The Ed Sullivan Show and the (Censored) Sounds of the Sixties

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ISSUES SURROUNDING THE CENSORSHIP OF POPULAR MUSIC HAVE PROVOKED some of the most complex debates about freedoms of speech and expression in recent years. Radio broadcasting bans imposed on songs during the first and second Gulf Wars, persistent criticisms of the celebrations of/incitements to violence allegedly contained in gangsta rap, attempts to implicate musicians in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings, and restrictions of airplay time faced by performers and their music following the attack on the World Trade Center have served to focus attention very directly on the justifications for, and arguments against, censorship.

But such discussions are not new. Forty years ago, three celebrated, controversial, and linked incidents, involving some of popular music’s best-known performers, provided comparable illustrations of impositions directed at live music and the individual responses that followed. A contemporary analysis of these historical case studies within the broader context of creativity and control in popular music can offer significant clues about the artistic integrity and motivations of the performers involved, and at the same time indicate the extent of potential or actual conflict between the entertainment industry and its leading practitioners, at a time when it was widely believed that such restrictions were there to be confronted.

Although (stereo)typically associated with the actions of the state—prior restraint by the government—it is important to recognize that censorship takes many forms and springs from many sources. In fact, it is best approached not as a singular action or policy, but as any
processes “whereby restrictions are imposed upon the collection, dissemination and exchange of information, opinions, and ideas” (O’Higgins 11). In the case of popular music, these restrictions may flow from decisions taken by record companies, retailers, radio and television, and campaigns organized by religious bodies, pressure groups, and the press, and they may be targeted at its production, distribution, performance, or consumption. It thus has much in common with other branches of the creative and performing arts. “Though its trials are less monitored and recorded, music is no less subject to censorship than other forms of artistic expression and the methods are much the same” (Petley 11). The examples of censorship discussed below demonstrate decisions made by television that were targeted at performance.

For three decades, the most important and influential TV entertainment show in the US was The Ed Sullivan Show. Broadcast nationally on Sunday evenings by CBS, the variety series ran from June 20, 1948 to June 6, 1971; significantly, it included and coincided with the first two decades of rock’n’roll’s “unruly history” (Palmer 11, Rock & Roll). With regular weekly audiences of around forty million (rising to seventy-four million for the Beatles’ first appearance in February 1964) an appearance on the show was generally recognized as a critical factor in establishing and maintaining a successful musical presence.

As a former newspaper gossip columnist and vaudeville performer, Sullivan was well versed in the practices of show business, and the longevity of the show may be attributed to his determination to uphold two particular policies: to affirm and emphasize his own authority, and to adhere to a successful formula—“Open big. Keep it clean. Always have something for the kids” (Bowles 28). In fact, the network’s recognition of Sullivan’s importance was made explicit when the show, which had originally been called Toast Of The Town in 1948, was renamed The Ed Sullivan Show in 1955. (A further indication was the renaming of the Broadway studio on West 53rd Street from which the show was broadcast as the Ed Sullivan Theater in 1967.)

In the 1960s, three of the most celebrated composer/performers of the decade, who were booked to appear on the show on separate occasions, faced objections to the lyrical content of particular songs, to which they responded in different ways. On May 12, 1963, Bob Dylan was instructed to substitute another song in place of “Talkin’ John
Birch Society Blues”; he refused and walked out. On January 15, 1967, the Rolling Stones were told to change the lyrics of “Let’s Spend The Night Together”; they agreed. On September 17, 1967, the Doors were asked to amend the lyrics of “Light My Fire”; they ignored the request and performed the song unchanged.

The three examples are instructive in a number of ways. They illustrate the perennial concern of the (would-be) censor of popular culture with the themes of sex, drugs, and politics. They provide a refutation of the received wisdom that successful challenges to censorship became commonplace through the decade. They present convincing evidence in favor of the assertion that “the American tradition that sanctifies abstract principles of free expression is often at war with its cultural biases in favour of repression” (D’Entremont 34). And their examination may, in a small way, help to counter the oversight noted by Martin Cloonan: “[B]ooks on pop usually only fleetingly mention censorship and books on censorship rarely mention pop” (1).

