

University of Nevada, Reno

**Parental Advisory – Explicit Content:
The Parents Music Resource Center, Conservative
Music Censorship, and the Protection of Children**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in History

by

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Abstract

Historians have long overlooked and misunderstood the Parents Music Resource Center, an activist group formed in 1985 to correct perceived excesses in heavy metal music. Scholars have focused their analyses almost exclusively on the First Amendment implications of the group's actions, largely dismissing the PMRC in the process. This thesis argues that by expanding the historical analysis of the group to include the social and political climate of previous generations and of the 1980s, the self-stated goals of the PMRC, and a musicological discussion of heavy metal and why the group specifically targeted this genre, we can see that the PMRC was in fact an incredibly influential sociopolitical activist group that is representative of the political shift in the United States in the 1980s.

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I. Introduction

In December 1984, Mary Elizabeth “Tipper” Gore came home from a shopping trip with a copy of the soundtrack album to the film *Purple Rain*, which her daughter had asked for as a gift. Released theatrically earlier that year, the film starred the musician Prince, who also wrote and performed several songs for the film’s soundtrack. After putting the record on, Gore was horrified at the lyrics of the track “Darling Nikki”: “I knew a girl named Nikki / I guess you could say she was a sex fiend / I met her in a hotel lobby / masturbating with a magazine.” Susan Baker, wife of James Baker, Secretary of the Treasury under Ronald Reagan, had a similar experience. Her seven-year-old daughter, after listening to the lyrics “Like a virgin / Touched for the very first time” from the Madonna song “Like a Virgin,” approached Baker asking for an explanation as to the song’s meaning. Shocked by these lyrics, Gore and Baker, along with other wives of prominent Washington D.C.-area politicians and businessmen, co-founded the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985 to challenge and correct what they perceived as thematic excesses in rock and heavy metal music. Seeking to implement a voluntary rating system similar to that used by the MPAA for feature films, the PMRC intended to create a system by which parents could be made aware of the lyrical and thematic content of music purchased for their children.

Throughout the early months of 1985, the PMRC sent letters to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and dozens of record labels and met with RIAA president Stan Gortikov demanding self-regulation on the part of these companies. In

addition to these meetings, the PMRC released numerous press statements and made a number of television and radio appearances explaining their position and their goals. In September of that year, the PMRC brought the issue before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and presented their arguments for a labeling and rating system. Many musicians, music industry employees, and music critics argued against the group's actions, citing the freedoms of the First Amendment enjoyed by performers. Despite the significant and highly publicized opposition to the PMRC's arguments, in 1990, after 5 years of controversy and debate, the now-common "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content" sticker, also known informally (and disrespectfully) as the "Tipper Sticker," debuted.¹

In their treatments of the PMRC, historians have largely taken the same defensive stance as the artists testifying at the 1985 hearing, typically invoking the First Amendment in their studies of the PMRC. This approach has resulted in histories of the PMRC that vary greatly in both quality and impartiality. Some studies are respectfully critical of the group's actions, arguing that free speech in the context of artistry is absolute and should not be subject to one group's or person's tastes. Others have openly attacked the group's founding members, all spouses of prominent Washington D.C.-area politicians and businessmen, as bored housewives on some misguided moral crusade, arguing by extension that legislating morality is inherently subjective and thus dangerous. Almost universally, the First Amendment is invoked either as the only lens of critique or as a shield and sword for defense and counterattack.

¹ Nuzum, Eric, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001, 7.

One example of the former is Frederick S. Lane's work on the culture wars in the United States. Typical of the brief discussion many historical works devote to Tipper Gore and the PMRC, Lane devotes only a relatively brisk passage to the group and attributes their success to their political connections before descending into a discussion of the constitutionality of the PMRC's crusade. Uninspiring, he concludes that based on their actions, the group's intentions were "disingenuous."²

Still other historians have failed to accurately describe the group's goals and give them appropriate credit for the change they enacted in relation to those stated objectives. Andrew Hartman notes that Gore struggled to maintain public awareness of the fact that not only was she a fan of rock music and a champion of free speech, but also that she was politically liberal. Throughout time with the PMRC, she repeatedly stressed her desire to not be stereotyped as another conservative hater of a frightening new form of popular culture. In his discussion of this, however, Hartman misses an opportunity to appropriately credit and critique the PMRC. His discussion makes it seem as if the changes they caused, which were changes they actively sought, simply got away from them and happened not because of the group and their influence on the music industry, but because others took over for them.³

Other historians of popular culture have been far less objective in their accounts of the PMRC. Peter Blecha's work on the history of music censorship initially describes the PMRC as "just another bunch of perhaps ditzy, if well-connected busybodies who

² Lane, Frederick S. *The Decency Wars: The Campaign to Cleanse American Culture*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006, 127-130.

³ Hartman, Andrew. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. University of Chicago Press, 2015, 177.

tried to present a reasonable ‘we’re not censors—just *concerned parents*’ vibe and seemed to want some sort of ‘review’ of the issues regarding dirty lyrics and nasty album-cover art.”⁴ Despite the fact that the PMRC was an organization of intelligent, politically and socially minded strategists, this is never presented in Blecha’s account. Instead, his demeaning language persists, and in his account the PMRC never stopped telling lies.⁵ And although other authors are less vitriolic and discuss the PMRC in more depth, this doesn’t mean that their works break the mold of constitutional myopia. Popular music writer Eric Nuzum discusses the group at length in his work on music censorship, and even states that the group “had more of an impact than most people in the music industry would like to admit.”⁶ However, his discussion is still built on the foundation of the First Amendment and he only hints at the broader context in which the PMRC’s actions took place.

In any discussion of a medium of popular culture, the work of cultural theorists would be central to the discussion’s foundation. Unfortunately, despite the potential for a hearty discussion of the PMRC’s action in a theoretical context, the opportunity has thus far been missed. Among the more notable examples, Lawrence Grossberg’s influential book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* fails to live up to this challenge. Grossberg asserts in his introduction that the PMRC best exemplifies one of the three major strategies for attacking rock music: to place the authority to define what is “proper” and “appropriate” in the hands of not only the parent,

⁴ Blecha, Peter. *Taboo Tunes: A History of Banned Bands and Censored Songs*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2004, 108.

⁵ *Ibid*, 108-112.

⁶ Nuzum, Eric, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001, 42.

but the patriarchal government.⁷ However, despite this lofty attribution of cultural power, the PMRC and Tipper Gore generate less than eight pages combined of discussion, including this brief and unsubstantiated proclamation, in the introduction.

Having taken previous historical works into account, it becomes necessary to reorient a discussion of the Parents Music Resource Center. Questioning the PMRC's actions on constitutional grounds is not only valid, but essential. Why, after all, should one group be allowed to decide the public's access to popular media of any kind on the grounds of inappropriateness, a subjective characteristic if ever there was one? The very concept goes so against the ideals of free speech that it is almost insulting to anybody with a modicum of respect for the Constitution.

One extremely important constitutional implication alluded to above that has been overlooked is that of the question of interpretation. If we adhere to the postmodernist philosophy and accept that there is no such thing as objective truth, what happens when a group of private citizens with one cause driving their action challenges the meaning of artistic popular culture, but bases their argument on a meaning different from that intended by the creator of that art? What are the constitutional implications of such a conclusion? Is the free speech as afforded by the First Amendment still a valid defense when one person takes a message as dangerous and harmful, even if another does not? Perhaps this was an unintended consequence of Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity: "I know it when I see it."⁸

Unfortunately, as necessary as it is to ask such questions, the conversation has

⁷ Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*. Routledge, 1992, 5.

⁸ Friedman, Leon, ed., *Obscenity: The Complete Oral Arguments Before the Supreme Court in the Major Obscenity Cases*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1970, 61.

been stunted. Historians have over-addressed this issue while failing to adequately critique the PMRC based on their own stated goals. Repeatedly throughout their campaign, the group's members insisted that their intention was not to censor popular music, but merely to educate parents about the lyrical content of the records that so many of America's youth were purchasing. As Susan Baker, cofounder of the PMRC stated during the hearing,

Some say there is no cause for concern. We believe there is. Teen pregnancies and teenage suicide rates are at epidemic proportions today. The Noedecker Report states that in the United States of America we have the highest rate of teen pregnancy of any developed country: 96 out of 1,000 teenage girls become pregnant. Rape is up 7 percent in the latest statistics, and the suicide rates of youth between 16 and 24 has gone up 300 percent in the last three decades while the adult level has remained the same. 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.⁹

For reasons such as these, they insisted, they were merely seeking the voluntary labeling of records with questionable lyrical content by the record labels themselves in order for parents to learn about the music their children would be listening to. It is perhaps most alarming then, that historians have overlooked statements such as this; from the constitutional perspective, there is a clear precedent for the protection of children, and the PMRC's focus made them a legitimate activist group.

Beyond issues of constitutionality and precedent, many historians have also overlooked the context in which the PMRC operated. The 1980s in the United States saw the mainstream reemergence of conservative political ideology and a major reshaping of

⁹ 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, 2.

