

# **Heavy Metal under Scrutiny: The Controversial Battle for the Protection of America's Youth**

Master's Thesis  
in North American Studies  
Leiden University



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## Contents

Introduction.....	2
Heavy Metal: Origins, Imagery and Values .....	6
The 1985 PMRC Senate Hearing & Aftermath.....	20
Heavy Metal on Trial: The Cases of Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest.....	41
Conclusion .....	53
Bibliography .....	57

## Introduction

During the 1980s, following the steady rise of neo-conservatism, several political and religious groups were formed to fight for what they deemed the loss of true American values. Among their targets was a music genre called heavy metal. Ever since its emergence, the genre met with serious opposition. Accused of promoting violence, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and distorted images of sex, heavy metal music was considered a threat to the well-being of America's youth. These accusations were major arguments in the 1980s religious conservatives' crusade to establish family values. Trying to raise parents' awareness of the music's ostensible catastrophic effects on adolescents, these conservatives campaigned to restrain or eliminate heavy metal music. In 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) was formed acting as a representative group of concerned parents with the aim to take action against the growing popularity of what they called "porn rock". In their "Filthy Fifteen" list the PMRC publicly condemned several artists, the majority of whom belonged to the genre of heavy metal, for having allegedly harmful content in their songs' lyrics. The tactics employed by the PMRC in the Senate Hearing of September 19, 1985, created an agenda that was later used in court cases against heavy metal artists. Here I wish to argue that using religious rhetoric and instilling fear among parents, conservative groups managed to associate heavy metal music with Satanism and the corruption of American youth, initiating a witch hunt of the genre's musicians that aimed to silence them through censorship.

The main purpose of this study will be the examination of the reasons conservative groups and the PMRC went after heavy metal and the arguments they used to support their cases. The leading primary source that will accompany this examination will be the 1985 Senate Hearing transcript often referred to as the 'Labeling Hearing'. The interest groups' methods of employing religious rhetoric and scare tactics as part of their convictions will also be thoroughly investigated in order to comprehend how they managed to present heavy metal as a peril for children and adolescents, thus encouraging further prosecution of the genre. Articles published at *Time Magazine*, *People*, *The New York Times* and *L.A. Times* as well as television reports will assist me in conceptualizing the form of the debate of that era. Roger Walmuth reported in 1985: "To a growing number of worried parents and concerned

citizens, rock 'n' roll is turning too often to sex, Satanism, drugs and violence for its major themes, and corrupting the values and views of unwary young people” (“Parents Vs. Rock”).

Sociological researches and historical accounts on heavy metal will be utilized in order to examine and interpret the elements of the genre and the controversy around it. Deena Weinstein’s study on heavy metal will be the leading source for delving into heavy metal music’s history and analyzing its themes. The works of Lisa McGirr and James A. Morone will assist me in understanding the background of religious conservatives and the beliefs they held, enabling me to determine what caused the clash between these conservatives and heavy metal culture. McGirr describes that normative conservatives opposed what they perceived the “decline in religiosity, morality, individual responsibility, and family authority” (180).

Another central issue of this research will be the exploration of how the connection between heavy metal and Satanism was created and how the cultural conservatives contributed to its persistence. While several academic researchers such as Deena Weinstein, Ian Christie and Eric Nuzum have discussed the effect the PMRC Hearing had on censoring heavy metal, they lack extensive evidence on what motivated the interest groups to attack heavy metal in the first place. In this research, I explore how the ‘Satanism Scare’ of the 1980s played a major role in forging alliances between religious and political groups that went after heavy metal artists. Rather than focusing on the outcome of the Hearing, I will examine further the conservatives’ employment of religious rhetoric in their effort to persecute heavy metal artists. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how their tactic was reproduced by high-profile figures and the media, who influenced the public, and in turn, aided in forming the association of heavy metal with Satanism.

Moreover, psychological and sociological studies on adolescents and music will shed light on the arguments often presented by both sides. Susan Baker, co-founder of the PMRC, blamed explicit music for the rise in suicide and rape statistics among young people (*Record Labeling* 11). Steven Stack’s research attributes the risk of suicide acceptability to the lack of religiosity often prevalent among the metal subculture (388-91). Weinstein, on the other hand, presents evidence that show the beneficial aspects of heavy metal to youngsters suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts (253). Christie’s narration of the genre’s history will open up the available primary sources for the analysis of the formation of the PMRC, its actions and the

Senate Hearing. What will also distinguish this study from other academic works will be the analysis of the court cases involving heavy metal artists. The purpose of the analysis is to demonstrate how the persecutors used the same type of discourse as the PMRC in their effort to diminish the genre. Transcripts and footage of the trials, newspaper articles covering the cases and testimonies of the parties involved, video and press material discussing the cases in retrospect will be examined to discuss the complex prosecution process of the particular bands involved in the trials that followed the Labeling Hearing.

While a close reading of the texts of the Hearing and the trials makes up one part of the methodology of this thesis, reliance on historical scholarship about the Reagan revolution and the rise of neo-conservatism provides another part. Together they produce a concise depiction of the conservative attack on heavy metal music. Combined with this historical scholarship, the close reading will show how the conservative use of for instance the satanic element in this history threatened one of the main rights at the heart of the American political tradition: free speech. Moreover, a detailed historical sketch and interpretation of the events and opinions surrounding the Hearing and trials will lead, paradoxically, to a defense of the notion that artistic texts at least can be highly ambiguous. A thorough and precise interpretation of conservative arguments about the dangers of heavy metal music will provide the stage for a defense of ambiguity.

The people and groups that went after heavy metal, who will often be referred to as “cultural conservatives” here, stem from a long line of history deeply rooted in American culture. The reason they are referred to as cultural conservatives is that they do not belong politically solely to the Republican Party with which conservatives are usually associated, but they do share many of the neo-conservative beliefs Republicans tend to hold (Weinstein 237-8). When the neo-conservative movement became prominent in the 1960s, nobody thought it would reach the dimensions it reached in the 1980s. It was a revolution much different than the one usually associated with the sixties. It was a call for the suburban conservatives to become active and fight against what they deemed the decadence of the American Republic caused by liberals of that era. A movement that nobody suspected would form such strong coalitions, not only became national, but also rose to power.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, it was clear that a new conservative era was about to begin. Even before Reagan was elected president, the

rise of neo-conservatism was evident in the several campaigns supporting family values, campaigns that Lisa McGirr describes as conservatives' "struggle to protect their particular vision of freedom and the American heritage" (4). During these passionate campaigns, which had supporters ranging from middle class suburban Americans to elitist politicians mainly affiliated with the Republican Party, several aspects associated with liberalism were attacked. Neo-conservatives also found strong support among religious groups, such as the Moral Majority, that pronounced itself "pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-moral and pro-American" (qtd. in Morone 453).

In their initial stages, neo-conservatives condemned the hippie culture of the sixties. Morone narrates how the social progresses of the 1960s inspired a major backlash from the conservatives, since they considered them the decade of moral decadence (407-8). Embracing the same anti-progressive sentiments, they went on to denounce everything that contradicted their "true American values" ideology, continuing well into the 1980s, when their movement gained the most power. In between these clashes, a fairly innocent bystander was caught: heavy metal. This music genre was distinguished for its loud and massive sound, quick tempos, intensified distortion and, usually, extreme vocals. Heavy metal contradicted all of the aspects the conservatives considered moral.

What irritated the cultural conservatives was the growing popularity of the genre among youngsters and the potential effects that it might have had on them. The notion that heavy metal advocated violence, suicide, substance abuse, sex (and sexism) and Satanic-related themes was deeply ingrained among them. Heavy metal artists were deemed as dangerous influences on American youngsters. The emphasis on chaos and Dionysian themes that characterize heavy metal contrasted sharply with the values of conservatives, who systematically attacked the genre and tried to impose limits on its artists' creativity. In a systematic and well-organized attempt they managed to influence public opinion and even the political scene leading to the 'Record Labeling' Senate Hearing of 1985. The opinions and anxieties of these highly influential figures were expressed through the then newly-formed Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), who held the Senate Hearing. In pursuance of restraining or eliminating heavy metal music these interest groups asked for "voluntary labeling" on music albums to cut the popularity of the genre at its distribution level.

## Heavy Metal: Origins, Imagery and Values

In order to understand what caused such opposition to heavy metal, its history and origins need to be examined. Like many other music genres, heavy metal has close ties with older genres. In her extensive analysis of heavy metal music and its culture, Deena Weinstein gives a detailed description of the history of the genre. Its emergence happened in the early 1970s; its predecessor was the “wider cultural complex of rock music, which in turn, had grown out of the rock and roll of the 1950s” (11). Weinstein uses AC/DC’s song “Let There Be Rock” as an example to describe the eruption of rock and roll. It is important to analyze the elements that influenced heavy metal, so as to comprehend what formed the distinctive sound, image and themes of the genre that spurred such major opposition against it. In AC/DC’s song, the history of rock and roll is told briefly but accurately. It starts by telling us that there was nothing like rock and roll prior to the year 1955, when it made a sudden appearance. Rock and roll was forged by “the musical sensibilities of the whites and the blacks” (11). The two races provided the schmaltz and the blues, and in turn got rock and roll. The result was a genre that incorporated the directness and sobriety of the blues with the emotional hype of the schmaltz (12). The song goes on to introduce the key elements of rock and roll in a specific order that is first sound, then light, and finally, drums and guitar. “The sound, meaning volume”, is of key importance, which is why it comes first and distinguishes rock and roll from other genres, followed by “light, which illuminates the band onstage” and gives it a god-like stature (12). At the end come the instruments, which in combination with the previously mentioned elements give rock and roll the energizing and emotional feeling that is apparent in its most perfect form in heavy metal music.

Although the connection between rock and roll and heavy metal is undeniable, there is no agreement on the exact period heavy metal occurred and which were its prime influences. Unlike rock and roll, heavy metal did not suddenly appear. Many critics claim that they can trace it back to the 1960s, while others argue that it most profoundly emerged in the early 1970s. Considering there can be no conclusive evidence on when the genre erupted, there is a lot of controversy surrounding the band(s) that started playing or, for that matter, invented heavy metal music. However, most critics and fans of the music agree on bands like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin arguing that they were two of the first ones to introduce elements now very

incorporated within the genre. According to Weinstein, there is even controversy about the very first heavy metal band, with Americans usually going for Led Zeppelin, and Brits favoring Black Sabbath (14). Ian Christie supports that Black Sabbath “unleashed the substance of heavy metal”, while he acknowledges the contributions of Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple by describing that they “fleshed out the edges and gave [the genre] sex appeal” (11). He attributes the creation of the distinct sound to the special technique adopted by Black Sabbath’s lead guitarist Tony Iommi. Iommi had to overcome the difficulty of playing with two cropped fingers caused by an accident he had when he was working at a factory in Birmingham, UK (Konow 5). In order to avoid the pain in his fingers “the group tuned to a lower key signature”, thus creating the sound that distinguished the band from any other existing music genres at the time (Christie 2). However, the boundary lines between “hard” and “heavy” are difficult to draw, so there are many bands that share some of the elements but are not considered heavy metal bands. One of these elements distinct in the heavy metal genre is the psychedelic music introduced by the psychedelic/acid rock of the 1960s. Heavy metal borrowed mainly stylistic traits from psychedelic rock, such as appearance on stage, extended guitar solos, as well as album cover designs and dress-code (Straw 107). Therefore, a psychedelic element was added to the qualities adopted from rock and roll and made the genre of heavy metal richer.

Heavy metal came to life around the time when there was need for a new medium of expression for the then fragmented 1960s youth culture. Following the devastating tragedy of the deaths of four people at the Altamont festival and the loss of many iconic rock and roll figures such as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, the supporters of the 1960s rock culture were left with a sense of bitterness and failure. As the Love Generation made way to a more harsh and violent reality it was made clear that “[i]t was the end of the 1960s and of all they represented” (Christie 7). Heavy metal came to fill in the void, as it combined the 1960s nostalgia with an added touch of realism. The numerous calamities and disasters happening all over the United States, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Charles Manson slayings created a deep feeling of pessimism among the flower-power generation. While these events occurred in the United States, “musically, there was a new British Invasion brewing,” but unlike the ‘60s rock and roll “its message was a harsh reflection of the world, not an escape from it” (Konow 3). What Weinstein terms as a “heavy metal subculture”, is what could be considered as one of



the descendants of the 1960s hippie culture (100). When the 1960s youth strayed away from its original ideology, several subgroups adhering to some of the themes associated with the rebellious culture of the sixties were formed. Among them there were groups interested in political protest, but the groups were mostly attracted to the hedonistic culture of the hippies. White suburban young males were particularly attracted to the latter, since they could excuse their need for “rebelliousness against authority and social order that did not provide them with attractive future prospects” (100). Simultaneously, they were also fascinated by the biker culture that projected a manly image to them and glorified the principles of living independently without rules. These combined interests in the hippie and the biker culture created a subculture of young people who were seeking for their own forms of self-definition. Therefore, even before heavy metal entered the music scene, there was already demand for a new type of expression to suit the needs of that newly-formed culture group.

When heavy metal first appeared, it seemed something completely new and could not be placed in one of the already existing music genres. The genre had been in existence for years before it was termed “heavy metal”. One of the reasons that created the need for a new genre is the incompatibility of the particular musical style with that of classic rock. There are several stories speculating how the term “heavy metal” came into use to describe this kind of music. Weinstein recounts the one where the term was first written by an American critic who was reviewing a Black Sabbath concert and used the phrase “heavy metal crashing” to describe the music of the band in a derogatory manner (19). Christie points out that before Black Sabbath’s appearance, the term ‘heavy’ used to refer to emotions expressed in songs rather than a musical style, while the ‘metal’ stabilizes the battle between “conflicting emotions and ideas” making an “unbreakable thematic strength that secured the tension and uninhibited emotion” (9). Another story on the origin of the term ‘heavy metal’ is about a fictional character in the novel *Nova Express* named “The Heavy Metal Kid”, whose behavior bears resemblance to some of the themes that are often distinct in heavy metal lyrics. However, the most popular and acknowledged story about the name of the genre is the one with Steppenwolf’s famous song “Born to Be Wild”. The song became deeply associated with biker culture and captured the exciting sentiment of riding a motorcycle and characterized the sound as “heavy metal thunder” (Weinstein 19). As mentioned previously, the metal subgroup was fascinated by biker culture, thus the song that epitomized this biker imagery could easily become the

reference for this type of music as well. In addition to that, what distinguished this song is the different manner in which the vocals were sung, since they were much harsher and “distorted, as well as the manner in which the guitar was played, intensely and with distortion” (20). As a result, the style in which the song is performed portrays qualities closer to what could be characterized as heavy metal than rock.