Bob Dylan “Talkin’ John Birch Society Blues”

Dylan had first been asked to audition for The Ed Sullivan Show at the time of the release of his first album Bob Dylan in March 1962; however, no invitation to appear had followed. Since then, his reputation as a singer-songwriter of great originality had spread rapidly. Robert Shelton, for example, reported that “his vulnerability, his identification with his material, suggested a young Sinatra . . . [but] . . . Dylan broke all past songwriting and performing rules—except those of having something to say and saying it well” (164–65). By April 1963, conscious of his growing prestige and alerted to the imminent release of his second album The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan, CBS executives contacted him again, and this time he was asked to appear. Dylan’s choice for the one song he was to be allowed to perform was “Talkin’ John Birch Society Blues,” a track he had written the previous year and recorded during the Freewheelin’ sessions. The song, which Dylan had frequently performed at appearances in and around New York before the show, satirized the extreme right-wing, anti-Communist organization, comparing its policies to those of Hitler.

Anthony Scaduto reports that “when he sang it for Sullivan and Bob Precht, producer of the show, they were delighted” (Bob Dylan, 138).
However, just hours before transmission, Dylan was told by CBS network editor Stowe Phelps that he could not sing it as the lyrics might be considered libellous. Asked to perform another song in its place, Dylan refused and left the studio; he was never to appear on the show. It was later alleged that it was Bob Precht who had personally insisted on the song’s removal (Hopkins and Sugerman 139). Sullivan himself claimed no role in the decision, arguing:

We fought for the song . . . I said I couldn’t understand why they [the John Birch Society] were being given such protection. But the network turned us down. They told us they understood and sympathized . . . but insisted they had previously handled the Birch Society on network news programmes, and couldn’t take the subject into entertainment. (Scaduto, Bob Dylan 140)

Two other developments followed from CBS’s decision. Columbia Records insisted that the track be deleted from the *Freewheelin’* album. It and three other songs—“Rocks And Gravel,” “Rambling Gambling Willie,” and “Let Me Die In My Footsteps”—were subsequently replaced by “Masters Of War,” “Girl From The North Country,” “Talkin’ World War III Blues,” and “Bob Dylan’s Dream,” when the album was released in May 1963.

Secondly, Dylan’s status increased significantly as a result of his refusal to obey CBS’s demands:

Ironically, the uproar about this blatant act of censorship did Dylan considerably more good, by portraying him as a rebel and counterculture hero, than if he had appeared on the show and performed . . . to an uncaring national TV audience. (Heylin 71)

The Rolling Stones “Let’s Spend The Night Together”

The Rolling Stones’ performance in January 1967 on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was in fact the fifth time they had been featured in the show. Their first appearance, on October 25, 1964, precipitated a considerable outburst of audience hostility to the group’s appearance and demeanor, so that Sullivan, who had appeared initially pleased with their two songs, announced: “I promise you they’ll never be back on the show. It took me seventeen years to build up this show, and I’m not
going to have it destroyed in a matter of weeks” (Andersen 98). However, as their commercial popularity and chart presence increased, they did in fact subsequently reappear on several occasions—in May 1965, August 1966, and September 1966.

By the time of their fifth appearance, on January 10, 1967, the group was clearly one of the world’s most popular, if controversial, groups. They had toured the US five times, and achieved four number one singles and two number one albums in that country.

The group intended to use the TV appearance to promote its new single “Let’s Spend The Night Together.” Released just a few days before the show, it had already been removed from the playlists of several US radio stations or else played with the offending word “night” bleeped out. At the afternoon rehearsal, the group was told by Sullivan that he would not permit such a blatantly sexual song to be sung to a family audience: “Either the song goes . . . or you go” he announced (Sandford 97).

The group’s response was to agree to alter the contentious section of the lyrics, so that “let’s spend the night together” became “let’s spend some time together,” and the song was performed accordingly. For some time afterwards, Mick Jagger attempted to deny his actions, claiming, despite the televised evidence, that he had not simply acquiesced to Sullivan’s demands: “I never said ‘time,’ I said ‘let’s spend some mmmm together, let’s spend some mmmm together,’” he was still insisting in 1968 (Appleford 244).