American cultural life. As Robert Collins notes, “Reagan shifted the American political mainstream to the right in part by forcing his opponents to move in that direction in order to counter his electoral and programmatic success.”¹⁰ One of the most notable aspects of the PMRC is how well they exemplify this major change in American society. The PMRC was made up most prominently of wives of Washington D.C.-area businessmen and politicians, though neither political party was actively involved in the group’s activities. They challenged rock music on the grounds of protecting kids, and their arguments against offensive lyrics saw them directly oppose what they called anti-Christian and morally and sexually questionable messages, longtime conservative causes. And though they insisted they were not seeking official government action, they did not scale back their efforts at the thoughts or suggestions of legislating the country’s morality. At best, this represented an acceptance of the idea of the “welfare state” that so many of the Reagan administration’s policies were designed to curtail. And while Tipper Gore, wife of future Democratic Vice President Al Gore, repeatedly stressed her liberal political beliefs, and the PMRC did borrow language characteristic of liberal sociopolitical groups with regard to society and morality, the group perfectly exemplifies this shift to the right in the United States in the 1980s.

Furthermore, in order to gain a thorough and proper understanding of the PMRC’s intentions, one must examine the arguments of the PMRC as they themselves stated at the time. This not only includes the transcript of the 1985 congressional hearing, but Tipper Gore’s 1987 book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, in which she defended at

¹⁰ Collins, Robert M. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years*. Columbia University Press, 2007, 243.

length her stance that the group's efforts were not tantamount to censorship and also explained the group's concerns regarding various issues perceived as threats to the youth of America. The PMRC's campaign readily employed conservative rhetoric, both old and new, and specifically emphasized the protection of the core family unit and its children. The group's arguments didn't just declare the education of parents so as to protect children their main goal, but called for it to take its place as society's main concern. Thus, with all of their messages and methods taken into account, the group can be seen as a shining example of new conservative sociopolitical special interest action, making the PMRC a unique and illuminating cultural example of the rightward political shifts of the United States in the 1980s.

Beyond this missing historical context, histories of the PMRC have also lacked a musicological perspective, which in turn has led to a lack of understanding beyond just the lyrical content of these records. Most importantly, the lack of an interdisciplinary approach has prevented historians from properly addressing one of the most glaring problems in the PMRC's argument: the implication that only heavy metal was guilty of featuring lyrical content considered excessive by the PMRC. Soon after the group's formation, they released what they called the "Filthy Fifteen," a list of the songs that were the most egregious examples of certain offenses, such as the inclusion of sexual references and occult themes in lyrics. As Eric Nuzum points out,

A close examination of their targets shows they wanted to curb only the sex and violence that could be encountered by suburban white teenagers. Never once was a country artist, song, or video included in the PMRC's lists, nor did they feel it necessary to label opera recordings, which are notorious for their sexual and violent themes. No one in the PMRC complained about theater, paintings, or sculpture, because teenagers don't buy paintings and rarely attend the theater unaccompanied. They do buy

records, and they buy millions of them.¹¹

By the time the group appeared before Congress, their focus had shifted to heavy metal music almost exclusively. There, and in interviews and statements to the press, the PMRC actively targeted heavy metal music, as it was the genre most readily available to and consumed by children.

It is thus necessary to include a musicological discussion of heavy metal and its contextual meanings beyond the words of the artists. Like heavy metal's critics, historians have only examined the genre and its lyrics from a literal standpoint. Whether the PMRC is attacking them or historians are defending them, the lyrics are taken at face value, discussed only in the context of First Amendment protection, and the discussion ends. Musicologists, however, have discussed the PMRC and their targeting of heavy metal in more depth, analyzing the musical form itself and its deeper meanings, contextualizing it properly in the process. Heavy metal is a distinct subgenre of rock music, and many of the defining characteristics of heavy metal have typically been seen as antagonistic against the very traits that keep that family unit together and wholesome. The deeper meanings within the genre must be accounted for, and these historical and musicological halves together help explain why the PMRC specifically targeted heavy metal more than any other musical genres.

This thesis has three main objectives. First, it aims to contextualize the group as both a descendant of previous generations of conservative music censorship and as representative of the conservative shift in the United States in the 1980s. Second, it seeks

¹¹ Nuzum, Eric. *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001, 19-20.

to combine the typical historical treatment of the PMRC, which sees the group as a challenge to First Amendment protections afforded to popular culture by focusing on heavy metal lyrics and imagery, with a musicological perspective. Musicologists have discussed heavy metal and its meanings at length, but these insights are absent from historical treatments. Joining the two approaches will help us to see why the PMRC targeted heavy metal more than other musical genres. And third, this thesis seeks to judge the PMRC by their own goals as they defined them, particularly the protection of children by labeling heavy metal records so as to warn parents of perceived offensive content.

In completing these objectives, there will be some necessary re-reading of the grounds covered by other scholars. It is important to include constitutional issues in the debate, but there will be a concerted effort to avoid falling into the trap of relying solely on the First Amendment. The constitutional definition of obscenity and its importance to the First Amendment aspect of the PMRC's hearing will be discussed. It will not however, be the focal point. Instead, the focus will be on the PMRC's arguments, the historical roots of those arguments, and the constitutional precedent regarding the protection of children at the societal level. Although generally dismissed as ineffectual, the group enacted significant change. While a small sticker on the covers of a few records may not seem like much when considered as a material accomplishment, the group set a precedent for conservative activism that, without legislation or regulation, successfully pressured an independent, private industry to change practices protected under the First Amendment. For this reason, the PMRC should be noted historically as a successful conservative social activist group, and when judged by their goals and how they achieved those goals, it is clear that the group is a prototype for future conservative activism. In

demonstrating this, this thesis will provide a more comprehensive, respectful, and properly contextualized history of the PMRC and their efforts regarding the labeling of rock records, and see the group remembered as they should be.

II. Censorship Law and Early Conservative Critiques of Popular Culture

It is certainly no stretch to say that popular music is frequently a source of controversy, inviting criticism and hostility from many critics on many grounds. Historically, those seeking to ban or censor popular music have done so more often than not by asserting that such works are “obscene” and therefore should be subject to government regulation. But on what grounds is music, and by association any medium of popular culture, legally obscene and on what grounds can the government regulate obscene materials? Understanding how the United States legally defines obscenity is important to the foundation of understanding the campaign by the Parents Music Resource Center.

The earliest legal definitions of obscenity in the United States take their roots in the 1868 English case *Regina v. Hicklin*. In the written decision, Chief Justice Sir Alexander James Edmund Cockburn defined obscene materials as any that tend “to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences”, regardless of any other value the material may possess.¹² In short, the court labeled obscene any material that would cause immoral behavior in persons already at risk of immoral behavior; such materials were effectively defined as the proverbial straw on the back of fragile morality. But perhaps the most important aspect of the obscenity standard arising from *Hicklin* was the tenet that the entire product did not need to qualify as obscene in

¹² Qtd. in Marc Schnall, “The United States Supreme Court: Definitions of Obscenity,” *Crime and Delinquency* 18, 1972, 60.

order to be regulated. If one portion of the product failed to meet this strict standard, the entire work would be made unavailable to the public.¹³ As the go-to American obscenity standard for nearly ninety years, the *Hicklin* standard was famously championed by Anthony Comstock in his attempts to regulate and prohibit materials he believed to be obscene, including birth control, pornography, and objects used for sexual gratification, as well as any informational materials related to these items.¹⁴ The Comstock Laws, the first of which was passed in 1873, drew from *Hicklin* in their power to ban and control questionable materials.

From the latter half of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth, the “Hicklin Test” would be the measuring stick of obscenity in United States law. Its standards were finally overturned with the *Roth v. United States* and *Alberts v. California* decisions in 1957. Samuel Roth and David Alberts had been convicted of sending obscene materials, specifically erotic fiction and nude photographs, through the mail and of publishing photographs of nude women, respectively. In a simultaneous 6-3 decision, the Court upheld their convictions and stated that obscenity was not protected under the First Amendment. More important, however, the Court did state, “All ideas having even the slightest redeeming social importance—unorthodox ideas, controversial ideas, even ideas hateful to the prevailing climate of opinion—have the full protection” of the First Amendment,¹⁵ even though they did not yet provide a clear definition of what could legally be considered obscene.

¹³ Wood, Janice Ruth. *The Struggle for Free Speech in the United States, 1872-1915: Edward Bliss Foote, Edward Bond Foote, and Anti-Comstock Operations*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-32.

¹⁵ Friedman, Leon, ed. *Obscenity: The Complete Oral Arguments Before the Supreme Court in the Major Obscenity Cases* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1970), 61.

It was in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964) that the Supreme Court first acknowledged the variable nature of obscenity. Nico Jacobellis had been convicted and fined \$2,500 under state obscenity laws for screening the French film *Les Amants*. The Court ruled that the film was not obscene and thus was subject to protection under the First Amendment. Justice Potter Stewart, in his concurring opinion, famously stated of obscenity, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”¹⁶ Stewart further acknowledged the difficulty in defining obscenity, noting that the country would find it difficult to establish a national standard due to the diverse beliefs and opinions of the nation’s respective communities.

