



# MAINSTREAM METAL, PARENTAL ADVISORIES, AND CENSORSHIP

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How was Heavy Metal involved in the 1980s controversy surrounding the creation of parental advisories for “offensive” music?

### OVERVIEW

In the early 1980s, Heavy Metal, which had begun as a somewhat marginal musical genre, began to enjoy mainstream success with the popularity of such bands as Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, Kiss, and Twisted Sister. Around the same time, MTV was born, offering a new venue for popular music and a new way for it to enter American households on a grand scale. With their high energy and visual splash, Metal bands became a mainstay of the channel, bringing the music of these groups considerable attention not only from fans, but from parent groups who deemed much of it “offensive” and sought ways to shield their children from it.

At the height of Heavy Metal’s mainstream success the wife of then-Senator Al Gore, Tipper Gore, established the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) along with the wives of several other prominent politicians. The PMRC advocated for the creation of a labeling system that would warn parents of explicit content on recordings. After a contentious hearing in the United States Senate, the record industry agreed voluntarily to adopt a labeling system that would advise parents about recordings containing content that was explicitly sexual, referenced drug or alcohol use, or contained graphic language. While many stores continued to carry recordings bearing these labels, some merchants—most notably Walmart—refused to carry recordings with advisory labels, a policy that Walmart continues today.

In this lesson, students will investigate the connection between the popularity of Heavy Metal and the emergence of the parental advisory system. They will consider who should have the power to declare a song “offensive” and whether or not access to such material should be regulated. They will further debate the merits of the labeling system, which is still in place, and consider whether or not labeling certain recordings should be considered censorship.



## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The involvement of Heavy Metal in the music regulation controversy of the 1980s
- The involvement of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the creation of a system of parental advisory labels for “explicit” or “offensive” music.

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Debate the relative merits of opposing arguments
- Evaluate different interpretations of songs and other forms of artistic expression
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the parental advisory system and whether or not it should be considered a form of censorship
- Common Core: Students will cite evidence from documents, pictures, and videos to develop an argument for or against a specific position (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Writing 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2; CCSS Speaking and Listening 4)
- Common Core: Students will think critically about how language functions in different contexts, exploring the theme of censorship (CCSS Language 3; CCSS Language 6)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

#### 1. Display the Parental Advisory Label on the board:



#### 2. Ask students if they recognize the parental advisory label and if they know what it signifies. (Note to instructor: The current Parental Advisory Label was introduced in the 1990s by the Recording Industry Association of America, which began issuing similar warning labels about music content in 1985.) Briefly discuss:

- Do your parents or guardians pay attention to these advisories?
- How much of an influence has this advisory had on your ability to access music?
- Does labeling music in this manner and regulating who has the ability to purchase it amount to censorship? Why or why not?

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Read the following quote aloud: “The Parents’ Music Resource Center [PMRC], a group led by a number of well-placed Washington spouses, contends that rock music has become offensively sexually explicit and that record companies must take steps to both caution consumers—through album warning labels—and reduce the frequency of such ‘offensive’ music” (“Zappa, Snider Take on Lyric Critics,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 1985).
2. Display the “Filthy Fifteen,” a list of popular songs the PMRC found particularly unsuitable for young listeners. Inform students that the highlighted songs are from Heavy Metal groups.

## Ask students:

- How many of these songs are from Heavy Metal groups?
  - Based on what you know about Heavy Metal, why do you think such a high percentage of the songs on the list fall into this category?
  - What conclusions can you draw about how some parents felt about their children listening to Heavy Metal from this chart? What does the chart indicate about the perception of Heavy Metal music in the mid-1980s?
  - Could you conclude that the efforts of groups such as the PMRC to label and limit access to music was directed largely at Heavy Metal? Why or why not?
3. Play the video of Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It” (1985) and distribute lyrics to the song. Briefly discuss:
    - What image do the performers in the video present?
    - What is the overall message of the song and the video?
    - Why do you think this song was included on the list of the “Filthy Fifteen?” What about it might be considered “offensive?” Why might parents
  4. Explain to students that in 1985, a committee of the United States Senate held a hearing on the issue of labeling “offensive” music, at which members of the PMRC and many others testified. Play students the clip of part of the testimony of Twisted Sister’s Dee Snider and discuss:
    - How does the way Snider presents himself at the hearings differ from his appearance in the video?
    - How does Snider describe himself?
    - Do you agree that his video of “We’re Not Gonna Take It” is consistent with the values he describes? Why or why not?
    - What do you think Dee Snider meant by “lyrical interpretation and judgment”? Is it possible for one person to interpret the lyrics of a song one way, while another might argue that they mean something very different? (Note: the instructor may wish to inform students that later in his testimony, Snider argues that while the PMRC claimed his group’s song “Under the Blade” made references to sexual activities, as the composer of the song he intended it as a song about someone’s experience having painful surgery.)
    - How would you define “offensive”? Who gets to decide what is “offensive” in music or art?
    - Is there anything in the music that you listen to that might be considered “offensive”? By whom? Why?
    - Who do you think should be responsible for deciding what music young people listen to? Their parents? The government? The recording industry? Or should they be able to decide for themselves?
  5. Divide students into pairs. Explain that each pair will be responsible for preparing an opening statement for a debate on Heavy Metal and the regulation of popular music. Students will be given a series of documents to help them prepare their arguments.
  6. Assign half of the groups to be in favor of the parental advisory system, and half