Later, Bill Wyman admitted that “the value of that programme was too great to jeopardize for the promotion of the single. And it was the only reason we’d flown to New York. So we compromised” (398). The same commercial rationale was used by Jagger to justify the group’s appearance one week later on the UK’s leading TV variety show *Sunday Night At The London Palladium*. On this occasion the media and public outcry was not over the lyrics of the song—which they performed unchanged—but over the group’s refusal to appear on the traditional revolving stage at the close of the show. Jagger commented “the only reason we did the show at the Palladium was because it was a good national plug” (Bonanno 62). The single (released as a double A-side with “Ruby Tuesday”) reached number 1 in the US and number 3 in the UK charts. The Rolling Stones made their sixth and final appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in October 1969.
The Doors “Light My Fire”

During 1967, much of the creative focus of popular music shifted from Britain and New York to California (Gillett 336). But while several groups enjoyed considerable album sales, very few had hit singles. One of those that did was the Doors, a Los Angeles group that quickly became noted for its “psychosexual theatricality and . . . aesthetic of direct audience confrontation” (Palmer, Rock & Roll 183). The group’s first single “Break On Through” had been a minor hit in the United States at the start of the year; its second “Light My Fire” topped the singles charts for three weeks after its release in April. Both songs were taken from the group’s debut album The Doors, released in January 1967. In June of the same year, the group had been excluded from the line-up at the Monterey Pop Festival because, according to drummer John Densmore, “[T]hey were afraid of us. We didn’t represent the attitude of the festival: peace and love and flower power. We represented the shadow side . . . the demon Doors” (114–15).

Nonetheless, CBS was very keen to book the group for The Ed Sullivan Show, recognizing that its combination of chart success and West Coast creativity might attract a large audience. Joan Didion had written:

The Doors are different, the Doors interest me. They have nothing in common with the gentle Beatles. Their music insists that love is sex and sex is death and therein lies salvation. The Doors are the Norman Mailers of the Top 40. (385)

Before rehearsals, the group was visited in its dressing room by producer Bob Precht (also Ed Sullivan’s son-in-law), who insisted to them that the line “girl, we couldn’t get much higher” could not be permitted because of its apparent reference to drug-taking. The group promised to substitute alternate words and, in fact, did so, for the rehearsal. However, during the live transmission of the show itself, they reverted to the original lyrics, singing the offending line with even more emphasis than usual. Precht was reportedly furious, shouting at the television monitor “You can’t do that! You guys are dead on this show! You’ll never do this show again!” (Hopkins and Sugerman 139–40).

In choosing to distance themselves from the negotiated compromise reached by the Rolling Stones four months earlier, the Doors were able
to avoid any accusations of surrender, and instead utilized the incident to confirm the confrontational nature of their music. Jim Morrison explained: “We’re interested in everything about revolt, disorder, and all activity that appears to have no meaning” (Palmer, *All You Need* 254). And John Densmore later commented: “We agreed that we needed more exposure . . . we’d done *Ed Sullivan* because the Beatles, the Stones, and Elvis had been on” (156).

The Doors never appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* again. Numerous concerts by the group were cancelled by promoters or halted by police during 1967, 1968, and 1969 because of actual or feared crowd disorder. Morrison was arrested on several occasions for offenses ranging from battery and drunk driving to lewd and obscene performance. In August 1970, he appeared in Dade County Court, Florida, following an alleged incident during a concert at Miami’s Dinner Key Auditorium in front of an audience of 13,000:

Morrison, who had been known for his use of obscenities, went too far . . . he made the ultimate faux pas by exposing his penis on stage. Six warrants for his arrest were filed. One of the charges was a felony for “lewd and lascivious behavior in public by exposing his private parts and by simulating masturbation and oral copulation.” (Martin and Segrave 123)

Found guilty, fined $500 for profanity, and sentenced to six months in jail for indecent exposure, Morrison was freed on a $50,000 bond and was awaiting the result of his appeal when he died in Paris on July 3, 1971 from an apparent heart attack.

**Contexts and Consequences**

The three examples discussed above are by no means the only examples of musical censorship in the 1960s. What makes them significant is that (a) the acts of censorship were quite overt—on national television, in prime time viewing hours, on the most popular entertainment show in the US; and (b) their common location (*The Ed Sullivan Show*) allows for direct comparison and evaluation in a way which many other individual restrictions do not.

