Banned And Censored Music Essay, Research Paper

Banned and Censored Music

The discussion of whether or not the censorship of music is constitutionally sound has come about. This problem has been around since the beginning of music in one way or another. The fact of the matter is that there is technically no such thing as the censorship of music in the United States(Banned Music 1). Although that is supposedly the case, that statement can be very misleading. It is stated in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution that every American is granted the Freedom Of Speech. This includes all musicians. Contrary to this statement, there has been a numerous amount of cases in which a song or music group has been banned of either their right to perform their act on stage, or the sale of their album has been condemned as illegal. The troubling fact about music censorship is that music is considered to be an art form, and there are certain laws set up to protect art from being censored. People should have the right to choose what type of music they want to listen to in this country.

Censorship is the control of what people may say or hear, write or read, or see or do. Censorship can affect books, newspapers, magazines, motion pictures, radio and television programs, and speeches. (World Book 345)

Most of the early problems with the censorship of music came about in the early 1950’s. This was the first real era of rock and roll in America. In 1954 a Michigan Congresswoman tried to pass a bill that stated that the mailing of any explicit or pornographic album could lead to some hefty jail time, up to five years if convicted. When looking back, the 50’s had some of the most laughable incidences when songs were banned. There was a Billie Holiday song by the name of “Love For Sale,” none of the radio stations were allowed to play it because of its strong sexual content and its depiction of prostitution. In even a funnier case there was a song by the name of “Transfusion” banned because it was felt that a blood transfusion was not a laughing matter. Perhaps the most farcical form of censorship in the 50’s came about in 1957 when Elvis Presley was scheduled to perform on the Ed Sullivan show. Cameramen were instructed not to film any of Elvis’s lower body because his dancing was considered inappropriate for the viewing audience(Elvis To Ice-T 3). What is so offensive about that to have it censored from the public. Times have changed though, today we just sit back and laugh at that type of censorship.

The 1960’s brought about a new wave of censorship. During the 1960’s, popular music diversified, and so did the

censors. Although the censorship supposedly diversified, the uncalled-for censorship of certain music continued. In 1964 the state of Indiana banned the song ” Louie Louie” because they felt that it had some sexual content in it. But if you listen to the words it is obvious that sexual content is no where to be found. In 1967, the Rolling Stones were forced to change the lyrics of a song in order to perform it on national television because, of course, it had sexual content. The song was called “Let’s Spend The Night Together” and they were forced to say “Let’s Spend Some Time Together.” Later that decade John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s album “Two Virgin’s” featured a naked picture of the two. These albums were confiscated before they even had a chance to hit the record stores. There was one Chicago retailer shut down by the vice squad for carrying this album(The 1960 s 1). A piece of art is destroyed if altered. What would Michael Angelos’ famous sculpture “The Thinker” be like if somebody carved clothes on to him. it wouldn’t be what he attended and therefore the art piece would loose most of its significance.

People often times do not get offended as easily as they use to. In the early 1990’s an album released by Nirvana featured a naked baby on the cover. There was very

little controversy over the cover and there was no ban of the record sale.

Unlike the 1950s, the 60s proved to have a few more controversial topics. That goes to show how people change their views about morality as time passes.

The 1970s proved to have just as many controversial cases about censorship, as the fifties and sixties. In April of 1971 Officials in Illinois released a list of popular music that contained drug references. The list included the popular children’s song “Puff The Magic Dragon” and the Beatles “Yellow Submarine,” (The 1970 s 1) This is so absurd. These officials must really have had a lot of time on their hands to sit around and turn around the words to these wonderful children songs. If somebody wanted they could depict violating thoughts or images out of many different forms of art.

The censorship of music only increased as the years passed by. In 1981 Olivia Newton John’s song “Physical” was banned because it was believed to have strong sexual content and this was considered to be more than inappropriate for the Mormon religion. 1985 brought about one of the most

prominent groups to support censorship in music. This group was the Parents Music Resource Group. This group was headed by Tipper Gore. This group was later named the Parents

Music Resource Center. The PMRC’s primary focus was getting record companies to monitor and rate their artist’s

releases with a system similar to the MPAA system for movies. This group brought about some problems about two types of music, rap and heavy metal. The PMRC hit them so hard that it became very hard to find a rap or heavy metal record in stores. In order to get around this many record labels released two versions of the same album, one was the original album and the second one was an edited version. The PMRC created a type of stickering system. Under the sticker system if an album was believed to be inappropriate, a sticker would be placed on the album cover. This sticker would indicate that the album should not be purchased by anyone under the age of eighteen due to explicit lyrics or violent behavior. This was a big step backwards for those who were against the censorship of music. This stickering system did not include the censorship of pornography. In 1987 a singer by the name of Jello Biafra was arrested for the distribution of pornography. He had a picture of a naked lady on the cover and was found to be inappropriate for the public. These albums were later seized and his band

eventually broke up.(The 1980 s 1) Pornography and prostitution are often times found to be legal in America, but a person’s constitutional right of speaking freely can

be outlawed by the same government, that really doesn t make since!

