

RECORD LABELING AND THE PMRC

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[Assignment: Write a persuasive essay in which you take a firm position on some topical issue and then defend and explain your stand, using at least 5 outside sources in your research. Your goal is, of course, to convince your reader that your position is the correct one.]

(1) Rock 'n roll is one of the most prosperous industries in the world today. The sounds of rock 'n roll music are inescapable; we hear them in shopping malls, in dentists' offices, at the gym, on television, and from car radios. Benefit performances such as Live Aid and Farm Aid have demonstrated that rock music can be a positive social force. However, an ever increasing amount of this music contains obscene, pornographic and violent elements which can have detrimental influences on young children. This music is readily available to young people of all ages on radios, on rock-video networks such as MTV, and in record stores throughout the nation. The first step in helping parents protect their children is to provide parental awareness. Therefore, the PMRC (Parents' Music Resource Center) should continue its campaign to label records that contain suggestive lyrics.

(2) The Parents' Music Resource Center was founded in May 1985 by a group of sixteen women concerned about the changing content of music lyrics. The founding and present executive board consists of president Sally Nevius; first vice-president Pam Howar; second vice-president Tipper Gore; and treasurer Susan Baker. They do not want their children exposed to rock music that contains sexual themes or innuendo about rape, incest, and homosexuality; violent themes such as sadomasochism and bestiality; themes concerning drug and alcohol abuse; themes encouraging violent rebellion against parents, teachers, and others in authority; and suicide, "the ultimate act of violence to oneself" (Mann 101). The PMRC is campaigning for record labeling when the lyrics contain any of these ideas.

(3) The group's primary purpose is to educate and inform parents about this alarming change in music lyrics, as well as to ask the industry to exercise self-restraint (U.S. Senate 11). An album cover with a pleasant picture of the members of the band gives no hint that it contains material that is not appropriate for young consumers. The PMRC has suggested a labeling system which would allow parents to be aware of the contents of the lyrics inside. Music products containing lyrics that are inappropriate for younger children due to explicit sex, explicit violence, or explicit substance abuse would contain a label warning parents and consumers about the lyrics' content.

(4) What the PMRC is advocating is a positive public service, not censorship, as some critics accuse. It is

concerned about the welfare of children and wants to work together with the industry to help parents without hindering artists. The PMRC's program would involve no government action or legislation. It is a voluntary agreement with participating members of the Recording Industry Association of America. "Censorship" implies restricting access or suppressing content; however, Susan Baker and Tipper Gore, co-founders of the PMRC, point out: "There is no restriction on albums containing this consumer information. Anyone can still purchase labeled products. They will simply be better informed about the contents before they do" (9). Furthermore, the labels will do nothing more than create awareness; the record lyrics themselves will in no way be changed, or "censored." In effect, labeling records is "little more than truth in packaging" (U.S. Senate 13).

(5) In addition to censorship accusations, many opponents question the need for labeling. But they fail to realize that much of rock music's popularity comes from its "willingness to express the forbidden idea, to say the thing that should not be said, to shock" (DeCurtis 16). Rock today seems to trivialize evil. Songs like Slayer's "Spill the Blood" and "Mandatory Suicide," or the Misfit's "Can I Go Out and Kill Tonight?" are treated as silly or cute by the rock critics (Goldman 29). Joe Stuessy, a music-theory professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, compares Chuck Berry's sympathetic "School Days," in which the singer seems to have his arm around the teenager saying, "I know how you feel, man" to W.A.S.P.'s "School Daze" with its violent message, "Burn it down!" (Mann 102). This type of destructive attitude is evident in many of today's lyrics, such as in the song "Whiplash" by Metalica:

Bang your head against the stage like you never have before. Make it rain, make it bleed, make it really sore. In a frenzied madness, now is the time to let it rip, to let it fucking loose. We are gathered here to maim and kill, for this is what we choose. (U.S. Senate 14)

The song "Bastard" by Motley Crue incorporates a similar enjoyment of violence: "Out goes the light. In goes my knife. Pull out his life. Consider the bastard dead" (U.S. Senate 15). Obviously, these are not the values that should mold our future leaders. Most parents do not listen to the music their children listen to and are, therefore, unaware of the lyrics' content. Without labeling, parents will not realize the messages their children are hearing and learning to internalize.

