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**FROM THE MCCARTHY ERA TO “GANGSTA RAP”: THE RHETORIC OF
POPULAR MUSIC AND MORAL PANIC IN THE UNITED STATES**

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

Popular music has been under attack since the formation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938, and the mobilization of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the 1980s marked a transformative moment in the on-going cultural struggle over popular music in America. For this study, I analyze how it was that popular music became the target of cultural crusaders who claimed that it threatened Americans, especially young people. In order to do this, I evaluate the actual music that, at four points in history, has been criticized as a threat to the moral foundation of America: the music of Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger during the Red Scare; Elvis Presley and the introduction of rock 'n' roll during the 1950s; the "porn rock" criticized by the PMRC in the 1980s; and finally, the controversy about "gangsta rap" in the 1990s. At the same time, I analyze the campaigns against such music, framing my analysis as case studies in the rhetoric of moral panic in an effort to understand the values and social mores underlying claims on both sides of these controversies. In addition, I analyze the various strategies of social control employed by the political and cultural "establishment," including legal actions against musicians, parental advisory warnings, and restrictions on airplay of supposedly offensive or dangerous popular music. Research on these moments in American history contributes not only to scholarly understanding of the role music plays in so-called "culture wars," but also to larger conversations about the rhetorical construction of American cultural identity.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

In late 1984, Mary Elizabeth “Tipper” Gore, wife of then Tennessee Democratic Senator Al Gore, walked into a record store with her daughter Karenna to purchase *Purple Rain*, the newly released album by the recording artist known as Prince.¹ Upon returning home, Gore was horrified by the sexual lyrics, especially in the song “Darling Nikki,” which featured the following lines: “I knew a girl named Nikki/I guess you could say she was a sex fiend/I met her in a hotel lobby/Masturbating with a magazine.”² As she would write later in her book, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, Gore recruited several other “Washington Wives” to form the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). These women included Susan Baker, wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker; Pam Howard, wife of Washington realtor Raymond Howard; and Sally Nevius, wife of Washington City Council Chairman John Nevius. One of the group’s first acts was to write to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) outlining their complaints and identifying fifteen songs by popular musicians that they deemed the “Filthy Fifteen.”³

Although not explicitly calling for censorship, the group made six initial demands of the RIAA: print lyrics on album covers; keep explicit covers under the counter; establish a ratings system for records; establish a ratings system for concerts; reassess the contracts of performers who engage in violence or explicit sexual behavior on stage; and establish a citizens’ watchdog group to pressure broadcasters not to air “questionable material.”⁴ In less than half a year after that first letter to the RIAA, more than 150 newspaper editorials were written about the PMRC.⁵

The PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic landed the group on the covers of national magazines, including *Newsweek* and *People*, and representatives of the group appeared on *Donahue*, *Good Morning America*, NBC's *Today*, *The CBS Morning News*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and the evening news of all three major television networks.⁶

The PMRC was so successful in drawing attention to what it considered obscene rock music (or what the group referred to as "porn rock") that on September 19, 1985, the United States Senate held hearings on the lyrical content of popular music.⁷ Attracting unusually large crowds to the Senate chambers, the proceedings attracted widespread national attention and extensive coverage from both the musical and non-musical press. In opposition to testimony from members of the PMRC, musicians Dee Snider, Frank Zappa, and John Denver testified before the Senate committee. Following the hearings, the RIAA declared it would monitor its releases more closely and, in an attempt to appease the PMRC, agreed to apply a parental advisory sticker on releases deemed to have either violent or sexually explicit lyrical content. The label, which became popularly known as the "Tipper Sticker," signaled an important moment in the history of popular music.

In my dissertation, I analyze the rhetoric of the PMRC as one of four case studies in how popular music has inspired rhetorics of moral panic in America. Focusing both on the music that inspired these reactions and the rhetoric of those who led efforts to censor or regulate popular music, I contribute to our understanding of the role popular music plays in political and cultural conflicts dating back to the 1950s. The PMRC was not the first or the last group to warn of the dangers of popular music. During the Red Scare several folk musicians, including Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger, were called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) to answer charges that their music was "un-American." During the same decade, Elvis Presley's

songs and physical gyrations prompted a new moral panic over the possibility that popular music might promote teenage rebellion and sexual promiscuity. Following the PMRC's campaign against the "Filthy Fifteen" and the establishment of the warning label in the 1980s, yet another moral panic erupted over "gangsta rap" in the 1990s, as critics complained that the music of rappers like Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.), Ice-T, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Doggy Dogg degraded women and glamorized violence. In each of these case studies it was not just the music, but a rhetoric of cultural critique that inspired moral panic. In each case, that rhetoric focused on different perceived threats, but together these cases testify to the significance of popular music as an important site for the rhetorical construction and negotiation of American identity.

In each of my case studies, I study the music itself, the rhetoric of the critics of popular music, and the responses of the political or cultural "establishment"⁸ called upon to resolve the controversy. In each chapter, the primary texts are the lyrics and music of popular recordings, along with the statements, editorials, testimony, and other rhetorical manifestations of the campaigns to censor or control the music or to mitigate its impact upon young people. In each case, I also examine the responses of musicians and the music industry to the accusations against them, as well as the strategies employed by various political and cultural elites to manage these controversies. In the end, I hope to contribute to a growing literature on the rhetoric of popular music and its role in the so-called "culture wars" of the late twentieth century.⁹

Rhetoric, Popular Music, and Moral Panics

The rhetorical forms and functions of popular music have interested rhetorical scholars since the early 1970s. As part of the growing interest in the rhetoric of social movements, protest music in particular has attracted considerable attention from rhetorical scholars.¹⁰ These early studies, which focused largely on the lyrics of protest songs, tended to downplay the persuasive power of popular music. In a study of the protest songs of the 1960s, for example, Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael argued that protest songs might contribute to “attitude change,” but only in combination with speech and other forms of protest.¹¹ Other studies have emphasized the in-group functions of protest music, suggesting that music functions primarily to unify or inspire people already committed to a cause. In an essay on the lyrical content of songs sung by the International Workers of the World (IWW), for example, David A. Carter argued that while music recruited few new members to the IWW, “the messages of the songs contributed to the solidification of the IWW membership and the polarization of the IWW from the mainstream of public opinion.”¹² Ralph E. Knupp drew similar conclusions in his study of labor and anti-war songs in the 1960s, concluding that “the promotion of group unity through rhetoric is the enduring contribution of protest music to social movements.”¹³ Although some of these early studies touched upon the periods and the music that I will analyze in my study, most focused narrowly on the lyrics of protest music and failed to consider the reception of that music or the controversies that have erupted over popular music in America since the 1950s.

Nearly four decades after James Irvine and Walter Kirkpatrick first called upon rhetorical scholars to attend to “musical form,” the field now has a significant body of work that analyzes and theorizes the interactions between lyrics, the music itself, the intended audiences, and the

social contexts.¹⁴ These studies recognize that a full understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of music requires a focus not only on words but sounds, including such characteristics as the mood or tone of the music, the instrumentation, and the rhythmic patterns. In his study of jazz and black nationalism of the 1960s, for example, Robert Francesconi argued that the melody, harmony, instrumentation, and rhythm of “free jazz” were dialectically opposed to “European jazz.” By placing greater emphasis on group improvisation, melody, and percussion instruments, for example, free jazz adopted a “rhetoric of music style” that identified American jazz with the African-American community and set it apart from the white world.¹⁵

Other scholars have used this sort of understanding of “musical form” to better account for the role of music in social movements. In *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*, for example, Stephen A. King examines the relationship between reggae music and the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica, as well as the reactions of both record companies and the Jamaican government to some of the more politically charged variations upon this form of popular music. As he examines the evolving musical form of reggae over time, King is interested in how changes in both the lyrics and the music influenced reggae’s capacity to communicate a protest ideology. According to King, reggae music initially provided a voice for the country’s poor black communities and often provoked police harassment of the musicians and government restrictions on radio airplay. As reggae grew in international popularity in the 1970s, however, a more commercialized version of reggae emerged, along with a movement of pseudo-Rastafarians who embraced the music and imagery of Rastafarianism but not its radical political critique. In addition, mainstream politicians like Michael Manley embraced the music and imagery of reggae in their political campaigns, further dulling the political edge of the music. As King notes, the commercialization and appropriation of reggae music into the

Jamaican political mainstream functioned as a rhetoric of social control that transformed reggae music from a form of social and political critique to a symbol of the country and an integral part of its tourism promotions.¹⁶

King's work is important for my study because he is interested in the rhetorical significance of popular music and the various ways such music might be received and resisted by its critics and the cultural establishment. While King is concerned specifically with reggae and the Rastafarian movement, his general approach is useful for my study because it incorporates attention to both the lyrics and the "sound" of popular music. In addition, King attends closely to the cultural context and the public controversies over the popular music he studies. This is particularly important for my study because while most of the controversies surrounding popular music in America since the 1950s have focused on lyrics, I am interested in understanding how popular music has been a site of rhetorical struggle and negotiation over American cultural identity. Prior to King's work, most scholarship on rhetoric and music tended to focus on how songs were received and interpreted by fans of the music. Like King, however, I am interested in the broader political and social ramifications of public controversies over popular music. More specifically, I am interested in how popular music invites a rhetoric of moral panic that attributes all sorts of political, social, and moral problems to popular music.

In his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, Stanley Cohen argues that "societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic."¹⁷ A moral panic, Cohen explains, is a period of intense social anxiety brought about by some "connection, episode, person, or persons" that becomes "defined as a threat to societal value and interest."¹⁸ As Cohen's subtitle suggests, popular music has often been the inspiration for these moral panics, and my four case studies help to illustrate how the rhetoric of cultural

critics might invite such panics. “It seems that as long as people have been listening to music,” as Matthew Jordan argues, “they have been questioning the impact of music on social mores and trying to clarify what kind of music is good for people and society and what is not.”¹⁹ Most of this concern, of course, has focused on the potential of new forms of popular music to corrupt the morals of young people.