In *Miller v. California* (1973), this discourse evolved into the most relevant change in the legal definition of obscenity in the United States to date. Marvin Miller had been convicted of violating California’s obscenity laws for using a mass mailing advertising campaign to sell adult materials. The Court cited the inconsistent definitions of previous obscenity cases, with different members of the Court calling for both looser and tighter definitions of obscenity. Ultimately, the Court established the “Miller Test.” As it currently stands in the United States, for a work to be considered legally obscene, *it must meet all three facets* of the “Miller Test.” First, would the average person, applying contemporary community standards, find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest? Second, does the work depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable state law? Third, does the work, taken

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

as a whole, lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value?¹⁷

The third prong of the “Miller Test,” known somewhat informally as the “SLAPS Test,” has complicated the many attempts to censor and regulate popular music. But, while it is difficult to prove a work to have absolutely no serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value, attempts have been made. After public outcry against the hip-hop band 2 Live Crew’s controversial 1992 album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, the album was declared obscene by a Florida judge. However, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals later ruled that the album did not qualify as obscene because it failed to meet the third prong of the “Miller Test.”¹⁸

Indeed, the third prong of the “Miller Test” has become the foundation of the First Amendment argument by the artistic community. Frank Zappa, testifying against the PMRC at the 1985 congressional hearing on the labeling of records with offensive lyrics, argued against such labeling because the potential stigmatization would essentially label the artists themselves, thus ostracizing them and creating a musical roster that narrowed the influences and opinions of others. Zappa stated that his own children had a right “to grow up in a country where they can think what they want to think, be what they want to be, and not what somebody’s wife or somebody in Government makes them be.”¹⁹ Zappa cited the same concept at the core of the “SLAPS Test” as the determining factor regarding whether music lyrics could be deemed obscene. Pointing out that, as albums

¹⁷ Brockwell, P. Heath. “Grappling with Miller v. California: The Search For an Alternative Approach to Regulating Obscenity,” *Cumberland Law Review* 131, 1994.

¹⁸ Betty Houchin Winfield, “Because of the Children: Decades of Attempted Controls of Rock ‘n’ Rap Music,” in *Bleep! Censoring Rock and Rap Music*, eds. Betty Houchin Winfield and Sandra Davidson (Greenwood Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁹ Qtd. in 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, 56.

are compilations of songs generally dealing lyrically with different themes, Zappa asked: if one song is sexually suggestive but the rest of the songs sound like Pat Boone, would that qualify the album, taken as a whole, as obscene?²⁰

The contested definitions of obscenity are traditionally debated in the discourse surrounding the censorship and regulation of popular music. Traditionally, conservative proponents of censorship argue that offensive works are obscene and thus it is the government's moral obligation to disallow their First Amendment protection. Conversely, the artists argue that it is immoral to censor their works simply because free expression means definitions of obscenity will vary greatly. As such, opponents of music censorship argue that the First Amendment guarantees their right to sing songs that might offend some, but not all, echoing the *Roth v. United States* and *Alberts v. California* decisions. In other words, the country was founded on differing opinions and beliefs, and limiting artists' products unfairly limits some attitudes from the same exposure afforded to other attitudes and opinions that prevail in the country at a particular point in time.

Proponents of music's censorship and regulation often state that such music presents a danger to society by potentially inciting dangerous or controversial behavior. Because of this, the government as well as private citizens have a right to prevent such behavior by lessening the availability of products that might cause violence, sexual deviance, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and other social maladies. Almost always included among those at risk of adopting such behavior are children. As such, the argument, "Won't somebody please think of the children?!" becomes standard to the

²⁰ 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, 60.

point of being stereotypical; the protection of children, the primary consumers of popular music, has become a consistent argument in the censorship debate. Because considerations of morality form the foundation of many critics' arguments, early critics of popular music are loudly echoed by critics belonging to later generations, such as the Parents Music Resource Center in the 1980s.

Blaming music for the potential degeneration of American society and morality in the twentieth century began with attacks on jazz in the 1920s. Dismissed with disgust by its critics, jazz heavily featured polyrhythmic, syncopated sounds which readily inspired sensuality in its listeners. Those who attacked jazz did so on the grounds that such sounds encouraged close physical proximity and intimacy many reserved for the privacy of one's own bedroom. Beyond such rhythms, the use of improvisation in jazz was seen as inspiring the country's youth to break out of social norms, and the music became popular for the unpredictable and virtuosic demonstration of individual ability, which critics charged pushed listeners into sexual deviancy.

Such conservative criticism formed the basis of most of the attacks leveled at jazz music. The genre's opponents blamed it for the corruption and sexualization of American youth, particularly of young women. They frequently blamed the dancing, which was scandalous to say the least. Specific dances targeted included the black bottom, the shimmy, and the varsity drag. But the most attacked dance of the time was the Charleston, during which the female dancers pop their knees open, allowing brief glances up their skirts and dresses.²¹ Coupled with the frequency with which male and female

²¹ Semonche, John E. *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 146.

dancers traded partners, it is no wonder that critics such as Reverend Phillip Yarrow of the Illinois Vigilance Association stated, “Moral disaster is coming to hundreds of young American girls through the pathological, nerve-irritating, sex-exciting music of jazz orchestras.”²²

There were also harsh concerns about the racial implications of jazz moving into the mainstream of American music. Critics called jazz “jungle music” and frequently compared it to African music, inherently seen as foreign and primitive. Sir Henry Coward stated bluntly in *The New York Times* on September 27, 1927, that “the popularization of jazz and the attendant immodest dances are lowering the prestige of the white races.”²³ Such attacks, as brutal as they were, were surprisingly rare, however. Since early jazz was a predominantly black musical genre, it was automatically treated as an “other” in the musical world; a lack of references to race in the discourse was merely indicative of an already-established boundary. But, as jazz became more and more popular, it was eventually commercialized. In doing so, however, it became more closely associated with white musicians and songwriters, thus downplaying its connection to black musical traditions.

Instead of criticisms largely rooted in race, music critics excluded jazz from popular discourse on the grounds of class. Critics and musicians looked down on jazz as music of a lower social standing. Civic and political leaders stigmatized the music not only as promoting the values of the lower classes and threatening the educated

²² Qtd. in Applerouth, Scott. “Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music,” *Cultural Sociology* 5:2, 2011, 233.

²³ Qtd. in Applerouth, Scott. “Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music,” *Cultural Sociology* 5:2, 2011, 236.

musicianship of the United States, but also endangering existing hegemonies.²⁴

Concerted efforts had been made to civilize the nation's populace through the spiritual enlightenment allegedly offered through classical music. Jazz, on the other hand, was 'retrograde': its use of multiple, conflicting rhythms and improvisation marked the negation of conventions of propriety and decorum. As such, jazz's alleged assault on aesthetic standards was nothing less than an attack on the moral code of those who sought to maintain existing social hierarchies.²⁵ Many Americans in the 1920s were still clinging to Victorian values²⁶ and jazz easily challenged these modes of behavior. As a result, many critics associated jazz with alternative lifestyles that were seen as promoting immoral behavior and beliefs. Because of this, jazz was seen as a direct challenge to the dominant value systems of the United States.²⁷

Of course, such fears were also expressed when rock and roll emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. Emerging from the musical traditions of jazz, rhythm and blues, and other "race music," rock and roll inherited many of the same controversial musical traits. Driven by throbbing drums and bass rhythms and often featuring vocals that were shouted rather than sung, rock and roll's very structure was a pulsing, dance-inducing one. With guitars often louder than the rest of the music, and guitar solos that would break out of the confinement of the traditional song structures, rock and roll came to represent the very essence of rebelling against an organized, structured existence.

²⁴ Applerouth, Scott. "Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music," *Cultural Sociology* 5:2, 2011, 236-237.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁷ Weissman, Dick. *Talkin' 'Bout A Revolution: Music and Social Change in America* (Backbeat Books, 2010), 107.

It comes as no surprise then that, similarly to jazz, rock and roll music was not received well by mainstream critics. As it, along with its black predecessor rhythm and blues, became increasingly popular among American youth, critics expressed concern over the racial and sexual components of early rock and roll, components which were criticized as originating in the black traditions of blues music. Given the demographics of album sales in the 1950s, it is easy to see why such concerns were so strong. Fueled by the baby boomer generation, record sales skyrocketed. From 1954 to 1960, records made a combined total of \$339 million. Sales of record players doubled in that same period. In 1957, 70 percent of records sold were purchased by teenagers; a large portion of the albums they bought were rhythm and blues and rock and roll records.²⁸

Rock and roll was not so much censored as it was segregated. Early blues musicians made records for small, independent labels, but when rhythm and blues music began to approach the fringes of the mainstream it was appropriated by record companies and altered to remove any offensive lyrical content. Subsequently, larger labels then signed white musicians to record popular rhythm and blues songs, with altered lyrics that were no longer racy and thus no longer potentially controversial. Artists who recorded the original versions were frequently not paid for their creative contributions while the music became “safe” to market to the veritable consumer army of youth buying records.²⁹

Despite the whitening of rhythm and blues music and transforming it into rock and roll, some black artists managed to break through to mainstream success. Breaking

²⁸ Brown, Valerie Jane. “Turnabout is Fair Play: The Censorship of Popular Music in the 1950s” (Masters Thesis, University of Oregon, 1991), 48.