It has been noted that throughout its history “rock’n’roll has . . . been described as ‘dangerous’ . . . to racists, demagogues and the self-appointed moral guardians of the *status quo*” (Palmer, *Rock & Roll* 11).
But such generalized descriptions do not help us to distinguish between “the twin axes of offence and causality” (Cloonan 289) employed by the proponents of censorship; nor do they illuminate the specific grounds on which censorship is introduced—sexual content, swearing, blasphemy, drug references, political content, and violence; nor do they sit easily with the frankly conservative or sentimental ideology of much of the last five decades’ popular music.

As suggested earlier, censorship needs to be understood as a process in which two critical factors are related. First, it is imperative to explore the contexts in which censorship occurs—the general context in which the imposition of restrictions is seen as permissible, and the particular context surrounding the individual event. Secondly, it is equally important to investigate the consequences of such censorship—for the censors and for the censored.

Since its development in the early 1950s, the capacity of rock’n’roll to shock has been well recorded:

The first blasts of the rock’n’roll era blew away the depression and tedium of the post-Second World War years . . . it was attacked by priests, journalists and local politicians, who saw the style as both obscene and liable to incite juvenile delinquency . . . [and] . . . because it threatened to challenge sexual and racial taboos. (Denselow 1)

Significantly, however, attacks were not confined to sources outside the entertainment industry, but were presented just as vociferously from within, by those who may have feared for their own careers.

Frank Sinatra: Rock’n’roll smells phony and false. It is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons. By means of its almost imbecilic reiteration, and sly, lewd, in plain fact, dirty lyrics . . . it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth. (Hill 51)

Yet such hostility had to be tempered with a recognition of the music’s huge business potential. Rather than turn its back on the profits to be made from the emergent teenage market in the US and elsewhere, the popular music industry’s response was to seek to control and restrict its unpredictability. This strategy followed several paths. One was to promote as replacements for the perceived disorderliness of performers like Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Larry Williams, and Gene Vincent, a cohort of neat, clean-cut, mainly white,
“teen idols” whose music and appearance could be relied on to reinforce the traditional conventions of the pop star—Bobby Vee, Fabian, Bobby Rydell, Ricky Nelson, Frankie Avalon, etc.

A second, related tactic was to redefine rock’n’roll so that it came to exist not as an alternative to, but as part of show business. The clearest individual example of this, of course, was the reinvention of Elvis Presley as family entertainer and movie star after his release from the US Army in 1960 when, ironically, the vehicle he chose through which to reintroduce himself to the public was a guest appearance on ABC’s *The Frank Sinatra Show* in March 1960. At the same time, television began to produce a series of competing shows in which the new “pop stars” routinely presented a more acceptable face of rock’n’roll. Among the most important of these were ABC’s *American Bandstand*, hosted by Dick Clark that “sold America the well dressed, well behaved side of rock music” (Friedlander 71), and *The Steve Allen Show* on NBC and *The Ed Sullivan Show* on CBS, which included rock’n’roll within their general variety formats.

Thus established, the producers of these shows were adamant that musical performances which might interfere with the successful television patterns they had evolved should be excluded. In Sullivan’s case, his public declaration in May 1956 that he would not have Elvis Presley on his show at any price—“he is not my cup of tea” (Guralnick 301), his insistence when Presley did appear on his show in September 1956 that the cameras should show him only from the waist up because of his pelvic gyrations (Hopkins 110), and his absolute refusal to book Jerry Lee Lewis in 1957, saying that after Presley, he didn’t want “any more of that crap” (Martin and Segrave 75) provided early indications of the way in which the show was to be organized through the 1960s. Whether the restrictions practiced on *The Ed Sullivan Show* took the form of exclusion (Jerry Lee Lewis) or interference (Elvis Presley), it quickly became clear that in order to appear on the show, popular musicians were expected to abide by certain standards and to adapt both the style and content of their performance accordingly.