In *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity*, Jordan shows how such concerns erupted in France in the early twentieth century, as jazz—an imported American form of music—was blamed for threatening the “French cultural ethos.”²⁰ Jordan’s main goal is to comprehend “how debates on jazz were used to fine-tune notions of what it meant to be French.”²¹ According to Jordan, debates over popular music provide insight into music’s role in the “construction of social identity.”²² Although jazz is now an uncontested component of French cultural identity, the first wave of jazz in France in 1917 created anxiety over an “American disease” that threatened French culture. Jazz music and dance at that time were depicted by critics as a savage black influence that threatened traditional gender roles and caused physical harm by promoting “unnatural” movements. On the other side of the debate, as Jordan notes, jazz supporters claimed that the excitement and enjoyment people associated with the music and dances were what people needed to heal from the massive loss of life and destruction caused by World War I. By the 1920s, jazz had become more familiar and debates shifted to what counted as “authentic” jazz and the role of the professional critic in distinguishing between “good” and “bad” jazz. Although criticism of jazz was widespread in France after World War I, by the end of World War II jazz had been “embraced” by the French and “assimilated” into the French cultural *ethos*. Even though anxiety about “Americanization” continued in postwar debates in France, jazz was separated from these discourses and upheld as a representation of a “true Frenchness.”²³

Jordan's work is important for my study because he is interested in the debates surrounding popular music and the ways such debates both reflect and help to shape cultural identity. My study will take a similar approach to the moral debates surrounding popular music in the United States, assessing the implications of those debates for our understanding of America's cultural identity. Like Jordan, I am interested in music that is considered "dangerous to mores" because it "moves" people or their neighbors "in unforeseen ways."²⁴ And like Jordan, I also am interested in what the "plaintive cries" of the critics of such music say "about the societies that voice them."²⁵ I also hope to follow King's lead in assessing how music that once scared and frightened people is sometimes co-opted by the larger culture. In the cases of Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, Elvis Presley, Ice Cube, and Tupac Shakur, for example, music vilified at the time it first appeared is now celebrated as an important part of our cultural heritage and even exploited for commercial purposes.

In sum, this study of American popular music and moral panics aims to contribute to our understanding of American popular music and the rhetorical processes through which music can inspire moral panics and shape our cultural identity. Rhetorical scholarship has contributed significantly to our understanding of how music—both the lyrics and its "sound"—has been used to foster ego development and group solidarity within protest groups. On a grander scale, the work of King and Jordan, among others, suggests that the rhetorical analysis of popular music can tell us much about a nation's social mores, cultural identity, and strategies of political and social control. Although concerns over the impact of music on young people dates back to the time of Plato,²⁶ the growing number of controversies over popular music in the last half-century, and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, is a symptom of the "culture wars" that have dominated American politics in recent years. An analysis of our society's reactions to controversial music,

as Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes, can tell us much about our shared values and the “American psyche.”²⁷ It also can help illuminate the limits of free expression, the boundaries of political and social tolerance, and the mechanisms of social control in America. By exploring how popular music has functioned rhetorically to shape America’s cultural identity in the last half of the twentieth century, this study contributes to the growing literature on the rhetoric of music, as well as to ongoing scholarly conversations about freedom of expression and the culture wars in America. Before describing the primary texts I will analyze and how I have organized the dissertation, I will next outline the research questions that guide my study.

Research Questions and Organization of the Study

As already mentioned, this dissertation consists of four case studies in the rhetoric of popular music and moral panics in the United States: the music of folk-singers Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger and their appearances before HUAC in the 1950s; the subsequent rise of rock 'n' roll and Elvis Presley and a new moral panic about teenage rebellion and sex during that same decade; the PMRC critique of “porn rock” and the subsequent congressional hearing in 1985; and the moral panic over “gangsta rap” and artists such as N.W.A., Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Doggy Dogg. In each of these chapters I address the following questions: how and why did the music of these various popular musicians come to be seen as a threat to America’s moral values or cultural ethos? How might one account for the rhetoric of moral panic that erupted in each case, and what were the rhetorical manifestations of that panic? More specifically, what *about* the music, or what *about* the political or social context of each case, best accounts for that moral panic? How did both fans and critics of these musicians respond to these

controversies? What rhetorical strategies did critics use to discredit the music, and how did the recording and broadcast industries respond to these controversies? And, finally, what do these controversies over popular music teach us about American cultural identity and the rhetorical processes of identity-construction?

In chapter 2, I focus on the popular folk music of the 1950s and how the Red Scare inspired members of the federal government and the mainstream press to criticize the music of two of the genre's biggest stars: Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger. In addition to analyzing the music of these artists, I also investigate their appearances before HUAC during hearings over allegedly “subversive” activities in America in the mid-1950s. During the Red Scare, anyone with even the most tangential connections to communism came under suspicion. As anxieties increased during the Cold War, cultural critics and federal officials targeted musicians like Robeson and Seeger, accusing them of promoting “un-American” or even pro-communist views. In this chapter I argue that the suspicions about Robeson and Seeger were not so much about their music as their personas and their associations with groups supposedly dedicated to a Communist take-over of America. By linking both singers to communism and the Soviet Union, the critics of Robeson and Seeger tried to marginalize both singers and silence their protests.

Of course, Robeson and Seeger were attacked for different reasons, and they responded with different rhetorical strategies. In the case of Robeson, he was praised early in his career for being “the embodiment of the aspirations of the New Negro.”²⁸ Although Robeson was initially commended for being “proud and pleasant,” the attacks against him quickly escalated following his return from the Soviet Union in 1939, when he declared that he was no longer going to “remain silent on the issue of blacks' place within America.”²⁹ As the moral panic over communism spread after World War II, Robeson was depicted by agents of the FBI and by some

within the mainstream press as a Soviet dupe, the “voice of the Kremlin,” and even a “black Stalin.”³⁰ Following riots at two of his concerts in Peekskill, New York in 1949, Robeson was transformed from a national hero to a cultural pariah. The panic surrounding Robeson's actions even led other black leaders and celebrities, like baseball player Jackie Robinson, to declare that Robeson no longer represented African-Americans. Soon after, the State Department revoked Robeson's passport, and the press stopped reporting his remarks. When Robeson finally had his opportunity to respond, during hearings before HUAC in 1956, he boldly attacked the committee and the government, calling his critics the real “un-Americans.”

While the attacks on Robeson highlighted his race, the criticisms of Pete Seeger were prompted by his anti-war and pro-labor music. Prior to World War II, Seeger and his band, the Almanac Singers, criticized President Franklin Roosevelt and America’s war involvement in their songs. When Hitler broke a non-aggression pact by invading Russia in 1941, the band's record label, Keystone Records, destroyed all of the band's records. Subsequently, Seeger and the Almanac Singers changed course, supporting President Roosevelt and the war effort. For a time the band’s music was even played during broadcasts sponsored by the Office of War Information. When Seeger was drafted into the United States Army, the Almanac Singers folded, and Seeger himself spent his time in the Army playing for the troops. When he returned home from the war, he shifted his focus toward creating a “singing labor movement,”³¹ led by a group of leftist activists called People’s Songs.

As the “driving force” behind People’s Songs, Seeger played a major role in the “creation and spread of radical protest songs.”³² Seeger spent the late 1940s and early 1950s performing these songs, including some that protested against racial discrimination and others that backed Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. During this time, Seeger formed a new

band, the Weavers, and earned critical and commercial success with songs such as “If I Had a Hammer,” “Goodnight Irene,” and “Wimoweh.” Despite this success, the Red Scare eventually caught up with Seeger and his band, who were attacked for allegedly providing aid and comfort to the enemy. Professional FBI informer and Senator Joseph McCarthy aide Harvey Matusow even testified in 1952 before the Ohio HUAC that Seeger and the Weavers were members of the Communist Party.³³ The band soon came to be seen as “untouchables,” and their scheduled concert and appearances were cancelled. Seeger continued to perform “underground” after the Weavers were blacklisted, and in 1955 HUAC subpoenaed him to appear before the committee to respond to charges that he was a communist sympathizer.

Whereas Robeson cited his Fifth Amendment rights and used his appearance as an opportunity to attack HUAC and the federal government, Seeger remained polite but not deferential during his appearance before the committee. He refused to answer many of the committee's questions, yet he also backed away from some of his earlier criticisms of the U.S. government. Seeger's more strategic rhetorical choices ultimately made it possible for him to survive the HUAC hearings and play an active role in the emerging civil rights movement in the 1960s. Robeson, on the other hand, became too much of a political liability. Still monitored closely by the federal government after his appearance before HUAC, Robeson was ostracized by the mainstream press and was subsequently regulated to the sidelines of the political struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the third chapter of my dissertation, I focus on the emergence of a new type of music, rock 'n' roll, and how the decade's biggest star, Elvis Presley, was accused of promoting lewd sexual behavior, race-mixing at concerts, juvenile delinquency, and even violence. Unlike the other popular musicians I examine in this project, Elvis was criticized as much for the *sounds* of

his music and his physical *movements* during live performances as for the lyrical content of his songs. In this chapter, I focus on the first phase of Elvis's career, beginning with his recording of "That's Alright (Mama)" for Sun Records on July 5, 1954 and ending after his discharge from the Army in 1960. In addition to analyzing the music, I also examine how critics of Elvis and rock 'n' roll blamed the music for a variety of social problems, and how Elvis attempted to tone down his image in response to the criticism. Against the back drop of increasing racial tensions in America and an upstart civil rights movement, I show how critics of rock 'n' roll portrayed it as the music of "threatening, lower-class outsiders," even as an "atavistic presence" in American cultural life.³⁴ And I show how Elvis, in response to such criticism, recast his image in more pro-American ways.

Whereas Robeson and Seeger were identified with the folk music tradition and got caught up in the Red Scare, the music and moves of Presley raised new concerns about the impact of rock 'n' roll music on social rather than political norms, particularly sexual mores. In addition, cultural critics, including singer Frank Sinatra, criticized Presley's form of rock 'n' roll as "degenerate" and "vicious," claiming it was responsible for "destructive reactions" in young people.³⁵ As the 1950's biggest star and rock 'n' roll's most recognizable icon, Elvis became a symbol of the cultural tensions of the time, and the rhetorical maneuvers he used to mitigate the criticism likewise reveal much about the cultural values of the time. After his move to RCA, a major mainstream label, in 1956, Elvis took a number of steps to tame and moderate his image, both in the studio and in live performances. These efforts included singing "Hound Dog" to a basset hound on *The Steve Allen Show* and appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, filmed from the waist up only. At the same time, his producers and handlers softened his persona and groomed

him for Hollywood films by encouraging him to sing more love-ballads and play less rock 'n' roll.

