC listed six demands for the RIAA to accept. Their main demand was to have labels put on records with “explicit content.” Their other demands were to “keep explicit covers under the counter, print lyrics on album covers, establish a ratings system for concerts, reassess the contracts of performers who engage in violence and explicit sexual behavior onstage, and establish a citizen and record-company media watch that would pressure broadcasters not to air ‘questionable talent.’”¹⁹ The RIAA attacked these proposals as unrealistic. In *People Magazine*, the head of the RIAA, Stanley Gortikov, said that a ratings system for each song “would be totally impractical. Unlike the motion picture industry, which rates about 325 films a year, the recording industry releases 25,000 songs annually, which would require a process for rating 100 tunes a day.”²⁰ The article continued: “What's more, says Gortikov, record

¹⁷ Nuzum, 42.

¹⁸ "Rhythm and Blues; Bum Rap?," *New York Times*, 139:47591 (January 21, 1990), sec. II, 5.

¹⁹ Nuzum, 22.

²⁰ Roger Wolmuth. "Parents Vs. Rock," *People Magazine*, 23:12 (September 16, 1985), 44.

companies have no control over the display of LPs in record stores, can't influence the behavior of performers onstage and, even if they wanted to, couldn't always place lyrics on albums because the copyrighted words are usually owned by others.”²¹

Throughout the controversy, the ladies of the PMRC talked about how their proposals were not censorship. Sally Nevius was quoted in *People* as saying “We want the industry to police itself. If they refuse, were going to look into legal ways to stop what we feel is contributing to the delinquencies of minors.”²² They also talked about how they were fans of Rock music such as Elvis and Buddy Holly, ignoring the fact that these artists had been subject to the same kind of attacks on their music as the PMRC was making about the popular musical artists of their day.²³ Indeed, even some musicians supported the PMRC’s proposals. Pat Boone, a fifties pop star said “Censorship should not be a bad word. No society can survive without it. I believe that the stop sign at the corner is healthy censorship. That’s what the Constitution had in mind—self-imposed, majority-approved censorship.”²⁴ As the PMRC grew more influential other groups were formed and many books were published on the topic of Rock music.

There are several of these books, but one of the most famous was *Rock* by famed anti-Rock crusader Bob Larson.²⁵ Written in 1980, Larson mainly wrote about the “pornography” he saw in Rock music. He attacked many famous musicians as “smut peddlers, hedonists, and drug

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²² Wolmuth, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

²⁵ Bob Larson, *Rock: Practical Help for Those Who Listen to the Words and Don't Like What They Hear* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980)

pushers.”²⁶ He also made several unfounded allegations against musicians and record companies.²⁷ In another book he wrote, *Rock and Roll: The Devil’s Diversion*,²⁸ Larson led his reader on a path to God with this pledge:

Antirock pledge: CONFESSING my faith in Christ and desiring to communicate his love and truth to my generation, and RECOGNIZING that many of the songs and singers or rock music express and promote a morality and life-style contrary to the highest of Christian principles, I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF TO THE FOLLOWING: 1. I will abstain from voluntarily listening to rock music so that I may adhere to the admonition of the Apostle Paul to ‘Think upon those things which are pure, honest, just, lovely, and of good report (Philippians 4:8) 2. I will destroy all rock records and tapes in my possession as an outward, symbolic act of signifying my inner dedication to conscientiously discriminate as to the records I buy and listen to.²⁹

Another well-known crusader against Rock music was Jeff Godwin, who wrote a book called *Dancing With Demons*.³⁰ In it he wrote that since the Beatles became popular in the 1960s, drug abuse had skyrocketed and the Beatles were solely responsible. He wrote, “Many millions of young lives world-wide have been utterly ruined as a result.”³¹ He also accused David Bowie of promoting homosexuality, “He okayed the rebellion against God’s law for the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁷ Larson claimed that record companies conducted research studies to test the degree of sexual arousal teenagers experience when they listen to new releases. No proof was given for this allegation. *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ Bob Larson, *Rock and Roll, the Devil’s Diversion* (Wheaton, Illinois: Bob Larson, 1970).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁰ Jeff Godwin, *Dancing With Demons: The Music’s Real Master* (Ontario, Canada: Chick Publications, 1988).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

natural use of man and woman.”³² While most of these books only blamed Rock music for societal problems and of glorifying hedonism, a few writers believed that Rock was more sinister and darker. These writers saw the devil everywhere in popular music.

