

# The Parents' Music Resource Center: from information to censorship

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**The Parents' Music Resource Center:  
from information to censorship**

"I knew a girl named Nikki [...] I met her in a hotel lobby she was masturbating with a magazine"  
(Prince, 'Darling Nikki', *Purple Rain*, Warner Bros., 1985)

**Introduction**

My purpose in this article is to recount the history of the Parents' Music Resource Center, an American organisation founded in 1985 whose main concern has been to denounce the obscenity and violence of rock music on the grounds that it is partly responsible for the numerous ills that plague the United States. The PMRC claimed that it only wished to inform the public but I intend to prove here that the actions of the organisation resulted in a *de facto* censorship of popular music. I shall accordingly describe the various steps of the process that led from information to censorship as well as probe the deeper reasons that may have motivated the action of the Center.

There is a tendency in Europe to consider with condescension the numerous and recurrent assaults on freedom of expression in the United States (even though, writes Donna Demac, most Americans 'believe that the United States is virtually free of [censorship]' or that it is 'less severe than ... elsewhere in the world' [p.3]). Until recently, many Europeans (and I for one) felt confident that such a situation could not develop to the same extent in their countries. Admittedly, several factors are specific to the United States: the puritan origin of the American

settlement, and what traces remain, the adoption of the First Amendment inscribing freedom of speech within the frame of the Constitution, the exceptions to this Amendment and the conflicts that ensued, the often extremely radical character taken by artistic expression in America, the extent of discriminatory practises against minorities, etc. Europeans were consequently tempted to dismiss the steady erosion of individual liberties in the United States as a unique case. There are however disquieting similarities that justify a careful assessment of the American context.

At first sight, the European situation may indeed seem quite different. In France, for instance, despite the traditional heavy hand of the State, censorship only remains in the motion picture industry (the revised 1990 Act) and for children's books and magazines (the 1949 Act). Undoubtedly the threat exists of encroachment upon other categories of speech. Such has been the case with clause 14 of the 1949 Act which stipulates that any book or magazine of sexual or violent character must be removed from display. Though it was originally meant to protect the children, clause 14 has been used 4716 times against adults' publications since 1949. Typically, in 1994, a scholarly book by art critic Jacques Henric was in some cities seized on the grounds that its cover showed 'L'origine du monde', a famous, once secret painting by Courbet that represents the naked vulva of a reclining woman. So far, however, the music scene has been virtually free from any kind of censorship, formal or not, despite the occasional uproar caused by French artist Serge Gainsbourg ('Je t'aime... moi non plus' in 1969, 'La décadanse' in 1971 or 'Love on the beat' in 1984) or contemporary French rappers (Doc Gyneco for instance, who was all the same awarded a 'Victoire de la Musique', the French equivalent to a Grammy or Brit Award). The only recent instance of official interference was the ban on rap group NTM for abuse to

police forces during a 1996 concert.

But however unobtrusive censorship may appear, one has to pay attention to its ideological basis, since a parallel can be drawn with the much more disquieting American situation. Censoring implies the existence of a 'public spirit'. There seems to be a threshold beyond which liberty must give way to control in order to protect the foundations of a country's collective identity. A fictitious, homogeneous community made up of 'average people' is the necessary pre-requisite for the establishment of any restriction on individual freedom. In most countries, such a spirit developed around the notions of family and race. The protection of youth requires a union of hearts and minds. The whole country must be united in the defence of its children. Many French laws are drawn up with these notions in mind: the 1881 Act on slander and libel which alludes to the 'feeling of fraternity that unites the members of the French family', the 1939 Act called 'Code de la Famille' which instituted numerous tax deductions, grants and allowances for families with children in order to protect 'the family and the race', etc. Ultimately, this is what is at stake with censorship, both in Europe and the United States: a collective indignation, a public reprobation that tries to impose family values and the spirit of the race. Family and race may in themselves be respectable, even desirable values. What is more disturbing is their use as an ideological justification for censorship.

In this respect, the example of the Front National is particularly telling. In March 1988, the Front National, the far-right French party of Jean-Marie Le Pen, contributed directly to the election of three candidates from the moderate Right as Chairmen of Regional Assemblies. Immediately after the election, the National Front demanded that the conditions of the deal be met, i.e., the

setting up of a 'national cultural policy' based on family principles and French values and threatened with drastic cuts in the budgets of dissenting cultural institutions. The following study of the PMRC analyses in what manner this spirit can be implemented, under the guise of information, and how any type of censorship is in fact a form of exclusion, the sacrificial expulsion of everything that interferes with the smooth working of the great national family.