Equally, however, it has to be recognized that Sullivan was not indifferent to the commercial advantages that such performers brought to his show and, to secure those advantages, was certainly willing to offer personal and positive endorsements in a manner that conflicted with some of his previous statements. For example, on the occasion of
Presley’s third, and final, appearance on the show in January 1957, he proclaimed:

I wanted to say to Elvis Presley and the country that this is a real decent, fine boy, and wherever you go, Elvis . . . we want to say that we’ve never had a pleasanter experience on our show with a big name than we’ve had with you. So now let’s have a tremendous hand for a very nice person. (Guralnick 379)

For Sullivan, who was himself in his sixties, decisions about how to accommodate the music of the 1950s and 1960s within the general entertainment format of a show that dated back to the 1940s presented major problems. “The bedrock of the show’s support was people in the middle and older age groups, but they alone could not carry the show in the ratings. To attract younger viewers meant booking more rock’n’roll artists, a move that inevitably alienated many of the older regulars” (Bowles 195).

It is against this general background that the particular circumstances of Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and the Doors’ appearances need to be situated. Dylan’s appearance came at a time when he—and other performers—were becoming increasingly involved in the Civil Rights movement, and in their opposition to racist or fascist organizations such as the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. In the previous twelve months, the Cuban missile crisis had brought the United States and the USSR to the brink of a nuclear confrontation and hardened many Americans’ fears and suspicions of Communism; Martin Luther King had been jailed for leading an illegal march in Georgia; the enrollment of James Meredith as the first black student at the University of Mississippi had led to prolonged rioting and mass arrests in Jackson; more than a thousand marchers (including Martin Luther King) had been arrested during a Civil Rights march in Alabama; and Governor George Wallace had vowed to defy a federal court order to open his state’s universities to black students. The early 1960s have been described as “a time when American protest was becoming a mass movement, no longer some small splinter party of Leftist ideologues meeting in an uncrowded telephone booth” (Shelton 137) and Dylan was quick to publicly associate himself with that protest through the subjects he explored in his songs:

I don’t have to be anybody like those guys up on Broadway . . . there’s other things in the world besides love and sex that are
important too. People shouldn’t turn their backs on them just because they ain’t pretty to look at. How is the world ever gonna get any better if we’re afraid to look at these things? (Heylin 54)

Within a few months of making this announcement, Dylan was booked for The Ed Sullivan Show, promising friends “Well, they won’t tell me what to sing” (Heylin 71).

The Rolling Stones had their first major US hit—“Time Is On My Side”—at the beginning of 1965. Deliberately choreographed by manager Andrew Loog Oldham to be a radical alternative to the Beatles—“Shock the hell out of everyone, especially the parents” (Scaduto, Mick Jagger 96)—the group continued to pursue in the United States the same strategy that had brought them public notoriety and generated enormous media attention in the UK one year earlier. Their single “Satisfaction” had been banned by several US radio stations in 1965 and, in fact, during the group’s appearance on Sullivan’s show in August 1966, the line “tryin’ to make some girl” had been bleeped over without their knowledge during the live transmission (Norman 135). In June 1966, fourteen of New York’s leading hotels refused to accept the group as they arrived for their fifth US tour. Concerts in Montreal, Ontario, and Massachusetts were abandoned because of audience riots. In September 1966, the single “Have You Seen Your Mother Baby, Standing In The Shadow” was released in the United States in a picture sleeve “that struck new horror into conservative hearts” (Norman 163). Photographed by Jerry Schatzberg on the streets of Manhattan, the members of the group were dressed in drag, depicted as aging transvestites with new names—Sara (Mick Jagger), Flossie (Brian Jones), Penelope (Bill Wyman), Millicent (Charlie Watts), and Milly (Keith Richards). Another photo session in November featured Brian Jones in Nazi SS uniform and jackboots, crushing a doll under his foot. Bill Wyman has commented that by the time of their engagement to promote “Let’s Spend The Night Together” on The Ed Sullivan Show, “[T]he spring of 1967 found us cast as the world’s baddest band . . . everywhere we turned and everything we touched became controversial” (414).

Unlike the Rolling Stones, the Doors were relative newcomers to the structures and cultures of the popular music industry, having released just two singles and one album before their slot on The Ed Sullivan
Much of the media and audience scrutiny was directed at the group’s lead vocalist Jim Morrison.