Equally important to Elvis's new image was his decision to refuse special duty when drafted into the Army in 1958. Popular entertainers often accepted invitations to avoid regular duty by performing for the troops, but Elvis declined special treatment. As Elvis told reporters before departing to his station in Germany, he had "a duty . . . to fulfill and I'm going to do it."³⁶ Following his time in the Army, Elvis and his new manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker, capitalized on Elvis's military service, crafting a new patriotic image that transformed the singer from "Elvis the Pelvis" to "Private Presley."³⁷ The *New York Times* reported that Elvis relished his Army experience so much he was "never going to grow back the long sideburns that were his trademark."³⁸ Once considered dangerous and blamed for teenage sex, race-mixing, and juvenile delinquency, Elvis thus became a model of how a popular musician might instead be an inspiration and a role model for youth.

In the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I analyze the moral panic mentioned at the outset of this chapter: the controversy created by the PMRC over "porn rock" and the "Filthy Fifteen" in the 1980s. In this chapter, I examine how the PMRC tried to mobilize public opinion and governmental action against popular music that they deemed debased, degraded, or even "pornographic." I argue that what was at stake in these debates was not just what constituted dangerous or "obscene" music, but also a distinction between "good" and "bad" parents. The primary musical texts examined in this chapter are the "Filthy Fifteen" songs denounced as "porn rock" by the PMRC. These include songs by Prince, Sheena Easton, AC/DC, Twisted Sister, and Cyndi Lauper, among others. Unlike the criticisms of rock 'n' roll and Elvis in the 1950s, the issue for the mothers of the PMRC was not sexually *suggestive* sounds or movements,

but lyrics that *explicitly* advocated sex and violence—at least according to the PMRC. In addition to examining the rhetoric of the PMRC’s oppositional campaign, I also analyze the congressional hearings that were held in 1985 to consider warning labels regulating the content of popular music.

The crux of the PMRC's testimony was that they were not seeking censorship, but were simply asking for help—as concerned parents—in monitoring the content of their childrens’ favorite music. In other words, they wanted the recording industry to help them fulfill their roles as parents. In the process, however, they shifted the blame for a variety of problems, from teenage suicide to sexual promiscuity and drug use, from themselves or from larger cultural forces to popular music. Avoiding the question of why their children listened to this type of music in the first place, the PMRC used the hearing to promote a moral panic over popular music and proposed a simplistic solution to the problem: a record labeling system. Musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider all argued that a labeling system would not make a difference, however, claiming that parents had a responsibility to *actually listen* to the music purchased by their children to decide for themselves if it posed some sort of threat. They also chastised the PMRC and Washington policy makers for neglecting the real threats to young people's morals and civic virtues, such as bad parenting, poverty, and the failures of our educational system. In short, the musicians accused the PMRC of scapegoating popular music and failing to address the real problems facing young people in America. Nevertheless, the Congress, while not requiring warning labels on popular music, did send a strong message to the recording industry encouraging warning labels.

Finally, in the fifth chapter of my dissertation, I analyze the moral panic surrounding the rise of gangsta rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Led by C. Delores Tucker, chairwoman of

the National Political Congress of Black Women (NPCBW), the campaign against gangsta rap echoed many of the themes of the PMRC a decade earlier. Like the PMRC, Tucker claimed that gangsta rap was “pornographic,” but her campaign went beyond that to also raise fears rooted in the growing racial tensions and anxieties of the 1990s. In the wake of the Rodney King beating, the Los Angeles riots, and O.J. Simpson’s murder trial, groups like the NPCBW shifted the critique of popular music from rock to rap, arguing that gangsta rap in particular was misogynistic, pro-gang, anti-police, and pro-violence. Tucker and her allies led efforts to ban the music from both the airways and concert halls, suggesting that by doing so they could solve most if not all of the problems facing the black community in America.

The targets of the NPCBW’s campaign included such works as N.W.A.’s album *Straight Outta Compton*, along with the music of Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Doggy Dogg. According to the NPCBW, songs like N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police” promoted violence against law enforcement officers, while other gangsta rap songs promoted violence against women, drug-use, and a host of other problems in the black community itself. The criticism of gangsta rap entered the mainstream public dialogue during the 1992 presidential campaign, when both Republican Vice-President Dan Quayle and Democratic Governor Bill Clinton criticized the music. Following the 1992 election, as artists such as Tupac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dogg became involved in high-profile criminal cases, a full-fledged rhetoric of moral panic erupted. Tinged with racial fears as well as concerns about sexual degradation and violence, the rhetoric of moral panic over gangsta rap eventually elevated Tucker and the NPCBW to great prominence and eventually led to congressional hearings over how best to mitigate the threat by regulating gangsta rap records.³⁹

Like the hearing involving the PMRC, the congressional hearings over gangsta rap functioned to assign blame and exercise social control. Instead of shifting the blame for bad parenting to popular music, however, Tucker and the NPCBW used the moral panic over gangsta rap to raise questions about who had the moral authority to speak for the African-American community. Gangsta rap music was certainly “pornographic,” according to Tucker and her allies, but it also perpetuated stereotypes of African-Americans in the broader white community, especially since many of the consumers of this music were white suburban youths. As I demonstrate, the rhetoric of gangsta raps’ critics suggested that “good” blacks did not focus on life on the streets, gang-banging, pimping, drugs, or violence. “Good” blacks were represented by the likes of Whitney Houston, whose music was frequently mentioned by Tucker in her congressional testimony, or Dionne Warwick, who testified that gangsta rap did not represent “the totality of our experiences as African-Americans.”⁴⁰ Although the hearings before Congress functioned rhetorically to reassign blame for the problems of the black community in America, I show how it was just another form of scapegoating, allowing a group of self-appointed black leaders to blame the music of their own young people for the problems described in the music itself, including racism, sexism, homophobia, gangs, lack of economic opportunity, and the influx of guns, alcohol, and drugs into black ghettos.

In conclusion, scholars of rhetoric and popular music have suggested that investigating popular music and moral panics not only contributes to our understanding of the rhetorical processes surrounding music, but also the construction of a nation’s cultural identity. Although rhetorical scholarship has shed much light on the role of protest music in social movements, we still have much to learn about the role of popular music in promoting moral panic in American culture. In addition, we still have much to learn about how some of America's most

controversial musicians—from Pete Seeger, Elvis Presley, and Tupac Shakur—have been rhetorically re-imagined as “official” cultural icons, making them safe for Americans and for democracy. In the Conclusion of my dissertation, I return to these issues, discussing how these debates over popular music have framed and reframed what it means to be a “good citizen” in America. By framing my dissertation around four specific case studies in popular music and moral panics in the last half of the twentieth century, my study will contribute to a better understanding of the rhetorical functions of music in civic and popular culture.

Endnotes

¹ Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 17-19. This story was recounted several times by Gore and other members of the PMRC to the public through interviews and press coverage of their actions.

² *Ibid.*, 17. “Darling Niki” is the second song on Prince and the Revolution’s *Purple Rain*; music and lyrics by Prince. Prince and the Revolution, “Darling Niki,” *Purple Rain*, Warner Brothers Records (LP), 1984.

³ The PMRC identified fifteen songs they deemed obscene and sent it not only to the RIAA, but also used them as part of their case for rating records. These fifteen songs (and the reason they caused concern) were: Prince’s “Darling Nikki” (sex); Sheena Easton’s “Sugar Walls” (sex); Judas Priest’s “Eat Me Alive” (sex); Vanity’s “Strap on Robbie Baby” (sex); Mötley Crüe’s “Bastard” (violence); AC/DC’s “Let Me Put My Love into You” (sex); Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It” (violence); Madonna’s “Dress You Up” (sex); W.A.S.P.’s “Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)” (sex/language); Def Leppard’s “High’n’Dry (Saturday Night)” (drug and alcohol use); Mercyful Fate’s “Into the Coven” (occult); Black Sabbath’s “Trashed” (drug and alcohol use); Mary Jane Girls’s “In My House” (sex); Venom’s “Possessed” (occult); and Cyndi Lauper’s “She Bop” (sex). See Eric Nuzum, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 21.

⁴ Maria Fontenot and Chad Harris, “Building a Better PIG: A Historical Survey of the PMRC and its Tactics,” *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (2010): 573.

⁵ Nuzum, *Parental Advisory*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985).

⁸ In each of my chapters, I specifically cite the critic and their affiliation.

⁹ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

¹⁰ For the early works on rhetoric and music, see Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 35 (1970): 295-302; Cheryl Irwin Thomas, "Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma: The Persuasiveness of Song," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 39 (1974): 260-268; David Bloodworth, "Communication in the Youth Counter Culture: Music as Expression," *Central States Speech Journal* 26 (1975): 304-309; and Elizabeth Kizer, "Protest Song Lyrics as Rhetoric," *Popular Music and Society* 9 (1983): 3-11.

¹¹ Kosokoff and Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest," 301.

¹² David A. Carter, "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 373.

¹³ Ralph R. Knupp, "A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Rhetorical Dimensions of Protest Music," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 46 (1981): 389.

¹⁴ James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1971): 272-284. Essays following in Irvine and Kirkpatrick's call include Alberto Gonzales and John J. Makay, "Rhetorical Ascription and the Gospel According to Dylan," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 1-14; Deanna Sellnow, "Rhetorical Strategies of Continuity and Change in the Music of Popular Artists Over Time," *Communication Studies* 47 (1996): 46-61; Deanna D. Sellnow, "Music as Persuasion: Refuting Hegemonic Masculinity in 'He Thinks He'll Keep Her'," *Women Studies in Communication* 22 (1999): 66-84; Stephen A. King, "The Co-optation of a 'Revolution': Rastafari, Reggae, and the Rhetoric of Social Control," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 10 (1999): 77-95; Deanna Sellnow and Timothy Sellnow, "The 'Illusion of Life' Rhetorical Perspective: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Music as Communication," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 395-415; and Stephen A. King, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002); Troy A. Murphy, "Rhetorical Invention and the Transformation of 'We Shall Overcome'," *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 4 (2003): 1-8; Sheryl Hurner, "Discursive Identity Formation of Suffrage Women: Reframing the 'Cult of True Womanhood' Through Song," *Western Journal of Communication* 70 (2006): 234-260; and Lisa M. Chuang and John P. Hart, "Suburban American Punks and the Musical Rhetoric of Green Day's 'Jesus of Suburbia'," *Communication Studies* 59 (2008): 183-201.

¹⁵ Robert Francesconi, "Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Music Style," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 36-49.