The names of heavy metal bands play an important role in detecting the most prevalent themes among the genre. While album names and lyrics are also essential, the name of a band gives away the initial and most important impression of what the band is about. In the metal scene, band names function as means of expression, and for this reason, many fans choose to wear them on T-shirts, hang posters and other sorts of merchandise that exhibit the band’s name. The meaning of a band name might also shed light on the method to interpret the band’s lyrics. Weinstein lists some distinct band names to prove the assumption that band names reveal the themes most incorporated in heavy metal music. Band names such as Annihilator, Anthrax, Death, Death Angel, Manowar, Megadeth, Nuclear Assault, Savatage, Slayer, Vengeance and Venom, “evoke ominous images with themes of mayhem and cosmic evil being most prevalent” (33). The use of religious symbolism intensifies this apocalyptic imagery, which reveals one of the two main themes discerned in heavy metal music; the theme of chaos. Themes dealing with chaos are not, however, the sole preoccupation of heavy metal music. Themes often found within the genre are characterized by Hjelm, Khan-Harris and LeVine as “transgressive” and by transgression they mean “the practice of boundary crossing, symbolically and/or practically, the practice of questioning and breaking taboos, the practice of questioning establishes values” (14).

Due to the genre’s 1960s hippie culture heritage, heavy metal is deeply engaged with Dionysian themes. As Weinstein explains, the “Dionysian experience celebrates the vital forces of life through various forms of ecstasy, which in heavy metal can be found in the unholy trinity of sex, drugs and rock and roll” (35). Unlike pop songs’ lyrics where romantic love is a major theme, heavy metal songs lyrics are mostly about the pure, primitive acts of sex and lust. Generally, there is pessimism about romantic relationships. Instead, the focus is on the animalistic nature of love-making, which is usually a fun and sometimes exaggerated act in heavy metal. Christie mentions that there was a tendency for heavy metal bands trying to surprise their audiences by explicit imagery as the audiences “craved the stimulation of difficult

territory” which would not be touched by other genres (21). Descriptions of sexual acts are most prevalent in “hair metal” bands or bands that play “lite metal”, a softer version of heavy metal. Lite metal bands are usually more preoccupied with Dionysian themes than other heavy metal bands. For instance, W.A.S.P. and Mötley Crüe are notoriously known for their preoccupation with the unholy trinity of Dionysian ecstasy. “W.A.S.P.’s infamous ‘Animal (F\*\*k Like a Beast)’ has been a prime target of anti-metal groups” along with many other songs that focus on the “carnality and absence of a spiritual element in sexual activity” (Weinstein 36). The anti-metal groups mentioned here are the organized cultural conservatives that went after heavy metal artists. As I will discuss later, the qualities describing sexual activity in heavy metal lyrics contrast with the concept of spirituality and sanctity involved in love-making held by conservatives.

Moreover, heavy metal has been blamed several times for encouragement of drug use, and although drugs are part of the Dionysian unholy trinity, there are not many songs that actually support the use of illegal substances. Weinstein mentions Black Sabbath’s “Sweet Leaf”, where the feeling of using marijuana is described and was “written at a time when marijuana smoking was popular among youth in the West” (37). While “Sweet Leaf” might be an ode to marijuana use, Black Sabbath’s “Snowblind” on the other hand, describes the negative effects of using cocaine. Although strong drugs are not encouraged through the genre itself, there is great passion for drinking and partying. W.A.S.P.’s “Blind in Texas” is a representative example. Tankard, a German thrash metal band, is mostly preoccupied with beer and their songs idolize the drinking of beer and the effects it has on a person. What might have led people believe drug abuse is encouraged by heavy metal is not the songs, but rather the acts of heavy metal artists themselves. There have been several cases where artists have indulged in excessive use of cocaine or other illegal substances in combination with exorbitant amounts of drinking and partying.

One of the least mentioned but probably most important aspect that heavy metal is preoccupied with is the praise of the music itself. Rock and roll, apart from being the predecessor of heavy metal, is also a fundamental symbol in heavy metal music. It portrays the power of the sound and the image of the genre, which is why it is immensely praised. “Writing and playing songs extolling the ecstasy that the music provides is almost a genre requirement” (37). Therefore, for heavy metal the most ecstatic aspect is the music itself. Many heavy metal songs have been written to pay

homage to this praised genre of music, such as Twisted Sister's "You Can't Stop Rock 'N' Roll" and "I Believe in Rock 'N' Roll", AC/DC's "Rocker", "For Those About to Rock (We Salute You)", "Let There Be Rock", Judas Priest's "Rock Hard Ride Free" and "Rock Forever", and Motörhead's "Rock 'N' Roll". Weinstein argues that some songs celebrate the music's power to "make life meaningful and possible, but in their majority they simply praise, pledge allegiance to or defend the music" (37).

As mentioned previously, heavy metal's fascination with apocalyptic and ominous images is attributed to its deep engagement with themes of chaos. Weinstein points out that while Dionysian themes are prevalent in other music genres as well, the themes of chaos are a distinct quality of the heavy metal genre. "Chaos is used here to refer to the absence or destruction of relationships, which can run from confusion, through various forms of anomaly, conflict, and violence, to death" (38). The reason heavy metal chooses to address the complex imagery of chaos is to bring awareness to the public of issues that society avoids talking about or confront. To discuss such issues is for heavy metal "a complex affirmation of power", a power that is generated by the ability to transform the forces of chaos into art (38). It is also an act of rebellion against society's conformist norms. Heavy metal challenges these norms and changes the discourse around issues that respectable society does not dare to address. For heavy metal, society's normality is an illusion, therefore it is rejected, and the only reality is found in the forces of chaos.

Heavy metal's lyrical imagery and discourse on chaos are heavily influenced by other cultural forms that have previously engaged in analyzing the themes of disorder. Religion is a major source of apocalyptic imagery and it is found in its most prominent form in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Weinstein suggests that the Book of Revelations is a particularly rich source of this kind of imagery and that it constitutes a great influence on heavy metal lyrics (39). Images of Satan, the good and evil forces that rule the world, as well as the traditional religious symbolism are very much ingrained in the genre's themes. For instance, Iron Maiden's "Number of the Beast" is a religious term to refer to the number 666, which in the Jewish and Christian faith is a reference to the devil. Band names such as Judas Priest and Exodus, also have religious connotations. Paganism also constitutes a source from which heavy metal borrows religious images. According to Weinstein, the use of pagan imagery is a form

of rebellion against the preconceived notions of Christians that paganism is a representation of chaos (39).

Heavy metal also draws its themes of chaos from literature, films and even history. Gothic horror stories and fantasy/ science fiction stories are popular sources that inspired numerous heavy metal bands with material for their songs. Weinstein mentions Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft and J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction in particular (40). Their influence can be found in songs such as "The Masque of the Red Death" by Crimson Glory and also by Manilla Road, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Iron Maiden and "Mordor" by Running Wild. Furthermore, many movies and, in particular, heroic and horror movies have inspired heavy metal lyrics and heavy metal has in turn, provided various such movies with soundtracks. The type of iconography associated with satanic imagery used in heavy metal may be largely attributed to the 1960s psychedelia heritage, according to Will Straw (118). He argues that within the hippie culture, J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction constituted a form of inspiration that lasted well until the eruption of heavy metal, where the tendency to borrow from "heroic fantasy literature and illustration" continued. Fictional figures such as Conan the Barbarian epitomize the tendency of using such imagery to illustrate "the masculinity of fantasy elements present within psychedelic culture" (118). Thus, the traits inherited from the psychedelic hippie culture exhibit qualities of chaos, which were altered to fit within the frame of heavy metal themes. Chaos in the form of a human action is also an inspiration to heavy metal lyrics. Historical figures such as Genghis Khan or Jack the Ripper have been used in heavy metal songs to describe forms of chaos such as mayhem, destruction and death. Anti-social fictional figures, often referred to as "monsters", are also an inspiration to heavy metal, since they do not conform to the norms of society and cause anarchy. Such figures found in the genre are "Iron Man" and "The Green Manalishi (With the Two-Pronged Crown)" (Weinstein 40).

Therefore, heavy metal songs are predominantly influenced by themes of Dionysian ecstasy and Chaos, whose influence is distinguished primarily in religious and pagan symbolism used in heavy metal lyrics. However, such symbolism in heavy metal is not used in the conventional way Christians use it and interpret it. Religious symbols are often used to refer to something different or are given a new meaning altogether. "The devil is frequently mentioned in heavy metal lyrics because he serves as shorthand for the forces of disorder" (41). So then again, the devil constitutes an

impersonation of chaos and is found frequently in heavy metal lyrics. The rebellious nature of the music found its representative in the symbolic image of the devil. Hell is also used in the same manner as a synonym for a place where chaos reigns. However, hell is also a place where those embracing chaos go to party. These two symbols are often used in a playful manner and come in contrast to the notions held about them by Christians. Thus, giving established Christian symbols new meaning reinforces the rebelliousness distinct in heavy metal music's themes. For instance, AC/DC's "Hell Ain't a Bad Place to Be" says hell is not such a bad place to be, because of a woman playing "devilish" tricks on a man that "brings out the devil in [him]" and makes him want to be in that place with her although it causes him suffering sometimes. In the end, he gets pleasure out of it and says "If this is hell, then let me say, it's heavenly" (Young et al.). The act of using such symbols playfully reflects the youthfulness behind the music genre, which contradicts the stiff sobriety of respectable society. Ultimately, this respectable society is the one to fight and oppose heavy metal, for it is against its youthful nature. Since most fans are usually in their teenage and young adult years, "it is no accident that those who testified against heavy metal at the Senate Hearing of 1985 were representatives of parental interest groups (PMRC and PTA)" (Weinstein 43). The use of controversial imagery and rhetoric which respectable society wishes to conceal is "an act of symbolic rebellion" on the part of heavy metal music (43).

It is obvious that there is a major clash in beliefs between the heavy metal community and what is called respectable society, in which fundamentalist conservatives also belong. However, how did they manage to get acquainted with heavy metal music in the first place? As I discussed earlier, heavy metal music and culture were an underground movement when they first appeared, usually only popular among a certain number of young rebels. When Music Television (MTV) was introduced in 1981, it targeted teenagers who, according to Marks, did not have a television program suiting their demands back then (*Intro*). MTV was formed to cater to this adolescent group who looked for something on television to fit their needs. Music videos were an easy way to approach the teenage audience and they were much more affordable than other kinds of programming. To make video clips attractive, MTV sought loud and edgy appearances for its shows, and none could fit better the description than heavy metal bands' performances. Due to the spectacle they offered to the viewer, with their energetic stage appearances and extreme clothing and hair

styles, they quickly reached thousands of households through television. “Among the first bands to be shown were groups such as Quiet Riot, Twisted Sister, Mötley Crüe, Dokken and the Scorpions”, which shared the extreme spectacle MTV sought for its music videos (Weinstein 162). The style of heavy metal became very much ingrained in MTV music video culture and the surprise was that “the styles, fashions, and symbolism of the genre attracted a far broader range of youth than those included in metal’s core audience” (162). The rise of the genre’s popularity among youngsters thanks to MTV, made heavy metal known also among several parents. MTV made bands such as Twisted Sister and AC/DC infamous among concerned parental groups, which campaigned for the welfare of their children. Therefore, it is not an accident that among the artists targeted by the PMRC in its “Filthy Fifteen” list several had been MTV stars due to their video clips’ popularity.

PMRC was not the only group that felt resentful against heavy metal music. MTV made the genre known to an enormous number of people, plenty of whom quickly formed their opposition against it. Several interest groups, among them many religious ones, organized campaigns to fight against what they deemed the ‘work of the devil’. MTV also became one of their targets when “by early 1985, MTV’s management cut back on heavy metal videos due to intense pressure from religious fundamentalists” (169). During that period, when heavy metal reached its peak in popularity and the demands were also high for it, the cut backs reflected the amount of power these fundamentalist groups had among the media and public opinion. This instance could be seen as the “laying ground period”, before the full attack was released against heavy metal in the Senate Hearing of September 1985. Among the critics of the genre were many academics, politicians and ministers who helped form the public opinion concerning heavy metal music. Weinstein mentions Baptist minister Jeff R. Steel whose description about the genre was that it “is sick and repulsive and horrible and dangerous” (1). The biased opinion of the minister was also shared with other religious figures who exerted an important amount of influence over people. Professor of music, Dr. Joe Stuessy, who testified before the United States Senate Committee, also shared resentment for the genre, stating that “it contains the element of hatred, a meanness of spirit. Its principal themes are extreme violence, extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, and perversion and Satanism” (*Record Labeling* 117). It is not incidental that his views about heavy metal were

common among members of the PMRC, since Dr. Stuessy served as a consultant to the group.

It is quaint that the amount of passion and love towards the genre by its fans was met with the same amount of hatred and loathing from its opponents. Weinstein points out the absurdity in the alliance forged between “those normally [considered] bitter opponents, the politically correct progressive critics and the religious and populist right wing” (237). Although both judge and utterly condemn heavy metal for different reasons, their shared contempt towards it is undeniable. The progressives criticized heavy metal not for its rebellious character, but for its apolitical stance, which, for them, does not serve society in a reformist way. For them, music should serve a cause and heavy metal’s unwillingness to do so means it is “an anomaly, an object likely to be made a taboo”, since it does not fit in either commercial pop music or committed rock (244). On the other hand, the fundamentalists’ approach is that the genre has adverse effects on a person’s soul and general welfare. The scare tactics employed by religious and cultural conservatives to denounce heavy metal stem from a “long tradition of conservative opposition to popular music” (245).