These people argued that most, if not all, Rock musicians were in league with the devil and practiced the occult. Many of these writers believed that the dominant beat of Rock music was a call to worship Satan. Again Godwin wrote “There is something in the BEAT of this music that fires up those who listen to it and releases primitive lusts within them... Rock’s incredible volume, coupled with screeching dissonance and the rhythmic beat of voodoo, form a battering ram that smashes the listener’s mind and spirit.”³³

Many books written by fundamentalist preachers railed against what they saw as the influence of Satan in popular music. Authors such as Godwin saw the devil everywhere, even in the seemingly innocent “il corna” hand gesture. This gesture was made by raising the index finger and pinky while holding down the middle and ring finger. It had been a salute among Rock fans since Ronnie James Dio introduced it in the early 1970s.³⁴ In *Dancing With Demons* Godwin claimed that Jimi Hendrix used voodoo rituals on stage to turn his music into voodoo ceremonies praising Satan.³⁵ As his proof, he mentioned Jimi Hendrix’s song “Voodoo Child.” Godwin also accused rap pioneers Run-DMC of being in league with the devil. His evidence was the album art to their debut record, which featured Joseph Simmon’s hand in the “il corna” formation. The photo was also slightly doctored which according to Godwin meant that “Run-

³²*Ibid.*, 25.

³³*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ The gesture has been used as a symbol for the University of Texas Longhorns since 1955, but it has been in use for much longer. Weinstein, 34.

³⁵ Godwin, 23.

DMC, obviously servants of Satan, were trying to obscure the proof just enough to throw Christians off the track.”³⁶ Godwin also wrote:

I have personally met a great number of the Rock stars. They have ALL agreed to serve Satan in return for money and fame... I attended special ceremonies at various recording studios throughout the U.S. for the specific purpose of placing satanic blessings on the Rock music recorded. We did incantations which placed demons on EVERY record and tape of Rock music that was sold. At times we also called up special demons who spoke on the recordings -- the various backmasked messages.³⁷

While Godwin came into prominence in the 1980s, many other preachers before him had written about the evils of “satanic music.” These books tended to all say the same thing and they all had the same thesis.

The common theme that ran through all the anti-Rock books was that Rock music was evil and a tool of the devil. Most of the books were written by fundamentalist Christians, who took the Bible literally and believed that Satan existed and was actively seeking souls to warp. They took a sensationalist angle and believed that Rock music had no redeeming social value. While they did not explicitly advocate for censorship in their books, it is obvious that they wanted to restrict access to young people. People like Godwin and Larson strongly supported the PMRC’s proposals of a music labeling system in the 1980s and along with other fundamentalist preachers, were essential in drumming up the support for music suppression efforts.

By the summer of 1985, the controversy over music labeling could not be ignored by the US government any longer. Soon, a Senate hearing was scheduled on the topic of popular music and music labeling. Three musicians agreed to testify, one of which was the direct target of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

attacks by the PMRC. With America watching, the debate between advocates of censorship and anti-censorship musicians took place in Washington D.C.

On September 19, 1985 a hearing began before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on the topic of the lyrical content of certain Rock records and the PMRC started out by attacking the music.³⁸ Susan Baker in her prepared remarks talked about how the Rock music of today could not be compared to the Rock music of the 1950s. Baker testified:

The outrageous edge of rock and roll has shifted its focus from Elvis's pelvis to the saw protruding from Blackie Lawless's codpiece on a WASP album. Rock lyrics have turned from 'I can't get no satisfaction' to 'I am going to force you at gunpoint to eat me alive.' The material we are concerned about cannot be compared with 'Louie Louie,' Cole Porter, Billie Holiday, et cetera. Cole Porter's 'the birds do it, the bees do it,' can hardly be compared with WASP, 'I f-u-c-k like a beast.' There is a new element of vulgarity and violence toward women that is unprecedented. While a few outrageous recordings have always existed in the past, the proliferation of songs glorifying rape, sadomasochism, incest, the occult, and suicide by a growing number of bands illustrates this escalating trend that is alarming.³⁹

Baker ignored the fact that both of the artists she mentioned were censored back in their day. Baker then claimed that the purpose of the PMRC was to educate parents, not to censor music. She claimed that they wanted the music industry to self-regulate, in order to make sure that sexually explicit, excessively violent, or pro-drug messages did not reach America's youth. She also talked about how Rock music had grown more vulgar, in her opinion.