²⁹ Nuzum, Eric. *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America* (HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 100-103.

such boundaries was rare and, coupled with the popularity of a music with strong ties to black musical traditions, prompted private groups to express fears that black culture was encroaching into white, mainstream America. In 1956, the White Citizens Council from Birmingham, Alabama said rock and roll was the “music of Negroes” and it did little more than bring out the animalistic and vulgar base of man. The group also called for jukeboxes to be made illegal, arguing that they were tools of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to poison the minds of white American youth.³⁰

A concern over the sexuality present in rock and roll was just as strong as, if not stronger than, the outcry over the perceived sexual promiscuity of jazz. In fact, the term rock and roll, coined by rock radio personality Alan Freed, was originally a black slang term for sex. Many rhythm and blues and rock and roll lyrics were filled with double meanings often submerged within the loud and driving, throbbing, music, which appealed strongly to American youth entering that hormone-fueled period of life and proving true the old adage that sex sells.³¹ When dancing, males and females indiscriminately and frequently changed partners, which pushed against the oft-promoted moral nucleus that was the American family by “challenging the idea that social dancing had something to do with a social relationship.”³²

Heavy metal emerged from rock and roll in much the same way rock and roll was born from jazz. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, British acts like Black Sabbath and Led

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ Nuzum, Eric. *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001, 149-151.

³² Semonche, John E. *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 147.

Zeppelin emerged with the first heavy metal sounds. Inspired by the blues and rock acts of the 50s and 60s, heavy metal came to be prominently characterized by the use of low-tuned and distorted guitars, heavy drum rhythms, vocals not only yelled, but growled, as well as the extensive use of instrumental solos to convey the musical virtuosity and power of the bands' performances. From a thematic perspective, sex is frequently featured in heavy metal music, keeping the genre in touch with its blues and rock roots, though violence and generally anti-conformist and rebellious themes also marked the lyrical content of the music. While the long-existent conflicts over black musical traditions are certainly relevant to any history of music censorship in the 1980s, heavy metal is the most significant genre to be discussed, as no other musical genre was singled out more by the PMRC.

From this discussion of obscenity and censorship, and the efforts of groups to censor jazz and rock and roll music, we can clearly trace the origin and growth of the discourse of conservative music censorship in the United States. By marking these newly emerging musical forms as dangerous, these critics were establishing hierarchical boundaries of decency. But as censorship law evolved, these musical forms became more and more protected. And while these genres were segregated, eventually becoming commercially viable and acceptable in the process, they also became generationally deified. When the young grew older, the acceptable forms of these musical styles came to be seen not only as acceptable, but themselves became metrics by which to determine obscenity. The vague sexuality didn't destroy the country's moral fiber, and as such, came to be seen as benign to the country's acceptable codes of behavior. And as heavy metal evolved from the genre conventions of rock and roll, a new brand of

conservatism arose to challenge it.

III. The PMRC as a Conservative Special Interest Group

When the Parents Music Resource Center emerged in the mid-1980s, they quickly found no shortage of commenters and observers in agreement with their criticisms of heavy metal and its lyrics. What made this social and political climate different from previous iterations of conservatism in the United States, however, is the unifying actions of Ronald Reagan. Conservatism under Reagan was more wide-reaching, incorporating traditional values with newly claimed platforms. When the PMRC arose, they quickly adopted this new, further-reaching conservative rhetoric. In doing so, they not only continued the tradition of conservative music censorship in their challenges of heavy metal, but also established themselves as members of the new conservative movement in the United States.

As many scholars have discussed,³³ the second half of the twentieth century saw the re-evolution of the conservative political ideology in the United States. Following the defeat of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election, conservatives found themselves at a crossroads with regards to political power. Pushing the extremes with which Goldwater had been associated out of the party and unifying the party around the traditional conservative tenets of individualism, limited government, and capitalism, true conservatives once again began appealing to substantial enough numbers of the American

³³ Of particular importance to the brief background presented in this thesis are Alfred S. Regnery's *Upstream* and David Farber's *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*. Together these two works provide a thorough, balanced examination of one of the most notable political shifts in the country's history.

population that classic conservatives were able to run as legitimate contenders for the presidency.

Everything conservatism needed to be in order to so thoroughly conquer American politics, it became under Ronald Reagan. As far back as the 1966 California gubernatorial election, Ronald Reagan was viewed as the hope and the future of conservatives in the U.S. As Jonathan Schoenwald observes, “Not only did he have a record of years of devotion to conservative principles, but unlike Goldwater he also had a congenial public personality. Reagan represented the conviction that conservatives could leave the realm of the extraordinary to become the ordinary.”³⁴ While Reagan promised that supply-side economics would relieve the country of national debt and that the United States would defeat the Soviet Union in the Cold War, his ultimate achievement was getting the public to embrace the conservative tradition Robert Taft spoke so frequently about: small government. This is seen as his defining accomplishment in the eyes of many historians. They posit that, “Critics who like to point out that Reagan did not actually accomplish much, that his programs did not achieve what he had promised, fail to understand that Reagan ran for president in order to change the American people’s concept of the role of government.”³⁵

Changing the population’s perception of what the government was supposed to be and how it was supposed to interact with the country’s institutions was not Reagan’s only achievement. Indeed, doing so would have been impossible without appealing to the

³⁴ Schoenwald, Jonathan M. *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism*. Oxford University Press, 2001, 7.

³⁵ Regnery, Alfred S. *Upstream: The Ascendance of American Conservatism*. Threshold Editions, 2008, 285.

Evangelical Christians, long absent from active political participation. After campaigning heavily to pass the Eighteenth Amendment, among other notable causes, American Evangelicals became an increasingly docile group politically beginning in the 1930s. Their activism mostly consisted of voicing support and approval for the country's anticommunist policies, but rarely went as far as to become direct political involvement.

This began to change in the 1960s. At the same time that Reagan was beginning his climb from movie star to Republican golden boy, Evangelicals rode a wave of resurgence that was responding to the Civil Rights movements, counterculture, the sexual revolution, and other radical movements of the decade. They also grew more restless politically due to the country's continued acceptance of secularization. In 1962, the Supreme Court issued its *Engel v. Vitale* decision, ruling that mandatory public school prayers were an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. This began Evangelicals on the path away from government, which would only be further exacerbated by later court decisions, perhaps most notably *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.³⁶

By appealing to this sleeping giant of the voter base, Reagan united the Republican Party around modern conservative policies and values. A monumental achievement though it was, it would also have been impossible without the grassroots level activism of concerned conservatives, perhaps none more infamous than Phyllis Schlafly. She and other conservatives had been organizing at the local level for decades, and they knew how to appeal to people personally, interweaving individual moral concerns with classic conservative ideals. For example, conservative activists

³⁶ Boyer, Paul. "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism," in Schulman, Bruce J. and Julian E. Zelizer, eds. *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*. Harvard University Press, 2008, 36.

campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment by arguing that government involvement would be necessary to establish the right for women to be equal (and conservatives would naturally be against government involvement) but it would take no additional effort to accept that women had a privileged role in society, one in which a woman builds the family and is loved and treated respectfully in return for it.³⁷

As a result of this dramatic resurgence, conservatism became so powerful in the 1980s that the entire spectrum of American politics shifted to the right.³⁸ And it is into this shifting political and cultural landscape that the Parents Music Resource Center emerged; only by understanding the group in this context can we truly appreciate their status as a unique activist group.

Following in the tradition of the many grassroots campaigns that sought to protect the morality and families of the country, the Parents Music Resource Center characterized many of the tenets of the American conservative ideology. Chief among them, as repeatedly stressed by the group's members, was the desire for no government involvement. Multiple times throughout the 1985 hearing and in numerous public interviews, PMRC members asserted that they were not seeking any government action or legislation. Instead they assigned responsibility to the private music industry. During the 1985 hearing, Tipper Gore declared this emphatically, stating that

Censorship implies restricting access or suppressing content. This proposal does neither. Moreover, it involves no government action...

Most importantly, the committee should understand that the Parents Music Resource Center is not advocating any Federal intervention

³⁷ Schneider, Gregory L., "Yelling Just As Loudly: Conservative Activism in the Sixties and Seventies," in Heather Ann Thompson, ed., *Speaking Out: Activism and Protest in the 1960s and 1970s*. Prentice Hall, 2010, 243-245.

³⁸ Collins, Robert M. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

or legislation whatsoever. The excesses that we are discussing were allowed to develop in the marketplace, and we believe the solutions to these excesses should come from the industry who has allowed them to develop and not from the government.³⁹

Such sentiment was echoed not only by other PMRC members at the hearing, but also by the public officials who oversaw it. Committee members, including Tipper Gore's husband, then Senator Al Gore, repeatedly referred to the hearing as the government responsibly allowing a public forum for a group to present societal concerns, though some derisively declared such an exercise a waste of time.

It wasn't just in public forums that Tipper Gore combatted negative critiques of the PMRC and its members. In her book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, she employed much of the same language as she had before the Senate committee two years prior. "Who decides which songs are musical pornography? Only the record company can make that decision—not the government, as some would have us believe, and not an outside censorship board, as others have charged. The music industry, which allowed these excesses to develop, would be asked to take responsibility for the product it markets to the public."⁴⁰

This was in keeping with one of the core conservative values that the Reagan ascendancy helped to reinforce into the mindsets of voting Americans: the idea that private industry was fully capable of regulating itself, based not only on traditionally conservative morals and sensibilities, but on the free market. By letting the country's good tastes and the almighty dollar dictate what worked and what didn't, the country's

³⁹ 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, 13.