The history of attacking what conservatives deemed “rebellious” music comes from their notion that the American Christian Republic was facing a decline of morals, mainly caused by their nation’s liberals. In her book *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr uses California Orange County’s conservatives as an example to describe the activism and ideologies behind the neo-conservative movement which was formed in the early 1960s and reached national dimensions by the end of the decade. Orange County is considered the “birth place” of this movement, where middle class men and women met “like-minded people”, who arranged meetings, “filled the rolls of John Birch Society”, an anti-communist, radical right wing society, “worked within the Republican Party, all in an urgent struggle to safeguard their particular vision of freedom and the American heritage” (4). For them, true American values were family, religion and love for the nation, all of which were threatened by the liberal agenda and the revolution of the 1960s. The movement exerted such a massive amount of influence socially and politically in the early 1960s that “the Right expanded its influence on the national scene in the late 1960s and 1970s and vaulted to national power with the Reagan landslide of 1980” (5). By the 1980s, the influential power of the conservatives had peaked and their opinion concerning cultural phenomena could easily affect and, in many cases, form people’s notions. As a consequence,



conservatives' ability to influence public opinion was essential during the period when they unleashed the smear campaign against heavy metal.

It is vital to discuss how conservatives perceived heavy metal music in order to fully comprehend the reasons they went after it. In this history of the rise of the neo-conservative movement it is obvious that a considerable majority of its supporters come from very devout Christian backgrounds. McGirr lists several examples of communities that embraced the conservative philosophy, all of which have certain characteristics in common, such as being very religious, socially homogeneous, prosperous, and having a strong liking for the military (14). Religiosity is a very vital part of the conservative movement as well as the tendency to respect order and morals. Hence, the Dionysian rebellion and chaotic character in heavy metal music's lyrics diverge from pious conservative values.

As discussed previously, what irritated conservatives was the 'transvaluing' of Christian symbols. For them, the appropriation of Christian symbolism is "a systematic temptation whose aim is to lead youth into the paths of sin"; thus, metal is deemed "a competitor for their souls" (Weinstein 238). Anything that does not conform to their frame of what is good is labeled sinful. The conservatives, however, fail to detect the transvaluing of symbolism in heavy metal, and instead stick to the literal reading of the lyrics, which leads to frustration and, ultimately, denunciation of the whole genre. The use of the figure of the devil has already been examined for its use as a representation of chaos and as a symbolic rebellion against authority. The conservatives, however, misinterpret its use and associate it with the Anti-Christ.

In the same manner, the theme of suicide in lyrics operates as "a symbol of freedom and resistance against organized constraints... [i]t is a form of life, not decadence" (260). Being very religious in their majority the conservatives are only used to the Christian interpretations and notions about these themes. "Suicide, for them, is the denial of God's gift of life" (261). Not only do they see heavy metal as a competitor for their children's souls, but also as a competitor to their way of thinking. Since the majority of the heavy metal fans are middle-class white males, for the conservatives they constitute "a target group for recruiting", and this male embrace of heavy metal music clearly indicates a breaking off from conservative ideology (261).

Consequently, their aggressiveness against the genre stems from their own incomprehensibility of the music, which leads us to the following conclusions. First, their inability to understand the playful substitution of religious symbolism for

Dionysian themes utterly makes conservatives incompetent readers of heavy metal lyrics, since they fabricate the arguments about the catastrophic effects of the music on adolescents. And second, the notions about the genre reflect conservatives' "ideological constructions of heavy metal rather than what heavy metal is to its fans [or] the artists who create it" with the ultimate aim to serve their political and social affiliations (239).

However, the witch hunt against heavy metal constitutes only a milestone in the long history of persecution of popular music by the conservatives. Long before heavy metal was even formed, advocates of conservatism condemned rock and roll, which was also seen as demoralizing and dangerous for adolescents. According to Weinstein, rock and roll was deemed malicious in the 1950s for "inflaming the sexual passions of the nation's youth", but behind the criticism was also utterly "widespread racism and fear of miscegenation" on the part of white middle-class Americans (245). Conservatives feared that the music might spark a rebellious behavior that would not conform to society's norms at the time, such as interracial dating. Rock music was also criticized in the 1960s, when the neo-conservative movement was gaining popularity. Among the critics of the genre was then-Vice President Spiro Agnew, who strongly believed that "the lyrics caused the youthful audience to take drugs and that the music was sapping the nation's power" (247). Although during the 1970s conservatives kept to a low-profile status due to the forced resignation of Richard Nixon, they managed to resurface by the end of the decade more prominently than ever. Their ability not only to re-emerge but to acquire such influence came from their potential "to pick up the pieces and profit politically from liberal failures", meaning in this case the generally considered unsuccessful Carter presidency (McGirr 5).

As mentioned previously, the conservative movement gained strength mostly through the Republican Party. However, fundamentalist Protestant church groups also played an important role in spreading conservative ideology throughout the nation. Their "family values" campaigns were warmly embraced even by the media and the general public. During that period, incidentally, the popularity of heavy metal was also rising steadily, which in turn led to the major clash of ideologies. Weinstein suggests that it is "Reagan administration's policy of deregulation [...] regarding the FCC's monitoring of radio and television" that, ironically, may have also been responsible for heavy metal's popularity rise, since the genre could 'advertise' itself

much more easily through the media (247). Therefore, conservatives' political actions might have indirectly helped heavy metal become widely known in the 1980s.

Once cultural conservatives became familiar with heavy metal, they needed reasons and the means to eliminate it. As Ian Christie points out, "after MTV brought the rock arena into the home [...] rebellion was now a fixture in American living rooms" (118). Concerned parents and fundamentalist watch groups felt their conservative values being threatened by this new rebellious music, like rock and roll had done in the past. Although it did not particularly encourage any kind of revolt in public, "the attitudes of heavy metal made a visible threat to public order" (118). The cultural conservatives found support in some of the researches conducted about musical preferences and delinquency in adolescents and used them as an example of how harmful heavy metal can be to young people. One of the researches suggests a link between delinquent acts and generally socially disapproved music, such as heavy metal (Verder et al.). However, it is not clear what incites such preference or what causes the delinquency. Another study among a group of teenagers named "The Stoners", who were involved in cults and possibly Satanist practices, conveys that these adolescents were also fond of heavy metal music and in many cases committed crimes as well (Trostle). Although this study indicates the link of disturbed individuals with extreme music, it does not cover the whole audience of heavy metal music. Among the critics of the genre, one who was very popular among conservatives for his diatribe against rock music was Alan Bloom. Weinstein indicates that although Bloom manages to grasp the Dionysian themes of rock music, he still dismisses it as irrational (263). He also uses Plato to support his thesis about rock music, saying that "music should foster reason [...] and that extreme pleasure drives a man out of his mind no less than extreme pain" (263). Hence, Bloom uses a two thousand year old argument to denounce rock music, although such genre was unheard of in Plato's era. However, for fundamentalist groups, these studies and critical opinions of conservative academics were considered more than enough proof to condemn heavy metal for causing delinquency among teenagers.

During the period when the conservative influence had reached national levels, it was almost an oxymoron that a music genre as rebellious as heavy metal grew in popularity, becoming available to every household with cable television. A major uproar in which conservatives would fight this new trend that was "invading" their homes and allegedly corrupting their children was well-nigh inevitable. With the

genre's growing recognition came great opposition from many fronts. The church played an important role in notifying parents of the dangers this new type of 'devilish' music held. It did not take long before church groups organized record burnings: a situation very similar to the record burnings of the early rock and roll music albums in the 1950s, when religious conservatives were concerned of the awakening of sexual fantasies in youngsters' minds caused by rock and roll. This time, however, the focus was on the acclaimed satanic messages elicited by heavy metal records. Churches held "seminars on the influence of Satan and devil-worship in rock music", which inspired individuals to take action against it (Dougherty 52). One of them, Art Diaz, organized a record smashing rally along with a teenage church group destroying 30 albums in total. Another record burning was held by a previous club owner who burned "\$2,000 worth of albums that he felt encouraged illicit sex and drug abuse" (52). Dougherty also mentions a "church group burning albums they believed 'subliminally influenced' young people" (52).

Surprising is the account of a record burning rally given by a Florida student in 1982. The student describes the rally held by a Baptist minister who spoke about the harms of rock music on the nation's youth. After evoking the surrounding crowd, "he said we should 'purge' our lives of this evil [...] then began to hold up record albums, say a few things about each one—either a line from the lyrics or a statement of condemnation—and break it, throwing the album into a raging fire" (qtd. in Weinstein 248). The most absurd part of the story was when the priest accused Pat Benatar's song "Hell Is For Children" of promoting devil-worship. He went on to throw the single album in the fire as well. When many of the students present started complaining that the priest took words out of context, he claimed that the Devil had already influenced them in despising God's work. Benatar's condemned song was denouncing child abuse, but the people holding the rally had interpreted the word "hell" in the song literally (248). Many similar events were organized throughout the United States, which had a major effect on peoples' general convictions about heavy metal. Since the religious community had a great amount of impact over politics, it is no accident that their contempt about this musical style spread and even influenced high-ranking politicians of both major political parties. It was a matter of time before a full-range attack would be unleashed on the demonized music genre.

## The 1985 PMRC Senate Hearing & Aftermath

It took only a few years for the outrage to be expressed and PMRC and PTA acted as its representatives. In the words of Weinstein, the PMRC hearing “provided a platform for, and bestowed a legitimacy on, the fundamentalist positions [...] against heavy metal.” (249). In the beginning of the 1980s, even before the formation of the PMRC, the National Parent/Teacher Association had suggested some sort of labeling on records that carried explicit lyrics, alarmed by the content of the lyrics of some songs, especially Prince’s “Let’s Pretend We’re Married” (Chastagner 181). The PTA sent letters to several influential figures of the time, including one of PMRC’s founding members, Susan Baker, wife of then Treasury Secretary James Baker.

It all started in 1984, when Tipper Gore, the wife of then US Senator Al Gore, had purchased a record titled “Purple Rain” by Prince as a gift for her eleven-year-old daughter. What Gore was not aware of at the time was that the record was a soundtrack to an R-rated movie and it included explicit description of sexual acts. When she listened to the album she became appalled with what she considered offensive material and believed that there should have been some kind of warning on the part of the record industry concerning the explicit content of the record. In her book *Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society* she describes her reaction: “I couldn’t believe my ears! The vulgar lyrics embarrassed both of us. At first, I was stunned—then I got mad! Millions of Americans were buying Purple Rain with no idea what to expect!” (qtd in “Parental Advisory” 13). Startled by this instance, Gore took to MTV to watch what was being shown on television all over America and that was when she came across Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It” and Van Halen’s “Hot For Teacher” video clips and became further outraged. The two clips were later used in the Senate Hearing as an example of the harmful intensions found in heavy metal music. It was not long before Tipper Gore invited Susan Baker to form an organization seeking a form of voluntary labeling from the record industry on albums that they deemed bore offensive material, such as sexually explicit or violent content.

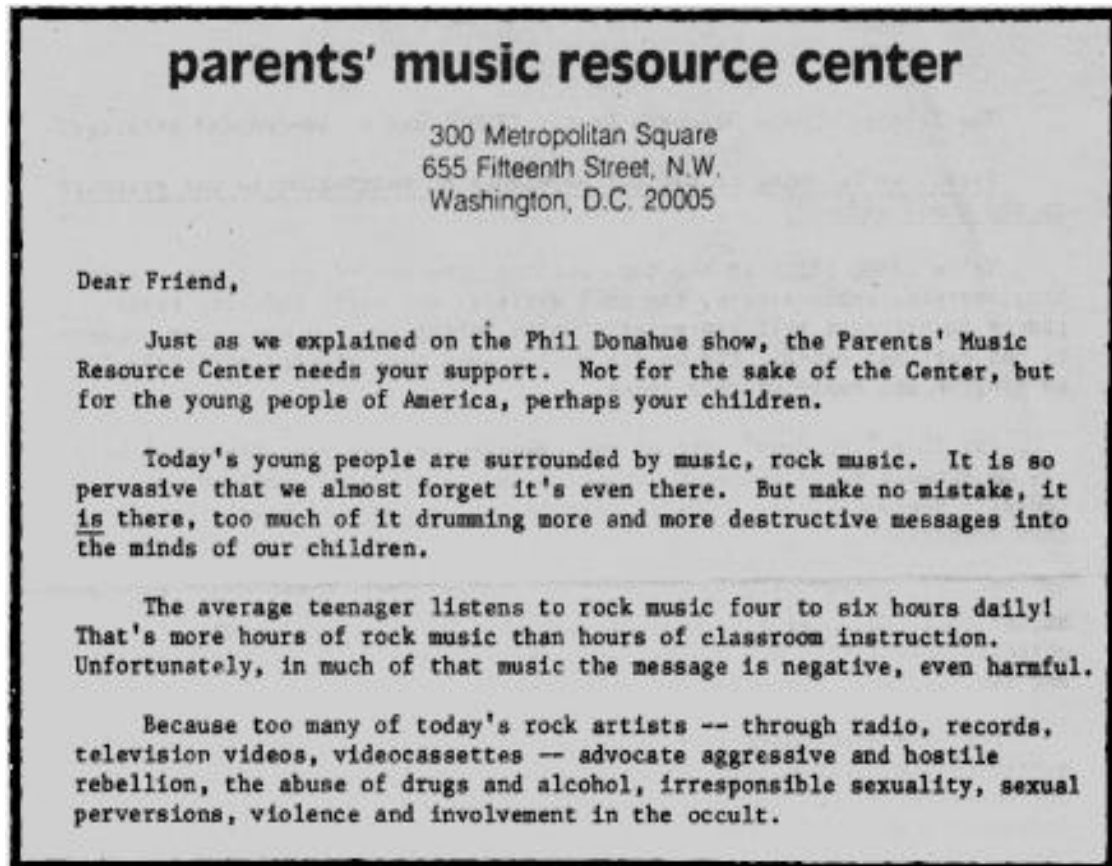
Ms Baker, alarmed by the issue of inappropriate music, went on to create the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), a tax-exempt non-profit organization, along with wives of other contemporary high-profile politicians or public figures. The official committee consisted of Susan Baker, Pam Howar, wife of Raymond Howar, head of a large-scale Washington construction company, Sally Nevius, spouse of John

Nevius, then Washington City Council's Chairman, and Tipper Gore, wife of then Democrat Senator of Tennessee and member of the Senate Commerce Committee, Al Gore. Among PMRC's other founding members were other "Washington wives" namely "Peatsy Hollings, wife of Senator Ernest Hollings, [and] Ethelann Stuckey, married to William Stuckey, a former Georgia Congressman" (Chastagner 181). The powerful group whose "entire list of PMRC co-chairs included the wives of 10 percent of the Senate" managed to spread the notion that obscene rock lyrics could be held responsible for the rise in suicide and rape statistics (Christe 119).