³⁸ Nuzum, 25.

³⁹ U.S. Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, *Record Labeling: Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation*. 99th Cong., 1st Sess., (September 19, 1985), 11. Hereinafter, Record Labeling Hearing.

Baker then talked about some of the societal ills that were affecting America. She made wild accusations about how the messages in Rock music affected American youth. Baker testified:

There certainly are many causes for these ills in our society, but it is our contention that the pervasive messages aimed at children which promote and glorify suicide, rape, sadomasochism, and so on, have to be numbered among the contributing factors. Some rock artists actually seem to encourage teen suicide. Ozzie [sic] Osbourne sings 'Suicide Solution.' Blue Oyster Cult sings 'Don't Fear the Reaper.' AC/DC sings 'Shoot to Thrill.' Just last week in Centerpoint, a small Texas town, a young man took his life while listening to the music of AC/DC. He was not the first.⁴⁰

The day continued with more testimony from the anti-Rock advocates. Tipper Gore repeated the same talking points as Susan Baker and called for the industry to police itself. She repeated her calls for the record industry to put a sticker on recordings with adult themes. One of

⁴⁰ One of the problems with the warning label proposal was that people interpret songs differently. The members of the PMRC interpreted songs literally, oftentimes they would judge a song based on its title. A song that Baker attacked in her statement during the Senate hearing was "Suicide Solution" by Ozzy Osbourne. This song is the perfect example of how the PMRC was dead wrong in most of its accusations. Baker and the PMRC claimed that the song encouraged teen suicide and that its message was dangerous to American youth. The actual message of the song is a good one. "Suicide Solution" is a song about drinking yourself to death and the dangers of alcoholism. The song opens up with the lyrics "Wine is fine, but whiskeys quicker, suicide is slow with liquor." The song continues with "Now you live inside that bottle, the reaper's traveling at full throttle." The song is about the slow death that comes with alcoholism. This song is especially meaningful to Osbourne as it depicted the self-destructive life he was living before he sobered up. It was also written in memory of AC/DC frontman Bon Scott, who died of alcohol poisoning. The term "solution" in the song title referred to a substance dissolved in liquid, in this case, alcohol. The song was clearly about alcoholism, but that did not stop the PMRC from blaming this song for teen suicides. Baker and Gore gave no reason why they interpreted the song in that way. If one looks at the lyrics, combined with knowledge about the person who wrote the song, one can see that the song is a strong denunciation of alcohol abuse. The PMRC misinterpreted other songs as well. In one misstep they said that the Dead Kennedy's single "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" glorified Nazism, when in fact the song was a strong denunciation of the Nazi movement. The PMRC had a history of misinterpreting songs and making false accusations and concerns over lyrical interpretation were later raised during the hearing by the musicians testifying, with Dee Snider attacking the interpretation of his song "Under the Blade." *Ibid.*,12.

the more interesting speakers, Dr. Joe Steussy, a professor of music at the University of Texas, gave testimony about the evils of heavy metal. He stated:

Today's heavy metal music is categorically different from previous forms of popular music. It contains the element of hatred, a meanness of spirit. Its principal themes are, as you have already heard, extreme violence, extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion and Satanism. I know personally of no form of popular music before which has had as one of its central elements the element of hatred.⁴¹

The anti-censorship advocates then gave their testimony. John Denver raised concerns about the misinterpretation of song lyrics. His song “Rocky Mountain High” was misinterpreted by previous censors as having contained pro-drug messages, when the song was actually about his love for the state of Colorado.⁴² The next speaker was Frank Zappa, who viciously attacked the censors. He said “the PMRC proposal is an ill-conceived piece of nonsense which fails to deliver any real benefits to children, infringes the civil liberties of people who are not children, and promises to keep the courts busy for years dealing with the interpretation and enforcement problems inherent in the proposal's design.”⁴³ Frank Zappa had been the target of censors earlier and was a noted advocate for anti-censorship efforts. His stand against the PMRC ended up affecting his reputation. Because of his stance as an anti-censorship activist, his record label assumed his records must have contained explicit content. After the Parental Advisory sticker proposal had passed, he received the “Explicit Lyrics” sticker on his album *Jazz from Hell*,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴² Nuzum, 32.