⁴⁰ Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Abingdon Press, 1987, 28.

private sector was seen as capable of deciding for itself how best to navigate any sort of debate, crisis, or controversy.

However, despite asserting that only the music industry as a whole should bear the responsibility of regulating the content of its products, the PMRC very publicly challenged what they perceived as music's excesses, particularly those of heavy metal. Despite publicly proclaiming lyrical obscenity an industry-wide problem, and naming Prince's work as the impetus for Gore's cofounding the group, the PMRC primarily challenged heavy metal and rock artists' songs and videos, and their targets included the genre's most well-known and popular artists, as well as many more obscure groups. They included more songs by heavy metal artists than from any other musical genre on their "Filthy Fifteen," a list of the fifteen most egregiously offensive songs available to children. Their hearing testimonies cited, almost exclusively, heavy metal music, music videos, and album covers as offensive. And in their denunciation of heavy metal, they rehashed many of the same sentiments that conservative critics had been using to attack popular culture for generations.

One of the most prominent of these critiques was sexuality, particularly women's sexuality. While many of their critiques of sex related to the explicit descriptions of sexual activities in song lyrics, the only specific band members named in relation to sexual lyrics were female band members. Whereas citations from works by bands such as KISS and Piledriver were certainly colorful, the group made specific mention of one artist in particular: Betsy Bitch, lead singer and founder of the band Bitch; in the lyrics cited by the PMRC, Betsy asks to be treated rough sexually, describing her desires and

the pleasure such treatment gave her.⁴¹ Tipper Gore again further elucidated on the PMRC's stance in her book. Specifically naming artists such as Madonna and Wendy O. Williams, whom she criticized for being sexual on stage, Gore draws comparisons between their acts and hardcore pornography, only hinting at the Court's stance on obscenity, discussed earlier in this paper.⁴²

The PMRC also expressed concern over violence present in the lyrics of rock and heavy metal recordings. In his testimony on violent lyrics in records, Jeff Ling specifically mentioned songs such as "Back in Business" and "Squealer" by AC/DC, but expressed more concern over the suicidal violence many of the songs alluded to. Ling specifically referenced "Suicide Solution" by Ozzy (misspelled as "Ozzie") Osbourne. Despite Osbourne's insistence that he was in no way encouraging suicidal behavior in the song, Ling pointed out that the artwork includes a picture of Osbourne with a gun barrel in his mouth. Towards the end of the 1985 hearing, Dr. Joe Stuessy of the University of Texas at San Antonio, testifying on behalf of the PMRC, elaborated on the dangers presented to American youth via the thematic elements of heavy metal music, including hatred, violence, and suicide.⁴³

It is also worth noting that, though they largely refrained from making it a focus of their testimony, the PMRC also critiqued several artists on the basis of Christian morals. At the hearing, the PMRC were joined by Ling, a former rock musician who had given up that life to become a youth minister. Much of Ling's Christian-rooted critiques

⁴¹ 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, 16-17.

⁴² Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Abingdon Press, 1987, 81-101.

⁴³ 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, 117-118.

were limited to passing remarks at individual artists and their album artwork. There was one exception, however, when Ling bluntly asserted that “occultic themes, primarily Satanism, is [sic] prevalent among such bands as Slayer, Venom, and Merciful Fate.”⁴⁴

The majority of the opposition to anti-Christian values came from Gore’s book. In an entire chapter dedicated to what she describes as a long-evolving affair with Satanism by America’s youth, Gore definitively declares that the morals of the United States should be Christian ones. Blaming everything from the board game *Dungeons & Dragons* to films such as *The Omen* and *Poltergeist* and cartoons such as *Bloom County* comic strips, Gore argues that children need to be given something better to believe in as Satanism “rejects Judeo-Christian religion, turns good and evil upside down, and rebels against life itself.”⁴⁵

In challenging the works of heavy metal artists, the PMRC focused almost exclusively on the lyrics of their songs. The group asserted that the frequent references to violence, sex, drugs, alcohol, and anti-Christian themes qualified the products as obscene, making them dangerous. However, the group, and the historians that have studied them, have misunderstood the context that these lyrics are meant to be understood in, that of the music itself. Musicologists have deftly answered questions about heavy metal music as a genre, and it is perhaps not surprising that a musicological viewpoint was entirely absent from the Senate hearing and is missing from historical treatments of the PMRC. Such an analysis of the characteristics of heavy metal is revelatory when included in the conversation. In breaking down not only the lyrics, but the social and artistic context that

⁴⁴ 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, 16.

⁴⁵ Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Abingdon Press, 1987, 121.

the songs should be judged from, and the value that the music itself adds to the lyrics, music scholars complete the First Amendment justification that historians present as automatic, passing the “SLAPS Test” with ease.

In the process of refuting the PMRC’s lyrical challenges (Ozzy Osbourne was actually an exceptionally moralistic songwriter; if Judas Priest did hide backwards messages in their songs, they were more comedic than anything, etc.), Robert Walser expertly demonstrates how the PMRC’s criticisms are only half valid by leaving out the music itself. In his discussion of the musical production of Ozzy Osbourne’s “Suicide Solution,” a frequent target of the PMRC, he notes that the song lacks the near-universal inclusion of the guitar solo in heavy metal music, arguing that this turns the song from the dangerous influence on youth into a lamentation. As he states, the drums, bass, and rhythm guitar “rigidly organize and control time; the guitar escapes with flashy runs and other arrhythmic gestures. The solo allows the listener to identify with the controlling power without feeling threatened, because the solo can transcend anything.”⁴⁶ By not including such a powerful instrumental tool and employing ambiguity in the lyrics, the singer becomes trapped, presenting both lyrically and musically themes of isolation, the song’s titular act becoming an unfortunate escape and the song a warning against it.

When the PMRC didn’t challenge a band’s lyrical output, they instead focused on the imagery the bands employed either in their music videos or in their album artwork. However, taken into the context of a musical whole, these are also misrepresented according to the work of musicologists. The most identifiable example of this is Satan, or

⁴⁶ Walser, Robert. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 149.

imagery associated with any Satanist or occult themes. As Walser points out, such imagery is rarely employed to actually conjure images of Satan with the objective of worship. Rather, he is employed as an unknown, an “other” that can possibly provide answers that differ from those of the established power structures. The imagery is thus allegorical, as a rose signifies love to a poet. By invoking imagery that represents the possibility that the unknown might provide answers, “mystical metal draws upon the power of religious traditions without obeisance to any,”⁴⁷ allowing the listener to both seek answers and question the normal structures in which to find them.

Armed with these examples, one is now aware that lyrics are only a part of the story when it comes to the meaning of heavy metal music. At its heart, heavy metal is about the power to form and mold and identity for oneself, possibly by seeking answers from sources considered to be outside the mainstream. In the 1980s, conservatism had reinforced the idea that a rigid conformity to previously established morals was part of a well-functioning, decent society. These two conflicting philosophies are naturally opposed to one another, and throughout the PMRC’s campaign, the music they sought to label was exposed as not having a place within the norms and structures that had been settled upon by previous generations.

Before closing this chapter, it is worth noting that while the PMRC clearly represented an America that had dramatically shifted rightward, they were not exclusively a hardline conservative group and not all of their critiques were conservative in nature. While the PMRC strongly adhered to the rhetoric and strategies employed by

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154

conservatism both past and contemporary, they also perfectly represent this rightward shift because of their use of left-leaning language and a self-professed nonpartisan stance in their arguments. As previously mentioned, the conservative ascendancy in the 1980s saw many of conservatism's liberal opponents adopt a more moderate approach in their political activities. When examining the PMRC's rhetoric and the grounds on which they critiqued popular music, we can see that the PMRC also expressed some concerns and employed some strategies that reveal some liberal tendencies as well.

From the birth of modern popular culture in the early 1940s, women were often portrayed in controversial and contradictory ways. Prior to the Hays Code, the strict moral guidelines Hollywood films were required to meet from the 1930s to the late 1960s, women were frequently cast in powerful roles that presented them as in control of their own actions and lives. After the Code's implementation, however, women were less assertive on the silver screen.⁴⁸ Additionally, after the Hays Code had been abandoned in 1968 for the MPAA's letter-rating system, films continued to be made primarily by men and about men, with women cast mainly as their wives, girlfriends, or prostitutes. There were exceptions however. Some films, such as *Up the Sandbox*, released in 1972, presented the female desire to transgress society's norms.⁴⁹ Women's popular music in the 1970s similarly saw contradictory images of women. Echoing feminist desires, Helen Reddy's 1972 song "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar" became an anthem of the feminist ideology. At the same time, however, women were still being portrayed as inferior. The 1976 Rolling Stones album *Black and Blue* featured a bruised and beaten woman on the

⁴⁸ Zeisler, Andi. *Feminism and Pop Culture*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008, 28-35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

cover; the hit single “Under My Thumb” reinforced the idea that women should be controlled by men.⁵⁰ This reflected a societal debate regarding what was appropriate for what agency women were appropriately allowed in respective popular culture presentations, a debate that was ongoing in the 1980s.