The 90s by is the most controversial decade as far as censorship goes. With all of the Knew and diversified types of music there is sure to be differences in taste. The widely known incident about the subject of banned music took place between the police in Dade County Florida and the rap group 2 Live Crew. 2 Live Crew released a very risqu album by the name of “Me So Horny” The record sale and distribution of this album were deemed illegal in Florida and Alabama just to name a couple of states. 2 Live Crew

were also arrested in Florida at a concert. The police claimed that the performance was too obscene for the general public. This led to 2 Live Crew’s next album to be titled

“Banned In The USA.” Later on that year rapper Ice T’s album “Freedom of Speech” was banned. It’s lyrics were also considered to be too obscene. (Music Censorship: Elvis to Ice-T 5) It seems that rap music is taking the fall for music censorship. Public Enemy, another rap group, has recently been under some heat for a video and an album they just recently released. The name of the album “By the Time I Get to Arizona” features a video in which it depicts the governor of Arizona as a David Duke type of character. Public Enemy claims that it is just trying to get its point across that it is wrong that the state of Arizona does not celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day(Loder, Censorship, A Town Meeting). Evan Mecham, the former governor of Arizona had this to say about the matter, “I could not understand how anyone could have the gall to market something like that and call it entertainment,”(Gregory Lewis 1). It should be added that Mecham was impeached for abolishing Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday. So I guess that you could say that Public Enemy was trying to get a point across and they succeeded.

In the mid 1990s many large chain stores took a major role in the sales of these so called obscene albums. Such stores as Wal Mart and K Mart decided not to sale any records that proved to be obscene. This meant that if a record label wanted to sell a lot of copies of an album,

they would have to start making sure they were acceptable for the general public. Since the Wal- Marts and K -Marts were so big it would be really hard to sale a large quantity of the albums at record stores.

As you can see, censorship is a big part of the music industry these days. Obviously censorship has been around for a while, but is it all that it is cracked up to be?

There are many groups or coalitions who believe the answer to this question is no. There is a group by the name of the Free Music Coalition, based out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that is always fighting for the right of musicians. They feel that the censorship of music is wrong and it is bad for the music community. The Free Music Coalition has three basic goals: 1. To educate the public

about the seriousness of the threats we are facing. Church groups, politicians, and the police have formed a network to censor music. Fans need to understand this to effectively fight back. 2. To organize a counter attack. To be successful everyone must band together, only then will activities such as letter writing campaigns, petitions, boycotts and demonstrations produce results. 3. Make

censorship illegal. The First Amendment is supposed to protect our freedom of expression, but lawmakers and police are able to twist the laws to stop ideas that they find dangerous or offensive. What we need is a law that prohibits the censoring and labeling of records, books, arts, or films. Only then can artists create without a

cloud of fear hanging over them. Only then can we enjoy the music we want to hear ( Fighting Censorship 1).

The Free Music Coalition is against the censorship of music because censorship is unfair to musicians. In a recent case in Michigan it wasn’t a band’s lyrics that got banned, it was one of their T-shirts. A young boy went to school with the inscription “Korn” on his plain black shirt. He was asked to change the shirt, and if he didn’t, he would be suspended (Music Censorship: Elvis to Ice -T 1&2). This incident can be more rightly justified; the Offense Principle states that a person can be stopped from doing

want he or she wants do if it is going to offend others(Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues 203). Everybody has a choice about what kind of music they want to listen to. My friend is big into rap music, and I am offended by the language used in it. It is his choice to buy and to listen to it, and it is mine not to. Him buying it doesn’t affect me, so there for it should be his right. If nobody is affected by a persons actions then it should be allowed.

The First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution states pacifically that each person has the right to freedom of speech.

Congress shall make no law representing an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free

exercise there of; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people living peaceably to assemble, and petition the government for a redress of grievances.

If a person is not allowed to express themselves and their feelings vividly, then they are not being given the right that is rightfully theirs.

Artists have never had their drawings censored

because they are inappropriate, and boxers don’t get censored because their sport is too violent, so why should musicians? Sure, some of the music out there is not appropriate for little kids to hear, but it is not the musicians’ responsibility to make sure youngsters do not hear it. So, for those people who believe the censorship of music is correct, maybe they should take their own advice and start censoring what they and their kid’s buy, and quit

worrying about what others are buying. America is based on individual rights and individual differences. Censoring the music in this country would go against everything America is all about. People should be able to choose want they want or don’t want.