### **Birth of the PMRC**

In the early 1980s, the National Parent/Teacher Association, a 5.4 million members American organisation, incensed by the lyrics of some rock songs, particularly the line 'I sincerely want to fuck the taste out of your mouth' in 'Let's Pretend We're Married' by Prince, (1999, Warner Bros., 1982), suggested to use a symbol on some records to warn prospective buyers of their contents. It publicized its proposal by a series of letters sent to influential personalities. A certain Susan Baker was among the addressees; she listened carefully to other songs, notably Prince's 'Darling Nikki', 'Sugar Walls' by Sheena Easton and 'Eat Me Alive' by Judas Priest, and what followed was the setting up of the most formidable censorship machine in American popular music. For Susan Baker was the wife of Secretary of the Treasury James A. Baker III. With a few friends, all married to heavy weight politicians (Peatsy Hollings, wife of Sen. Ernest Hollings, Ethelann Stuckey, married to William Stuckey, a former Georgia congressman, Sally Nevius, whose husband, John Nevius was a member of the Washington City Council, Tipper Gore, wife of Al Gore Jr., at the time senator of Tennessee, now vice-president and Pam Howar, spouse of the CEO of a major Washington construction firm) she decided to create an organisation in order to inform parents about the pornographic contents of some rock records.

In May 1985, the Parents' Music Resource Center was born. Its board of directors was constituted of another 17 "Washington Wives", married to senators, congressmen and Cabinet officials along with a couple of businessmen's spouses and an advisory board where one could find Joseph Stuessy, a Professor of Music at the University of Texas, the Honorable Andrew Young, the Mayor of Atlanta, or TV host Sheila Walsh. The PMRC was founded with the financial help of Mike Love, from the Beach Boys, and of Joseph Coors, the owner of Coors beers. Both had actively supported Reagan's candidacy, and Coors offered offices to the PMRC. A minister from Virginia, Rev. Jeff Ling, famous for his 'slide-shows' denouncing sex and violence in rock music, was enrolled to write the abundant literature the PMRC intended to publish. Several religious organisations offered their logistical support: Teen Vision, from Pittsburgh, Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and the Religious Booksellers Convention (which distributed Tipper Gore's book, *Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society*), though the PMRC denied any ideological connection with these groups.

The PMRC's goals were clearly defined: 'to educate and inform parents of this alarming new trend...towards lyrics that are sexually explicit' (PMRC, 1985, p.1). Such information and education relied on a stricter enforcement of obscenity laws (see *infra*) and on a less permissive attitude (Susan Baker called it 'self-restraint') from record companies. The PMRC thus rejected the accusation of censorship: 'Pornography sold to children is illegal, enforcing that is not censorship. It is simply the act of a responsible society that recognizes that some material made available to adults is not appropriate for children' (Baker, 1987, p.1). Its purpose was to show the causal link between rock music and social problems such as the increase in rape, teen-age suicide or teen pregnancies: 'It is our contention that pervasive messages aimed at children which promote and glorify suicide, rape and

sadomasochism have to be numbered among the contributing factors' (Baker, 1985, p.20). As Lawrence Grossberg put it, the PMRC aimed at re-asserting control over the cultural environment of children; the moral fabric of the United States, its personal and family values had to be rescued through the regulation of youth's cultural consumption (p.193). Grossberg detailed the successive steps used by the PMRC in its strategy: first, adolescents were assimilated to children; this implies they needed the security of definable boundaries, which eventually shifted the weight of social issues from adult society to youth culture. Typically, in her 1987 book, Tipper Gore's method was to describe social problems in extremely broad terms, e.g., on page 75: 'white males are most at risk for suicide', before making an (often erroneous) assertion about youth culture such as 'young white males are also the primary audience for heavy metal', and leaving the reader to draw his own conclusion: 'what happens when a confused, depressed adolescent picks up the album...?'

It followed that many social evils should have been avoided by a stricter control of their causes, i.e., in the PMRC's mind, the lyrics of certain songs. Not because of their contents *per se* (Tipper Gore herself admitted that many TV shows were more licentious) but because they subverted the ideological values of American society (something the 'hottest' TV programme will indeed never do). The PMRC studied several solutions for the information of parents and the protection of children: printing lyrics on record sleeves, removing from display records with 'lewd' sleeves, systematically monitoring radio and TV shows and above all, securing the spontaneous agreement of record companies to indicate by means of a code the general tenor of some records: V for violence, X for sexually explicit lyrics, O for occult, D/A for drug and alcohol, etc. According to the PMRC, it was time to put an end to the drift toward pornography in rock music.



