

Entertainment

Censorship and the disc: another spin on freedom of expression

by Michael Edwards

This seems as good a time as any to open discussion on freedom of speech and censorship in music. I abhor censorship in any form and think that any idea, opinion or sentiment has the right to be expressed no matter how vile and obnoxious it may be. As soon as we enter the situation where someone sitting in an office somewhere is deciding what we are able to see, hear or have access to then we have entered a very dangerous society where we are no longer in control. Someone deciding when there is one 'motherfucker' too many, one too many 'obscenity' depicted or when the lyrics describe a realism which the censor does not want to acknowledge exists. Not a healthy situation for anyone.

We are now in a situation where almost every new major label recording that has explicit language on it will carry an advisory sticker to inform the potential purchaser of the content (thanks to the work

of Tipper Gore and her supporters). Not only does this make it incredibly easy to pick out the albums with the most 'fucks' for your money, but the sticker only tells of bad language. We are not alerted to the homophobia of Guns 'N' Roses or the misogyny of most heavy metal bands - isn't it more disturbing that people are being exposed to this? But the advisory sticker simply gives extra publicity to an artist, and when the media gets involved, sales can go through the roof. When George Michael's 'I Want Your Sex' was banned by the BBC then it went straight to the top of the charts as did Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'Relax'. Controversy equals publicity equals sales.

The whole thing came out into the open most recently with the 'Cop Killer' controversy from Ice T and

his band Body Count. It seemed that he was advocating that everyone go out and kill some policemen, and most listeners will, of course, respond to music by doing exactly what the content tells them to (especially if the message is played backwards, if I remember correctly). Time Warner did stand by the artist, which came as a shock, even though the media was having a field day with it, as were the politicians. And eventually after death threats to the artist, the chairman of the company and his family (which is much better than killing cops...) the track was removed from subsequent copies. This set up a mad rush for the unedited version which now sells for a pretty penny on the collectors market. Bad publicity? Maybe, as it did lead to Ice T being dropped by his record company before they released his next album.

Rap music seems to breed real controversy, mainly for the reason that the 'call to arms' are usually by black artists (to a mainly black audience?) and that is where the hypocrisy enters. The 1990 album 'Viva Dead Ponies' by The Fatima Mansions contained a song called 'Angel's Delight' where the lyrics go "Kill a cop, why the hell not? Let's all kill some cops". Hmm -

ous as censorship, it would seem.

Skrewdriver are a band that most people are thankfully unfamiliar with but they were a neo-Nazi hardcore punk band that have been putting out albums for years now. The albums are almost impossible to find; most stores refuse to carry them because of the sentiments involved. But the music was available for the people that really wanted it; only a small percentage of population. Most of the REALLY nasty music has been driven underground as the majority of the population is simply not interested in it - maybe we have less to worry about than we think. Even without censorship, this music is having little success. In a post script to this, the leader of Skrewdriver was killed in a car crash last month and the music press are having a field day in reporting the death in an ambivalent fashion in most cases, although I did glimpse one 'Goodbye Nazi Scum' headline in a special anti-fascism issue of a British music magazine.

One organisation which seems to be censoring more and more recordings is that perennial campus favourite, Columbia House. A quick browse through one of their latest advertisements shows that

six of the more popular CDs are being offered in "Edited Versions" including the most recent by Prince, Madonna, House Of Pain and Cypress Hill (although the final

one is under the guise of a "Radio Version"). Why are they doing this? Hard to say really, because they do label albums that have content which may be objectionable to some people, and some of the edited versions are still labelled in this fashion. Isn't it enough to pro-

vide the obligatory warning?

Apparently not. The whole thing gets a little bit more bizarre at this point because Columbia House state that they do not carry out the editing, but are offered edited versions from the record companies. Columbia House simply passes on these versions to the listeners as if providing some special service to look after the morality of minors in the music club. When I asked Columbia House to justify the censorship, they told me that it was so that these albums could be enjoyed by a family audience. So why not offer the full and edited versions side by side? Maybe because the edited version would not sell when in direct competition with the full version. Go into any store, they sell albums only in the way that the artists intend - unedited. Yet Columbia House maintain that they do not cause the censorship. But by buying and distributing edited version, they are perpetuating the whole process. By only asking for the full versions then the edited versions would disappear overnight. I'm still not exactly sure what is removed in the editing process - it would be interesting to compare and contrast - but it does mean that the recording is not being presented in the way that the artist intended. I even wonder if the artist is aware of what is going on.

The other thing that troubles me is that there doesn't seem to be any consistency in their policy. Why are some records are edited while others get through? It goes back to the idea that there is someone sitting in an office somewhere making the decision about what is or is not acceptable for you to listen to. If that upsets you as a member of Columbia House, then write to tell them, as they tell me that I am the only person to complain. Show them that someone else cares too.

But should we be really concerned about the effect of music upon people - can music make someone go out and kill, rob, maim and generally become a nasty person? Maybe it's a convenient defence in court, but it seems unlikely. The fear of satanic messages from 1970s heavy metal is now laughable, but maybe music does have more influence in someone's life than we give it credit for. Will the teenager listening to Guns 'N' Roses pick up the anti-gay sentiments? If we begin to think in this way, then the entire media approach has to be re-examined and we have to start figuring out who the arbiters of what we hear and think will be. And who will determine this? You can bet they won't ask us. When it comes to censorship, the only thing to do is to allow all types of material to be out there and hope that the correct decisions are made by the individual. Not totally naive considering the fate of the PC party....

Explicit Language warning labels make it incredibly easy to pick out the albums with the most "fucks" for your money...we are not alerted to the homophobia or the misogyny.

Offer valid until December 15, 1993. Not valid in conjunction with any other discount offer. Available for Dine-In, Take-Out and Delivery where applicable. Not redeemable as cash. Offer does not include International Gourmet Pizzas. In P.E.I. Pepsi equivalent is 750ml, deposit extra.

339 King St. 458-1900

15 Prospect St. 453-1400

Northside 459-1707