¹⁶ On the role of reggae music in Jamaica's tourist industry, see King, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*, 122-130. As King notes, the increasing popularity of reggae music in Jamaica influenced some of their biggest tourism attractions, including the popular festivals Reggae Sunsplash and Reggae Sumfest, in addition to "Rent-a-Dreads" (commonly referred to as "Rentas"). "Rentas," according to King, are young, unskilled, and uneducated Jamaican men who have co-opted the Rasta look and rent themselves out to female tourists. Unlike more "authentic" Rastafarians, the "Rentas" do not adhere to the radical elements of the movement and are motivated by economic gain.

¹⁷ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Matthew Jordan, "Don't Upset the Rhythm: Innovative music is seen as a moral threat," *Journal of Popular Music* (February/March 2010): 18.

²⁰ Matthew J. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2010).

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid., 233-246.

²⁴ Jordan, "Don't Upset the Rhythm," 20.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ On the ancient Greeks concern with music and cultural ethos, see Jordan, "Don't Upset the Rhythm." Plato warned of music's ability to creep into the consciousness of men and wreck havoc on the traditional laws and customs of society. Since the ancient Greeks believed that certain modes of music could move people, especially music that was new and unexpected, then it had to be monitored closely. Plato, as Jordan notes, thought music was "too powerful" and that musicians should be "banned" because they threatened the accepted ways of listening as well as the larger cultural ethos. As Jordan suggests, the concerns of the ancient Greeks have been shared by every culture; all societies worry about the potentially harmful effects of popular music, particularly on young people.

²⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Case of 2 Live Crew Tells Much About the American Psyche," *New York Times*, July 15, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/15/opinion/1-the-case-of-2-live-crew-tells-much-about-the-american-psyche-574190.html> (accessed June 26, 2013).

²⁸ Paul Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: New Press, 2005), 80.

²⁹ This assessment appeared in a *New York News* article by Edgar G. Brown on April 25, 1925. See also Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 80-97.

³⁰ Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 4.

³¹ According to Seeger, the early recruitment letters from People's Songs told readers they envisioned creating a "singing labor movement." See Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, ed. Jo Metcalf Schwartz (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972): 20.

³² Allan M. Winkler, *"To Everything There is a Season": Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38.

³³ While in Dayton, Ohio on assignment investigating the communist recruitment of young people, Matusow, a paid informer for the FBI, testified on February 25, 1952 about the communist use of folk

music before the Ohio House Un-American Activities Committee—a joint committee of state representatives and senators charged with finding communism's influence in Ohio. The committee was based on the federal government's HUAC, and its members had sweeping powers to question Ohioans about their ties to communism. In his testimony, Matusow named Pete Seeger several times, as well as the Weavers—who had just performed in Cleveland and Akron—saying that they entertained communists and worked to recruit members to the Communist Party. His testimony is available in full on-line at http://antiochcollege.org/antiochiana/songs_from_the_stacks/songs_from_the_stacks_072811.html (accessed June 26, 2013).

³⁴ Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954-1984* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 39.

³⁵ John Frayn Turner, *Frank Sinatra* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), 104.

³⁶ Susie Behar, *Elvis* (Sywell, UK: Igloo, 2009), 67.

³⁷ “King of Rock 'n' Roll Becomes Pvt. Presley,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1958, 28.

³⁸ “Presley Set to Become Sideburn-Less Civilian.” *New York Times*, March 2, 1960, 42.

³⁹ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

Chapter Two:

Folk Musicians as Rhetorical Threats: Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and the Red Scare

It is tempting to remember the 1950s as a wholesome time, a time of hula-hoops, teenage love songs, and television programs like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver*.¹ This collective memory of the 1950s is problematic, however, because it ignores the “great cloud” hanging over America, the threat of atomic war in the “age of anxiety.”² It also ignores the Red Scare and the persecution of anybody with even the slightest connection to the global communist conspiracy. While it was true that the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) gained members following World War II, not every union member or civil rights activist was a communist sympathizer, as some Cold Warriors believed. During the war, workers who identified with the CPUSA and some of the more radical unions even honored “no-strike pledges” and “employer-employee cooperation plans” that assured uninterrupted war production. Far from anti-government agitators, most union workers obeyed the wartime directive of the president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Phillip Murray: “Heed the Call of Your Commander-in-Chief and Work, Work, Work, Produce, Produce, Produce.”³

Despite this “wartime nationalism,” the seeds of “postwar anticommunism” were planted long before the war ended.⁴ As early as 1943, for example, a Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California reported that America was already engaged in a “two front war” against the communists, a “battle of ideas” that would determine who would “rule the world.” Urging nothing short of “total war and victory,” the committee called for “a fighting faith for our Democracy, our Constitution and our way of life.”⁵ In 1945, the same sentiments

led to the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)⁶ as a permanent committee of the U.S. Congress. Given broad powers to identify and root out domestic threats to America's government and way of life, HUAC became the institutional embodiment of the Red Scare, investigating dozens of groups and individuals suspected of communist sympathies.⁷

During the Red Scare, American folk musicians were among the many groups targeted by HUAC and other anti-communist crusaders. Because folk musicians like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger sang about "the people" and the everyday struggles of workers and others oppressed by "the system," they were natural targets for anti-communist forces who suspected anybody who criticized America or the American way of life. Folk music also became a target because of its connections to organized labor. Since most of folk music's lyrics were set to simple, well-known melodies, the songs were often sung by workers while walking the picket lines.⁸ As America emerged from World War II, folk musicians also focused attention on the persistence of racism in America. It was within this context that two of folk music's leading figures, Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger, became targets of anti-communist crusaders bent on rooting out traitors to America's cause.

In this chapter, I argue that the targeting of Robeson and Seeger by government officials and other anti-communist forces was not so much about their music as about fears that their *personas* and their *connections* to the civil rights and labor movements might undermine patriotic support for America's cold war policies. The attacks were not only an attempt to regulate what was safe and permissible for Americans to say during the Red Scare, but they were also a way to discredit "radical" views on race and labor relations in general. As both singers became more popular, their critics ramped up the accusations in an attempt to silence their

voices. Both singers sang “people’s songs,” but their growing popularity, in combination with their critique of American politics and culture, represented a threat to the government’s efforts to build a consensus behind its aggressive cold war policies.

Although each singer was said to pose a threat to America, they were seen as posing different *sorts* of threats. Robeson most obviously challenged racism and race norms, while Seeger tried to mobilize unions for better working conditions. Regardless, both were accused of communist sympathies and targeted by HUAC. In response, Robeson employed a defiant, even confrontational style. Robeson cited his Fifth Amendment right protecting himself against self-incrimination, but he also refused to keep silent about racism and the mistreatment of blacks in America. As such, Robeson’s persona not only represented an anti-American threat, but more importantly, a *black* anti-American threat. Instead of backing down from his protests, Robeson used his HUAC hearings to demand that the federal government protect black people. Seeger, on the other hand, backed away from his earlier protests and adopted a more polite persona. Seeger implicitly cited his rights to free speech and association and refused to answer the committee’s questions, explaining that he felt it was “improper and immoral” to ask any American about their political associations. Even though Seeger was eventually found guilty of contempt for refusing to answer the committee’s questions, he survived to sing again because he did not criticize the federal government in his testimony or disrespect the committee with the tone of his response. Unlike Seeger, Robeson successfully challenged HUAC while avoiding contempt charges, but his persistent criticism of racism in America hurt his concert bookings and made him too much of a political liability for the emerging civil rights movement.

Paul Robeson: From National Hero to Pariah

Historian Joseph Dorinson has described Paul Robeson as “the greatest legend nobody knows.”⁹ Before earning international notoriety as an actor and singer, Robeson was praised for his academic and athletic achievements as a student at Rutgers University from 1915 to 1919. Only the third African-American ever accepted at Rutgers and the only black student attending the University at the time, Robeson wrote a senior thesis on the constitutional amendment that overruled the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision and declared African Americans citizens of the United States. Robeson’s thesis, “The Fourteenth Amendment: The Sleeping Giant of the American Constitution,” optimistically concluded that the amendment would someday help all Americans “develop a higher sense of constitutional morality.”¹⁰

Robeson went on to be named class valedictorian, and he was also a two-time first team All-American football player. Although commended for his intellect and his on-field achievements, Robeson still experienced the “paradox of black Americans”: he was treated as a second-class citizen and denied the same housing and dining options as white students at Rutgers because of the color of his skin.¹¹ Despite the discrimination, Robeson continued to profess faith in the ideals of democracy and the American dream, and he advocated a doctrine of racial progress through self-help.¹² In his commencement address at Rutgers, for example, he concluded: “We of this less favored race realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands. On ourselves alone will depend the preservation of our liberties and the transmission of them in their integrity to those who will come after us.”¹³

Robeson resented the mistreatment of black people in America, but his father, a minister and former slave, taught him to carry himself with a mixture of pride and modesty. A “proud

and pleasant” disposition initially served Robeson well, as the mainstream press could frame him for white audiences as an example of the progress black people were making in America.¹⁴ This was important for Robeson’s reputation because in the 1920s he began playing black spirituals – what W.E.B. Du Bois termed “sorrow songs”¹⁵ – before packed audiences around the world. These “sorrow songs,” which included “Deep River,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and “Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho,” described the determination and survival of black people, reminding audiences that America was not that far separated from the times of slavery. Although some leaders of the Harlem Renaissance critiqued Robeson’s appropriation of black communal songs for commercial performances, he was widely praised as “the embodiment of the aspirations of the New Negro.”¹⁶ During this time, Robeson made very few comments regarding race relations in America. As such, it was much easier for white audiences and the mainstream press to accept him and praise his performances.