⁴³ Record Labeling Hearing, 52.

which was entirely instrumental. This cost him lots of money, as many stores, including Wal-Mart would not stock records that had a parental advisory sticker.⁴⁴

Zappa's testimony was the most vehement in defending the right to freedom of speech by musical artists. Zappa testified:

It is my understanding that in law First Amendment issues are decided with a preference for the least restrictive alternative. In this context, the PMRC demands are the equivalent of treating dandruff by decapitation. No one has forced Mrs. Baker or Mrs. Gore to bring Prince or Sheena Easton into their homes. Thanks to the Constitution, they are free to buy other forms of music for their children. Apparently, they insist on purchasing the works of contemporary recording artists in order to support a personal illusion of aerobic sophistication.⁴⁵

Zappa had previously attacked the PMRC; in a *Los Angeles Times* article, he said:

The whole thing is preposterous. It seems like the kind of campaign a bored Washington housewife would dream up when she's at a summer barbeque. The record industry is acting like a bunch of cowards. They're scared to death of the fundamentalist right and want to throw them a bone in hopes that they'll go away. But this stickering program will just start a precedent- they'll always want more.⁴⁶

Zappa was mainly concerned with the government regulating music. He testified that the government should not be involved in the censorship of music. He argued that this was a violation of the First Amendment and claimed that any government action taken as a result of the Senate hearing would be unconstitutional.

After Zappa had testified, Senator Slade Gorton of Washington questioned Zappa:

I can only say I found your statement to be boorish, incredibly and insensitively insulting to the people that were here previously; that you could manage to give the First Amendment of the Constitution of the

⁴⁴ Nuzum, 39.

⁴⁵ Record Labeling Hearing, 52-53.

⁴⁶ "Parents Warn: Take the Sex and Shock out of Rock," *Los Angeles Times*, no vol.:no issue (August 25th, 1985), sec. Calender, p. 67.

United States a bad name, if I felt that you had the slightest understanding of it, which I do not. You do not have the slightest understanding of the difference between government action and private action, and you have certainly destroyed any case you might otherwise have had with this Senator.⁴⁷

Zappa shot back, “Is this a private action?” Zappa was worried about the possibility of laws passed by the government to restrict access of albums with explicit content. Gorton refused to reply and the chairman moved on with questioning.⁴⁸

One of the most notable speakers on the pro-Rock side was Dee Snider, lead singer of the heavy metal band “Twisted Sister” who had been the direct target of PMRC attacks. Snider walked into the hearing room wearing acid wash jeans, a t-shirt, and a denim vest, with his long hair flowing behind him.⁴⁹ He pulled his speech out of his back pocket and started. He first told the committee about his personal life. He was 30- years old, married, and the father of a three year old son. He said that he was raised a Christian and that he still believed in those principles. He did not smoke, drink, or take drugs, but he was the frontman of a heavy metal band, which instantly meant that he would be attacked by the PMRC.⁵⁰ He also attacked the lyrical interpretations of his songs. Gore had written a letter that was subsequently published by several newspapers and magazines. In it, she claimed that Twisted Sister’s song “Under the Blade” was about sadomasochism and rape. Snider testified,

Ms. Gore claimed that one of my songs, ‘Under the Blade,’ had lyrics encouraging sadomasochism, bondage, and rape. The lyrics she quoted have absolutely nothing to do with these topics. On the contrary, the words in question are about surgery and the fear that it instills in people.

⁴⁷ Record Labeling Hearing, 58.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁹ Nuzum, 32.

⁵⁰ Record Labeling Hearing, 73.