The group could not have made the matter national without the help of mass media, which undoubtedly played a very central role in making the group's arguments known to the public by generally adopting the discourse used by PMRC's leading figures. Amy Binder, who conducted a comparative study on how "media served as an ideological vehicle" for the cases of harmful lyrics in heavy metal and rap music, suggests that the media's discourse was influenced by the "opinion writers' perceptions of the populations represented by these two musical genres" (754). Furthermore, she claims that the writers engaged in dialogue about the lyrics did not only focus on the content itself but also "embedded in their discussions reactions to differences in the demographic characteristics of the genres' producers and audiences", which, for the case of heavy metal, it is a predominantly young white working- and middle-class population (754). It was therefore expected that a large part of the public would share the concerns of the PMRC and the media, since the group affected by the harms of heavy metal would supposedly be the listeners themselves, namely white children and adolescents.

The PMRC was officially formed in May 1985. To the aid of the fearless "Washington wives" came Dr. Joseph Stuessy, Andrew Young, Mayor of Atlanta, and Sheila Walsh, TV host, and Reverend Jeff Ling, "famous for his 'slide shows' denouncing sex and violence in rock music, was invited to write the literature the PMRC intended to publish" (Chastagner 181). The PMRC easily gained financial and moral support. "Mike Love, from the Beach Boys, and Joseph Coors, owner of Coors beers, had both actively supported Reagan's presidency and Coors offered offices to the PMRC" (181). Moral and logistical support was offered by many religious organizations, such as the Religious Book-sellers Convention, (which later distributed Tipper Gore's *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*), "though the PMRC denied any ideological connection to these groups" (181). From informing about

pornographic material found in rock lyrics in local church groups to reaching national media, Tipper Gore and Susan Baker showed the amount of influence they could exert through their positions on the public. The following letter is a plea the women wrote to raise funds for the cause of the PMRC (Fig. 1).



### 1. PMRC's fundraising letter

What critics often seem to dismiss when they discuss the actions and impact of the PMRC on concerned parents is the role the Satanism scare of the early 1980s played in forming a widely appalling image for heavy metal music. What was reported as the rise of Satanic crimes in some suburban areas of the United States created an immense fear about the protection of children and adolescents from such events. Although many times lacking concrete evidence and with sometimes unreliable witnesses the panic over Satanism was promoted successfully all over the nation especially with the broadcast of television's documentary 20/20: "The Devil Worshipers", a report on alleged Satanic crime, which aired on May 16, 1985. It is fascinating that in the introduction of the documentary the host states that "the police have been skeptical

investigating these acts just as we are reporting them,” making us also question the integrity of the accounts presented (*Devil Worshipers part 1*). The first report recounts the murder of a teenager in a small town in Long Island having “Satanic” motives. The journalist states that “the victim was forced to pray to Satan as he was repeatedly stabbed to death” (*Worshippers 1*). Among the two suspects for the murder, one was found innocent and the other one committed suicide in jail before his trial took place. At this point, it should be pointed out that the young suspect, the latter of the two, shown on the screen wears an AC/DC shirt. This depiction constitutes a foreshadowing for the following part of the documentary, where heavy metal is listed as a possible clue connected with Satanic crime and worship of the devil. Although the reporter mentions that the official explanation for the aforementioned murder was “a drug-related crime”, the police asked for it to be labeled “Satanic”. Another crime presented in the report as Satanic is the slaughter of a number of animals although the police gave “no official explanation” (1). In the same manner, a map of the United States is shown where crimes with “Satanic clues” have been committed, but although all of them were investigated by police, “there was not much result” in the effort of connecting them to Satanic-related motives (1).

The documentary goes on to divide Satanists into three groups: the self-styled Satanists, the religious Satanists, and the Satanists who belong in cults (1). The first group, according to the report, consists of usually young people, who “get inspired” by and introduced into Satanism by material found in their everyday surroundings, such as movies and books in stores. Discussing the influence of these materials on adolescents and Satanic practices is Mike Warnke, a Christian evangelist, comedian and a so-called expert on Satanism. Warnke, posing as a reformed ex-high priest of Satanism talks about Satanic rituals and behaviors that might indicate if a child or teenager shows signs of interest in Satanism. The ironic part at this point is that Warnke’s claims about him being deeply involved in Satanism in the 1960s were proven false in 1991 by *Cornerstone*, a Christian magazine. *Cornerstone* provided a report which demonstrated that Warnke’s accounts did not match facts about the time he claimed he was a high priest of Satanism (*Trott Dates Don’t Work*).

In the dialogue about Satanic-related material one could not miss music, which, according to the reporter, “falls in the category of heavy metal” (*Worshippers 1*). “The Satanic message is clear”, he says, “both in the album covers and the lyrics



which are reaching impressionable young minds” (1). In support of this argument, the documentary shows carefully selected parts from heavy metal video clips by artists such as Mötley Crüe and Ozzy Osbourne adding that “the symbolism is all there; the Satanic pentagram, the upside down cross, the eyes of the Beast, rebellion against Christianity and the obsession with death” (1). A competent reader and interpreter of the use of religious symbolism in heavy metal can easily understand the playful manner in which these symbols are used. However, for the makers of this documentary the use of Christian symbolism shows how heavy metal is associated with Satanism. Although the reporter admits that most of heavy metal groups say that “all is done in fun”, he constructs an argument saying “but according to police, it is having an effect on many children, a growing subculture that mixes heavy metal music with drugs and the occult” (1). Yet there is no such police report that officially states the effect heavy metal music could exert on a child or one that could associate the genre with criminal activities. The message of the documentary is very clear, however. By the end of the show when co-host Barbara Walters asks reporter Lawrence Pazder how a parent could be aware of a child’s suspicious behavior, he replies by saying that “the clues are there [...], if they are into heavy metal music, [...] then parents should look deeper into it” (*Worshippers* 3). Pazder had claimed in the past that he was an expert on “satanic ritual abuse”, but like Warnke, he was discredited of his expertise in 1990 (Caroll *SRA*).

Self-proclaimed “experts”, such as Pazder and Warnke, had their reputations and arguments disparaged in the early 1990s but back in the 1980s, they seemed to have a considerable amount of influence on the media and public opinion. Their methods of associating Satanism with a music genre, in this case heavy metal, could be characterized as successful merely by looking at the responses of the public, which adopted the convictions of these so-called experts and reproduced them in several cases that later emerged.

This uproar led to the formation of several other groups that believed the convictions of the “experts on Satanism” and this allowed the wide distribution of books discussing the association of rock music with Satanism. The writers of these books argued that most, if not all, rock musicians were into practising the occult and worshipping Satan. Even in the early days of rock and roll this idea was cultivated by several Christian fundamentalists. Notable is the book *Rock & Roll: The Devil’s Diversion* written in 1970 by Bob Larson. Larson believed that rock and roll was a

medium for demons to enter the body and possess it. Christie also mentions how Larson contributed to the rise of the Satanic scare among the ignorant by discussing some “far-fetched warnings concerning Black Sabbath’s supposed use of astral projection and chicken blood rituals” (121). Others actually considered the beat of the music itself as a call to the devil. Jeff Godwin wrote that there is an element present in the beat of this music which raises primitive instincts and due to its incredible volume and “rhythmic beat of voodoo”, it “form[s] a battering ram that smashes the listener’s mind and spirit” (33). There was certainly a common theme among the books written against rock and that was the genre’s connections with Satanic practises and how the music works as a tool of the devil. The writers of these books clearly could not distinguish any benefits that this music could offer to society. While there was no indication that they advocated censorship, it was apparent that they wished to limit the influence and distribution of such music. As a result, these people quickly associated with the PMRC when it came to prominence and supported its suggestion about a labelling system for records.

Apart from the major support the PMRC got from religious figures and the media, what they also often used to their advantage were their own interpretations of the songs they condemned. For instance, the infamous song of Ozzy Osbourne “Suicide Solution” was used several times as an example by the conservatives over the years to illustrate how heavy metal encourages suicide. This false interpretation also constituted part of Dr. Stuessy’s statement in the PMRC Hearing (*Record Labeling* 12). The inaccurate information and misuse of lyrics was quite frequent and through the influence of groups such as the PMRC they managed to spread like wildfire. It was fairly expected then that the issue would reach the form of national debate through the Senate.

The PMRC initially aimed for media coverage in order have their concerns known and after a few appearances on TV, they began to attract a lot of publicity. Once they became familiar to the public, they started forming their demands and firstly sent a letter to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) asking the recording industry to “exercise voluntary self-restraint perhaps by developing guidelines and/or a rating system, similar to that of the movie industry” (“Parental Advisory” 11). However, the PMRC targeted only heavy metal or pop artists that were popular at the time and no other artists or types of genres. After a few months, the issue had really blown out of proportion with numerous newspaper editorials

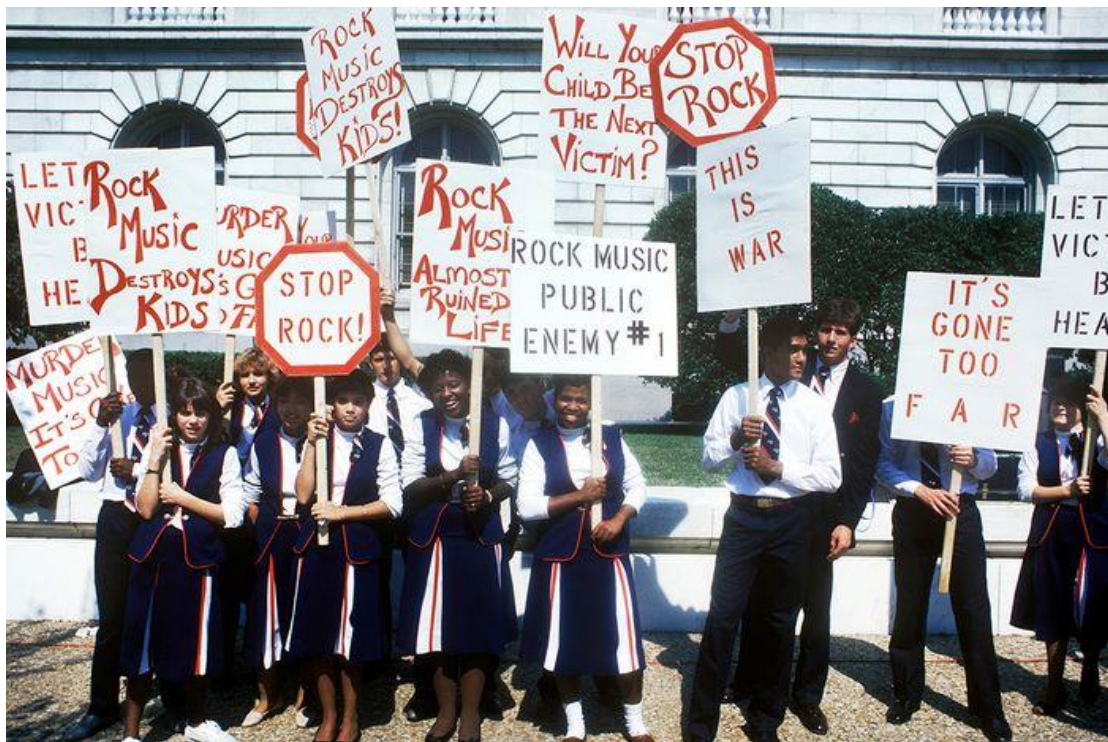
writing about the issue of explicit lyrics in music. Time Magazine published articles with titles such as “New Lyrics for the Devil’s Music” and “Rock Music Is A Four-Letter Word” asking “Have the lyrics gone too far?” (Clarke, Cocks). Representatives from the PMRC made several appearances on shows on all major networks in order to “educate parents of this alarming trend [...] towards lyrics that are sexually explicit, violent, or glorify the use of drugs and alcohol” (“Parental Advisory” 14).

It did not take long for the plans of the PMRC to come to fruition. They quickly gained recognition and support from concerned parents around the country who started demanding a warning label on albums with explicit content. The impact of the PMRC was quite obvious, as Nuzum points out that in 1985, only 22 percent of adults wanted parental advisory stickers on records, while six years later, the number had risen to 53 percent due to the efforts of the PMRC (17). The Washington wives were claiming that their goal was to educate parents about the dangers of what they named ‘porn rock’ but simultaneously tried to convince the recording industry to impose limits on the distribution of albums carrying offensive material for the sake of protecting the children from inappropriate music. In their letter to the RIAA the PMRC requested that records with explicit material carry a sticker so that the public can be aware of their content. One of their suggestions was also to “keep explicit covers under the counter, print lyrics on album covers, establish a ratings system for concerts, reassess the contracts of performers who engage in violence and explicit sexual behavior onstage, and establish a citizen and record-company media watch that would pressure broadcasters not to air questionable talent” (19).

The RIAA responded by naming these proposals as unrealistic. The head of the RIAA, Stanley Gortikov indicated the impracticality of a ratings system for records. He stated that “[u]nlike the motion picture industry, which rates about 325 films a year, the recording industry releases 25,000 songs annually, which would require a process for rating 100 tunes a day” (Wolmuth “Parents Vs. Rock”). Gortikov also explained that record companies could not exert control over how records are displayed in record stores, could not influence performers nor could push for the printing of lyrics on the sleeves, as the lyrics are copyrighted. To appease the PMRC the RIAA suggested that a single sticker could be generated reading “Parental Guidance: Explicit Lyrics” to warn consumers about explicit content. However, the PMRC was still not satisfied with the RIAA’s proposal and by the summer of 1985, the controversy had reached a point that asked for immediate action. Due to the

adamant efforts of the ‘Washington wives’ it was decided that congressional hearings would be held in order to discuss the proposed rating systems in the Senate Commerce Committee on September 19.