Fronted by former UCLA film student and self-styled poet Jim Morrison, the Doors opposed the “peace, love and flowers” strain of sixties solipsism with darkly droning tales of death and transcendence, murky Freudian freak-outs, and ecstatic derangement of the senses as practiced by the late-nineteenth century French poet Rimbaud. (Palmer, *Rock & Roll* 183)

The group had been fired from its residency at Los Angeles’ Whiskey A Go Go in July 1966 by owner Phil Tanzini after singing the lines “Father, I want to kill you; Mother, I want to fuck you” in their performance of “The End” (Hopkins and Sugerman 94–98). Morrison and the other members of the Doors—Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek, and John Densmore—made no secret of their regular use of marijuana, LSD, and alcohol, often appearing on stage at the Whiskey A Go Go and the nearby London Fog under their influence. In order not to discourage radio airplay, their first single “Break On Through” had been edited by the group’s record label (Elektra) so that the line “Everybody loves my baby, she gets high, she gets high, she gets high” became, bizarrely, “Everybody loves my baby, she get, she get, she get” (Hopkins and Sugerman 103).

Often glibly referred to as “the summer of love,” 1967 has been singled out for particular attention by Friedlander in his analysis of the evolution of rock’n’roll lyrics:

Nineteen sixty-seven was a watershed year. Lyrics covering the Vietnam War, the search for a new humanistic morality, and the fight for minority rights emerged in the day’s rock/pop music . . . Music critical of contemporary society became available nationwide. (285–86)

Some of the music of the 1960s was, unequivocally, about drug use—the Rolling Stones’ “Mother’s Little Helper,” Canned Heat’s “Amphetamine Annie,” Steppenwolf’s “The Pusher,” the Velvet Underground’s “Heroin,” etc. But such was the state of public uncertainty that entirely innocuous titles such as “Puff The Magic Dragon” and “Up, Up And Away” were accused of being pro-drug compositions, as was almost any recent or current song which included the word “high” in its lyrics. It was in this climate, in the late
summer of 1967, that the Doors were to make their appearance on
*The Ed Sullivan Show*, to perform their million-selling, chart-topping
single.

These three very public acts of corporate intervention had very public
consequences, not the least of which was to remind popular musicians
that despite the revolutionary qualities typically attributed to the deca-
de, the 1960s remained a period in which power rested very firmly with
the major institutions in the broadcasting industry. The impositions
visited on those appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* need to be seen
therefore not as isolated incidents, but rather as significant examples of
the way in which power was generally, and successfully, articulated
within that industry. For Sullivan in particular, his actions demonstrat-
ed and confirmed his ability to undermine the autonomy of popular
musicians by threatening to deny them the national exposure they
sought. For the performers themselves, such experiences were clear
reminders that strategies had to be devised in order to accommodate the
demands of those who sat as censors. These strategies included acqui-
escence, withdrawal, or resistance, as discussed above. Increasingly they
also included self-censorship, through which many songwriters, antici-
pating problems, would compromise by amending potentially contro-
versial lyrics in advance; and/or concealment, where the “real meaning”
of a song could be obscured by “euphemism and thinly veiled analogy”
(Street 115). A pertinent example of both is revealed in the composition
of Lennon-McCartney’s “Day Tripper” for the Beatles.

Paul McCartney: We were putting in references that we knew our
friends would get, but the Great British Public might not. So “she’s
a big teaser” was “she’s a prick teaser.” The mums and dads didn’t
get it but the kids did. “Day Tripper” was about tripping. Acid was
coming in on the scene, and often we’d do these songs . . . I re-
member with the prick teasers we thought, that’d be fun to put in.
(Miles 209)

The issue of creativity and control in the lyrics of popular music has
a long history. The pre-war songwriting manual “How To Write And
Sell A Hit Song” warned that:

Direct allusions to love-making . . . must be avoided. Love in pop-
ular songs is a beautiful and delicate emotion and marriage is a
noble institution. Profanity should never be used in a popular
song. Direct references to drinking, and songs that have to do with
labor and national and political propaganda are also prohibited on the air. (Silver and Bruce 19)