Though they were clearly uncomfortable with women being portrayed as actively sexual, the PMRC were strongly opposed to the sexual objectification of and violence towards women. Consequently, in 1984, when Tipper Gore’s eleven-year-old daughter played the soundtrack album to the film *Purple Rain*; Gore was shocked by the lyrics because they sexually objectified a woman. Such sexuality is present throughout the entire song. When Prince begins singing, the listener can’t help but notice the high pitched delivery of his vocals, which serves to reinforce the androgynous nature of Prince’s very carefully cultivated musical persona, a persona which would undoubtedly be unsettling to many suburbanite parents for which the traditional family unit is at the center of their lives. But beyond this is the implications the music itself makes. At 00:48, as prince sings about Nikki grinding, the music and the rhythms become very sexually charged. The guitars get scratchy, and from 01:50 until the song ends, what can readily be interpreted as highly sexual sounds dominate the song; the guitar thunders on roughly, the bass is played with heaving, grinding notes, and Prince’s vocal shrieks and moans are clearly evocative of the moans of sexual pleasure.

During the hearing on record labeling, the PMRC dedicated significant portions of its statements to expressing distaste for the way women were frequently being portrayed

⁵⁰ Ibid., 81-82.

in heavy metal music and music videos. They cried foul over songs such as “Darling Nikki,” but also Prince’s song “Sister,” which they argued presents a positive image of incest. They also discussed Wrath Child’s “Sweet Surrender,” the lyrics of which seem to advocate rape, “Tie You Up” by The Rolling Stones, the music video for the song “Torture” by The Jacksons (previously known as The Jackson 5), all of which, they charged, promoted sadomasochistic sexual behavior. They also cited the track “Golden Showers” by The Mentors, which depicts a woman being sexually humiliated and objectified at the hands of a male.⁵¹ Though the members of the PMRC never specifically stated that their primary concern was the image of women in rock and heavy metal music, by critiquing these songs on these grounds, they implicitly promoted a message of equality and dignity to the young girls of the nation, a message clearly inspired by the powerful efforts of the feminist movement.

It should also be noted that the group repeatedly stressed that they unquestioningly supported musical artists’ right to free expression. Repeatedly asserting that their efforts did not amount to censorship, they expressed a hope that artists would never be forced, either by private companies or the government, to alter or remove any content on the basis of some other group’s sensibilities. In an attempt to counter the assertions about the PMRC made by the group’s opponents, Gore wrote of her critics: “They found it easy to confuse the issue by throwing out cries of censorship while refusing to address the real problem. They dodged the real point—that in a free society we can affirm the First Amendment and also protect the rights of children and adults who

⁵¹ 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, 16-17.

seek to avoid the twisted tyranny of explicitness in the public domain.”⁵²

In one case, Gore appeared on a 1988 episode of the television show *Firing Line*, a political debate and interview program hosted by William F. Buckley Jr., the incredibly influential conservative author and commentator (his magazine, *National Review*, founded in 1955, is largely seen as helping to reenergize the conservative intellectual base in the latter half of the twentieth century). During the interview, Gore repeatedly asserted that she had no desire for the PMRC to affect an expansion of the power of the federal government, and that the music industry, a group of private entities, should be trusted to regulate itself. However, Buckley emphatically called Gore out for what he perceived as a half measure. Defending the conservative tenet of morality, he equated the content of heavy metal records to child abuse, and argued that the federal government was thus morally obligated to step in and take action.⁵³

It is no surprise that, with their talking points and strategies pulling from both conservative and liberal ideologies, the group was successful largely because they enjoyed bipartisan support. The group famously partnered with the National Parent Teacher Association in their campaign against excesses in music lyrics, and, coincidentally, Gore’s later efforts on behalf of educational reform saw her somewhat in agreement, at least philosophically, with Frank Zappa, perhaps the PMRC’s most ardent opposition. The group also enjoyed support from Ronald Reagan, who, when asked about the group, spoke positively of their efforts to undo the “glorification of drugs, violence,

⁵² Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Abingdon Press, 1987, 29.

⁵³ Hartman, Andrew. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 177.

and perversity.”⁵⁴ Ultimately, the group walked a very fine line in their campaign. That they received bipartisan support and actually brought about so much change is as much a testament to their underappreciated activist savvy as it is to the political climate in which they operated.

Despite this, however, many historians have implicitly interpreted the 1985 hearing as the group’s fifteen minutes of fame. Many scholars have based entire studies of the PMRC on the assumption that the group merely wanted to make noise of their own to counter the music they were offended by. However, the PMRC was in fact so reluctant for government involvement that they nearly declined to even take part in the hearing to begin with. And though they participated in that hearing, and accepted invitations to other public forums and saw their stances espoused in Tipper Gore’s book, their opponents cried censorship so loudly and so often that historians have focused, almost exclusively, on the constitutional implications of the group’s actions. To be fair, there is no shortage of important constitutional points to make. In his opening statement at the 1985 hearing, Senator Ernest F. Hollings stated that any redeeming social value to be found in rock music was “inaudible” and that “if I could find some way constitutionally to do away with it, I would.”⁵⁵ But, what scholars have inexplicably overlooked is that while the PMRC’s efforts do raise important constitutional questions, these questions have already been debated almost ad nauseam. Instead, historians should have been looking at the group on behalf of which the PMRC’s entire campaign rested, and that which made them

⁵⁴ Weinraub, Bernard. “Rock Lyrics Irk Reagan,” *The New York Times*, October 10th, 1985, Late City Final Edition, Sec C.

⁵⁵ 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, 2.

so powerful: children.

IV. Government as a Protector of Children and Constitutional Precedent for the PMRC's Goals

Many scholars have ignored the fact that while the PMRC did argue for the regulation of the music industry, and did so by engaging in many of the same dialogues traditionally employed by conservative critics of popular culture, they were not a one-track conservative group seeking an unconstitutional change for the sake of their own sensibilities. Rather, they argued on behalf of America's youth and the education of parents for the sake of better protecting them. By arguing that offensive music was dangerous to children, not only did they further align with traditional conservatism by seeking to protect the traditional family unit, they did so from a legitimate legal ground. Thus, their campaign was based on the traditional conservative tenet of preserving the traditional core family unit, largely via the protection and development of America's children.

Groups that advocate for regulation or censorship of popular entertainment have often touted the protection of the young in attempts to justify their action. Such inclusion of children in the popular culture censorship debate stems from the legal concept of *Parens Patriae* (translated from Latin as "parent of the nation"). Having evolved greatly over the years, *Parens Patriae* has seen a significant extension of legal rights to children on the grounds that they too are human beings and subsequently have constitutional rights, just as adults do. The landmark Supreme Court decision *In re Gault* (1967) granted children the same rights as adults in criminal proceedings including the right to

counsel, the right to notice of charges, and the right to confront their accuser. The Court continued to expand the rights of children with *In re Winship* (1970), which stated that children had to be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, just as adults do. In *Goss v. Lopez* (1975), the Court stated that in public schools, students have a right to notice of charges and a hearing before they can be suspended.⁵⁶

In *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978), the Court held that the government does have an interest in protecting children from offensive material and that the FCC has the authority to prohibit the broadcasting of indecent material during times when children could be expected to comprise a large portion of the audience.⁵⁷ This decision is an outlier in the evolution of *Parens Patriae*, however, as the government has largely been reluctant to censor or regulate popular culture on the behalf of children. Beyond laws that disallow sales of adult materials based on age, the government has passively decided that either exposing children to the potentially harsh or shocking examples of popular culture in the United States or shielding them from what is out there is a decision more befitting the parents and the communities in which they live.

That's not to say that government officials have not had the opportunity to restrict the availability of such materials to youth. There have been many instances in which the government could have chosen to legislate such exposure, but little has come from these episodes. In 1953, Congress declined to pass a bill which would limit the interstate

⁵⁶ Zimring, Franklin E, *The Changing Legal World of Adolescence* (The Free Press, 1982), 77-87.

⁵⁷ R. Wilfred Tremblay, "FCC v. Pacifica Foundation," in *Free Speech on Trial: Communication Perspectives on Landmark Supreme Court Decisions*, ed. Richard A. Parker (University of Alabama Press), 2003, 218-223.

distribution of music recordings deemed obscene. John Danforth, chairman of the 1985 hearing on record labeling, opined in his opening statement that the purpose of the hearing was not to promote any sort of censorship legislation, but to “provide a forum for airing the issue itself, for ventilating the issue, for bringing it out in the public domain.”⁵⁸ Cardiss Collins, chairwoman of the 1994 Congressional hearings on the lyrics of rap records, stated in her opening statement that her intention was not to “legislate morality” but to “raise the moral consciousness of the country.”⁵⁹

Despite the numerous, unsuccessful attempts by activist groups to influence either censorship or regulation, the government has repeatedly chosen not to legislate industries that private consumers, including parents and their children, are exposed to. On numerous occasions throughout American history, private groups have formed and attempted to influence official government action, frequently out of a specific self-interest. One prominent example is the Hays Code. In response to a number of risqué films and off-screen scandals, movie studios founded the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (1922), which would eventually become the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), and chose Will H. Hays as its first president. With more than three dozen states in the process of establishing censorship boards to review films, Hays took action to prevent a censorship bill proposed in Massachusetts from becoming law. When the bill failed, he established the film industry’s authority to self-regulate via his eponymous office. Ultimately, the office produced the Hollywood Production Code, or

⁵⁸ 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, 1.