### **Censorship and obscenity**

Before going any further, the notions of pornography and obscenity need to be defined in the American context. The word pornography only has a common meaning, but obscenity also has a legal one. It describes a category of speech not protected by the First Amendment, namely speech about sex. However, as M. Heins noted, 'many legal scholars find no basis in history or logic for the "obscenity exception" to the First Amendment' (Heinz, p.17). Although other categories of speech initially left outside First Amendment protection were progressively included (libel in 1964, profanity in 1971), on the contrary, the stand against obscenity steadily hardened. Though the first laws against obscenity were passed only at the end of the 19th century under the impulse of Anthony Comstock, founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, in the 20th century, the pace quickened and several Supreme Court rulings shaped the current definition of obscenity. In 1957, in *Roth v. United States*, obscenity was defined as 'a speech about sex that is utterly without redeeming social importance'.<sup>1</sup> Two more criteria were added in the sixties, 'patently offensive' and 'appeal to prurient interest in sex' (which sets 'good' pornography apart as it may have artistic value or arouse non prurient desires). But as the Supreme Court pointed out, the line separating what is obscene (thus illegal) from what is pornographic (and as such under First Amendment protection) is often dim and uncertain.

In 1973, *Miller v. California* modified one more time the definition of obscenity. Instead of 'utterly without redeeming social importance', the new criterion became 'lacked seriously literary, artistic, political or scientific value', with all the ambiguities regarding the appreciation of 'value' in artistic works. Another major change was that from then on, 'contemporary

community standards' were used to decide whether a given material was 'patently offensive' or appealed to 'prurient interest in sex'. This implied that depending on the State or the city, the same material could be judged illegal or not. This legal frame was strengthened by the establishment of another category of speech, indecency, which, though not obscene, can all the same be restricted by law. It applies to 'patently offensive depictions or descriptions of sexual or excretory activities or organs'. These various definitions, because of their looseness, leave room for subjectivity and led to numerous convictions for obscenity and indecency by local courts. Such was the legal apparatus on which the PMRC relied in its efforts against rock music.

### **Censoring sexuality in popular music**

It was not the first time popular music was being attacked. Until the late eighties, obscenity prosecutions against music had been virtually inexistant but it does not mean that music had not been the target of censorship. The issue is obviously too large to be dealt with here satisfactorily, but a few facts may prove useful to delineate the context in which the PMRC developed. From their early days, jazz and blues had often been labelled 'the devil's music' or 'jungle music' and as Count Basie recalls, they were often described in terms of 'orgies' (Heins, p.80). African-American genres frightened because they expressed every aspect of human nature, including sexuality; the rampant discrimination against African-American culture was thus made legitimate and respectable since censoring these musics was presented as a crusade for decency. While black music had been directed at the black market, no one had really objected; it is only when the white youth began to be attracted that the attacks really began.

In the early fifties, the trade magazines *Billboard* and *Variety* launched a crusade against 'leerics' in Rhythm and Blues songs,

which led to the banning of many R&B records by jukeboxes operators and radio stations disk jockeys. They were supported in their efforts by various religious organisations, including black ones. With the advent of rock & roll, the situation worsened.<sup>2</sup> State authorities (such as the Texas Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Commission) began suggesting to radio stations which records should be banned (almost all by black artists). Many stations were but too happy to cooperate. In 1956, the North Alabama White Citizens Council declared that rock & roll appealed to 'the base in man, br[ought] out animalism and vulgarity,' and was part of a 'plot by the NAACP to mongrelize America.' In the same year, Gene Vincent was found guilty of obscenity and public lewdness by a Virginia State court (Martin, p.73) while Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis were ostracised for their private sexual lives. Rock & roll was also associated with juvenile violence and described as an incentive for rioting. The Ed Sullivan Show is a telling indicator of the fluctuating threshold separating what was deemed acceptable from what was not. Sullivan had for instance initially refused to host Elvis Presley as 'unfit for a family audience' until his national appeal called for a reversal of opinion. He subsequently described Presley as the epitome of Americanness (although shooting him only from the waist up). During the sixties, other artists were banned from the programme until their commercial clout proved irresistible, but they also had to comply with some restrictions: in 1965, the Rolling Stones had words from 'Satisfaction' deleted and had later to alter their hit 'Let's Spend the Night Together' into 'Let's Spend Some Time Together' (however, The Doors' Jim Morrison sang 'Light My Fire' with its original lyrics despite his promise to sanitize them, to the ire of Ed Sullivan).