In September 1970—four weeks after Morrison’s trial—Vice President Spiro T. Agnew chose to emphasize the theme of drug lyrics in rock music, when, in a press release, he warned against “the blatant drug-culture propaganda” he saw as inherent in songs like “With A Little Help From My Friends,” “White Rabbit,” “The Acid Queen” and “Eight Miles High,” and in movies such as “Easy Rider.” In October of that year, Agnew and President Nixon hosted a drug abuse conference at the White House attended by more than seventy radio broadcasters who were asked to cooperate by screening out rock’n’roll lyrics that promoted drugs. At the same time, the Federal Communications Commission, under its arch-Republican chairman Dean Burch, launched an initiative against “obscene or druggy song lyrics” (Chapple and Garofalo 115), which threatened radio stations with the removal of their licenses if they continued to play such songs.

And in the 1980s, the political establishment returned to the ground covered by the Republican administration of the early 1970s. Sponsored by Tipper Gore, wife of the future Democrat Vice President Al Gore, the Parents Music Resource Center accused the record industry of making records about sex, violence, and the glorification of drugs and alcohol freely available to children. Its demands, which included “a more detailed ratings system, lyrics to be printed on record sleeves, the contracts of those who engaged in violent or explicitly sexual behavior on stage to be reassessed, [and] broadcasters to be pressured not to air controversial songs or videos” (Denselow 266) led to the industry adopting a policy of voluntary labeling, whereby any record whose lyrics were deemed to contain explicit references to sex, violence, or drugs should contain a warning sticker proclaiming “Explicit Lyrics—Parental Advisory.”

Conclusion

Ironically, one consequence of the censorship suffered by all three performers was that their positions were unequivocally enhanced. Dylan’s refusal to comply with Sullivan’s request confirmed his status within the folk/protest audience as a singer–songwriter of considerable integrity. The Rolling Stones’ agreement to alter their lyrics gave them
the national television exposure they craved and their fifth US chart-
topping single. The Doors’ dismissive response helped to cement their
prestige within the counter-culture, who praised the group’s decision
to distance itself from any sort of negotiation with the establishment.
Sullivan also was able to walk away with his reputation as a guardian of
public decency and champion of “middle America” unblemished: “he
knew what the public wanted to see and he brought it to them . . . he
wanted only to please” (Bowles 16–17).

Notwithstanding the significance of their actions for their sub-
sequent career trajectories, the experiences of Bob Dylan, the Rolling
Stones, and the Doors on The Ed Sullivan Show remain illustrations of
tensions which have existed throughout the development of popular
music. Moreover, such tensions are not surprising. In particular, it has
long been recognized that the lyrics of rock songs do create complex
and conflicting expectations among those who hear them, which pull
the performer in different directions: “[T]he rock star must meet new
and larger contingencies which result from the size, nature and values
of the audience, as well as the values and rules of the dominant cor-
porate order of American society” (Coffman 272).

In this respect there are clear continuities between the circumstances
surrounding these television case studies of the 1960s, and the pressure
group activity of the 1980s and beyond. The contested subjects are the
same—sex, politics, and drugs/alcohol; and the adversaries are the
same—a counter-cultural or subcultural audience against the represen-
tatives of the country’s dominant corporate order.

The 1960s are frequently celebrated as an era in which the themes
and topics of rock’n’roll, the activities of its leading practitioners, and
the ambitions of its audiences played a central part in fighting for and
winning substantial social and cultural liberties:

They rejected the hypocritical compromises, the puritanical indi-
rection and the exclusiveness of many of the older ballads . . . the
egocentric monogamous lyrics, the bourgeois orchestrations . . .
They desired greater sexual freedom . . . it was part of a fervent
attempt to regenerate man. Youthful energies flowed out toward
social reconstruction or into the . . . expansion of the individual
psyche through hallucinogens. (Mooney 24)

Much of that remains admirable and true. What this discussion sug-
gests, however, is that those victories may not have been so emphatic,
and the narratives may not have been so straightforward, as we choose to remember; and that then, as now, the popular musician—even if distinguished by the sort of celebrity and success considered here—has much to do in marshalling the regenerative spirit of rock’n’roll against the institutionalized authority of the censor.

Works Cited


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