During the 1930s Robeson grew tired of being “proud and pleasant,” and his discourse started to reflect more radical themes and tones. In 1937, for example, Robeson told the British press that he no longer could “portray the life nor express the living interests, hopes and aspirations” of his people with “commercial” projects.¹⁷ That same year he declared: “The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.”¹⁸ In 1938 Robeson told a reporter that he no longer believed in Du Bois's notion that a “talented tenth” of black people should lead the black masses out of their oppression through their own personal achievements.¹⁹ In addition to changing his discourse in interviews, Robeson also changed the lyrics to some of his most well-known songs to reflect his new political stance. Singing before a rally to raise funds for victims of the Spanish Civil War in December 1937, for example, Robeson changed the final lines of the song “Ol’ Man River” from

“I get weary/An’ sick of tryin’/I’m tired of livin’/An’ scared of dyin’” to “But I keeps laughin’/Instead of cryin’/I must keep fightin’/Until I’m dying.”²⁰

Living in London from 1927 until 1939 convinced Robeson of the hypocrisy of the United States in proclaiming to stand for freedom and equality. When he returned to America on October 23, 1939, he was an international star,²¹ and he made it clear he was going to use his newfound celebrity to fight for the rights of black people in America: “My roots are here, and I always expected to come back. In England I considered problems from the point of view of Africa; in this country I look at everything from the point of view of the Negro worker in Mississippi.” When asked by one reporter if he was a communist, Robeson replied “I am not a communist, and I am not a fellow traveler; I’m an antifascist.” When another reporter asked why he did not criticize Joseph Stalin, Robeson answered, “Because in Russia I didn’t find any race prejudice.”²²

Federal agents responded to Robeson’s return by actively monitoring his actions and whereabouts, aggressively pursuing any evidence linking him to communism. As early as January 13, 1941, for example, the FBI, under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, issued the first memorandum on Robeson labeling him a member of the Communist Party.²³ In the spring of that same year the Dies Committee in the House of Representatives, a precursor to HUAC, accused Robeson of “Un-American Activities.”²⁴ In addition to assigning special agents to trail Robeson and file regular reports, the FBI also tapped his phone conversations and bugged apartments he was known to visit. In January 1943, Hoover wrote to the special agent in charge at the FBI’s New York Field Office that Robeson should be added to a list of people subject to “custodial detention” in the case of a national emergency or war, and Robeson was so designated on April 30, 1943.²⁵ By August of 1943, Hoover and the FBI reported that Robeson was “a

leading figure in the Communist Party” who was “actively attempting to influence the Negroes of America to Communism.”²⁶

Frustrated with the lack of progress in fighting racism and passing anti-lynching legislation in America, Robeson's rhetoric became even more defiant following World War II. In 1949, for example, Robeson told a reporter, “I am a radical and I am going to stay one until my people get free to walk the earth. Negroes just cannot wait for civil rights.”²⁷ Later that same year he declared, “I defy any errand boys, Uncle Toms of the Negro people, to challenge my Americanism because by word and deed I challenge this vicious system to the death.”²⁸ As Robeson’s rhetoric became more radical, three important developments in 1949 amplified concerns about his loyalties. The first occurred at the Paris Peace Conference on April 20, 1949 when Robeson delivered an extemporaneous speech following a three-song performance. Robeson had been invited to attend the conference by the Coordinating Committee of Colonial Peoples, who asked him to represent the 700 million colored people of the colonial world.²⁹ The second and third moments occurred when Robeson returned to America and riots broke out at his next two concerts in Peekskill, New York. These three moments symbolized not only a transformation of Robeson's persona, but also changes in how the mainstream press and the government viewed him.

Robeson's appearance at the Paris Peace Conference marked the moment when the press began to portray him as a willing tool of the Soviet Union and part of a foreign conspiracy to overthrow the United States. In his Paris speech, Robeson declared the wealth of America was built “on the backs of millions of blacks,” adding “we are resolved to share it equally among our children.” This was not the first time that Robeson made such an argument, but he went on to say that “we shall not put up with any hysterical ravings that urges us to make war on anyone.

Our fight for peace is strong. We shall not make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union.”³⁰ An *Associated Press* dispatch, which was picked up by a majority of white mainstream newspapers the next day, claimed to “quote” Robeson’s speech: “We colonial peoples have contributed to the building of the United States and are determined to share in its wealth. We denounce the policy of the United States government, which is similar to that of Hitler and Goebbels.” The dispatch also reported that Robeson said it was “unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations, against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.”³¹

The backlash against Robeson was quick and immediate. “The white press rushed to inveigh against him as a traitor,” Robeson’s biographer Martin Duberman explained, while “the black leadership hurried to deny he spoke for anyone but himself.” Meanwhile, “agencies of the U.S. government excitedly exchanged memos speculating about possible grounds for asserting that he had forfeited his citizenship.”³² In addition to the attacks from the white press and the federal government, many black leaders also condemned Robeson for his Paris remarks. Roy Wilkins, acting director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), went on the radio to clarify that “Negros loved America first no matter how many of them were lynched or Jim Crowed.” An editorial in the May 1949 issue of *Crisis* magazine, the NAACP’s official publication, claimed Robeson failed to represent “any American Negroes” and that in Paris he “must have fancied himself a general in the Communist-led army of the proletariat.”³³ Following the backlash over his appearance in Paris, HUAC held hearings on the communist infiltration of minority groups and set out to hear what other prominent black leaders and entertainers thought of Robeson’s comments.

The majority of witnesses called by HUAC testified that they did not agree with or support Robeson's position regarding blacks and the war. The most prolific and significant witness called to testify against Robeson was Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodger star who broke Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947. Robinson claimed Robeson's comments were "very silly," adding that if he wanted to "sound silly" expressing them in public then that was "his business and not mine." In contrast to Robeson, Robinson said he was a "religious man" who felt "free to worship as I please" in America.³⁴ Robinson's testimony not only portrayed Robeson as "Un-American," but it also provided the white mainstream newspapers with a new voice for black people. The *New York Times*, for example, printed Robinson's testimony in full the next day and Eleanor Roosevelt, in her nationally syndicated column, "My Day," wrote that "Mr. Robeson does his people great harm in trying to line them up on the Communist side of the political picture. Jackie Robinson helped them greatly by his forthright statements."³⁵

The attacks against Robeson were effective because he was abroad while the hearings were taking place and therefore could not defend himself against his critics. Upon returning to the United States in August, Robeson partnered with People's Artists, a left-wing music organization created by Pete Seeger, to play a benefit concert in Peekskill, New York.³⁶ The day after the concert was announced the Peekskill *Evening Star* ran a front-page story with the following headline: "Robeson Concert Here Aids 'Subversive' Unit—Is Sponsored by 'People's Artists' Called Red Front in California." The *Star's* editorial declared that the "time for tolerant silence that signifies approval is running out." A letter by an American Legion officer cited in the same editorial warned that "the weaker minded are susceptible to their [communists] fallacious teachings unless something is done by the loyal Americans of this area."³⁷

On August 27, 1949, thousands of local vigilantes arrived at the campgrounds where the concert was to take place ready to lynch Robeson. Since Robeson was not at the concert yet, the mob trapped the concertgoers in the campgrounds for several hours. Despite the fact that many of the concertgoers were women and children, the mob still threw rocks at the group and attacked the men with baseball bats and fence-posts. Although members of the FBI were on-hand to take note of Robeson's activities, police did not arrive until much later. Robeson had attempted to enter the site but was advised by friends and concert organizers to turn around before an attempt could be made on his life. In what could have been a mass lynching of Robeson and others, it was remarkable that no one died that day at the concert.³⁸

Following the riot Robeson refused to back down from his earlier statements and he rescheduled the concert at a different Peekskill campground for September 4. In an interview before the rescheduled show Robeson said he was ready to “make the supreme fight for my people and all the other underprivileged masses,” adding that his people would not be deterred from “bringing true freedom to those who follow it.”³⁹ When news of Robeson’s return arrived in Peekskill, anti-Robeson protestors once again mobilized. The Associated Veterans’ Group announced it would hold a parade the same day as the concert, while Peekskill residents proudly displayed stickers declaring “Wake Up America, Peekskill Did!” The night before the rescheduled concert, two effigies of Robeson were burned in the small town’s shopping district.⁴⁰

On the morning of September 4, more than 20,000 concertgoers, 8,000 anti-Robeson protesters, and 900 police officers arrived at the campground. Members of People’s Artists surrounded Robeson as he took the stage, shielding him as rumors circulated amongst the concert organizers that snipers were in the hills surrounding the new campsite.⁴¹ Joined by Pete Seeger

and other performers, Robeson sang without incident, much to the delight of his audience. Although the concert itself went smoothly, problems emerged as concertgoers attempted to leave. Peekskill law enforcement officers were on hand for the rescheduled show, but they failed to prevent the protesters from blocking the roads while throwing rocks and bricks at the exiting vehicles. Others rushed cars, dragging out occupants and beating them as the police watched but did nothing to intervene.

Both local politicians and members of the mainstream press blamed Robeson for the riots, arguing that the concert's purpose was to promote communism. The protesters and the police, on the other hand, did only what any good American would do when communists invaded their town. New York Governor Thomas Dewey's Press Secretary James C. Hagerty said the riots were caused by "a bunch of communists" and local police and veterans were "magnificent" in their response.⁴² Walter Winchell, who hosted one of the most popular radio programs in America at the time, suggested Robeson wanted his detractors to riot: "The Reds don't want American concerts. They want to provoke Americans into rioting, so that their radio commentators can have some evidence for their ravings. And so I sincerely hope that the American Legionnaires and the other war veterans will not fall into his Moscow trap when Paul Robeson starts his nation-wide concert tour."⁴³ Following his Peekskill concerts, the State Department revoked Robeson's passport. When Robeson and his lawyers sought an explanation, they were told his passport was revoked because "his frequent criticism of the treatment of blacks in the United States should not be aired in foreign countries."⁴⁴

By focusing on the "Red" Paul Robeson, members of the government and the mainstream press downplayed Robeson's racial critique and amplified his alleged communist connections. By framing Robeson as the "voice of the Kremlin" and a "black Stalin," Robeson's critics could

ignore—and, in the process, invalidate—his protests of America's race relations.⁴⁵ 1950 should have been the height of Robeson's career, but the white mainstream newspapers stopped covering his activities, black leaders and organizations distanced themselves from him, and the State Department revoked his passport, essentially placing him on “house-arrest” in his own country. Blacklisted and with no place to travel or perform, Robeson would have to wait until 1956 to answer his critics.

“You are the Un-Americans”: Paul Robeson’s HUAC Hearing

On June 12, 1956, the first witness of the day before the HUAC was Paul Robeson. The purpose of the hearings were to determine whether American passports were being used “in furtherance of the objectives of the Communist conspiracy.”⁴⁶ Chairman Francis Walter (D—Pennsylvania) argued that previous HUAC hearings had revealed offenders with “a pattern of procuring American passports by representing that they were going to travel for business or pleasure,” but when they got there “they used devious methods of circumventing the travel restrictions so they could attend communist-sponsored conferences and other propaganda.”⁴⁷ Communists were not only creating front organizations to carry out their aims, Walter argued, but they also used “people who, though not actually Communist Party members, were nevertheless witting or unwitting servants of the communist cause.”⁴⁸ HUAC presented the hearings as an opportunity for Robeson to explain that he was not using his passport to do harm to the U.S., as well as to distance himself from the global communist conspiracy.