not want their children to listen to or watch the video of this song?

### PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

the groups to be opposed. Explain that they will use the handouts to draft a two-paragraph statement regarding their position on whether or not parental advisory labels should be placed on musical recordings.

7. Distribute the Document Organizer, Statement Template, and Document Set. Allow students adequate time to read through the documents, take notes on the Document Organizer, and write their opening statements.
8. After each group has prepared its two-paragraph statement, create groups of four students, each consisting of one pair that supports the labeling system and one pair that opposes it.
9. Ask each pair to read its opening statement to the second pair in its group. Reverse the procedure, with the second pair reading its opening statement.
10. Ask each pair to respond to the opposing pair's arguments. Allow groups sufficient time to discuss/debate the relative merits of each position.

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Reconvene the class as a whole, and discuss:

- Overall, which side do you think presented the stronger arguments?
- What was the most compelling evidence in support of each position?
- In her statement, Tipper Gore argued that labeling is not censorship. Do you agree or disagree? What evidence can you offer to support your position? (Note: You may wish to ask students to consider Walmart's policy of refusing to carry CDs marked with a parental advisory.)
- What do you think the labeling system achieves? Do you think an alternate system might be appropriate? Why or why not? What might such a system look like?
- If Heavy Metal had not achieved mainstream success, do you think there would have been a call for censorship? Why might a particular style of music's popularity draw political concern or debate?

### WRITING PROMPT:

Ask students to expand their opening statement into a five-paragraph essay in which they make a more complete case for their position. They should be sure to use specific examples from the documents and their knowledge of popular music to support their arguments.

## EXTENSIONS:

1. Depending on the maturity level of students, you may wish to explore some of the other songs included on the list of the “Filthy Fifteen” and their subject matter.
2. Students may also further explore the testimony at the 1985 Senate Hearings (available online). Please note that this testimony includes somewhat more detailed discussion of the specific material the PMRC found “offensive,” and is not suitable for all students.
3. With your guidance, have students explore multiple interpretations of the Motorhead song “Ace of Spades” (1980):
  - Distribute the lyrics to the song. Ask students to read the lyrics in pairs and discuss the meaning of the song.
  - Discuss the concept of lyrical interpretation, and ask students if there might be more than one possible meaning of the song.
  - Have students write an interpretation of the song in their own words.
4. The PMRC’s efforts are not the first of this kind in the United States; many works of art, music, and literature have been labeled inappropriate or potentially corrupting by critics. Between 2000 and 2009, for example, there were efforts ban the Harry Potter series because critics thought that the witch and wizard characters promoted the occult. In other cases, the work of Dr. Seuss was subjected to disfavor, particularly because of its underlying political themes.

Have students research efforts to censor a book by Dr. Suess or J. K. Rowling, or, alternatively, a work of their own choosing (this could be a book, film, music, or piece of visual art--ideally one with which they are already familiar or can obtain from the school library. This list of banned books from the American Library Association may be a good starting point). Have students identify a time when someone recommended censoring or banning their chosen work, and ask them to write a short letter to the editor of a local newspaper about the issue. Students should clearly explain what the effects of banning the work would be, and make a strong argument for or against the censorship.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

#### *College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects*

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12*

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Language 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## **RESOURCES**

### **VIDEO RESOURCES**

- Black Sabbath – The Band Name (1973)
- Dee Snider – PMRC Senate Hearings (1985)
- Twisted Sister – We're Not Gonna Take It (1984)

### **HANDOUTS**

- Handout 1: Lyrics for “We're Not Gonna Take It”
- Handout 2: Document Set
- Handout 3: Document Organizer
- Handout 4: Statement Template