In the mid-seventies, after a few rather uneventful years, blue songs came under attack again. This time, even industry officials

joined the fray. Vice-presidents at Casablanca, ABC or Warner Brothers Records, programme directors at major radio stations and even the National Association of Broadcasters expressed their concern over sexual lyrics. The strongest attack came from Reverend Jesse Jackson who, through his PUSH organisation, launched a campaign against off-white songs, most by black artists. As the PMRC ladies would do a few years later, he placed the blame for the increase in illegitimate births and abortions on songs advocating sex (Martin, p.251). On the whole, though, his campaign failed and was blamed for confusing ethic with ethnic issues, despite an attempt at fending off the criticism by focusing, with the help of feminist organisations, on the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls* album. By the early eighties, the issue of sexual lyrics had lost momentum, though occasional cases of censorship still occurred since, as Martin and Segrave write, 'rather than lying dormant, sex rock became the focus of a sort of sniper warfare as opposed to an all-out assault by anti-rock forces' (p.256). It would remain in that situation until the campaign launched by the PMRC in 1985.

### **The 1985 Senate hearings**

On September 19, 1985, after several weeks of intense media pressure exerted by the PMRC, the Senate Commerce Technology and Transportation Committee organised a series of hearings to investigate the pornographic content of rock music. This was the first official event directly imputable to the PMRC. Several rock personalities were called upon to give evidence: Frank Zappa, Dee Snider, from the group Twisted Sister and John Denver. The RIAA, the Recording Industry Association of America, also attended the hearings. They were primarily meant as a symbolic show of force since no legislation had been contemplated at the outcome, the Committee being aware of the complex constitutional issues involved. Nevertheless the PMRC believed the mere threat should

prove sufficient to urge the record industry to more caution. And indeed, on November 1, 1985, before the hearing were even over, the RIAA substantially acquiesced in the PMRC's demands, save a few alterations to the initial project. Consequently, the RIAA asked its members (85% of all American record companies, including all the majors) to choose between two solutions: either to affix a warning label or to print the lyrics on the sleeve. In most cases, record companies chose the warning label. Thus, from January 1986 to August 1989, out of 7500 albums released, 49 displayed some kind of warning message (in the same period, the PMRC had considered 121 records offensive), including re-released album by blues artist Sonny Boy Williamson. Among the first was French artist Serge Gainsbourg's *Love on the Beat* for whom the label was altered into 'explicit French lyrics'!

There is another account of the story. Since 1982, the RIAA had been trying unsuccessfully to have a bill passed in Congress (HR 2911 and S 1711, the Home Audio Recording Tax) a bill which would have established a tax on blank audio tapes, at the rate of 1c. per minute, yielding approximately \$250,000,000 a year, an enormous stake from which only the record companies and a few stars would have benefited, due to the appropriation system considered (Kennedy, 1985, p.135). As early as May 1985, the RIAA had accepted to meet the leaders of the PMRC to discuss their demands. This was followed by the hearings we have mentioned. As it happened, four of the senators who sat at the hearings of the Commerce Committee (Sen. Packwood, Sen. Gore, Sen. Thurmond and the chairman, John C. Danforth, Republican Senator of Missouri) not only also sat at the ad-hoc committee which worked on the HR 2911 bill, but were besides married to PMRC's officials. On November 1, 1985, the RIAA signed the agreement with the PMRC; a few months later, the tax was voted. Which consideration overrode the other? The fear of an hypothetical legislation on sex in rock

music or the prospect of a substantial bounty? Questioned on the subject, Paul Russinoff, an RIAA official, stuck to the official position that the labeling compromise was the lesser of two evils, the only way to avoid coercitive legislation.<sup>3</sup> This is what the RIAA annual report confirms: 'the Parental Advisory Program continues to offer a sound, sensible and constitutionally legal alternative to censorship legislation.' (RIAA, 1994, p.18) To be fair, the RIAA yielded on the main points only and firmly rejected the PMRC's other demands (a rating system and a ban on explicit covers).

For others, however, accepting what the PMRC wanted was a serious mistake. During the hearings, Frank Zappa stated his position in no equivocal terms:

The PMRC proposal is an ill-conceived piece of nonsense which fails to deliver any real benefits to children, infringes the civil liberties of people who are not children, and promises to keep the courts busy for years dealing with the interpretational and enforcemental problems inherent in the proposal's design.

He did not hesitate to allude to the less respectable reasons that may have led the RIAA to sign the deal:

The ladies' shame must be shared by the bosses at the major labels who, through the RIAA, chose to bargain away the rights of composers, performers and retailers in order to pass H.R. 2911; the Blank Tape Tax, a private tax levied by an industry on consumers for the benefit of a select group within that industry ... Is it proper that the husband of a PMRC founder sits on any committee considering business pertaining to the blank tape tax or his wife's lobbying organisation? Can any committee thus constituted find facts in a fair and unbiased manner?