The committee opened their questioning by offering Robeson the opportunity to denounce the Communist Party. Richard Arens, HUAC’s lead counsel, started by asking

Robeson why he refused to sign an anti-communist affidavit for his passport. If Robeson wanted his passport so badly, the government reasoned, then he should have signed the affidavit, especially since he claimed he was never a member of the Communist Party. Robeson declared that “signing any such affidavit” was a “complete contradiction of the rights of an American citizen.” Later, when Arens asked if he was a member of the Communist Party, Robeson responded harshly, “Oh please, please, please. What do you mean by the Communist Party? As far as I know it is a legal party like the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.”⁴⁹

Instead of simply denying that he was a member of the Communist Party, Robeson invoked his Fifth Amendment right and mocked the hearings and ridiculed the committee members. Robeson described HUAC’s hearing as “really ridiculous,” a “laughing matter,” and “nonsense.”⁵⁰ When Chairman Walters tried to direct him to answer HUAC's questions, Robeson attacked the Chairman for authoring legislation that discriminated against immigrants. “You are the author of all of the bills that are going to keep all kinds of decent people out of the country,” Robeson argued. The Chairman responded, “No, only your kind.”⁵¹

Robeson claimed that the real reason he had been called to testify before HUAC was because he refused to remain silent about the mistreatment of blacks in America. Robeson made this clear during the hearings, declaring “the reason that I am here today, you know, from the mouth of the State Department itself, is because I should not be allowed to travel because I have struggled for the independence of colonial peoples of Africa” and because “when I am abroad I speak out against the injustices against the Negro people of this land.” Robeson argued he was “not being tried for whether I am a communist,” but instead for “fighting for the rights of my people who are still second-class citizens in this United States of America.” Robeson closed on

another defiant note: “You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of people, for the rights of workers.”⁵²

Chairman Walter attempted to downplay Robeson’s protests, urging him to instead read Jackie Robinson’s testimony. Robeson shot back, “I am sure that in his heart he would take back a lot of what he said about any reference to me.” Robeson reminded the committee that he had been one of the people to speak on behalf of Robinson when he was fighting for the right to play baseball in the major leagues. “Get the picture and get the record,” he instructed Chairman Walter.⁵³ Robeson had heard this argument before—that he should follow other prominent members of his race who were less combative and more patriotic. According to Robeson, however, “the success of a few Negroes, including myself or Jackie Robinson,” could not “make up for thousands of Negro families in the South.” Once again, Robeson refused not only to denounce communism but also to defer to more moderate leaders of his own race.

Much of the questioning of Robeson before HUAC focused on his appearance at the Paris Peace Conference in 1949. Arens and Congressman Bernard Kearney (R—New York) asked Robeson to explain his statement that black people should not go to war against the Soviet Union. Robeson responded it was “unthinkable” that any of his “people” would take up arms in the name of a country that did not recognize their rights. According to Robeson, “What should happen would be that this United States Government should go down to Mississippi and protect my people. That is what should happen.” Robeson said he was “for peace” with all of the “decent people in the world,” including Russia and China. When Congressman Gordon Scherer (R—Ohio) asked why he didn't just go live in Russia, Robeson stated: “Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country and I am going to stay here and have a part of it

just like you.” He then became even more defiant, defying the committee to run him out of the country: “And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?”⁵⁴

Rather than deal with Robeson's accusations of racism in America, Arens chose to focus instead on his attitudes about Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet communists. Prior to his hearing, Robeson had refused to criticize Stalin in public while claiming Russia was the only place that treated him with the “full dignity of being a human being.”⁵⁵ In responding to questions about how he viewed Stalin, Robeson declared that Stalin’s leadership was “a question for the Soviet Union.” Instead of distancing himself from Stalin, Robeson tried to shift the conversation back to why the United States treated blacks as “second and third class citizens.” According to Robeson, the federal government, including HUAC, were representatives “of the people who, in building America wasted 60 to 100 million lives of my people, black people drawn from Africa on the plantations.”

Instead of talking about Stalin, Robeson urged the committee to own up to its responsibility for America’s history of slavery: “You are responsible and your forbearers for 60 million to 100 million black people dying in the slave ships and on the plantations, and don’t you ask me about anybody, please.”⁵⁶ When Arens asked Robeson about his close friend Ben Davis, a former New York City councilman who was convicted of trying to overthrow the government under the Smith Act in 1949 and served three years in prison, he finally lost his temper, declaring that “you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”⁵⁷ At that point, Chairman Walter adjourned the hearings. It was clear that Robeson was not going to answer their questions about his political affiliations but was instead going to go on the offensive against the committee itself.

HUAC rested its case against Robeson on his refusal to denounce communism and the Soviet Union, his Paris Peace Conference statements, and his failure to distance himself from Stalin. Robeson not only refused to do all this, but he also turned the tables on the committee by comparing the alleged threat posed by the Soviet Union to the United States' history of crimes against black people. Following the abrupt end to the hearing, the committee members met behind closed doors and voted unanimously to cite Robeson for contempt.⁵⁸ Although the committee's contempt recommendation did not lead to criminal charges, the State Department still restricted Robeson's passport until 1958 and the press blackballed the singer. Banished to the outskirts of American popular culture, Robeson's career was effectively destroyed.

Pete Seeger and a "Singing Labor Movement"

At an early age Pete Seeger was introduced to folk music and politics by his father, folk archivist Charles Seeger, who emphasized not only the sounds of folk music, but also the important messages they communicated. Unlike the chart-topping popular music of the 1940s and 1950s (songs that typically focused on themes of "love" with lines like "baby I need you"), Seeger described folk as music with "all the meat of life in them." According to Seeger, folk songs' "humor had bite, it was not trivial. Its tragedy was real, not sentimental."⁵⁹ In December 1940, Seeger, along with Woody Guthrie, formed the Almanac Singers, a "loosely organized" group of left-leaning folk musicians. Millard Lampell, another founding member, claimed that the Almanac Singers were "trying to give back to the people the songs of the workers."⁶⁰ During this time Seeger joined the CPUSA, criticized President Franklin Delano Roosevelt for warmongering, and generally remained silent regarding the Hitler-Stalin pact.⁶¹

The rhetoric of the Almanac Singers was political from the start. On their first album, *Songs for John Doe* (1941), the band recorded several antiwar songs, including “The Yanks Are Not Coming,” “Plow Under,” and “The Ballad of October 16th.” The latter, set to the music of the old folk song “Jesse James,” included the following chorus attacking Roosevelt for introducing a peacetime war draft:

Oh Franklin Roosevelt told the people how he felt
We damned near believed what he said
He said, “I hate war – and so does Eleanor,
But we won’t be safe till everybody’s dead.”⁶²

Songs for John Doe also called for non-intervention in World War II and criticized large corporations for seeking lucrative defense contracts. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, Harvard constitutional law professor Carl Friedrich called the Almanac Singers a “Poison in Our System,” calling not merely for legal suppression but also cultural shaming of the group: “These recording are distributed under the innocuous appeal: ‘Sing out for peace.’ Yet they are strictly subversive and illegal. You can never handle situations of this kind by mere suppression.”⁶³

The band’s record label, Keynote Records, took notice and imprinted each record with “Almanac Records” instead of the company’s real name. Keynote also required the band to front the company the record’s production costs. Meanwhile, Hitler invaded Russia and even the CIO came out in favor of Roosevelt’s war effort. By the time the Almanac Singers released their second album, *Talking Union*, in July 1941, their first album had become so unpopular that Keynote Records destroyed all the remaining inventory. Unlike *Songs for John Doe*, *Talking Union* contained no explicitly anti-Roosevelt content.

On their third album, *Dear Mr. President*, released in May 1942, the Almanac Singers not only reconciled with Roosevelt, but also expressed full support for the war effort. In the title

track, “Dear Mr. President,” Seeger expressed his strong support for defeating Hitler: “Now, Mr. President/We haven’t always agreed in the past, I know/But that ain’t at all important now/What is important is what we got to do/We got to lick Mr. Hitler, and until we do/Other things can wait.”⁶⁴ Unlike their previous records, which featured more pro-union songs, *Dear Mr. President* focused on the “one big job to do,” which was to defeat Hitler and totalitarianism in general. In the title song, Seeger even seemed to volunteer to pick up a gun himself: “That’s lick Mr. Hitler and when we’re through, Let no one else ever take his place/to trample down the human race. So what I want is you to give me a gun/ So we can hurry up and get the job done.”

The Almanac Singers rhetoric was now sufficiently patriotic that the Office of War Information (OWI) included several of their live performances in official OWI broadcasts. Nevertheless, the mainstream press and the music industry remained skeptical about the group. After nearly thirty million listeners heard the Almanac Singers on the opening of a new OWI radio series, “This is War,” newspapers around the country reminded readers of their past with headlines like “Singers on New Morale Show Also Warbled for Communists” and “‘Peace’ Choir Changes Tune.” Following this wave of bad publicity, the group lost popularity and HUAC listed the band as a subversive communist front. The final blow to the group came when Seeger himself was drafted into the Army.⁶⁵

In the Army Seeger trained to be an airline mechanic, but spent much of his time entertaining the troops. In 1945, he returned home and created a new folk music organization called People’s Songs.⁶⁶ In soliciting support for the effort, Seeger described the organization as an effort to collect all sorts of “People’s Songs”—“work songs, play songs, nonsense songs, religious songs, and fighting songs”—in order to “bring to as many people as possible, the true democratic message that came out of this music.”⁶⁷ In his book *The Incomplete Folksinger*,

Seeger further explained that he had become “convinced that the revival of interest in folk music would come through the trade unions.” In founding People’s Songs, he “envisioned a singing labor movement spearheading a nationwide folk song revival.”⁶⁸ Initially the press praised People’s Songs and their monthly publication, *People’s Songs Bulletin*. The *New York Times*, for example, applauded People’s Songs for providing “a musical stethoscope on the heartbeat of the nation, translating current events into notes and lyrics.”⁶⁹ *Fortune* magazine also approved of the organization’s celebration of labor music, explaining that “Americans love a party even on the picket line.”⁷⁰ Within a year, more than a thousand people had officially become members of People’s Songs, and the organization had established ties with organized labor, providing music for mine workers walking picket lines during a strike in Pittsburgh, recording an album for the CIO’s political action committee, and producing a filmstrip for the National Maritime Union.⁷¹

By 1947, however, fears of communist infiltration of labor unions and other domestic institutions brought People’s Songs under suspicion. President Harry Truman already had created loyalty and political review boards for federal employees, and HUAC was busy exposing communist influences within the entertainment industry, beginning with the “Hollywood Ten.”⁷² That same year, Hoover and the FBI began gathering information on People’s Songs, secretly attending their meetings and the appearances of musicians associated with the group. Within two years the FBI had amassed more than five hundred pages of evidence against People’s Songs, taking the group “more seriously than the Communist Party did,” according to Seeger biographer David King Dunaway. Even though the FBI’s analysis concluded that folk music had a limited effect and represented no real mass movement, it alleged that Seeger and other folksingers gave voice to “red-intellectuals,” nourished radical communities, and undermined national security.⁷³ As the cold war escalated, tensions within the labor movement itself

increased, with more and more labor unions purging themselves of suspected communists. At the same time, many within the labor movement distanced themselves from radical folk music.