⁵⁹ Senate Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Competitiveness, *Music Lyrics and Commerce: Hearing Before the Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd Sess., February 11, 1994 & May 5, 1994, 1.

the Hays Code as it would come to be known. Written by Catholic priest Daniel Lord, who expressed specific concern for children and saw the family as the moral core of America, the code was adopted specifically to avoid government censorship of film and to allow Hollywood to maintain private control over the content and the morality of film.⁶⁰

After World War II, there was a wave of fear regarding juvenile delinquency. The American Bar Association disapproved of violence in mass media, citing potential negative consequences for children who would be exposed to such violence. Producers and publishers of products aimed at children, including books, films, radio programs, and comic books feared that the ABA would try to influence legislation aimed at censoring such materials. In fact, Arthur Freund, chairman of the Criminal Law Section of the ABA, sought positive portrayals of police, lawyers, and judges in such media and was inspired to act after seeing negative depictions of lawyers and judges in Hollywood movies in an attempt to guide children toward making life decisions that would positively impact society.⁶¹

And so, by the time Tipper Gore co-founded the Parents Music Resource Center, there was already a longstanding and widespread tradition of private interest in censoring popular music on the grounds of protecting children. The group's early activities continued this custom. The first meetings were held in Washington D.C.-area churches, the PMRC founders having invited friends and other concerned parents on their shared

⁶⁰ Black, Gregory D. *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-2, 21-49.

⁶¹ Gilbert, James. *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 80-82.

Christmas card mailing lists. Having examined musical products and programs, such as those airing on MTV, the group decided to focus their outrage, and decided to take the issue directly to the record companies and the RIAA, the trade organization which represents them, via a letter writing campaign. In the name of protecting children from indecent entertainment products, the letters proposed a rating system similar to that employed by the Motion Pictures Association of America to rate films. An “X” rating would indicate that an album contained sexually explicit content, “V” would indicate violent themes, “O” would indicate occultic, Satanic, or anti-Christian content, and “D/A” would represent lyrics that promoted the use of drugs and alcohol. Only a handful of record companies bothered to acknowledge the PMRC’s letter, and none agreed to adopt any ratings.⁶²

The group subsequently held meetings with the RIAA and representatives of numerous record labels. By presenting their arguments and their justifications directly to the record companies, as well as reinforcing them in their numerous public statements, the PMRC made it extremely clear that their campaign was serious, and they would not settle until they felt parents were properly equipped to make decisions based on the wellbeing of their children. By the fall of 1985, with the issue becoming increasingly more public, Congress had begun to take note. Though Gore and the other founders of the PMRC were initially hesitant to attend,⁶³ they accepted an invitation to take part in a hearing scheduled by Senator John Danforth examining lyrical content of popular music

⁶² Packer, Sharon and Jody Pennington, eds. *A History of Evil in Popular Culture: What Hannibal Lecter, Stephen King, and Vampires Reveal about America, Volume 1: Evil in Film, Television, and Music*. Praeger, 2014, 347-352.

⁶³ Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Abingdon Press, 1987, 32.

records. In accordance with the PMRC's oft-repeated goals, in the opening statements of the hearing, Senators Al Gore and Paula Hawkins each reiterated the PMRC's stance that the hearings were not indicative of attempts to censor, but rather to educate parents about the lyrical content of records, and thus to allow the country to preserve its future through the protection of its children.

In their opening statements, the PMRC's Susan Baker and Tipper Gore reinforced the point that their primary goal was to educate parents and to propose self-restraint by the industry as a solution to the threat music posed to the nation's youth. Baker argued that the lyrical content of rock records, which were being marketed toward youth at an unprecedented rate, was at least partly responsible for what the PMRC perceived as the degradation of America. Furthermore, a lack of information available for parents' reference only magnified the dangers.⁶⁴ Jeff Ling's subsequent testimony reinforced the powerful and negative impact music had made on some of America's children. Ling began by lamenting the loss of two boys who had killed themselves in two separate incidents while listening to AC/DC's "Shoot to Thrill". Ling criticized the lyrics, album covers, and videos by several prominent artists which portrayed satanic imagery, drug abuse, violent behavior and sexual degradation of women, linking them all to examples of teenage death or injury.

During the questioning following the PMRC's testimony, Senator J. James Exon asked the PMRC's intention in taking part in the hearing. Tipper Gore again reiterated that the PMRC was in no way seeking federal action, merely voluntary labeling by the

⁶⁴ 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, 12.

RIAA. This response prompted Senator Exon to ask, “I wonder, Mr. Chairman, if we are not talking about Federal legislation, what is the reason for these hearings in front of the Commerce Committee?”⁶⁵ The chairman responded that not all problems could be solved in America with legislation, making it necessary to provide a forum for airing concerns. Exon retorted that the hearing, despite publicizing legitimate threats to the children of the nation, was just another publicity event that Congress indulged in and was unnecessary because the issue was beyond its primary purpose of regulation and legislation.⁶⁶

Three prominent musicians testified next: Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider of the band Twisted Sister. Zappa, one of the more colorful personalities of contemporary rock music, stated bluntly that the PMRC’s proposal, even though it was meant to protect children from potentially damaging entertainment content, was a foolish, pointless, and sensationalist overreaction and that the demands were “the equivalent of treating dandruff by decapitation.”⁶⁷ Zappa posited that a rating system would open the door to endless moral questioning of the artists themselves, potentially limiting their success as professional musicians. Ultimately, Zappa, who defended his right to raise his children however he deemed appropriate, offered his own solution: stores selling records would keep copies of the lyrics at the store for parents to read before purchasing the album without any alterations.

Testifying next, John Denver stated his belief that the labeling of records being sought by the PMRC would “approach censorship.”⁶⁸ His brief testimony highlighted the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 49-50.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 65.

potential misunderstanding of lyrical content by concerned parents and reinforced the need for well-informed contextualization of artistic products. He detailed the minor controversies caused by his song “Rocky Mountain High,” which had been banned from several radio stations for supposed drug references, and his film *Oh God*, which many theater owners and advertisers believed to be blasphemous and thus refused to advertise or promote. He explained that he wrote his song to be a celebration of the beauty of the Colorado wilderness and that his film was intended to spread the message of God, not to take His name in vain. Such messages, he felt, were positive ones that could have a good influence on children. “Obviously, a clear case of misinterpretation. Mr. Chairman, what assurance have I that any national panel to review my music would make any better judgment?”⁶⁹

The third and final musician to testify, Dee Snider of the heavy metal band Twisted Sister, was unique in that he was the only witness whose music had faced accusations from the PMRC. The song “We’re Not Gonna Take It” had been included on the PMRC’s “Filthy Fifteen” and was criticized for containing violent and threatening elements. For example, in its repetition of the phrase “We’re not gonna take it” over and over throughout the song, growled, yelled, and chanted rather than sung, the vocals invite comparison to protests and demonstrations against tyrannical power. With the heavy use of the snare drum, an extreme reading could find it suggestive of a march to violence, a call to arms to the youth of America to overthrow the parents repressing their right to rock and roll. This is most obvious at 01:35 and 02:40, when Dee Snider’s voice

⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

disappears into the sounds of a crowd cheering, and at 02:48, when all the instrumentation except for the aforementioned snare drum and the anthem-like lyrics repeat again and again until the song ends.

It's easy to see why Twisted Sister's song was so easy for the PMRC to target. The lyrics and music evoke a call to action, but the traditional characteristics of heavy metal combined with the genre's popularity surely made the song particularly threatening. Heavy metal's (and the song's) use of distorted guitars, heavy, pounding drums, and shouting create a sheer wall of volume and noise.⁷⁰ In this way, the song represents pure power, and with heavy metal in the 1980s becoming focused on catchier songs, that power proved to be more commercially successful and thus more of a threat to children.

At the hearing, the PMRC was not content merely to discuss the song, but the accompanying music video was also presented at the hearing. Instead of being the realization of a call to overthrow established power structures, however, the song is over the top and flamboyant, simultaneously touting the imagery commonly associated with heavy metal, while also managing to be an extremely watered down version of that same product. If one were to see the video immediately after the other videos the PMRC presented at the hearing, one might believe it was intended as lighthearted satire. The video sees a young preteen boy magically transformed into the heavy metal caricature of Dee Snider as the boy's father is blown out the window and smashed behind doors by the power of rock music. Snider's appearance, the heavy red, white, and blue makeup, the

⁷⁰ Walser, Robert. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 42.

platform boots, the curly hair full of styling product, is almost comical and resembles more of a heavy metal costume than actual heavy metal. The band members' appearances all take on a borderline farcical tone, and the song and video, taken as an entire musical whole, don't seem very threatening to suburban youth.

The fact that the song was not intended to be threatening formed the basis of Snider's arguments against the PMRC's claims. After pointing out to the committee that he was raised and still adhered to Christian principles and had never used drugs and did not drink alcohol, he turned his attention to "We're Not Gonna Take It." He presented the lyrics and noted that they contain no direct references or even implications of violence. He did admit that the song's music video contained stylized cartoon violence, but pointed out that the band had recently granted permission to the United Way of America to use clips from the video in a program about American family; the United Way requested clips from the video "because of its 'light-hearted way of talking about communicating with teenagers.'" ⁷¹ More important, Snider questioned the legitimacy of the PMRC's demands to regulate the *song* as only the *video* presented any sort of violence.