(6) The psychological aspects of repeated exposure to these lyrics can be devastating. Psychiatrist Robert S. Demski, chief of staff at Laurel Ridge Hospital in San Antonio, claims that "once something is learned at an

early age, it may be difficult to unlearn" (qtd. in Mann 103). The average teenager listens to three to four hours of rock music per day; he or she is constantly exposed to lyrics that are inappropriate for children and young adults. Bob DeMoss, founder and director of Teen Vision, a non-profit group in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, that evaluates music and media, found that "about sixty percent of heavy metal lyrics rely on destructive, depressing, or degrading themes" (qtd. in Mann 102). These are the types of themes that are rampant in much of rock music today; if something is not done to make the public aware of these themes, the outcome could be irreversible. Dr. L.D. Tashjian, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Philadelphia, has studied the effects of rock on youngsters and his findings support Demski's analysis. A Reader's Digest article cited Tashjian's study of

seven- and eight-year-olds who listen to lyrics extolling sexual sadism, bondage, [and] bestiality. . . . [At] this very impressionable age such messages can seriously warp their sexual orientation. The younger child or the potentially disturbed youth is liable to be profoundly and dangerously influenced. (102)

These youths may become desensitized to "brutality and degradation" (Mann 103), and become criminals with seriously demented psychological views and values.

(7) Probably the worst consequence of contemporary rock music lyrics is teen suicide. According to an article in Reader's Digest, many of the five thousand teen suicides reported annually are "linked to depression fueled by rock music and lyrics that glamorize sadistic violence and drug abuse, as well as suicide itself" (103). Many of the victims find encouragement from rock stars who "present death as a positive, almost attractive alternative" (U.S. Senate 13). Support of suicide is prevalent in Metallica's song "Faith in Black" when the singer screams:

I have lost the will to live. Simply nothing more to give. There is nothing more for me. I need the end to set me free. Death greets me warm. I will just say good-bye. (U.S. Senate 14)

With messages like this, it is no mystery where teenagers get their suicidal ideas. Staff writer Peggy Mann of Reader's Digest relates the sad story of nineteen-year-old John McCollum of Indio, California. When he died, the coroner's report stated that McCollum committed suicide by shooting himself in the head while listening to "devil music." At the time of his death, McCollum had been listening to songs by Ozzy Osbourne for five hours. These songs promoted such messages as, 'suicide is the only way out' from "Suicide Solution" and 'can you help

me? Oh, shoot out my brains . . . I tell you to end your life' from "Paranoid" (103). This does not imply that a suicide would not occur without the music; however, far too often it plays a contributing role.

(8) The Parents' Music Resource Center is requesting record companies to voluntarily label their own products, to create a uniform set of criteria across the record industry for what topics would require labeling, and to make lyrics for labeled music products available to the consumer before purchase. Through its publicity and persistence, the PMRC was instrumental in instigating the hearings on rock music held by the Senate Commerce Committee in September, 1985. This inquiry led to an agreement with the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) where albums with "explicit material" would either have lyrics printed on the cover or would carry a parental advisory label. Since then, however, the RIAA has complied with the agreement on less than half of the materials containing explicit or violent lyrics. On those records that did have a label, the warning was printed "almost too tiny to read. Others made a joke of the label--'Warning: Do not play if accompanied by an adult'" (Mann 104). With this type of compliance, labeling the records does not serve its intended purpose.

(9) Even though the RIAA is not wholly supporting the PMRC, many groups have taken measures into their own hands in order to stop the influx of offensive lyrics. In an unsigned article in Time magazine, as of June 8, 1989 in Amarillo, Texas, Western Merchandisers, Inc. requires that any consumer wishing to purchase records containing sexually explicit and violent lyrics must be at least eighteen years of age. In the same Time article, Walter McNeer, an executive vice president at Western Merchandisers, explains that they do not want to censor; rather, he feels they have "an obligation to [both] the customers and the communities" (31).

(10) Parents in San Antonio were horrified when they realized their preteens were attending concerts "that exalted murder, sexual sadism, bestiality, and drugs." A city ordinance now requires parents or legal guardians to accompany children under fourteen to any concert that features material "deemed obscene to children." Bobbie Mueller, head of Community Families in Action, says the impact has been "significant and performances are more restrained" (qtd. in Mann 104-5).

(11) A recent article in the New York Times reported that the Pennsylvania House of Representatives had passed a bill that would prohibit the sale of explicit recordings unless the packages are labeled with a fluorescent yellow sticker with a message saying

Warning: May contain explicit lyrics descriptive of or advocating one or more of the following: incest, suicide, bestiality, sadomasochism, sexual activity in a violent context, murder, morbid violence, illegal use of drugs or alcohol. PARENTAL ADVISORY. (Pareles)

These are the types of measures necessary for protecting children from explicit lyrics. Society would certainly benefit if more groups took the initiative to label records.

(12) The RIAA simply has no valid reasons for not labeling records containing questionable material. Labeling is not censorship in any form. Instead, it is a necessary action that will help parents screen what their children hear. It will not take the place of good parenting; it will only ease that tremendous and difficult job. Parents are able to check ratings on movies and videos or read previews about television shows. Is there really any difference between this and being able to know the contents of an album before purchase? Labeling records is not too much to ask; it is something that needs to be done. Until society is able to rid itself of the evils of the world and can protect its children from any harm whatsoever, the Parents' Music Resource Center is perfectly correct in its campaign for labeling records.

Works Cited

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