Meanwhile, the arguments of the PMRC got warmly embraced by the public, which in many cases strove to show their loyalty to the interest group’s cause. Christie mentions the vivid image of “religious protesters outside the congressional offices waving placards for the TV cameras reading ROCK MUSIC DESTROYS KIDS and WE’VE HAD ENOUGH” (120). Another slogan reading “Will your child be the next victim?” points to the effect the scare tactics had in promoting the idea that rock music is connected with Satanism, suicide and/or substance abuse (Fig. 2). Public outrage and mass media frenzy were the sort of atmosphere building around the Senate Hearing.



**2. Anti-rock protesters during the 1985 Labeling Hearing**

# The Filthy Fifteen

ARTIST	SONG	RATING*
JUDAS PRIEST	"Eat Me Alive"	X
MÖTLEY CRÜE	"Bastard"	V
PRINCE	"Darling Nikki"	X
SHEENA EASTON	"Sugar Walls"	X
W.A.S.P.	"(Animal) Fuck Like a Beast"	X
MERCYFUL FATE	"Into the Coven"	O
VANITY	"Strap On Robby Baby"	X
DEF LEPPARD	"High 'n' Dry"	D/A
TWISTED SISTER	"We're Not Gonna Take It"	V
MADONNA	"Dress You Up"	X
CYNDI LAUPER	"She Bop"	X
AC/DC	"Let Me Put My Love into You"	X
BLACK SABBATH	"Trashed"	D/A
MARY JANE GIRLS	"My House"	X
VENOM	"Possessed"	O

\* (Proposed)    X = Profane or sexually explicit    O = Occult    D/A = Drugs or alcohol    V = Violent

### 3. The 'Filthy Fifteen' list with its four subcategories



### 4. Two of the most controversial album covers criticized by the PMRC

On the other side of the battle, heavy metal and its supporters had no substantial support or means to demonstrate their arguments. However, even if they did, “opposing the PMRC, in the eyes of conservatives, was to advocate degeneracy of the worst kind” (119). Once PMRC’s “Filthy Fifteen” list was announced in 1985, it was clear whom the interest groups were targeting and what they were accusing them of. Among their tactics was also presenting “oversized album covers and reciting offensive lyrics, mostly out of context” (120). The list was meant more as an example of the type of “dangerous” lyrics found in rock and contemporary music rather than a personal attack on the artists mentioned. However, stigmatization of the artists involved could not be avoided. Among the targeted artists of the list only Dee Snider of the band Twisted Sister testified in front of the Committee to defend his art. He reminisces: “they contacted my management and wanted to know if I would testify, figuring ‘Let’s get the most recognizable character in metal at the time and put him up there as the poster boy for censorship.’ They were caught off guard, because they didn’t know I spoke English fluently.” (qtd. in Christe 120). The “filthy” songs were separated into four categories with ‘X’ standing for profane or sexually explicit material, ‘O’ for occult, ‘D/A’ for drugs or alcohol, and ‘V’ for violent incentive (Fig. 3). PMRC’s purpose with the list and the Hearing was “to show the causal link between rock music and social problems such as the increase in rape, suicide or teen pregnancies” (Chastagner 181). While most of the artists were picked for sexually explicit lyrics in their songs, artists blamed for dealing with the occult were also criticized. Christe comments that “most of them had never reached, or were ever intended to reach, such a large mass-media audience” (121). King Diamond of the targeted group Mercyful Fate indicates “I guess the worst thing that ever happened to us was kind of good [...] The PMRC picked ‘Into the Coven’, but they could have picked any song!” (qtd in Christe 121). Apart from the charismatic frontman Dee Snider, to the defense of rock music also came Frank Zappa and John Denver, who individually supported the artists’ right to freedom of expression.

Due to the immensity of the volume of the testimonies given in the Senate Hearing of September 19, 1985, focus will be given on the main themes that were discussed. Weinstein marks that the PMRC “was only concerned with the lyrical content of rock music. No objections were made to its sound” (249). It is therefore appropriate and essential to analyze the arguments concerning the lyrical content of the songs and contemplate the indications made about the significance of the First

Amendment concerning the freedom of speech and expression. However, importance was also given to the visual element of the music thanks to its popularization through MTV. Thus, two music video clips were shown in the PMRC effort to illustrate the features with which they were most concerned. The first one was “Hot For Teacher” by Van Halen and the second “We’re Not Going To Take It” by Twisted Sister. Three popular album covers by Def Leppard, W.A.S.P. and Wendy O. Williams accordingly were also presented as part of the presumably offensive visual material available to the consumers (Fig. 4). The videos and album covers were shown in the introductory part of the Hearing. Senator Hawkins commented: “I think a picture is worth a thousand words. This issue is too hot not to cool down. Parents are asking for assistance, and I hope we always remember that no success in life would compensate for failure in the home.” (*Record Labeling* 10).

The necessity of parents getting informed about this arising new trend of explicit lyrics in music was expressed by Susan Baker. Speaking also on behalf of PMRC’s president Pam Howar and treasurer Sally Nevius, Baker highlighted the importance of parents taking measures against such harmful influence on their children as well as the urge to impose a certain amount of restraint on the music industry (11). In an effort to prove how deeply ingrained music is in adolescents’ everyday lives, she describes how teenagers accompany their daily tasks with listening to music and, for that reason, how immense the influence could be on them. In an effort to accentuate the seriousness of the matter of explicit lyrical content, Baker makes a comparison between songs popular in the 1950s and contemporary songs at the time. She points out that there is no longer much subtlety in the method sexual acts are described in songs. It is ironic at this point that Baker failed to recognize that the songs she was referring to had also been targets of censorship in the past. What caused further distress for the PMRC was the rise in popularity and sales of record albums containing explicit lyrics, which they deemed could be responsible for the rise in teenage pregnancies, rape and suicide statistics (11). However, Baker failed to provide any evidence or studies showing a causal link between popular music and pregnancy, crime or suicide rates. For the committee, the rise in the statistics was already alarming enough and prodded them to find someone or something to blame. As a result, the incidental growth of the popularity of rock music, which did not fit their tastes, would be a perfect scapegoat.

In the defense of Ms Baker came Dr. Stuessy, who firmly believed that several rock bands promoted suicide through their songs. Using his expertise on music, he made connections between listening to music and how it affects one's demeanor, and how 'harmful' music can lead to destructive behavior. Ozzy Osbourne's song "Suicide Solution" was used in his testimony as proof that glorification of suicide exists in rock music. Osbourne's condemned song was actually written to portray the dangers of alcoholism and to show his own personal struggle with alcohol abuse. Reading the lyrics one can only see that the only reference to suicide is the "slow" one related to alcohol: "wine is fine, but whiskey's quicker Suicide is slow with liqueur" (Osbourne). The song also worked as a tribute to Bon Scott, AC/DC's first frontman who died due to alcohol poisoning. Unfortunately, the wildly inaccurate interpretation of the song by the PMRC's advocates lasted long enough to become a case for the trial of Ozzy Osbourne. Along with Osbourne's song, Dr. Stuessy also mentioned Blue Oyster Cult's 'Don't Fear the Reaper' and AC/DC's 'Shoot to Thrill' as additional examples. Once again, the misinterpretation of the songs is discovered if someone takes a closer look at their lyrics. "Shoot to Thrill" is a playful metaphor for a man's sexual climax and has no suicidal references whatsoever. Dr. Stuessy said in his testimony to the Senate: "just last week in Centerpoint, a small Texas town, a young man took his life while listening to the music of AC/DC. He was not the first" (*Record Labeling* 12). He implied at that point that the music itself gave that young man the motive to take his own life. As discussed in the previous chapter, the misinterpretation of rock songs was quite common among cultural conservatives as they failed to detect the double meanings of the songs. Most of the time, they did not bother to even read the actual lyrics as they had already condemned the songs mostly due to interpreting their titles literally.

Even the times that they did read the lyrics, they would often take them out of context and use them to serve their purpose. Such was the case with songs seen as promoting bondage, rape and sadomasochism such as "Under the Blade" by Twisted Sister. Dee Snider, frontman of the band, provided the committee with the full lyrics of the song in an effort to prove the PMRC's accusations false. John Denver also showed his concern about the misinterpretation of song lyrics and mentioned his personal experience with his song "Rocky Mountain High". Denver had written the song in order to express his mix of emotions when he visited the Rocky Mountains in Colorado but the song was misjudged as an ode to drugs and was banned from



radio stations (65). Pointing to his unpleasant experience with misinterpretation and censorship Denver tried to make a statement about the dangers of imposing limits on artistic expression.

Further on in his testimony Denver suggested that restricting freedom of expression may result in an even more dangerous scenario. He stated that there is a major difference in practising discipline in a close-knit environment such as a family, but when this is practised by “a self-appointed watchdog of public morals, [it] is suppression and will not be tolerated in a democratic society” (65). He also related this form of suppression to the practises of Nazi Germany (65). What Denver implied was that if there were to be any form of censorship on the part of the PMRC, then this would constitute a breach of the First Amendment of the Constitution and could prove to be toxic for a free society.

Denver also succeeded in pointing out that the rise in suicide statistics could be attributed to alternate reasons other than alleged harmful music influences. He suggested that parents should take responsibility for the well-being of their children by recognizing and helping with their children’s issues and fears. Having talked to youngsters himself Denver mentioned that the youth’s struggles stem from their frustration about the future and uncertainty about the world’s economical and political status (66). He indicated that these inner-struggles led some of the adolescents to take their own lives. However, he believed that, if the issues were addressed in a proper manner, there would be a brighter future for all mankind (66). Therefore, Denver’s conviction was to deal with the root of the problem rather than merely the symptoms, in this case, the rise in the suicide statistics. As a strong advocate against censorship, he insisted that no form of restriction be imposed on records throughout his testimony and insisted that there could not be a music form powerful enough to influence youngsters perilously, the moment effective communication between parents and children took place.

Another firm advocate against censorship was Frank Zappa, who condemned the actions of the PMRC. Like Denver, Zappa had also been a victim of censorship in the past, which made him the most passionate anti-censorship supporter in the Senate Hearing of 1985. He zealously defended the artists’ rights to freedom of expression and was highly concerned with some senators’ inclinations to passing some type of legislation concerning this matter. Senator Exon confirmed that he would consider some form of regulation “recognizing the problems with the right of free expression

[.] unless the free enterprise system [...] see fit to clean up [their] act” (52). In an effort to appeal to the public Zappa cited the First Amendment to the Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

He intended to highlight the danger of infringement of the Constitution in case legislation was passed. In addition to that, Zappa attacked the PMRC by characterizing their proposal as an “ill-conceived piece of nonsense”, which would not only not provide any real benefits to children but also breach the rights of adults (52). Zappa also pointed out that the PMRC’s concern about ‘porn rock’ is merely a distraction from the fact that they associated with the RIAA “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” (53). Zappa speculated that the bosses of the record companies decided to benefit from artistic creation sacrificing their own artists’ rights. He said “the PMRC has created a lot of confusion with improper comparisons between song lyrics, videos, record packaging, radio broadcasting, and live performances. These are all different mediums and the people who work in them have the right to conduct their business without trade-restraining legislation” (53).

Moreover, he detected the hidden interests behind the façade of a group posing to be concerned parents while their actions indicated personal preferences instead. He pointed out that “the establishment of a rating system, voluntary or otherwise, opens the door to an endless parade of moral quality control programs based on things certain Christians do not like” (54). At this point, it is obvious that the PMRC’s preoccupations concerning rock music mostly come from a clash of moral beliefs. Zappa did not fail to detect this and raise it as an issue in front of the Committee.

However, he did not denounce entirely the proposal of printing lyrics on the sleeve albums but remarked that it would cost money to receive the rights to publishing them. He deemed this solution fairer than a subjective rating proposed by the PMRC which could destroy an artist’s reputation and would violate the rights and contract of the artist involved. Ultimately, Zappa wanted to avoid any type of government action that would interfere with freedom of speech and expression and

gave the San Antonio, Texas instance as an example of detrimental actions towards artists. He recalled that San Antonio tried to impose ratings similar to those suggested by the PMRC to live concerts even though the city attorney regarded the effort as unconstitutional (57). Zappa concluded that such actions could stigmatize an artist and for that he pointed out the need for parents to take responsibility for what their children listen to or watch.

Following the testimonies of anti-censorship advocates Denver and Zappa came Dee Snider, the only representative among the performers targeted directly by the PMRC on their list. Since the accusations were also personal, Snider initially addressed the committee by giving information about his lifestyle and beliefs. He stated that he was the lead singer of the band Twisted Sister, which is musically categorized as heavy metal, a married man with a son of his own and a Christian following Christian principles (73). He also mentioned that he did not use any narcotics or alcohol. Apart from his outward appearance, which seemed extreme to the majority, Snider attempted to draw similarities between him and the members of the PMRC and PTA, as both parties share the responsibilities of parenthood and the beliefs stemming from Christianity. However, his primary goal was to address the issues that affected him and fellow artists the most, since his utmost concern was the labeling proposal and the incorrect lyrical interpretation of his music. Snider dismissed the PMRC's labeling proposition as well as Head of RIAA, Gortikov's suggestion for a voluntary labeling system on the part of the industry (73). Such labeling system would criticize subjectively the works of several artists, which could in turn have a major effect on their career.

