

## **Music on Trial: Rock, Rap, and Responsibility**

In 1988, a Nevada couple claimed that their son committed suicide after listening repeatedly to "Suicide Solution," a heavy-metal song recorded by the band Black Sabbath.

In 1994, Curt Cobain, singer and songwriter for the rock group Nirvana shot himself after a prolonged bout with depression. Many believe that Cobain's suicide was an expression of the hopelessness and alienation that were trademarks of his music.

In 1996, Joe Gallegos, a Colorado youth, died in a shootout with police after he murdered his roommates. Acquaintances speculate that he was obsessed with "Locc 2 da brain," a rap tune in which a street gangster murders his enemies.

Months later, rap star Tupac Shakur was fatally wounded by an unknown assailant in Las Vegas. Shakur's death was the final chapter in a violent personal history that seemed to reflect the credo of guns and gangs featured in his music.

Six months after Tupac's death, Christopher Wallace, a.k.a. Notorious B.I.G., was gunned down outside a Los Angeles music awards ceremony.

In January, 1997, teen-agers in Vancouver, Canada, rioted in celebration of a concert given by Marilyn Manson, a shock rocker who wears androgynous make-up, Nazi uniforms and fishnet stockings. Manson, who renamed himself after mass-murderer Charles Manson, drinks his own blood and urges fans to "kill everyone and let your god sort them out."

Over the past decade, contemporary popular music has become the focus of intense public scrutiny. Many believe that the lyrics and lifestyles expressed by shock-rockers, heavy-metal, and gangsta rappers promote hopelessness and romanticize gang life, drug use, and violence against women. They argue that the thoughts and feelings expressed in this music pose a menace to society and should be subjected to tighter control.

Others believe that artists and the music they create serve a vital function by reflecting the society we live in. They maintain that rockers and rappers are protected by the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech.

Still others argue that certain categories of speech stand outside the protection of the First Amendment. They point out that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the First Amendment does not protect obscene material. The court defined obscenity as material that appeals to prurient interest, is patently offensive, and fails to make a significant contribution to literature, the arts, politics, or science.

The controversy surrounding grunge, heavy metal, and gangsta rap is not new. Other music in other times has caused similar reactions.

## **The 1950s: Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay**

During World War II, people moved from the South to work in the defense plants of Los Angeles, Chicago, and the industrial Northeast. They brought their own music with them. This rural folk and blues music formed the roots of rock, country, and rhythm 'n' blues.

In the beginning, only a few small companies recorded blues and country singers. Most of these musicians were not professionals. They often signed away their rights to a song for \$5 and \$10 apiece. At these rates, a small record company could afford to take a chance on recording an unknown player. These early rock 'n' roll and rhythm 'n' blues recordings allowed the music to grow and change, but they were meant to reach only limited audiences.

By the 1950s, however, teen-agers had begun to tune into radio broadcasts featuring the music of future stars like [Carl Perkins](#), [B.B. King](#), [Jerry Lee Lewis](#), and [Fats Domino](#). As early as 1952, white teen-agers were traveling to black neighborhoods in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles to buy rhythm 'n' blues records from black record stores. The artists and the companies who recorded them began to cash in on a new-found "crossover" popularity in which these specialized artists began to appeal to a broader audience.

[Sam Phillips](#), a small Southern blues record producer, noticed the lure that black music held for white teenagers. "If only I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars," Phillips reportedly claimed. Phillips' quest was not hopeless. A young white singer from Memphis, Tennessee, described his early musical experiences this way:

"We were a religious family, going round together to sing at camp meetings and revivals and I'd take my guitar with us when I could. I also dug the real low-downed Mississippi [blues] singers like Big Bill Broonzy and Big Boy Crudup although they would scold me at home for listening to them. 'Sinful music' the townsfolk in Memphis said it was. Which never bothered me I guess."

The young white singer's name was [Elvis Presley](#). Sam Phillips heard Presley perform and hired a trio of country musicians to back the young singer. With Elvis playing guitar and singing "It's All Right," a blues tune written by black singer Big Boy Crudup, this unassuming group made rock 'n' roll history. By the end of 1956, rock 'n' roll tunes from small record labels like Sam Phillips' accounted for more than one-third of all the Top Ten hits, according to the record industry magazine, [Billboard](#).

The music recorded by these crossover artists stirred up a great deal of controversy. Anxious parents stood on the other side of a generation gap listening to the unfamiliar sound of boogie woogie, electric guitars, and rhythm 'n' blues. The lyrics of these songs were often full of incomprehensible slang and thinly disguised sexual innuendo. The new music created a strong backlash in a population that was not fully prepared for racial equality or changing sexual attitudes.

[Alan Freed](#), a veteran New York disc jockey and pioneer promotor of rock 'n' roll, was forced off the air when his nationally syndicated TV show "Rock 'n' Roll Dance Party" showed black singer [Frankie Lymon](#) dancing with a white girl. [Richard Berry](#), author of the rhythm 'n' blues favorite "Louie, Louie," was questioned by FBI agents who responded to public accusations that the song's lyrics were obscene.

Organized religion took a strong stand against rock 'n' roll. Boston's Reverend John P. Carroll claimed that "the suggestive lyrics on rock 'n' roll records are a matter for law enforcement agencies." Chicago's Cardinal Stritch proclaimed that rock 'n' roll dancing and "tribalism...could not be tolerated by Catholic youth."

### **The 1960s: I Wanna Hold Your Hand**

The [Beatles](#) landed in New York in February 1964. Originally, the image the English group put forth was non-controversial. This talented quartet of loveable mopheads quickly caught the attention of American youth. The Beatles' first American hit, "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," became the fastest-selling record in history.

