

# Music and censorship



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## **Music and Censorship**

Music today is an important part of our lives. It is a way to express ourselves as individuals and it is a form of art that helps us define who and what we are. We use it to express our feelings, our views, and our ideas. Today, many artists are faced with censorship and is one of the controversial things that they have to deal with. Censorship's purpose is to limit or restrict certain parts of a certain subject. In music words are either changed or bleeped out so that it would be considered appropriate. But, if music is considered an art form, then why censor it? Musicians are artists and music is their way of expressing themselves. Censorship takes away everything that defines art and what makes artists 'artists'.

In music, there are different types of styles or genres. There is classical, pop, rock, country, metal, and the list would go on. But there's a certain genre that's primarily targeted by censors...and that is rap. Rap is probably one of the most popular music genres today, but is also one of the most criticized one. The reason why it is criticized so much is because it has explicit content usually having references to sex, drugs, and violence. To some people they believe that it promotes sex, drug usage, and violence acts while others believe that it's simply just self-expression. So what if it does talk about all these bad things? What happened to freedom of expression? Freedom to create and freedom of speech are vital to our society. Music is art and there is no question about that. Censors need to realize that art not only explores on happy and pleasant feelings, but also fear, anger, sadness, and truth in our everyday lives. It is essential to recognize that aside from lyrical quality, there are other things that make up music. In Victor Lombardi's Music and

Censorship, he quotes Peter Michaelsons, author of *The Aesthetics of Pornography* in saying “ The responsibility of society, if it accepts poetry as a mode of knowledge, is to remain open to what poets of all genres, including the pornographic, have to say. Otherwise all mirrors will soon reflect the same imbecilic smile.”

Censorship isn't something new; in fact, it's something that's been implemented dating back in the early 1940's. In Kathleen Anthony's article *Censorship of Popular Music: An Analysis of Lyrical Content*, she states “ In the 1950's radio networks and stations commonly used this form of censorship, altering song lyrics or removing lyrics deemed offensive for broadcast...often the songs meaning was changed considerably and without consulting the song's original lyricist for the revision”(8). In 1985, albums began being labeled with ' Parental Advisory' for explicit content. In Steve Jones's article *Ban(ned)in the USA: Popular Music and Censorship*, he states “ the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) agreed to Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) Request for labels on sound recordings warning of explicit content”(6). However, The ' Parental Advisory' labels and tracks that were edited have only made rap artists even more inspired and creative, and that's why listeners are even more drawn to it. Many listeners want to hear the original version of the music or track that is censored because it doesn't convey the truth. While some artists choose to write about love, nature, or happy thoughts, others choose to write about struggles in life. If the words in the lyrics are articulated in a manner that is offensive and makes the person uncomfortable, the solution is to simply not listen to it.

One of the most controversial music artists today is Eminem. A lot of people absolutely love him and a lot of people hate him. Using his incredible skills in writing and rhyming, he is able to rap pretty much about anything and everything, from his hardships in his early life and his dislike for the mainstream media, he became one of the most well known iconic rapper today. To artists, their work is their pride, it is what defines them and their work is their reflection of themselves. To censor their work is to deny them their ability to express themselves. In Eminem's song Till I Collapse, he talks about the importance of his music and how it affects him.

“ Music is like magic there's a certain feeling you get when you're real and you spit and people are feeling your shit. This is your moment and every single minute you spend trying to hold onto it cause you may never get it again. So while you're in it try to get as much shit as you can and when your run is over just admit when its at its end.”

Eminem feels that it important to hold on that something that is dear you (which is the feeling he experiences when he raps) and not give it up because that is what you are and the feeling you get when you have that is something that you might experience again. “ Cause sometimes you feel tired, feel weak, and when you feel weak, you feel like you wanna just give up. But you gotta search within you, you gotta find that inner strength and just pull that shit out of you and get that motivation to not give up and not be a quitter, no matter how bad you wanna just fall flat on your face and collapse.”

In his song Stimulate he talks about how his songs are attacked by censors and people who dislike his music.

“ My lyrical content is constantly under fire

No wonder why I constantly bomb back

To combat attacks with constant concepts

When lyrics are constantly took outta context

Failure to communicate with congress has

Been a problem for the longest, I guess”

Eminem is telling the listeners that his lyrics constantly attacked because of the things he says in his music and how everything taken out of context. This only causes him to retaliate by creating more songs based on the reactions he’s getting. What people need to realize is that some topics that the artists sing about are purely for entertainment and are not meant literally.

“ My music can be slightly amusing

You shouldn’t take lyrics so serious, it might be confusing

Just trying to seperate the truth from entertainment

It’s stupid, ain’t it? I get sick of trying to explain it”

According to one interview with Eminem, he was quoted as saying: “ A lot of my rhymes are just to get chuckles out of people. Anybody with half a brain is going to be able to tell when I’m joking and when I’m serious.” However,

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according to Todd Brauer's article Rap Uncensored, " This is actually quite uncommon. There are many rappers with lyrics like this and most don't bother to clarify what they say as being " just entertainment." Rap does present the hard truth about many aspects of inner-city life and our nation's hidden problems, but people, especially kids, need to learn that a large portion of the violence, drugs, sex, vulgar language, and images used in rap music are not something to admire."

Even though some many of the rap songs are offensive, it talks about inequality, poverty and politics which contain important messages that people can definitely relate to. This is why so many of the people who lash out against rap music are white people. In Robin Lakoff's book, *The Language War*, it was explained that the majority group has a tendency to overlook opposing views to keep their power. One can look at Eminem as part of a majority group; however, since he has such a strong relationship with the black culture it makes him an easy target to get bashed. In Bell Hooks interview with rapper Ice Cube she stated " The way that white people continue their power is, in part, through their control of our (the black race's) images and representations." If someone has control over who gets to say what, then those people have the power to define society.

This pretty much says the war over rap censorship is not only a battle over whether or not the First Amendment is being crossed, but it is also an attempt by those in power of language to prevent change and suppress those threatening it.

Efforts to ban songs by artists like Eminem and Ice Cube would balloon the “us versus them” mentality even more, leading to people who do not support the song’s lyrics but do support free speech (Chideya). The basis of America is to let everyone be able to voice their own opinion so I don’t see any good reason for that to be completely taken away. Warning labels, edited album versions, and age restrictions on buying labeled albums serve as a fair compromise without largely limiting people’s access to rap music. I don’t think there is a way to completely stop people from obtaining this music without violating some of our constitutional rights. Again, education about the lyrics and topics that exist in rap music seems to be a better combatant.