Furthermore, Snider wanted to use his personal experience to portray how detrimental inaccurate lyrical interpretation could be and how in many cases it could lead to what he described as "character assassination" (73). Several bands were targeted by the PMRC for supposedly promoting the use of violence, drug or alcohol abuse and/or occult practises. Among those bands was Twisted Sister, whose song "Under the Blade" was characterized as sexually deviant and whose video clip "We're Not Gonna Take It" was marked for advocating violence. These false perceptions originated from statements written in a letter by Tipper Gore earlier that year. Gore's convictions about the band were later reproduced in several newspapers and magazines. Snider condemned Gore for using "Under the Blade" song's lyrics out of context and misquoting them to present proof for what she perceived as

sadomasochism. As Snider points out, Twisted Sister always had their songs' lyrics available in the inner sleeve of their albums (73). In addition to that, he was adamant that the song was written for one of his band mates when he was about to undergo surgery in order to describe "the fear surgery instills in people" (73). Twisted Sister's song was one of the most prominent instances of lyrics taken out of context by the PMRC and was frequently used to promote their agenda against heavy metal. Unfortunately, this misuse of lyrics--along with its wrong interpretation--was reproduced repeatedly by the media and was in turn widely accepted by the public.

In his testimony Snider continued to provide evidence of misjudgement of his band's work. "We're Not Gonna Take It" was listed in the 'Filthy Fifteen' list as a song with violent content. However, by reading the lyrics one will find that there are no references to anything violent but, on the contrary, one will find it is a harmless, but powerful and energetic song. One of the verses goes "We've got the right to choose and there ain't [sic] no way we'll lose it, this is our life, this is our song. We'll fight the powers that be just, don't pick our destiny 'cause you don't know us, you don't belong" (*We're Not Gonna Take It*). The song brings out a youthful energy and a sense of disobedience to authority, which is a common element in heavy metal music. What seemed to aggravate the PMRC was most probably the visual representation of the song rather than the lyrics themselves. The video showed a family whose son was into Twisted Sister's music and when confronted by his father about his future, the son responded that he wants to "rock" (*We're Not Gonna Take It*). Then, the son is transformed into the stage persona of Dee Snider who, along with his bandmates, play games at the expense of the father in a cartoonish way. Snider clarified that the video "was simply meant to be a cartoon with human actors playing variations on the Roadrunner/Wile E. Coyote theme" and that "after each catastrophe the villain suffers through, in the next sequence he reappears unharmed by any previous attack" (*Record Labeling* 74).

As part of his testimony Snider also addressed the comment made by Tipper Gore on television concerning the band's presumably offensive merchandise. Discussing the alleged harm heavy metal presented to the public Gore stated that although this type of music constituted only a small fraction among music genres, it did, however, become more and more popular. "You look at even the t-shirts that kids wear and you see Twisted Sister and a woman in handcuffs sort of spread-eagled" (qtd. in *Record Labeling* 74). Snider refuted passionately that any such merchandise

existed, as he insisted that his music always avoided any type of sexism, and instead promoted inclusivity for both males and females alike. Gore's lack of research in this matter indicated that members of the PMRC often used scare tactics and misinformation to instill fear amongst uninformed parents. As a result, the repetition of such information proved to be harmful for the band's reputation, as Snider also illustrated. He mentioned that he encountered several children whose parents would not allow them to listen to Twisted Sister anymore due to the misinformation the media reported (74).

Snider was not, however, completely against the family values the PMRC was promoting through its campaign. He considered that the responsibility for these values lies in the hands of the parents themselves and not in the government or any type of interest group. Thus, he encouraged parents to get further informed about the music their children listened to and to read the lyrics of the songs, so that they would have a clearer view of what is appropriate for them. Nevertheless, Senator Gore deemed this idea as an "unrealistic expectation from parents" (79). Regarding government regulation, Senator Hollings mentioned the FCC's control over acts of profanity on television and how it did not pose a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution, to which Snider responded that there was a major difference between public airwaves and the privacy of one's home (76). Subsequently, addressing the ill-informed accusations against him Snider made an effort to demonstrate the dangers that censorship would cause in case freedom of artistic expression was marked by non-objective labeling.

When the Senate Hearing came to an end, there was a sense of victory for the defenders of free speech and expression. However, the influential power of the PMRC was highly underestimated. The whole controversy around the genre of heavy metal carried on to what Binder termed as the "five year debate", during which pressure on the recording industries became even more severe and persecution of the artists of the genre continued unhindered (758). Even before the Senate Hearing the parental interest groups had managed to have MTV cut back on heavy metal videos and later convinced the majority of the record labels to place a warning sticker on the album covers containing explicit material. The RIAA conceded and by November 1985, Zucchini reported that there were already a number of albums with the sticker for PARENTAL GUIDANCE: EXPLICIT LYRICS on display at record stores (*Rock Censorship*). Frank Zappa had already questioned the motives of the RIAA, which

quickly succumbed to the demands of the PMRC due to their interest in introducing the Blank Tape Tax legislation, a private tax introduced by the government that would profit the record industry by collecting royalties on blank tapes. Incidentally, the committee that held the Labeling Hearing “was also in charge of the tape legislation” (Weinstein 267). The implementation of the offensive lyrics sticker in 1985 was the first milestone the PMRC reached and by 1990 the black and white sticker of Parental Advisory was standardized and has been used ever since to distinguish albums with explicit content (Christe 123).

The advocates of the PMRC insisted that labeling did not constitute censorship. However, when the sticker was introduced, several major retail stores such as Wal-Mart refused to display any of the records carrying a warning label (124). This had a devastating effect on several artists whose work was labelled as offensive. Weinstein mentions that many of them who continued to produce what was characterized as explicit found themselves soon without contracts, as the record labels deemed them unprofitable (267). The fear spread fast among accused artists while cultural conservatives continued to exert pressure on the record industry.

Unfortunately, the amount of power the moral watchgroups exerted managed to have an effect even on the careers of individuals. Among them were Frank Zappa and Dee Snider, who were immediately targeted since they took a stand against censorship on September 19, 1985. Zappa’s album *Jazz from Hell* was labelled with a warning sticker and was not sold in big record stores. Funnily, the album was only instrumental, but it is believed that Zappa’s conflict with the PMRC played a major role in the record company applying the label on his album (*Censorship Incidents*). Similarly, Dee Snider and his band were also met with opposition. He believes that Twisted Sister’s 1985 video “Be Chrool to Your Scuel” was intentionally discarded by MTV in order to please the PMRC supporters (Christe 124).

The battle against heavy metal did not stop at attacking the apparent affiliates of anti-censorship but evolved into a carefully planned tactic to eliminate the genre altogether. This was most evident in cases of legislative proposals on a state level at the time after the Labeling Hearing. There were numerous incidents of people trying to pass state legislation restricting or even banning artists whose work was considered somehow offensive. This included albums and, many times, live concerts as well. In 1990, a bill was introduced in Louisiana that suggested strict prohibition of “the sale, exhibition or distribution of lyrics harmful to minors” and failure to abide by the law

could result in a \$5,000 fine (Weinstein 268). The bill eventually did not pass, as it was met with serious opposition from the artistic community; however, obstacles kept coming for several heavy metal bands years after the Senate Hearing. Weinstein recalls an incident involving Skid Row's vocalist, Sebastian Bach, who was arrested on stage for allegedly "thrusting his pelvis towards the crowd" (qtd. in 268). Another episode occurred in 1989 with the cancellation of one of Metallica's concerts in Notre Dame University due to 'bad publicity' and the low turn-out for their concert in Iowa, due to the refusal of local radio stations to publicize the event (268). Maryland Delegate Judith Toth tried to pass legislation "aimed at amending the state's obscenity statutes to include records, tapes, and laser discs" (*Censorship Incidents*). Zappa once again defended artistic expression by denouncing this bill as unconstitutional. On the other hand, Toth had the conviction that harmful lyrics could cause 'antisocial behavior' and therefore government regulation was necessary to control rock music ("Parental Advisory" 35). Fortunately for the artists the bill did not pass.

Apart from efforts to push for government action against heavy metal bands, there were several private actions that range from mild to extreme. Due to the wide appeal the PMRC and PTA had on parents, several of them deterred their children from listening to bands that were stigmatized by the moral watchgroups and also forbade them from wearing or buying any heavy metal merchandise. Several school officials followed the same principles as well by banning heavy metal T-shirts from the appropriate dress code (Weinstein 268). The general sentiment of hatred towards the misunderstood genre had an impact on sales of heavy metal albums, concert tickets and paraphernalia. Weinstein remarks how "some ministers even tried to 'demetalize' fans in the same fashion as people who had been members of religious cults in the 1970s" (268).

A number of organizations even tried to profit from this heated situation providing some kind of relief for stressed parents and confused youngsters. Christie recalls the establishment of a "pay-per-minute telephone hotline" by the PMRC that aided callers with information concerning Satanism and provided a "voice-mail menu" listing bands with lewd lyrics (124). Following the path carved by the PMRC religious fundamentalists disclosed obscene lyrics in rock music to draw audiences and benefit from them. One of them was Jerry Falwell. Falwell exploited the misinterpretation of rock songs' lyrics to raise awareness and to launch a fund-raising organization, which had a hidden political agenda. His goal was to use his earnings

for “political operations such as reversing the legality of abortion” and “replacing the theory of evolution in the schools with biblical creationism” (125). Falwell’s business savvy inspired other religious fundamentalists to invent similar schemes that could be of advantage to themselves and their organizations.

It was not long before these fundamentalists thought of an alternative to conventional rock music in order to control another portion of consumers. The invention of Christian metal was the product of a few religious leaders who targeted primarily young audiences and whose purpose was to show parents that there was a moral substitute for the condemned genre of heavy metal. Christian metal is characterized as an “‘antimetal’ metal with the inherent musical meanings of the original but [with] an evangelical message” (Weinstein 269). The shows of the Christian metal bands were similar to the original ones with the difference that they engaged the audience with displays of faith in Christ. One of the most accepted bands in the mainstream is Stryper, whose songs’ lyrics often employ Christian symbolism with its traditional interpretation. They became famous with songs such as “To Hell with the Devil.” Even Christian metal bands, however, did not escape criticism altogether. In an interview with Stryper’s lead vocalist Michael Sweet, Christe refers to the controversy surrounding the 1986 album *To Hell with the Devil* because of its imagery on the album cover. The original cover showed “an angel ripping a pentagram necklace off Satan’s neck”, but some people were offended by the image of the pentagram, thus, the band decided to release the album with a “plain black cover with just the Stryper logo on it” (qtd. in 122).

Meanwhile, hidden behind the political debate about heavy metal music and its influence the RIAA managed to push for the passing of the 1992 Audio Home Recording Act. This legislation permitted the establishment of a private tax on blank cassettes allowing the majority of the profits to go to the record companies (Christe 124). RIAA’s success in this matter is assumed to be due to their leniency to succumb to the PMRC’s demands during the Senate Hearing of 1985. Zappa had already indicated that scenario in his testimony in front of the Committee by highlighting the interest of the record companies to profit at the expense of the artists’ rights (*Labeling Hearing* 61).

Most importantly, the legacy of the Senate Hearing of 1985 was not merely the beginning of a continuous debate over censorship in music but also the starting point for a number of misconstrued ideas surrounding the genre of heavy metal, which



are still largely accepted to this day. Binder discusses how the public embraced the fundamentalist's rhetoric that explicit lyrics of any form could have disastrous effects on children's behaviors (758). She calls this the "corruption frame" in the sense that it became widely accepted that the music itself could corrupt young listeners (758). This theme inspired in turn the notion that music can lead young people to the ultimate form of corruption, meaning suicide. In relation to the corruption frame, another type of rhetoric became prominent at the time of the Hearing and that was "the duty of parents and other responsible adults to protect America's youth from offensive lyrics" (758). Binder defines this as the "protection frame". The assumption that explicit lyrics could have such a powerful influence on children which could lead them to take their own life, created the idea that heavy metal bands may be held accountable for one's death by suicide. A third concept adopted by a substantial portion of the public was the danger someone 'corrupted' by music could pose to society (758). Although Binder mentions that this term was rarely used to describe the type of behavior in relation to heavy metal music, it was used, nonetheless, to portray the danger society would face if someone were afflicted by heavy metal's presumed Satanic influences (758). Ultimately, although the community of 'metalheads' refrained from getting involved in the political discussion to avoid further persecution, "the taint of misunderstanding would continue to plague the music," leading to a number of controversial court cases involving heavy metal artists, as we will examine in the next chapter (Christe 125).

## Heavy Metal on Trial: The Cases of Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest

### "Suicide Solution"

Wine is fine, but whiskey's quicker  
Suicide is slow with liqueur  
Take a bottle, drown your sorrows  
Then it floods away tomorrows  
Away tomorrows  
Evil thoughts and evil doings  
Cold, alone you hang in ruins  
Thought that you'd escape the reaper  
You can't escape the master keeper  
'Cos you feel life's unreal, and you're living a lie  
Such a shame, who's to blame, and you're wondering why  
Then you ask from your cask, is there life after birth  
What you saw can mean hell on this earth  
Hell on this earth  
Now you live inside a bottle  
The reaper's travelling at full throttle  
It's catching you, but you don't see  
The reaper's you, and the reaper is me  
Breaking laws, knocking doors  
But there's no one at home  
Made your bed, rest your head  
But you lie there and moan  
Where to hide, suicide is the only way out  
Don't you know what it's really about  
Wine is fine, but whiskey's quicker  
Suicide is slow with liqueur  
Take a bottle, drown your sorrows  
Then it floods away tomorrows

While the heated debate surrounding explicit lyrics remained strong after the PMRC Senate Hearing, nobody could foresee the next blow the heavy metal community would take. It was only four months after the Labeling Hearing when Ozzy Osbourne received a lawsuit blaming him for the death of 19-year-old John Daniel McCollum. McCollum had committed suicide on October 26, 1984 while listening to one of Osbourne's albums. The sight of the adolescent, still wearing his headphones while lying lifeless on the bed, shook his parents and also the public who later saw the image released by the police (*Wilkening Lawsuit*). Osbourne was surprised to find that he was being accused of being an accomplice to the suicide of McCollum because of the lyrics found in the song "Suicide Solution", which, according to McCollum's parents, were a "proximate cause" for their son taking his own life (qtd. in *Wilkening*).