Above all, he set the issue in a broader context:

The establishment of a rating system ... opens the door to an endless parade of moral quality control programs... What if the next bunch of Washington wives demands a large yellow 'J' on all material written or performed by Jews, in order to save helpless children from exposure to concealed Zionist doctrine?

The way the situation evolved could only strengthen his conviction. In 1990, he declared:

They should have fought tooth and nail from the day they first got the PMRC letter, they should have told those people 'Go stuff it, you got no business meddling in my affairs, you're not a government agency... it's just another piece of fundamentalist frogwash, get outa my face!' (interview with J.B.Peterson, Pacifica Radio, June 21, 1990)

#### **From information to censorship: the process**

The most disastrous consequence of the Senate hearings and the resulting labeling agreement was that what may have originally been a genuine desire to inform gave way to downright censorship. Even Tipper Gore recognized that the hearings were a mistake in the sense that 'they gave the misperception that there was censorship involved' (Gore, 1988, p.C18). For the PMRC held fast to the fiction that labeling was in no way a form of censorship and steadily refused to endorse any legislation aiming at censoring specific records. Grossberg suggests that the regulations implied by enforcing censorship incarnate 'systems of bureaucratic within the space of daily life' (p.167), a situation the members of the PMRC, all staunch advocates of liberal principles, could not accept. This did not prevent the PMRC, adds Grossberg, from sacrificing the space of individual rights in the name of the family 'though it apparently violates America's

supposed ideological commitment to individualism' (p.287). The family thus becomes a tool for social discipline, controlling the possibilities of childhood. But whatever ambiguities may exist between public and private control, the PMRC never admitted that its action could amount to censorship.

I now intend to outline the process through which a concern with information could lead to censorship. Four main phases can be observed. The first step was a series of attacks against individual artists, taking advantage of what existing legislation there was. The second involved initiatives by local authorities relying on the warning label as an indicator of what should be censored. This was followed by efforts at States level to pass legislation defining what could be sold and to whom, still on the basis of the warning label. The whole brouhaha eventually inspired record companies to exert more than caution regarding the nature of their production.

The most spectacular attack on an individual artist came in 1986. It was directed at Jello Biafra, leader of the Dead Kennedys, who was indicted for having included in one of his records (*Frankenchrist*) a poster by Swiss artist Giger depicting sexual organs. The grounds upon which the charge was brought were 'infringement of section 313.3 of the Californian Penal Code' (distribution of harmful material to minors). Though Jello Biafra was eventually discharged, the trial left him head over ears in debt, without a group and unable to record for years. The PMRC cannot deny having been directly involved in the case; during the trial, it released the following statement:

The PMRC feels that the poster and the Dead Kennedys' album *Frankenchrist* is a blatant example of pornography and failure to provide truth in packaging. The warning sticker which was placed on the shrink wrap, not on the album itself, claims that the poster is a work of art



which some may find repulsive and offensive. This does not relay the explicit nature of the poster and does not adequately warn parents to the contents of the album. The right to consumer information prior to purchasing a product is the time honoured principle in this country. This is clearly a violation of that principle. (PMRC, 1986, p.28)

Admittedly, the PMRC did not call for the suppression of the album, merely for better 'truth in packaging', but its involvement in the trial weakens its claim of standing against any kind of censorship.

In the wake of this early trial, local authorities tried to make the most of existing legislation to increase their control over what was sold in their district, particularly to minors. Bills, 'informal' letters by local police officers, council ordinances, a dazzling array of (sometimes barely) legal weaponry was used to criminalize the sale of certain records. This time, the attacks no longer bore on specific individuals but on a whole range of music. Most of the time, the targets were selected on the basis of the warning label, though the labels had no legal standing regarding what could or could not be sold to minors. The most dramatic case concerned the rap group 2 Live Crew. On February 6, 1990, following a prosecution on obscenity grounds by Broward County Sheriff Nick Navarro, Judge Grossman of the Boward County Circuit Court issued a 'probable case' ruling, stating that he had good reasons to think the album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* was obscene and therefore illegal under Florida law. The order was simply photocopied and distributed to local record shop owners who were threatened with arrest if they failed to comply. Most retailers subsequently stopped selling the record, except 3 who were accordingly arrested. On March 16, 1990, the group decided to protect their rights by filing suit in a federal court. Two years

later, the Federal Court of Florida reversed Judge Grossman's initial ruling; a decision which was confirmed by the Supreme Court's 1992 denial of certiorari. It considered that no obscenity judgement had been passed at the time the order had been issued, so that the whole procedure amounted to a prior restraint of free speech.