Furthermore, the reader of this article is led to believe that the three lines she quotes go together in the song when, as you can see, from reading the lyrics, the first two lines she cites are an edited phrase from the second verse and the third line is a misquote of a line from the chorus. That the writer could misquote me is curious, since we make it a point to print all our lyrics on the inner sleeve of every album. As the creator of 'Under the Blade,' I can say categorically that the only sadomasochism, bondage, and rape in this song is in the mind of Ms. Gore.⁵¹

Next, Snider attacked the misinterpretation of his song "Were Not Gonna Take It." The song was listed on the "Filthy Fifteen" for violent lyrical content. Snider remarked:

You will note from the lyrics before you that there is absolutely no violence of any type either sung about or implied anywhere in the song. Now, it strikes me that the PMRC may have confused our video presentation for this song with the song with the lyrics, with the meaning of the lyrics. It is no secret that the videos often depict story lines completely unrelated to the lyrics of the song they accompany. The video 'We're Not Gonna Take It' was simply meant to be a cartoon with human actors playing variations on the Roadrunner/Wile E. Coyote theme, each stunt was selected from my extensive personal collection of cartoons. You will note when you watch the entire video that after each catastrophe our villain suffers through, in the next sequence he reappears unharmed by any previous attack, no worse for the wear.⁵²

Next, Snider refuted an accusation that Gore had made on television. Gore talked about a t-shirt that she had seen a teenager wearing. She mentioned that it featured a woman in handcuffs and said "Twisted Sister." Snider attacked this and said that it was untrue. Snider said that Twisted Sister had never sold a t-shirt with that design and that he took steps to steer clear of sexism in his music, merchandise, and stage show. Snider then challenged Gore to provide proof of her claims.⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74.

Snider believed in parental responsibility and he attacked the PMRC's demands for the regulation of music. He agreed with the PMRC that his job as a parent was to make sure that what he was buying was appropriate for his children. He claimed that it was not the government's responsibility to regulate entertainment. Snider concluded his remarks with:

The beauty of literature, poetry, and music is that they leave room for the audience to put its own imagination, experiences, and dreams into the words. The examples I cited earlier showed clear evidence of Twisted Sister's music being completely misinterpreted and unfairly judged by supposedly well-informed adults. We cannot allow this to continue. There is no authority who has the right or the necessary insight to make these judgments, not myself, not the Federal Government, not some recording industry committee, not the PTA, not the RIAA, and certainly not the PMRC.⁵⁴

The Senate hearing concluded and was considered a victory for anti-censorship advocates. They had successfully defended themselves against the unsubstantiated claims by the PMRC. But, in the long run, they lost the war. The RIAA adopted the PMRC's proposal and agreed to put a sticker on albums with "explicit content." The sticker read "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics." The Parental Advisory sticker was placed on albums starting in 1989 and they continue to be placed on albums to this day. The PMRC had won and soon major stores such as Wal-Mart refused to stock albums with the sticker on them.⁵⁵ The "Tipper Sticker" had passed, but the debate over music censorship continues to this day. During the late 1980s, the rise of "gangsta rap" led to continued calls for censorship and as the 1980s became the 1990s, the debate over the censorship of music continued unabated.

After the RIAA agreed to put warning labels on albums, many states and cities began to pass legislation to restrict access of stickered albums to people under the age of 18. San

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁵ Nuzum, 33-34.

Antonio, Texas passed a city ordinance that banned people under the age of fourteen from attending concerts by artists whose albums had a warning sticker unless they were accompanied by a parent. This was later ruled to be unconstitutional.⁵⁶ Many states considered bills that restricted people under the age of eighteen from buying stickered albums, but the most extreme example was Maryland. The sponsor of Maryland's bill, Judith Toth, wanted to change the state's obscenity laws to include albums that had the parental advisory sticker. Toth wanted retailers to put stickered material in a separate section of the store that children could not access. The bill also required people to show identification before purchasing stickered albums. Toth wanted to punish the record industry for selling objectionable material, by proclaiming "I say the recording industry is going to go broke defending themselves. Wait until we start court cases under existing laws. The purpose isn't to win; the purpose is to keep them tied up that they don't know what hit them."⁵⁷ Frank Zappa eventually traveled to the state to speak in protest of the bill. He and Toth got into a heated debate. In one instance, Zappa said: "This is censorship. I oppose this bill for a number of reasons. First of all, there's no need for it. The idea that the lyrics to a song are going to cause 'antisocial behavior' is not supported by science."⁵⁸ Toth immediately shot back: "This bill is constitutional. We're talking about minors in the first place. And stop worrying about their 'civil rights.' Start worrying about their mental health, and about