Accusing a heavy metal band for a troubled individual's actions was not something new. In the years prior to the Labeling Hearing, heavy metal became associated with two famous criminals. Richard Ramirez, often coined as the "Night Stalker", was a vicious serial killer in the early 1980s whose nickname was given after the 1979 AC/DC song "Night Prowler" (Christe 308). The song is about an eerie character that slips into beds at night. Although Ramirez committed heinous crimes, he did not have any real connection with heavy metal music but for his nickname. Yet, AC/DC received criticism after a baseball cap was found in one of Ramirez's crime scenes with reporters suggesting that it was AC/DC's song "Night Prowler" which inspired Ramirez to commit the crime (McPadden). Research later showed that Ramirez was actually experiencing mental health problems from a young age and was mentally manipulated by his uncle, who was also a psychopath who had committed atrocious crimes in the past (308). During the Satanism scare phase, one figure became really prominent and that was Ricky Kasso, also known as "The Say You Love Satan Killer". Kasso had killed a teenager in the woods under the influence of LSD. What made heavy metal relevant to that case was that he was wearing an AC/DC T-shirt at the time he was arrested, which also matched the several graffiti of heavy metal bands found in playgrounds where he and his friends used to gather (McPadden). The pictures of him in that T-shirt swept the media and although the killer's motive was ultimately drug-related, there was no hesitation to condemn heavy metal once again. Insinuating that heavy metal motivated these sick individuals to commit crimes was absurd. Similarly in that fashion, Christe mentions how the

Beatles were accused of influencing Charles Manson through rock music for his series of atrocious crimes in the 1960s (308).

The prior attacks on heavy metal and rock music in general made it much easier for special attorneys and prosecutors to take heavy metal bands to court, especially after the success of the PMRC pushed their anti-metal agenda on to the public. The PMRC advocates had the conviction that heavy metal was a threat to the individual and society and, amongst all the hysteria, people started believing that artists who created this music could be held liable for criminal actions or self-inflicted damage incited by a heavy metal fan (Christe 311). Demonstration of such belief was the accusation of Ozzy Osbourne for John McCollum's suicide.

Initially, the grieving parents were oblivious to what led their son to commit suicide, since they insisted that he did not show any signs of depression. "[He's] a perfectly normal kid there, who really doesn't show any signs of any depression at all, and happy and all of a sudden, six hours [later], he's dead. No one [could] explain it, the only thing we know is he was listening to this music" said McCollum's father in an interview on television in 1986 (qtd. in Wilkening). It is baffling that the parents decided to take action against their son's favorite artist. What presumably led them to make that decision were their daughter's words. In the same TV interview, the mother of McCollum said that she was constantly thinking what could be the reason that John committed suicide and when she asked her daughter, she responded that "it was the music he was listening to" (Wilkening). Apparently, the observation of the daughter about her brother's musical preferences created the idea that heavy metal music could be responsible for this young man losing his life. After all, the supposed harmful effect this genre of music could have on young people was becoming a widely accepted new trend, especially after all the publicity the PMRC Senate Hearing got nationwide.

As discussed previously, the common strategy of cultural conservatives was to condemn heavy metal music by misinterpreting the lyrics, reading them literally or taking them out of context. This was another such case, where the McCollums somehow chose to ignore the first two verses of the song and jumped to the second chorus where it read "Made your bed, rest your head / But you lie there and moan / Where to hide? Suicide is the only way out/ Don't you know what it's really about" (Osbourne "Suicide Solution"). It is obvious that when these lyrics are taken out of context, they can be completely misinterpreted and for someone who is not aware of

the song's background, it might cause speculations that the song actually talks about contemplating suicide. In the McCollum's case, what built up the prosecution's evidence further was that the record *Blizzard of Ozz* featuring the song and *Diary of a Madman* were found on the family stereo and they knew Osbourne was John's favourite artist. Therefore, they assumed that the song and his love for his idol were what ultimately encouraged him to end his life.

The McCollums quickly found support among attorneys who held the same convictions about heavy metal. One of them was Thomas T. Anderson, who also appeared on television to condemn Ozzy Osbourne by branding him as "an evil demon who brainwashed his fans" (*Behind the Music*). Anderson also indicated how Osbourne's fans used "the sign of the devil" and shouted "Ozzy" repeatedly in his concerts in an effort to highlight the amount of influence he had on his fans. In the interview, Anderson exclaimed that "it is a felony" that Osbourne assisted in the young man's suicide (*Behind the Music*). It is not accidental that Anderson was a born again Christian and that he was a member of a campaign against heavy metal, which expressed that there was a causal link between the genre and the rise in suicide rates. "I've been studying this problem for a year", he said on another interview in 1986, "and there is a trend, a frightening trend...and [I believe] that we have in this case opposing forces of Satan and God" (*Heavy Metal Suicide*). It is, therefore, not far-fetched to deduce that he had personal convictions about the genre when he took up the McCollum case.

The case was filed originally on October 25, 1985, only a month after the controversy surrounding censorship and the Senate Hearing, and then again as an amended version on December 4 of the same year. The plaintiffs accused Osbourne and CBS records and "alleged claims which were based on theories of negligence, product liability and intentional misconduct" (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). The prosecution insisted that Osbourne's objective with his songs was to intentionally cause harm on his fans. Tom Anderson stated that they could not prove that Osbourne actually wanted John to take his own life, but claimed that the artist and the record company "knew that [Osbourne's] record would encourage or promote suicide" (*Heavy Metal Suicide*).

The plaintiffs emphasized the relationship Osbourne had with his fans and highlighted the amount of potentially detrimental influence that could stem from the idolization of Osbourne, who was known to the public as a sinister rock and roller.

They presented arguments about how Osbourne's personal struggles with alcohol and addiction could eventually pose a threat to frustrated teenagers, who already have to deal with problems of self-identity and the difficult transition time at that stage of life (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). They alleged that "this specific target group was extremely susceptible to the external influence and directions from a cult figure such as Osbourne who had become a role model and leader for many of them" (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). What the plaintiffs described as destructive impact on youngsters were not only the acts of Osbourne as a person, but also the representations of him as an artist and performer. Ozzy Osbourne became widely famous after the notorious act of biting a live bat's head off in one of his shows. Although he stated numerous times that the feat was a mistake, as he had expected the bat to be fake, it has remained, nonetheless, as one of the most memorable acts of Osbourne. The themes and iconography of his music had also been highly scrutinized over the years, with Christian fundamentalists accusing him many times of devil worshipping, mockery of Christian morals and fascination with death. The prosecution also used such arguments to portray that Osbourne's music operated in a fashion that it presented life to be filled "with nothing but despair and hopelessness" and that "suicide [was] not only acceptable, but desirable" (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). Therefore, they supported that Osbourne and CBS records were aware that these messages were promoted to the public and, nonetheless, pursued to profit from them.

As mentioned earlier, big part of the McCollums' case against Osbourne was the lyrics found in the songs from albums *Blizzard of Ozz* and *Diary of a Madman*. They suggested that the songs' lyrics encouraged John to commit suicide, mainly the song "Suicide Solution", but possibly intentionally neglected to mention that John did not listen to either of them around the time of his death. The two albums were found by the parents on the family stereo only after John's death. It is essential to specify that John was actually listening to the album "Speak of the Devil" before he committed suicide in his room, to which the prosecution did not "express criticism, or even discussion, of any of the songs contained in the album" (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). However, the prosecution focused on the intention of Osbourne and CBS records to harm the public by releasing these albums and, therefore, aiding vulnerable human beings like John to commit suicide. Due to these motives, the plaintiffs requested the protection of free speech under the First Amendment not to be applicable to the defendants and determined that defendants should be "liable for

punitive damages” (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). On the other hand, Osbourne clarified several times the meaning of the song “Suicide Solution” and deemed the situation to be a “terrible case of misinterpretation” and to the accusations against his performance on stage he added that what he did was “just a form of art, a form an entertainment” (*Heavy Metal Suicide*). In addition, Osbourne and CBS records’ attorneys feared the implications a potential victory would have on freedom of artistic expression and expected they would be disastrous for the industry.

After the initial charges against Osbourne and CBS were dropped, the McCollums’ attorneys filed a new suit alleging the existence of hidden messages in the song “Suicide Solution” that prompted listeners to “get the gun and shoot, shoot, shoot” (“Suit Alleges 'Hidden' Lyrics”). The plaintiffs claimed that what actually prompted John to take his own life were ‘masked’ lyrics found during an instrumental break of the song and that they were not available in the printed sleeve of the album cover. This new allegation was similar to previous theories of Christian fundamentalists, who supported the existence of hidden messages in records played backwards of several rock bands such as Led Zeppelin. Furthermore, plaintiffs alleged that the ‘masked’ lyrics are not easily detectable, as they are sung at “1 1/2 times normal speech rate” and that the music of Osbourne constitutes “a ‘hemisync’ process of sound waves which impact the listener's mental state” (*McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). In this case, the prosecution argued that the defendants were responsible for cultivating the idea of suicide in John’s mind and in that method, assisted him in committing it.

The defendants’ response to these allegations was that they were absurd. Osbourne’s lawyer, Michael O’Connor, stated that his client denied the existence of any hidden lyrics and Douglas Abendroth defending CBS records said the record company “unequivocally does not place anything in its records in the nature of an intentional hum” (“Suit Alleges 'Hidden' Lyrics”). The plaintiffs’ aim was to exempt Osbourne from the protection of free speech under the First Amendment on the grounds that he had a malicious intent towards others. They cited the exception clause, which reads that “speech which is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action, and which is likely to incite or produce such action, is outside the scope of First Amendment protection” (qtd. in *McCollum v. CBS, Inc.*). However, the defence declared that there were no such intentions on the part of the artist and the record company.

Ultimately, Los Angeles Superior Court Judge John L. Cole once again dismissed the claims of the plaintiffs, as there was no clear-cut evidence of Osbourne's music inciting thoughts about suicide. As the defence pointed out, the plaintiffs focused only on one part of the song ignoring the verse that demonstrated that the word 'solution' in the song translated as a liquid and not a way out. Apart from the fact that John McCollum did not actually listen to the particular song "Suicide Solution" around the time of his death, there was no further evidence to indicate that John could hear or even understand the 'hidden' lyrics suggested by the prosecution. Since Judge Cole determined that the defendants did not have the intent to cause any harm through the lyrics, he deemed Osbourne's work was entitled to protection under the First Amendment. Therefore, neither Osbourne nor CBS were to be held accountable for any damages the plaintiffs suggested and plaintiffs were not entitled to financial compensation. "We have to look very closely at the First Amendment and the chilling effect that would be had if these words were held to be accountable" Cole commented about the McCollum case ("Suit Dismissed").

Although the outcome of the trial was once again a victory for anti-censorship advocates, the trial of Ozzy Osbourne was merely one of the suits that followed the PMRC's tactics, with prosecutors seeking to blame artists for individuals' actions. The efforts of the McCollums' lawyers to frame Osbourne for the suicide of John did not go unnoticed by the public which was already gazing critically at heavy metal bands. However, as in many cases similar to the "Suicide Solution" trial, parents failed to recognize what was really occupying their troubled teens. A psychologist hired by McCollums' own attorney to assess John's mental state said that the parents "missed the warning signs" (*Behind the Music*). He also revealed that John had drinking problems and had dropped out of school in the age of sixteen; signs which may point to depression and, consequently, the reason he might have decided to take his own life. Nevertheless, the stigmatization of heavy metal continued well into the 1990s, when once again another major heavy metal band was accused of encouraging its fans to commit suicide.

It all started when Judas Priest were handed a court order during one of its concerts in Nevada in 1990, which accused the band for the death of Raymond Belknap and the attempted suicide of his friend James 'Jay' Vance. Five years earlier on December 23, 1985, the two teenagers went on a drinking binge, smoking marijuana and listening to the 1978 Judas Priest album *Stained Class*, when they



found themselves in a playground and shouted ‘Do It, Do It’ before shooting themselves in their face with a shotgun (*The Judas Priest Trial*). Raymond died instantly, but when it was Vance’s turn, he said that “there was so much blood [he] could barely handle it” but went on to shoot himself, but although seriously injured and disfigured, he survived (Eyewitness). The distressed parents could not accept that their children took the step to take their own life, and oblivious to the mental issues lying behind their troubled youngsters’ minds pointed the finger to Judas Priest. Following the years-long propaganda of the cultural conservatives that heavy metal posed a threat to the well-being of children, the parents sought to relieve their consciousness from blame by placing it on the heavy metal artists (Weinstein 254-5).

Although several similar cases were dismissed by courts all over America, the court in Reno, Nevada allowed such case to proceed to trial. Weinstein mentions that originally the lawsuit blamed Judas Priest for the lyrics of “Beyond the Realms of Death” found in the album *Stained Class*; however, when the plaintiffs’ lawyers became aware that similar cases were dismissed due to the protection under the First Amendment, they changed strategy (255). Their new strategy involved finding subliminal messages in the song “Better than You Better than Me”, which was also part of the 1978 Judas Priest *Stained Class* album. As with the case of Ozzy Osbourne, Judas Priest was also accused of placing subliminal messages in the record in order to illicit the desire to commit suicide in their listeners. Judge Jerry Whitehead allowed the case to go to trial because it was not about the lyrics of the songs but about the “whole concept of subliminal persuasion”, since subliminal messages were not protected by the First Amendment (*The Judas Priest Trial*). The prosecution charged the band and their record company, CBS, for “manufacturing and marketing a faulty product, negligence and intentional and reckless misconduct” (Rohter).

One of the most essential points in this case was the alleged existence of subliminal messages in the *Stained Class* album. The focus shifted from the lyrics to the attempt to discover such messages and investigate whether they influence behaviour. As I mentioned earlier, the youngsters shouted “Do It” before committing the suicide act, inciting, thus, the idea to the prosecution that what prompted them to “do it” were hidden messages found in the record. Self-proclaimed subliminal expert Dr Wilson Bryan Key made an effort to show the public how subliminal messages work. In an interview on television, he played the Judas Priest record and indicated where the phrase “Do It” is heard in the recording. In addition, he claimed that the

phrase was heard repeatedly through “Better than You Better than Me” and that “each time it increased in stereophone [sic] intensity “Do It, Do It, DO IT” (*The Judas Priest Trial*). Timothy Post, attorney for the mother of James Vance, said that in this case, the fact that lyrics were provided in the album did not constitute a defense, since it was the “non-speech element, subliminal messages, which [was] the basis for the liability” (“The Verdict on Subliminality”). Although the plaintiffs did not make any direct accusations on heavy metal this time, they nonetheless implied that the existence of such harmful masked lyrics is found in heavy metal music. Post expressed that it was the music that brainwashed the two teenagers and made them feel compelled to take their own lives (*The Judas Priest Trial*). Post felt that it was time the music industry and heavy metal were held accountable for the harm they caused onto young impressionable minds. He claimed that “mind intrusion is the worst kind of invasion of privacy” and alleged that by holding Judas Priest responsible did not constitute a form of censorship, but rather a warning to exercise restraint for the sort of content heavy metal bands put in their albums (“The Verdict on Subliminality”).