Snider then challenged the PMRC's accusations that Twisted Sister's song "Under the Blade" encouraged sadomasochism, bondage, and rape. He presented the lyrics to the song and revealed the PMRC's accusations to be based on a grouping of two different lyrics and a misquote of the chorus, presented in its testimony in a way that made the lyrics appear sequential within the song. Whereas Jeff Ling presented the lyrics as "Your hands are tied / your legs are strapped / you are going under the blade," the

⁷¹ 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, 74.

lyrics are actually “Your hands are tied / your legs are strapped,” and then makes references to lights flashing in one’s eyes. Snider made a point to comment that it would be odd for Gore to misquote the lyrics in such a way as the band made it a point to include all of their lyrics with all of its albums,⁷² and Snider’s point went unaddressed either by members of the committee or of the PMRC. In concluding his testimony, Snider commented on the possibility of misinterpreting a song’s intended meaning when he explained that he wrote the song in support for Twisted Sister’s guitarist, who was having surgery; the song was intended to represent the fear people have of going “under the blade.”⁷³

Beyond specific refutations and defenses, the arguments in opposition to the PMRC were based almost exclusively on the First Amendment. Specifically, the arguments which Frank Zappa and Dee Snider made are excellent examples of the “SLAPS Test” in action. Both questioned the validity of attempting to censor a product that was not entirely obscene. Zappa questioned whether one “bad” track was sufficient to censor the rest of an album’s tracks as well, and Snider questioned whether it was legitimate to ban a song in any of its forms if only the video for the song could be considered obscene. In addition, John Denver perfectly stated the difficulty of declaring a work obscene. Under the “Miller Test,” a work must appeal to the prurient interest and have no serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value as judged by contemporary community standards. Clearly Denver’s works were misinterpreted by those who did not understand the standards of the Colorado community. If they were understood, the works

⁷² Ibid., 73.

⁷³ Ibid., 77.

would not have been met with any amount of controversy.

The senators that oversaw the 1985 hearing adhered to the tradition of *Parens Patriae* the same way that government representatives before them had. The committee members stated repeatedly that legislating any sort of censorship or regulation of rock and heavy metal music was not Congress's intention. They repeatedly reinforced that their intention was merely to increase parental awareness of such lyrical content, thus allowing parents to make better-informed decisions when purchasing music for their children. In keeping with the discourse from the days of jazz and rock and roll, the PMRC testified that the lyrics of rock and heavy metal music were contributing to the sexual perversion of America's youth. As sex sells and sells well, they asserted, the continued presence of sexual themes in music was hardly surprising. What made the PMRC's attempt to regulate rock and heavy metal records different, however, were the contemporary ideologies that informed their goals. While the PMRC clearly echoed many of the same criticisms from generations prior, their testimony came from both the re-emergence of American conservatism and a desire to protect the vulnerable morality of the country's children.

V. Conclusion – The Legacy of the Parents Music Resource Center

This thesis has argued that the PMRC, long remembered as a special interest group that was just another bland attempt at controlling people, was in fact a serious activist group, and a successful one. Their arguments were rooted in longstanding conservative and legitimate legal tradition, and their calls for change were answered, even if the answers had a less dramatic impact than their critics would like to admit. It is curious to note, then, what became of the PMRC in the collective consciousness of the American public's memory. Whereas scholars have essentially dismissed the PMRC, the country's legal record accurately, albeit briefly, indicates that they did have a lasting impact on limiting the exposure of questionable popular culture to children.

After the group became famous to the public in 1985, they continued to participate in congressional hearings on the issues of excessive content in entertainment available to children. On June 16th, 1998, the Senate Committee on Science, Commerce, and Transportation held another hearing to determine how effective the parental advisory sticker had been in the years since its adoption. As one would expect, the PMRC and the results of the group's actions were discussed extensively. The PMRC (by now known as the Parents Music Resource Center on Music Lyrics) was again represented, though this time by only one member, Barbara P. Wyatt, the organization's new president. Wyatt's testimony reveals that the group's focus had remained firmly on the protection of children. In addition to referring to the four founding members of the group not as founders or members, but as mothers, Wyatt asserted that

Young people are listening to music for hours every day, and they are watching MTV, which puts thoughts and imagery in their fertile minds. The brain receives all messages. It does not discriminate between retaining or discarding the good and the bad. What you put in the brain stays. And if you feed the brain themes which are detrimental, there may be an outcome that resembles the input.⁷⁴

Wyatt also repeated assertions made by the group previously: that they sought no legislation and that they respected the freedom afforded artists by the First Amendment.

However, Wyatt also conceded that up to that point, the label had been a failure. Due to the label not being required by all record labels that released offensive material, children were not being as well-protected as the group had hoped they would be. This was further reflected in the still-high sales of both labeled and unlabeled records to children. Consequently, Wyatt alluded to a need for stricter legislation, though she stopped short of actually proposing it. Instead, she adopted the biblical wisdom of many conservative opponents of popular culture and of the previous leaders of the PMRC in arguing that children should be protected more than ever in light of the danger of music lyrics.⁷⁵

Krist Novoselic, formerly the bassist of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band Nirvana and then president of the Joint Artists and Music Promotions Political Action Committee (JAMPAC), also testified at the hearing. Novoselic argued that society's greatest threat to children was hardly music lyrics alone, as there were a great many threats that required both parental and government intervention. He contended that the propensity for attacking music in the guise of protecting children, particularly after an

⁷⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Labels and Lyrics: Do Parental Advisory Labels Inform Consumers and Parents?* 105th Cong., 2nd sess., 1998. S. Hrg 105-1060, 57.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

instance of mass violence, was mere sensationalism. In response to such sensationalism, he proclaimed that the real enemy was mindlessness with regards to parenting. As a result, and as aided by newfound accessibility due to rapidly improving technology, private initiatives, such as the parental advisory sticker, and private enterprises, such as TV Guide, Entertainment Monitor (a magazine that was dedicated to presenting the content of entertainment products), and magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, should suffice for the parent who wishes to have a say in the entertainment products their children consume.⁷⁶ In other words, just as the free market had allowed potentially offensive lyrics to become so widespread, the free market had also created sources of reference for concerned parents.

In the days since the PMRC's campaign, historians have continued to critique the group largely through the lens of the First Amendment. And while many historians have noted that today the internet can seemingly provide every lyric to every album made, thus being an invaluable tool to the parents the PMRC sought to assist, many have failed to note the impact of the group on the private industry. While conservatism holds that private industry can and should police itself, few scholars note that today's iTunes and Spotify identify explicit songs, just as many offensive records started featuring stickers after 1990. That the private music industry continues such practices is both a testament to the impact the PMRC had, as well as the continued presence of this dilemma in the information age.

While the 1998 hearing was the first one since 1985 to address the rating of

⁷⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

popular entertainment products, it was not the last. And though the 1998 hearing continued to reflect the group's desire of protecting children, other hearings that followed saw the focus of record labeling shift from the constitutional protection of children to other constitutional implications. On September 20th and 21st, 2000, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary met to discuss the antitrust repercussions of the music industry regulating itself via the Parental Advisory sticker, and whether or not there were legitimate grounds for the government to intervene. No member of the PMRC or the music industry was present. There was one passing mention of the group, and no discussion of either of the group's goals of protecting children and avoiding government legislation in doing so.

Six years later, on September 28th, 2004, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space held a hearing that examined the effectiveness of rating popular media. This time, the content of popular entertainment and the resultant effects on children again took center stage, though the entertainment mediums being debated were film, television, and video games. While arguments and justifications similar to those voiced in 1985 and in 1998 were made, there was no mention of music or the lyrical content thereof, no mention of the Parents Music Resource Center, and as a result, no indication that the group was any more than a postscript in the history of constitutional arguments.

Historians have hardly considered the group's legacy to be worthy of barely more than a footnote. Rather than acknowledge the PMRC as a unique and influential group that reflected the rightward turn the country had undertaken, and the contradictions that right turn had with many of the staples of popular culture, they instead see the group's

legacy as that of a hypocritical special interest group. They frequently cite the inconsistent and convenient application of the Tipper Sticker to albums critical of the PMRC or to works by artists who were known opponents of the group. In one notable example, Frank Zappa's 1986 album *Jazz From Hell* was labeled, despite being an entirely instrumental album and eventually winning the Grammy Award for Best Rock Instrumental Performance. In another case, the rock artist Danzig saw the song "Mother," a thinly-veiled song about an overprotective parent who is attempting to shelter her child from some undefined threat, labeled despite lacking any offensive language and naming no member of the PMRC by name, nor by naming the group at all.

Even with all of this taken into account, the PMRC's legacy should rather be that of one of the most unique activist groups of the 1980s. When historians have dedicated significant historical analysis to the PMRC, they have typically regarded the group as little more than a historical anomaly. The so-called "Washington Wives" are rarely seen as more than bored housewives, offended by some songs and who used their husbands' positions of power and influence to gain a token hearing which in turn affected minor change. But they must be taken into proper historical context. They deserve to be evaluated based on their stated goals, particularly the protection of children, and their impact on private industry cannot be overstated. The group was a legitimate sociopolitical special interest activist group, operating in a unique time in which the political and cultural landscape was undergoing a dramatic shift. Moreover, they accomplished what they set out to do. The Parents Music Resource Center functioned as a how-to for conservative, constitutional activism and symbolized America's rightward shift in the 1980s.

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