The concept of prior restraint describes the fact that police or local authorities declare or suggest that a given speech might be illegal before any judgment has been passed, i.e., prohibiting expression in advance. The practise came under light in 1927 when authorities used the law to silence the-by all accounts-obnoxious and racist paper *Saturday Press* owned by Jay Near and Howard Guilford. Despite the nature of the publication, some (such as publisher Robert McCormick and the fledgeling American Civil Liberties Union) objected to its censoring prior to the condemnation of any specific article, on the sole basis of its general tenor. In 1931, accordingly, the Supreme Court ruled out the Minnesota law, stating that prior restraint was disallowed under the U.S. Constitution. This was expanded in 1961 in *Bantam Books, Inc. v. Rhode Island Censorship Board*, Board which had 'thanked' publishers in advance for their cooperation in not distributing incriminated books in Rhode Island. In 1978 the Supreme Court added that 'by inducing excessive caution, prior restraints also indirectly and unintentionally suppress speech'.<sup>4</sup> It was precisely to avoid such abuses that the First Amendment had been introduced. According to Jeffrey B. Kahan, 'the use of prior restraints to censor concerts and albums suggests dark motives in and of itself. This technique lends itself to indirect and unintended censorship. Performers lose the right to make any statement. Without the opportunity to answer their critics in an adversarial hearing, [they] lose the right to defend their views, much less air them' (p.2610).

Following the 2 Live Crew episode, the attacks on rock music took a sharper dimension as several states considered passing laws which would have criminalised the sale of specific records to minors, banned them from display or forbidden their distribution altogether. The process had begun in 1986 when Rep. Judith Toth from Maryland, alerted by the PMRC, had introduced a bill (which was eventually defeated) intending to criminalise the sale of obscene records to minors. It started anew in 1990 when Rep. Joseph Arnell, after having attended a Tipper Gore lecture too, sponsored another bill in Florida. The purpose of his bill was to turn what was initially a voluntary agreement (affixing a warning label) into a law. Not only the label would have become mandatory on the selected records but selling them to minors would have become a crime. Eighteen other states, supported by a public opinion aroused by the PMRC, soon followed suite and contemplated similar legislation. The most serious threat came from Louisiana, where Governor Buddy Roemer had to exert his right of veto to block the bill, acting on the advice of the PMRC's leaders who felt somewhat alarmed by what they had triggered and wanted to stress the voluntary basis of the deal. At this point, however, their action can no longer be equated to merely informing the public. The sponsors of these bills, who acknowledged their debt to the PMRC, were explicitly bent on censorship; for Pennsylvania's Rep. Ronald Gamble, 'the intent is not so much the warning labels, but to make sure the records are not sold', while the husband of one of the PMRC's members, Sen. Ernest Hollings, declared 'if I could find some way constitutionally to do away with [explicit lyrics], I would. [I've asked] the best constitutional minds around to see if the stuff could be legally outlawed'.<sup>5</sup>

The RIAA actively opposed these bills, often by advising state

governors. Thus, it was thanks to RIAA pressure that the Governor of South Carolina vetoed a bill that would have established a \$1 tax on any record containing sexually explicit lyrics. Faced with the threat of legal requirements and censorship bills, the RIAA counter-attacked in 1990 by designing a new, standard warning label (the one still used today: Parental Advisory/Explicit Lyrics), and strongly advising its members to affix it on records that could be deemed controversial. However, the determination of the censors did not relent. In 1993, South Carolina, New Jersey, Arizona, Florida, Oregon and New York State, and in 1994 Missouri and Alaska were still considering legislation relying on the RIAA label as a means to determine which records had to be censored, which would have saved them the trouble of actually listening to every single album released. Thus, a device initially intended to warn parents was being used as an indicator for censorship. As Heins puts it, 'although the RIAA insisted that its label did not mean music stores should refuse to sell certain recordings to minors, the warning was simply too tempting and convenient a shortcut for censors' (p.90). She quotes an RIAA official disagreeing with the use of the label as a method for law enforcement officials to prohibit the sale of material to minors who had bitterly commented: 'For now, that has been the effect' (p.91).