The plaintiffs found plenty of support among people who already had the conviction that heavy metal had a detrimental effect on young people. Apart from Key, youth counsellor, Darlene Pettinicchio said she would “testify against heavy metal” because, according to her, “it sends the wrong message to impressionable young people that in death there is power, [...] there is control” (*The Judas Priest Trial*). The prosecution also hired experts to demonstrate the existence of subliminal messages in the album. One of them was William Nickloff Jr., who identified as an audio expert, but it was later discovered that he was actually a marine biologist. He played the songs in the court room several times changing the tempo, pausing or reversing it and claiming that he heard the phrases “Do It”, “F\*\*\* the Lord” or “Try Suicide” at several intervals (*Subliminal Judgement*). The existence of hidden messages in the lyrics supported psychologist Howard Shevrin of the University of Michigan, who made an effort to illustrate how powerful subliminal messages were because they attacked the subconscious of one’s mind and, thus, were more dangerous (Moore). Shevrin had conducted extended research on subliminal messages and believed they could affect the psyche of an individual even to the point that the individual would be persuaded to end their life. While there was some logic in the possibility of such messages being influential, Shevrin failed to provide the court with

any credible scientific evidence (Moore). However, what made the case stronger against the heavy metal group was that their own fan, James Vance, who was still alive after the shooting at the time, claimed it was Judas Priest's music that was responsible for their behavior the night the suicide pact took place (*The Judas Priest Trial*).

Meanwhile, the defense highlighted the troublesome past of the youths involved. Sue Ellen Fulstone, attorney for Judas Priest and CBS records, claimed that the two teenagers had already been involved in criminal behaviour and were part of problematic families long before they came in contact with heavy metal. Rohter mentioned that the teenagers were "high school dropouts with criminal records and both had problems holding jobs. Each also came from a family with a history of domestic violence and child abuse and had received counseling" (Rohter). Thus, it is much more likely that the unfortunate youngsters were cultivating suicidal thoughts long before they were introduced to the music of Judas Priest.

Moreover, the defense also debunked the notion that subliminal messages affect behaviour. Weinstein points out that the prosecution did not have any credible academic research to support the notion that hidden messages affect behavior. She mentions the years-long investigation of psychology professor of York University, Ontario, who had the conviction, that "there's good evidence [subliminal messages] don't work" (qtd. in Weinstein 255). Another expert from the University of Washington in Seattle agreed with these findings. He had conducted a study where he had some participants listen to tapes with hidden messages and some others to tapes without messages and deduced that there was "no difference in mental function between subjects" (255). Timothy E. Moore, expert in Forensic Psychology, Anthony Pratkanis, professor of Social Psychology and Don Read, Cognitive Psychologist, who testified in favor of the defense, also demonstrated how research showed there was no evidence of any behavioral alteration of people exposed to subliminal messages. The study findings of John R. Vokey and J. Don Read of the University of Lethbridge were particularly interesting as they had sufficient evidence to suggest that "the apparent presence of backward messages in popular music is a function more of active construction on the part of the perceiver than of the existence of the messages themselves" (Vokey and Read 1985). Therefore, if listeners are told about a hidden message in a record, they are more prone to discern it.

The members of Judas Priest did not hesitate to voice their opinion on the matter and also testify in court in order to defend their work. Rob Halford, singer of the band, was asked whether there were any hidden messages in the records. Judas Priest and CBS denied several times the existence of such messages and Rob Halford explained that what plaintiffs claimed to hear were only his “own breathing exhalation after the end of the line” he was singing (*The Judas Priest Trial*). He even sang a-cappella in court the two verses that plaintiffs determined contained masked lyrics in the recording. Halford has a particular breathing technique when singing, which distinguishes him from other artists and also helps him perform the high-pitched notes his voice can reach. To the defense of Halford came expert Anthony Pellicano. Pellicano, who was behind the analysis of the Watergate tapes and the tapes of shots of the Kennedy assassination, “played ‘Better than You Better than Me’ and established that the sounds heard were [Halford] exhaling, coupled with the guitar [...] and the drums over that, it could be mistaken for ‘Do it, do it’” (Eyewitness).

Public opinion was divided concerning the trial of Judas Priest. Although the case became even more sensitive when news of the death of James Vance surrounded the media, an immense part of the public supported Judas Priest thinking the case against them was slightly far-fetched. Rob Halford recalls of an elderly man telling him that he thought the trial was “a waste of taxpayers’ money” (Eyewitness). The band also remembers the support they received from people outside the courtroom, which differed immensely from the atmosphere in court. Plaintiffs were already aware of the troubled past of the youngsters before they committed the act; however, they were deeply convinced that Judas Priest gave them the final motivation to proceed to completing it. James Vance would have been the prosecution’s star-witness in the trial, but died due to several complications from his surgeries and a painkiller overdose three years after his suicide attempt (Rohter). The death of Vance pushed the plaintiffs to pursue the case more aggressively and also make it much more public.

Despite the initial leniency of the judge to allow the trial, the amount of evidence that Judas Priest did not assist in any manner in the death of the two teenagers was massive, and could not be overlooked. Sue Ellen Fulstone, said it was a product liability case with plaintiffs trying to prove there was a defect with the record, meaning the alleged existence of subliminal messages, and that “that defect was the proximate cause for the injuries suffered.” She stated that plaintiffs did not meet the criteria to win the case, as they could prove neither the existence of subliminal

messages nor that the content of the backwards messages could influence the alleged victims to commit suicide (*The Judas Priest Trial*). In August 1990, judge Jerry Whitehead decided in favor of Judas Priest and CBS records. He explained that plaintiffs were unable to provide sufficient evidence that subliminal messages were placed in the album intentionally or prove that said messages led the teenagers to commit suicide. Specifically, the Judge determined that he did hear the phrase ‘Do It’ in the record; however, he determined that although subliminal messages were present, they were “a chance combination of sounds”. He also did not recognize there was any proof of backwards masking or “scientific proof backwards masking can be perceived or affect conduct” (*The Judas Priest Trial*). The judge did, however, fine CBS \$40,000 for court delays, because CBS was late providing mastered tapes of the album, but, had they been punctual, the trial could have been avoided (*The Judas Priest Trial*).

Although the outcome of the trial of Judas Priest and CBS records was seen as victorious, the implications of the Judge’s verdict were disheartening. Even though the judge did not find the music of Judas Priest and the band itself guilty of the teenagers’ death, he did agree with the plaintiffs on the existence of subliminal messages in the record. Weinstein recognized that and she added that the verdict left open the possibility for similar cases in the future “that would attempt to demonstrate a causal linkage between subliminal messages and suicidal or any other proscribed behaviour” (256). Plaintiffs’ attorney, Kenneth McKenna, even stated that this would not be the last case for subliminal messages and that he would not hesitate to “file one tomorrow”. He also said “it’s just a matter of time before this music is proven to cause violence amongst youngsters” (*The Judas Priest Trial*). Glenn Tipton, guitarist of Judas Priest, expressed his concern about the verdict of the case by discussing the danger similar cases could pose to the freedom of expression if every artist was afraid of a potential lawsuit (Eyewitness). The misconception surrounding heavy metal seemed to be undying among the cultural conservatives, who did not stop to attack the genre and its artists any chance they got.

## Conclusion

When heavy metal initially came out of the ashes of the unfulfilled goals and dreams of the 1960s generation, it attracted only a small population of pessimist young adults. The method in which it discussed subjects otherwise labelled as ‘taboo’ in society gave it a pioneering attitude and a powerful force that was absent in other musical styles of the time. An energetic rhythm reminiscent of rock and roll along with a touch of realism and the desire to go against the establishment spoke to young people at the time. Coincidentally, advances in technology and the introduction of Music Television in the American homes made the genre recognizable not only among enthusiastic teenagers but adults as well. Adolescents appreciated the manner in which everyday life’s concerns were addressed through heavy metal and they easily became identified with its rebellious nature.

It is common for adults to not approve or dislike their children’s music. When heavy metal reached its prominence it coincided with the rise of the neo-conservative movement, which endorsed “true” American values such as the importance of family, allegiance to the nation and mainly Christian principles. Their new found power was established when in 1980 Reagan was elected president and conservatives became more prominent than ever. Their views on Christianity and pious behavior clashed greatly with the spirit and image of heavy metal, which embraced Dionysian practices and the forces of chaos. They immediately despised the genre and condemned it for the appropriation of Christian symbolism and its take on socially disapproved concepts, such as the discussion around suicide and death. Heavy metal threatened their image of the quintessential American home.

When heavy metal got attacked by righteous fundamentalists it did not bow down to the pressure easily and, in that fashion, contributed to the long legacy of rock and roll’s opposition history. However, never before had any other music genre faced such organized persecution that attacked its values, its views, its artists and fans. The cultural conservatives of the 1980s took advantage of their growing popularity among misinformed and susceptible Americans to push their own political agendas. They found additional support among several Christian fundamentalists who also denounced heavy metal for its denial to conform to Christian morals. As with rock and roll in the past, heavy metal was accused of being a medium of the devil

corrupting young people. The alliance that these moral ‘warriors’ forged led to the formation of the PMRC. The PMRC introduced a new era in which political power was used to express personal distastes and an elusive method of controlling people’s rights to freedom of speech. Due to their immense influence on the public, the PMRC members easily spread misinformation and malicious judgement about heavy metal, and because of their misconceptions and inability to interpret the music, they associated it with Satanism. Heavy metal was never successful in shedding this accusation or properly defending itself, as the subculture chose to remain a “proud pariah” during the whole debate. The abstinence from the controversy surrounding the genre proves that the essence of heavy metal culture is to remain marginal (Weinstein 274).

Unopposed, the cultural conservatives through the PMRC successfully spread their notions and ill-informed opinions about heavy metal in the Senate Hearing of 1985. They claimed that their purpose was to inform about the dangers of harmful lyrics in music, while they insisted on the enforcement of subjective labeling on albums containing explicit content. Disregarding the protection of the artists’ work under the First Amendment, which guarantees free speech, they made an effort to eliminate the distribution of albums created by artists they deemed offensive, the majority of whom belonged to the genre of heavy metal. The media played a major role in reproducing and promoting the objectives of the PMRC and, as a result, managed to convince everyday Americans of the alleged detrimental effects heavy metal could have on young people. The PMRC advocates based their claims on studies showing the rise in suicide and rape statistics and believed that heavy metal was the perpetrator.

Only a small number of people came to the defense of the artists’ rights to freedom of expression. John Denver, Frank Zappa and Dee Snider gave lectures about the First Amendment in front of the members of the Labeling Hearing. They pointed out the perils of censorship and subjective judgement of artists’ work and how this could injure the artists’ careers and reputations. Zappa criticized the affiliation of the record industry with the PMRC on the artists’ expense and thus exposed the hidden financial interests the Committee was masking as the Hearing’s purpose to inform worried parents. Furthermore, Snider provided evidence of the PMRC’s misinterpretation of the lyrics of some of the songs the committee had labelled as ‘filthy’ and showed to the public that the PMRC’s allegations about heavy metal were

not always substantiated. Although the anti-censorship advocates triumphed during the Senate Hearing, the views and impact of the PMRC remained dominant in the public domain afterwards.

Following the tactics employed by the PMRC, several people targeted heavy metal as the cause for their youngsters' demise. Families who lost their children to suicide tried to place the blame onto heavy metal artists claiming that the music was the reason their children decided to take their own lives. Christian fundamentalists once again got involved in portraying their views about the alleged harms of heavy metal and were adamant supporters of the families who pursued the conviction of the artists and restraint of artistic expression. Ozzy Osbourne was brought to court due to the misconception that his song "Suicide Solution" encouraged suicide through the lyrics. The case was dismissed due to lack of evidence to portray malicious intent on the part of Osbourne and the First Amendment's protection of speech.

However, the implication that Osbourne's song also contained subliminal messages, not protected by the Constitution, created another method of prosecution of heavy metal artists. The charge that masked lyrics prompted two young people to make a suicide pact was made against Judas Priest. Although plaintiffs failed to provide evidence of subliminal messages' alleged corruption potential, it was suggested that subliminal messages could be present and this suggestion left the possibilities open for similar lawsuits being filed in the future. The Judas Priest trial served as "but one example of a national crusade bent on destroying free speech in entertainment" (Philips). The fact that both cases were allowed in court showed the terrible consequences the continuous propaganda against heavy metal proved to have.

The whole debate surrounding heavy metal showed how dangerous the PMRC's agenda was as it created and spread views about the genre that were untrue and unjustified. The cultural conservatives' views on heavy metal were but "artifacts of their ideological prejudices" and the media which unwittingly reproduced those stereotypes and "encouraged an internal tradition of criticism with self-conscious standards" (Weinstein 274). The clash between conservatives and heavy metal was unavoidable due to their principal differences in religious and societal values. However, disagreeing with one's opponent due to personal beliefs should never justify employment of scare tactics with the goal to hinder or eradicate a form of artistic expression. The Labeling Hearing "not only spread the misconception that heavy metal causes suicide, but it also linked the music to mayhem in general" (256).



As a result, heavy metal became repeatedly the scapegoat for social panics which challenged its artists' rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. Ultimately, what the adversaries of heavy metal missed was that "its values and symbols have multiple, ambiguous, and undecidable interpretations" and the effort to diminish the genre through censorship breaches the freedom of people (274). "People who want to strangle other people's rights are possessed by one of the worst devils around — the Satan in their souls which is called intolerance," Angus Young of AC/DC said in 1985. "Rock & roll is about one simple thing: freedom. When someone tries to murder that freedom, we're against it" (qtd in Levin).

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