During the presidential campaign of 1948, Seeger and other People Song's artists supported Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace. Like Robeson and Seeger, Wallace advocated improved relations with the Soviet Union, an end to segregation, and voting and labor rights for non-whites and poor working people. Wallace's refusal to engage in the usual cold war rhetoric endeared him to communists, but it also cost him support from organized labor. Nevertheless, Seeger supported Wallace from the beginning, singing "A Visit with Harry" (to the tune of "Oh, Susannah") at his nomination in Philadelphia:

I went up to the president
And this is what he said,
"This fellow Henry Wallace
Is a rantin' Rooshian Red!
We've got to jail the communists
To keep this country free,
And everyone's a communist
Who doesn't vote for me..."⁷⁴

Seeger subsequently hit the campaign trail with Wallace, singing songs at Wallace rallies across America. At some stops, both Seeger and Wallace were met with verbal and even physical attacks. When Seeger joined Wallace on a trip to Burlington, North Carolina on August 30, 1948, for example, people mobbed their caravan and pelted the candidate with eggs and tomatoes. Enraged by the attack, Wallace grabbed a nearby bystander and shouted, "Are you an American? Am I in America?" When the ballots were counted two months later, it was clear Seeger won few votes for Wallace, especially in the South. Wallace not only lost the election, he barely received one million votes, finishing fourth. In addition, the time Seeger spent on the campaign trail hurt the day-to-day operations of People's Songs.⁷⁵

People's Songs operated on a "shoe-string" budget and, according to Seeger, it ultimately failed to reach "a single miner's union local."⁷⁶ With Seeger campaigning for Wallace, the organization eventually went bankrupt and was forced to close. Frustrated but undeterred, Seeger formed a new organization to promote folk music, People's Artists, and a new band, the Weavers. Seeger's new band continued to sing politically progressive messages, arguing for equality and justice in songs like "If I Had A Hammer," but they were much more interested in appealing to mainstream America. Instead of trying to create a "singing labor movement" like he did with the Almanac Singers and People's Songs, Seeger and the Weavers wore tuxedos, performed at large concert-halls, and played less finger-pointing and more commercially viable songs. They gained most of their popularity for playing covers of earlier folk songs, including Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene."

After the Peekskill riots, however, it became nearly impossible for any bands with communist connections, past or present, to book concert dates. Desperate to keep the band together, the Weavers accepted an invitation to appear regularly at an upscale New York nightclub. Six months later the band had a manager, a recording contract with Decca, and a hit record with nearly two million copies sold ("Goodnight Irene," with "Tzena Tzena" on the B-side). Over the next two years Decca sold more than four million Weavers records, and the band had several more hit songs, including "So Long," "On Top of Old Smoky," and "Wimoweh."⁷⁷

Despite the increasing commercial success of the Weavers, Seeger and the band continued to face allegations that they were communists. By the end of June 1950, *Red Channels*, one of the biggest anti-communist periodicals in America, listed Seeger's name thirteen times. Published by the right-wing journal *Counterattack*, *Red Channels* relied on *Daily Worker* clippings and other material provided by the FBI to claim that Seeger was not only an

official member of the Communist Party, but that his music provided aid and comfort to communists. On February 6 and 7, 1952, former Communist Party member Harvey Matusow, who previously worked at a People's Songs chapter in New York City and was now cooperating with the FBI as a paid informer, testified that Pete Seeger and the other Weavers (except Lee Hays, who he said quit) were members of the Communist Party. The band's popularity, according to Matusow, was used to "attract many young people to the movement because they respected the Weavers and thought they were good singers and entertainers." Once the young people were at the event, Matusow said, a Communist Party organizer would have a "good chance" to recruit many of them.⁷⁸ The Weavers were advised by their manager to stop playing their more politically progressive songs and to focus on their commercial hits, but the damage was already done.

Because of Matusow's testimony, the Weavers were now considered political "untouchables."⁷⁹ "We had started off singing in some very flossy nightclubs," Seeger recalled, "then we went lower and lower as the blacklist crowded us in. Finally we were down to places like Daffy's Bar and Grill on the outskirts of Cleveland."⁸⁰ A number of their scheduled performances were cancelled, and before long, according to the Weavers' Ronnie Gilbert, "there was no work to be had."⁸¹ As the Weavers approached the end of their Decca contract, they realized that stores would not stock their records.⁸² Late in 1952, the band took a hiatus and Seeger decided to perform solo. For the next three years, Seeger tried to sustain his career by playing smaller shows at summer camps, churches, school auditoriums, and college campuses for roughly twenty-five dollars per appearance.⁸³

As Seeger carved a new career, his past protests and affiliations continued to overshadow his performances. After a performance at Pennsylvania's Bucknell University in

January 1955, for example, reporters pressed Seeger to explain Matusow's allegations. Since Matusow had recanted his testimony in his recently published autobiography *False Witness*, Seeger could have easily dismissed any communist connections but instead refused to address it.⁸⁴ Seeger's refusal to discuss his political affiliations only fueled the controversy that surrounded him. Herbert Philbrick, one of the most prominent anti-Communist columnists at the time, wrote that Seeger was "the Reds' most highly advertised entertainer." For the next few months it was impossible for Seeger to dodge questions regarding his communist affiliations, and HUAC eventually subpoenaed him during the first week of August 1955.⁸⁵

After he consulted with his lawyer Paul Ross, Seeger realized he had three options: name names, cite the Fifth Amendment, or trust in the First Amendment. By pleading the Fifth, Seeger could have walked out of the hearing a free man, but he feared being labeled a "Fifth Amendment Communist." The morning of Seeger's appearance before HUAC, the *New York Times* applauded HUAC and Chairman Walter for the "decorum" of the hearings and opined that since HUAC was a "duly constituted committee of Congress," any witnesses who failed "to give it their corporation" would have to "bear the onus of public suspicion that they have something to conceal."⁸⁶ Although taking the Fifth may have been the safest route, Seeger thus chose to stand up to the committee, telling Ross that he planned to "attack these guys for what they are, the worst of America." He felt he could do that, he explained, because "there was no job I could be fired from."⁸⁷ Ross warned Seeger not to be "a smartass" and advised him to either answer the committee's questions politely or to explain why he refused to answer them—as opposed to just "taking the fifth."⁸⁸

“I Sing For Everybody”: Pete Seeger Before the HUAC

On August 18, 1955, HUAC met in New York to question Seeger and other New York area entertainers with alleged connections to communism.⁸⁹ Some on the committee apparently hoped to establish that Seeger's work funded communist organizations, but most seemed content to argue that communists listened to and took comfort from his music. Instead of “naming names” or citing his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself, Seeger refused to answer the committee’s questions, claiming that he wrote songs “for everybody,” regardless of race, class, or political affiliations. Unlike Robeson, Seeger remained polite and cooperative throughout the hearings, occasionally resorting to humor to deflect hostile questions but never disrupting the decorum of the proceedings.

Seeger first responded with humor to HUAC's chief counsel Frank Tavenner’s questions about his occupation. He told the committee, “I make my living as a banjo picker—sort of damning in some people’s opinion.”⁹⁰ Tavenner ignored the comment and asked Seeger about a *Daily Worker* article promoting his singing for a Communist Party event. Seeger responded, “I refuse to answer that question whether it was a quote from the *New York Times* or the *Vegetarian Journal*.”⁹¹ When directed to answer the question, Seeger invoked his rights as a citizen but did not technically “take the Fifth”: “I am not going to answer any questions as to my associations, my philosophical or religious beliefs or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election or any of these private affairs. I think these are very improper questions for any American to be asked, especially under such compulsion as this.”⁹² Seeger’s response clearly annoyed some members of the committee, but in dismissing Tavenner’s questions as “improper and immoral” Seeger was

able to avoid discussing his own political views or naming others who might be guilty of sympathy for the communists.

As the hearing progressed, members of HUAC continued to press Seeger to admit supporting the communists or to name names of communists who he associated with. Finally, Seeger responded with indignation: “I feel that in my whole life I have never done anything of any conspiratorial nature and I resent very much and very deeply the implications of being called before this committee that in some way because my opinions may be different from yours that I am any less of an American than anybody else. I love my country very deeply, sir.” If that was the case, Chairman Walter responded, then why didn't he want to “make a little contribution toward preserving its institutions” by providing the names of communists who used folk music for entertainment and fundraising. Seeger declined to name names, and he insisted that his “whole life” had been dedicated to standing up for America’s ideals.⁹³

Unlike Robeson, Seeger tried to walk a thin line between respectfully responding to the committee’s questions and expressing his righteous indignation that they dared question his patriotism and loyalty to America. Whereas Robeson cited his Fifth Amendment and attacked HUAC, Seeger merely labeled the inquiry “improper and immoral” and politely declined to answer questions he considered too “private.” Seeger also stuck to his lawyer’s advice and kept his answers short, making it clear he would not answer the committee’s questions. Unlike Robeson, who could barely conceal his contempt for the committee, Seeger referred to members of the committee as “sir” and often deflected hostile questions with humor. When Seeger was asked to identify himself in a picture of a 1952 May Day parade, for example, he compared the question to Pontius Pilate’s question to Jesus Christ: “Are you king of the Jews?” Chairman Walter told Seeger to “stop that” and answer the question, to which Seeger replied, “let someone

else identify that picture.”⁹⁴ In this, one of the most confrontational moments of the hearing, Seeger flatly refused to confirm or deny HUAC’s photographic evidence of his allegedly “subversive” and “Un-American” activities.