The immediate fallout of resorting to labeling was what is called the 'chill factor'. The label 'Explicit Lyrics' becoming synonymous with obscenity, several major retail chains (Camelot Music & Video, Sears, J.C. Penney, Disc Jockey, etc.) decided they would no longer carry labeled records. Others such as Trans World, Tower, Musicland, Waterloo, Record Bar or Sound Exchange declared that despite the absence of legislation they would not sell these records to minors, requiring proof of age from their customers and making their employees responsible if records were found to have

been sold to minors. For example, in a memo sent from the headquarters on April 20, 1992, Super Club required its local managers to check pronouncements from local judges and district attorneys and remove from display albums intended to be prosecuted as well as restrict their sale to minors. To make sure the decision would be enforced, cashiers were compelled to enter the customer's ID and their own into a computer system for each purchase. Those policies were very often adopted under direct pressure from mall developers whose leases frequently stipulate that no obscene material can be sold within the malls. The need to maintain good relations with local authorities has also to be taken into consideration. Thus the owner and operator of two Hoguild Records stores in San Antonio declared that his official line, when interviewed by local papers, was to say he did not carry any of the labeled albums as he expected police forces to keep on helping him in case of a burglary. Though admittedly the PMRC did not officially endorse these practises, it nevertheless stated in its Spring/Summer 1991 Newsletter that it supported 'the individual policies of retailers relating to "18-to-purchase"' (p.2).

As a consequence, an increasing number of record companies became extremely wary in their artistic choices and tried to reduce to a minimum the production of records which would logically have had to carry the advisory tag. Alternatively, they tried to persuade artists on their roster to sanitize their lyrics and render them more acceptable commercially, using as standards records that had already passed the test of the censors. The only exceptions were for chart-toppers like Prince or independent record companies, in rap mostly, for whom the advisory label may have served as a kind of advertisement, mostly in an ironic or sarcastic tone. But this remained exceptional (for instance 'Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics' by George Carlin, on Eardrum / Atlantic or "Parental

Advisory: Explicit Rap", on Priority Records). All things considered, then, labeling can hardly be considered as anything but censorship, although an elegant one, disguised as consumer information. And as Charles Krauthammer wrote, 'Who's against consumer information?' (1985, p.A27) The PMRC's insistence on labeling triggered unofficial though effective forms of censorship, from refusing to sell to refusing to record or produce artists whose lyrics were considered scandalous or licentious, whatever their artistic or social value.

### **Behind the mask**

What were the real goals of the PMRC's founders? Should we question their sincerity? Are they simply hypocrites? Can we believe their alibi? Were they really only trying to protect and inform? Who were their real targets? For one thing, one has to stress their links with religious organisations, though they repeatedly denied them. I have already mentioned the support the PMRC received at the outset from various churches. Some went further; Parental Guidance or Christ Disciples, among others, regularly carried information related to the PMRC in their brochures, and encouraged their members to support it financially. The PMRC even asked Bob DeMoss, from fundamentalist organisation Focus on the Family, to produce their promotional video *Rising to the Challenge*. It is also striking that among the legislators who promoted the censorship bills, several (Rep. Jean Dixon from Missouri for instance) had long been supporting causes (the anti-abortion movement or the right to teach Creation Science) that were on the agenda of the Religious Right. For religious motives are difficult to disentangle from political intentions. This appeared extremely clearly in Jerry Falwell's book *Listen, America!*. One can find in it the thesis, taken up by the leaders of the PMRC, that the liberals are responsible for the loosening of moral standards and that they are on the same footing as

pornographers '[The liberals] are not going to call our nation back to righteousness and neither are the pornographers and smut peddlers and those who are corrupting our youth' (1980, p.21). For Falwell, the deterioration of the country's morality was a deliberate action by the liberals and part of the communist plot aiming at unsettling America. As a result, writes Yves Lemeunier, 'morality has become the instrument of a kind of political racism in whose name part of the population is irretrievably condemned' (1988, p.115). Certainly, the PMRC did not go so far but its links with fundamentalist groups cast suspicion on its professed political neutrality. All the more so as Jerry Falwell and President Reagan officially endorsed its action.

Deeper motives for the PMRC's action are suggested by the fact that its most frequent targets were heavy-metal and rap music, two genres traditionally (though erroneously) associated to minority groups, working class youth and the black community. In the heyday of the PMRC, rap's success had dramatically increased. An RIAA CEO quoted in the L.A. Times of July 19, 1992 claimed that 'rap has empowered an entire new generation of successful young black entrepreneurs', too disquieting a fact for some, perhaps. Besides, a Sound Data survey published in the same issue revealed that 74% of all rap albums were sold to whites, which made it all the more threatening. Very revealing in that respect is the war against rap music waged in the early 1990s by two leading figures of the black bourgeoisie, Illinois Senator Carol Moseley-Braun and Dr. C. Dolores Tucker, chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women. The Senate Juvenile Justice Subcommittee hearings they instigated were intended to crush the most prominent style of rap at the time, gangsta rap. A single figure of the black community opposed them, Rep. Maxine Waters whose district included part of South Central L.A.. For the leaders of the conservative fraction of the black community, rap music and its success among white

youths contributed to the sexual, violent image cast on African-American culture.