⁵⁶ San Antonio's city ordinance was the first in the nation to be passed. It only affected the concerts of artists whose albums had the sticker affixed, even if one album by an artist had a sticker, people under the age of fourteen were banned from attending without a parent. *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁷ Toth had previously attacked rock musicians. She strongly supported the PMRC's proposals and believed that the next step was the government regulation of rock music. After the bill she co-sponsored failed, she wrote more bills, they all ended up failing. *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

the health of our society.”⁵⁹ The Maryland bill failed, but bills like it were introduced in many other states after the Parental Advisory sticker proposal was passed.

The RIAA gave into the PMRC’s demands not because they were concerned about records with explicit lyrics falling into children’s hands, but rather because they wanted a piece of legislation passed. In the 1980s, the development of the cassette enabled people to tape radio broadcasts onto blank cassettes. The RIAA believed that this was a form of piracy and they thought that it was hurting their profits. They wanted Congress to pass a piece of legislation known as the “Home Audio Recording Act.” This was a tax on blank cassettes and 90% of the profits from the tax would go to the record companies. With the debate over Rock music raging and the government organizing Senate hearings, it would have been very difficult for the RIAA to get the tax passed if Congress was angry at them over their inaction about Rock music. The women who started the PMRC had connections to Capitol Hill and many of their husbands were in positions of power. Frank Zappa brought the connections between the PMRC and the Home Audio Recording Act up in his testimony during the Senate hearing earlier. Zappa testified:

The ladies' shame must be shared by the bosses at the major labels who, through the RIAA, chose to bargain away the rights of composers, performers, and retailers in order to pass H.R. 2911, The Blank Tape Tax, a private tax levied by an industry on consumers for the benefit of a select group within that industry. Is this a consumer issue? You bet it is. The major record labels need to have H.R. 2911 whiz through a few committees before anybody smells a rat. One of them is chaired by Senator Thurmond. Is it a coincidence that Mrs. Thurmond is affiliated with the PMRC?⁶⁰

Zappa had previously brought up the connection between Strom Thurmond and the PMRC. Zappa had written in a letter that the RIAA had a huge financial interest in anti-home

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁰ Record Labeling Hearing, 53.

taping legislation. He said, “The record companies are willing to chop up artist’s civil rights so that they won’t have to lose any potential profits from their anti-home taping and piracy campaign.”⁶¹

During the hearing, Zappa continued in his testimony, “Are we expected to give up Article 1[First Amendment] so the big guys can collect an extra dollar on every blank tape and 10 to 25 percent on tape recorders? What is going on here? Do we get to vote on this tax?”⁶²

Zappa was right, the RIAA was willing to sacrifice artist’s civil rights so that the record companies would not lose profits. They wanted this tax to pass because it would be a major source of income for them. Because the RIAA was worried that if they did not do anything about Rock music their pet legislation would not pass, they agreed to the PMRC’s demands so the debate over Rock music would be ended and they would be able to get the Home Audio Recording Act passed. The Home Audio Recording Act was eventually passed in 1992. This bill ensured that all revenue that came from the blank tape tax would be split among the members of the RIAA.⁶³ The RIAA proved during the PMRC debacle that they were willing to put profit over the right to free speech by musical artists.

The Parental Advisory sticker was the result of a long and protracted battle. The PMRC had successfully forced major American corporations to bow down to their demands. The Tipper Sticker was the culmination of decades of efforts to censor popular music. The whole PMRC debacle showed that corporations were willing to put profits ahead of civil rights and the

⁶¹ Nuzum, 25.

⁶² Record Labeling Hearing, 54.

⁶³ Nuzum, 20.

suppression of freedom of speech was very troubling. The PMRC was simply one of a long line of organizations that sought to rid the country of immoral popular culture. The trend to censor and suppress free expression continues to this day. Movements such as the PMRC have had a big impact on American culture, but they are dangerous to American democracy because they seek to suppress unpopular opinions and expression. This was un-American and the PMRC's proposal truly was an ill-conceived piece of nonsense.

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