Within two years, however, the Beatles had become embroiled in some of the major social issues of the day. In 1966, John Lennon claimed that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" and that Christianity would "vanish and shrink." Radio stations in Birmingham, Alabama, banned the Beatles' music. Other towns followed suit. Bonfires of Beatles records and memorabilia lit up the sky in communities across the nation. The [B.B.C.](#), Britain's national broadcasting corporation, refused to play certain Beatles tunes on the grounds that they encouraged drug abuse.

The Beatles were not the only musicians who were criticized for endorsing the counterculture of the 1960s. By 1966, a new breed of American rockers had come to prominence. Artists like [Bob Dylan](#), [Janis Joplin](#), the [Grateful Dead](#), and the [Jefferson Airplane](#) weren't simply writing new rock 'n' roll. They were providing living models for a new lifestyle. Much of the new music resonated among young music fans and gave expression to their thoughts and feelings about personal freedom, racial equality, the Vietnam War, and experimentation with drugs.

In 1969, half a million young people gathered to hear their favorite bands at [Woodstock](#), New York. By that time, America's faith in its own values had been challenged by the prolonged conflict in Vietnam, the violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the assassination of several of its most respected leaders. Backed up by an unofficial network of "underground" radio stations that advocated the new hippie and anti-Vietnam war lifestyle, rock music once again seemed to be taking sides in the bitter conflicts that were sweeping mainstream America.

### **The 1990s: The Beat Goes On**

For more than a decade, attempts have been made to put limits on objectionable lyrics in rap, heavy-metal, and grunge rock. During the 1980s, [Tipper Gore](#), the wife of then-

Senator [Al Gore](#), spearheaded an attack on violent and obscene lyrics. Her organization, the Parents Music Resource Center, organized a campaign to persuade record companies to place warning labels on some albums.

The recent call for control over controversial song lyrics has garnered support from across America's political spectrum. A television commercial by [C. DeLores Tucker](#) and [William Bennett](#) begins by saying, "I'm a liberal democrat....And I'm a conservative Republican. But we're both worried about the society our children live in today."

Bennett, the former secretary of education under the [Reagan](#) administration, calls for self-regulation by artists and record companies who produce what Bennett calls "filth for profit." C. DeLores Tucker is a civil rights veteran who marched with [Martin Luther King](#). Tucker is concerned that rap music is demeaning to women. Her organization, the National Political Congress of Black Women, advocates banning "the sale of pornographic and misogynistic lyrics...." Although they disagree over many political issues, both Tucker and Bennett see eye to eye on the issue of rock, rap, and obscenity.

Tucker is also critical of shock-rocker Marilyn Manson. She claims that Manson is responsible for "the dirtiest, nastiest porno directed at youth that has ever hit the market." Manson has been jailed for committing sex acts on stage in front of thousands of teenagers. Salt Lake City and Oklahoma City both passed resolutions banning Manson's concerts.

In response to the controversy surrounding Manson and his shock-rock recordings, teen counselor Lynda Fletcher believes that parents should pay more attention to popular music. She advises parents to "play shock-rock music with their kids and explain why the lyrics are offensive."

Shock rock, heavy-metal, and gangsta rap also has its defenders. Bill Stephney, owner of a Manhattan music production company, argues that rap doesn't cause society's problems, it merely responds to them. As evidence, he points to the recent past when a new rash of problems began to plague black communities all across America. "It is very easy to hear the differences before and after 1985," Stephney maintains. "The messages and images [of rap] go from talking about parties, finding girls, and hanging out, to Uzis, nine-millimeters, gun battles and crack wars."

A six-year study of music fans by Jeff Arnett, a researcher at the University of Missouri concludes that heavy-metal music often has a calming effect on "metalheads." Arnett observes that heavy-metal music appeals to young people with aggressive tendencies because it makes them feel like they "belong," that they share the same feelings and observations about society with others, and they can use the music to harmlessly release their aggression.

While speaking about Joe Gallegos, the young Colorado man who murdered his roommates, Ron Stallworth, a veteran cop and gang expert, maintained that "[w]hen somebody says the music made him do it, we should instead look at the person's

socialization process: Who were his friends? What did he do with his life?" Stallworth says, "There were other things going on in [Gallegos'] life." In fact, Gallegos came from a broken home, had a history of methamphetamine use, and carried a criminal record including a conviction for assault.

Throughout the 20th century, rock music, from rhythm 'n' blues to heavy-metal and rap—has been linked to some of society's most difficult issues. Should this controversial music be censored? Can music actually encourage lawlessness, violence, or immorality? Do the ideas and feelings relayed by rap and heavy metal music actually cause the problems they describe or do they act as a mirror for society's problems?

### **For Discussion**

1. How did controversy first arise around rock 'n' roll?
2. What were some issues that surrounded the rock music of the 1960s? What are some issues of today's music?
3. Do you think certain music is harmful? If so, should it be restricted? Explain your answers.

## **A C T I V I T Y**

### **Should Record Companies Stop Marketing Controversial Artists and their Work?**

Many people believe that record companies should not produce or distribute music that encourages lawlessness, violence, or immorality. Is the music industry responsible for the content of the music it sells? Should record companies refuse to produce and distribute controversial artists?

1. Form groups of four students each. Each group should review the article and create arguments for and against self-censorship in the recording industry.
2. After reviewing the pros and cons of music industry censorship, each group should write a one-paragraph opinion on their findings and choose a reporter to present its opinion to the class.
3. Reconvene the class and discuss the opinions of each group.