Hence my conviction that the primary motive behind the action of the Washington Wives was to divert the people's attention from major issues by focusing it on trivial ones and specific groups. It is a well-known trick, particularly effective when, as was the case with the PMRC, it is based on genuine though ill-founded moral convictions. Artists and audience alike represent easy targets, obvious scapegoats. René Girard's seminal work on the scapegoat process defines the criteria required for the transformation of an innocent into a scape-goat. The most important is the subtle status of the victim who must at the same time belong to the community so that his sacrifice will be effective, and stand somewhat apart from it, in order to prevent a cycle of retaliatory actions. Another criterion is that the imaginary transgression attributed to the selected individual to justify his sacrifice is very often of a sexual nature. Girard also outlines the function of the scapegoat process, i.e., bringing together the various members of a community in times of disorder, doubt and fear through a cathartic process. The actions of the PMRC against rap and heavy-metal fans and artists perfectly fit these criteria. As Robert Walser wrote, 'heavy metal (along with rap) remains the dark "Other"' (p.103).

As a matter of fact, one can read on PMRC leaflets that 'studies have concluded that over the past decade the rate of arrests for homicides committed by 14-17 year olds has tripled' and that 'according to the Attorney General Janet Reno as cited in the American Medical Association 1996 report on violence in America, there are more than 16,000 street gangs with more than 500,000 members nationwide'. In perfect PMRC strategy, no conclusion is given, the reader is left to ponder on the causal link that may



exist between violence and the music criticized elsewhere by the Center. Scapegoating is a convenient means not to deal with real-world problems. Eliminating cultural differences offers a simple solution to the complex social ills targeted by the PMRC. Searching for real solutions is a challenge seldom taken up by political leaders. The role played by 'deindustrialization and disastrous social policies' or 'poverty, joblessness and police brutality' (Walser, p.144) and other problems such as 'homelessness, a stagnating economy, a crushing debt, destructive racial divisions, widening economic disparities' (Heins, p.186) are obviously much more volatile issues than the musical practises of illiterate minorities. As Marjorie Heins adds, with the communist menace gone, it was tempting to find new demons 'among any group that challenges the imagined "traditional values" utopia of our mythical past: sexual nonconformists, provocative artists, pornographers...' (p.188). It was the course followed by the Washington Wives who tried to rally a majority of Americans around the defence of the family and the race presented as threatened. Subtle mix of moral concerns and political interests on a fundamentalist backdrop, the PMRC crusade was indeed a reactionary form of censorship.

### **Aftermath**

Today, April 1998, the potency of the PMRC has dramatically declined. The impetus generated by Ronald Reagan's moral struggle has begun to recede, and rap and heavy-metal music have gradually entered mainstream American tastes, making their repression harder. The PMRC is still kicking but no longer with the same conviction. Despite recent agreements with the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Parent/Teacher Association, law enforcement agencies as well as numerous churches and schools nationwide, and an aborted attempt in January 1998 at changing its name from the Parents' to the

Partners with the Music Resource Center (to tone down the emphasis on the family, I assume), its days are gone. As explained in a recent personal letter, 'due to limited funding and staff', it can no longer afford to publish its Newsletter. It has accordingly altered its goals, claiming today to serve as a resource center to 'educate and promote public awareness of the positive (my emphasis) long term effects of music on health, analytical and creative thinking and self-esteem'.

Nevertheless, the threats of censorship are far from being removed as recent speeches, not only in France, seem to prove: in the preliminaries of the 1996 presidential campaign, former Senate majority leader Bob Dole declared 'we must hold [...] the entire entertainment industry responsible for putting profit ahead of common decency', while William Bennet addressed Time Warner officials with an 'Are you folks morally disabled?' and House Speaker Newt Gingrich proposed a boycott of radio stations playing obscene music.

'...it's all just a little bit of history repeating'  
(Propellerheads).

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Endnotes:

1. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476, 484 (1957)
2. see, Hill, T. 1992: 'The Enemy Within : Censorship in Rock Music in the 1950s' in *Present Tense Rock & Roll and Culture*. ed. Anthony DeCurtis, (Duke University Press)
3. personal interview, Washington, June 1994
4. *Pittsburgh Press Co. v. Commission on Human Relations*, 413 U.S. 376, 390, 1972
5. sources: 1991 report from the People for the American Way Action Fund

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