Even though Seeger refused to divulge any information regarding his political affiliations or the politics of his associates, Tavenner continued to cite *Daily Worker* articles that mentioned his performances and urged him to explain if in fact he did perform at Communist Party functions. Tavenner specifically cited two of Seeger's songs, “Wasn’t That a Time!” and “The Hammer Song,” as potentially subversive since both songs had been mentioned in the *Daily Worker*. Tavenner and the members of the committee wanted Seeger to explain where he played these songs. Seeger said that he would be glad to talk about these songs—but not where he played them—because his songs were the “clearest explanation” of what he believed in “as an American.”⁹⁵ Seeger even offered to sing “Wasn’t That a Time!” before the committee. According to his biographer David Dunaway, the offer “sounded like a joke, but Pete wasn’t kidding. He had a physical need to make his voice heard, to demonstrate what he did with his life.”⁹⁶ The members of HUAC refused his offer, however. They were not concerned about the song *per se*, but whether Seeger, in writing such songs, was “performing a valuable service for the Communist Party.”⁹⁷

As the hearings came to a close, it was clear that Seeger was not going to answer the committee’s questions. In regards to the people he played for, Seeger portrayed himself as a musical voice of all “the people.” In his testimony, Seeger argued that he did not play political favorites: “I have sung for Americans of every political persuasion, and I am proud that I never refuse to sing to an audience, no matter what religion or color of their skin, or situation of life. I have sung in hobo jungles, and I have sung for the Rockefellers, and I am proud that I have never

refused to sing for anybody.” Finally, he professed his loyalty to America and went on the offensive: “I love my country very dearly and I greatly resent this implication that because some of the places that I have sung and some of the people that I have known, and some of my opinions, whether they are religious or philosophical, or I might be a vegetarian, make me any less of an American.”⁹⁸ Before being dismissed from the hearing, Seeger thus turned the tables on his inquisitors, suggesting that it was they, not he, who posed a threat to the ideals that made America great.

Despite the eloquence of Seeger’s self-defense, the U.S. House of Representatives cited him for contempt of Congress on July 25, 1956. On March 26, 1957, a federal grand jury indicted Seeger on ten counts of contempt of Congress. Seeger pleaded not guilty and was released on bail, but he still found himself banned from the commercial airwaves while awaiting trial. The terms of Seeger’s bail also required him to obtain permission anytime he wanted to leave his hometown in upstate New York, a measure that made it even more difficult to book shows. Seeger assumed his case would come to trial quickly, but he was mistaken. Seeger’s trial did not begin until March 27, 1961, and just a few days later he was found guilty of all ten counts of contempt. Judge Thomas Murphy sentenced Seeger to a year in prison for each count, to be served concurrently. Immediately Seeger and his lawyer appealed the conviction, and Seeger’s friends quickly raised the money to bail him out. One year later, the U.S. Court of Appeals heard the case, and Judge Irving Kauffman overturned Seeger’s conviction on a technicality, ruling the indictment was “defective because it failed to properly allege the authority of the subcommittee to conduct the hearings.”⁹⁹

Robbed of a lucrative career while trapped in his legal troubles, Seeger returned to the “underground” network he had played as a solo artist, singing politically progressive songs

before small audiences at summer camps, churches, school auditoriums, and college campuses. The shows Seeger played after his appearance before HUAC were certainly not as high-profile as they had been before, but they did start to build “new audiences” for the singer.¹⁰⁰ By the end of the decade, Seeger, unlike Robeson, had restored his reputation as an important musical figure, and he could now openly profess his political views, marching hand-in-hand with civil rights protesters as they sang “We Shall Overcome.”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Criticisms of Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger by members of Congress and the mainstream press might be seen as an attempt to define and regulate what was safe and permissible for Americans to say during the Red Scare. By linking each singer to communism, the artists’ critics were able to marginalize and invalidate their protests against racial discrimination and the oppression of workers in the United States. Although both singers were celebrated at various points in their careers, both also represented political threats to America during the Red Scare. What is significant about the attacks on each singer is that neither was ever proven to have clear connections to the communists. Both were criticized for protesting against racial or labor conditions, which in the mind of their accusers translated into support for communism. Because there was no direct evidence of either’s connections to communism, both singers had room to respond, although they responded with different rhetorical strategies.

Robeson's response was, for the time, militant, antagonistic, forceful, and confrontational. According to rhetorical scholar Herbert W. Simons, militants act on the assumption that a “fundamental clash of interests” exists between them and their opponents, and they “use rhetoric

as an expression, an instrument, and an act of force.”¹⁰² Robeson did not adapt to the needs, wants, or values of his audience, nor did he adapt to the context of the Red Scare. Instead, he confronted and provoked his opponents by defying and insulting them. This was especially clear in his response to the Peekskill riots, when he rescheduled rather than canceled his concert and compared his critics to “Fascist storm troopers.” According to Robeson, it was they, not he, who stood in opposition to “peace and democracy in America.”¹⁰³

Robeson's discourse obviously failed to persuade any of his anti-communist critics, and he paid the price when the State Department revoked his passport. Robeson's voice was renowned around the world, but in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois he still faced persecution at home: “His voice is known in Europe, Asia and Africa, in the West Indies and South America and in the islands of the seas. Only in his native land is he without honor and rights.”¹⁰⁴ Robeson's critics were rhetorically successful in that they silenced one of the most outspoken voices of the black community. As a result, Robeson was regulated to the sidelines, becoming but a “footnote” to the emerging civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰⁵

After Robeson regained his passport in 1958, he could only find work performing abroad. He became “a militant spokesperson for the world's oppressed,” but his words were rarely cited by prominent members of the civil rights movement.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, he is today recognized as one of the “early risers” of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and a precursor to its more militant wing.¹⁰⁷ In particular, Robeson's 1958 autobiography *Here I Stand* is recognized not only as an important political biography, but also an early manifesto calling upon blacks to organize and act for change.¹⁰⁸ The book influenced later militant black leaders, most notably Malcolm X, who requested a meeting with Robeson shortly before he was assassinated.

The rhetorical strategies used by Seeger were more moderate than Robeson's. Throughout his HUAC appearance, Seeger tried to show respect for the committee. He constantly referred to the members of the committee as "sir," and while he did call the questioning "improper and immoral," he never raised his voice or disrupted the hearings with accusations against his accusers. More importantly, Seeger distanced himself from his earlier anti-war and pro-labor music. Unlike Robeson, Seeger tried to deflect attention from his earlier protests with the Almanac Singers.

Seeger's rhetorical choices allowed him to go on to a successful solo career after his testimony before HUAC. Indeed, Seeger's reputation only grew following his appearance before the committee, especially within the generally liberal or left-leaning folk music community. "In some ways," argues Seeger biographer David Dunaway, "the HUAC ordeal was the making of Seeger rather than his undoing." Seeger's "puritan habits had a Boy Scout leader's blandness," Dunaway continues, "and his music seemed too wholesome and rural for mass audiences. Under HUAC's attack, however, he became a warrior of song."¹⁰⁹ Seeger may not have had a big impact on the labor movement or unions in the 1950s as he had hoped, but he did go on to be a highly visible figure in the civil rights and anti-war protest movements of the 1960s.

Today both Robeson and Seeger are recognized as important cultural figures. In the case of Robeson, historian Philip S. Foner has described him as the "most important authentic voice of America in the era of the Cold War."¹¹⁰ Robeson biographer Murali Balaji has claimed that his "contributions to culture, politics, and philosophy are immeasurable."¹¹¹ For the celebration of his eightieth-birthday, Robeson earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.¹¹² And in 1998, for the centenary of his birth, Robeson was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Grammy

Award.¹¹³ In addition, two student centers at large universities—Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey and the Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania—are named after him.¹¹⁴

In the case of Seeger, his biographer Alec Wilkinson claimed that he “did more to make people aware of folk music in the middle of the 20th century than any other performer.”¹¹⁵ In 1993 Seeger was also awarded a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award,¹¹⁶ and later that same year he also earned honors from the Kennedy Center for his lifetime of contributions to American culture.¹¹⁷ One year later, he received the highest honor that a performing artist can earn from the federal government—the National Medal of Arts. President Bill Clinton presented Seeger the award, which has been given annually since 1985 to individuals or groups for their “outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support and availability of the arts in the United States.”¹¹⁸ Further solidifying his contribution to American culture, singer Harry Belafonte said at Seeger’s 1996 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction that he was “one of the great sons of this country.”¹¹⁹ More recently, President Barack Obama asked Seeger to perform at his 2008 inauguration celebration, approving his version of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land.”¹²⁰ Although both Robeson and Seeger are viewed as important cultural icons today, both were seen as “subversive” threats and thus blacklisted in the 1950s for daring to speak out against the policies of the United States federal government.

Endnotes

¹ James Darsey, “Joe McCarthy’s Fantastic Moment,” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 68.

² *Ibid.*, 67-69. Darsey explains that W.H. Auden’s 1947 poem “The Age of Anxiety” “provided a convenient label for the time and gave eloquent expression to much that we could not or would not articulate.” See W.H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1969).

³ Robbie Lieberman, “*My Song is My Weapon*”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵ The Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California, also known as the Tenney Committee, delivered their report to the 55th session of the California Senate in 1943. The quotes come from the section entitled “Subversive Groups Attack Weaknesses.” The full report is available on-line at <http://archive.org/stream/reportofjointfac00calirich#page/n3/mode/2up> (accessed June 26, 2013). See also Edward L. Barrett, Jr., *The Tenney Committee* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1951).

⁶ The committee was actually the House Committee on Un-American Activities, but most historians and scholars refer to it as the House Un-American Activities Committee, hence HUAC. I will use this terminology for the remainder of the chapter.

⁷ Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 21. The Special Committee on Un-American Activities, under the leadership of Democratic Congressman Martin Dies of Texas, was the forerunner group to the HUAC from 1938 to 1944. In 1945 Democratic Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi moved to make it a permanent standing committee.

⁸ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58-59. In the 1920s, for example, the International Workers of the World (IWW) used folk songs to voice the concerns of the movement and, more importantly, solidify the strength and morale of its members. Joe Hill, a leading songwriter for the IWW, believed that “a [folk] song was much more effective than a political pamphlet” because the message was more accessible and lasting; singing a song was a collective and cathartic experience that reading prose alone could not produce.

⁹ Joseph Dorinson, “Introduction,” in *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy*, ed. Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002), 7.

¹⁰ Dorothy Butler Gilliam, *Paul Robeson: All American* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Book Company, 1976), 20. See also Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 25-26.

¹¹ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ Paul Robeson, “The New Idealism: Rutgers University Commencement Speech,” (New Brunswick, New Jersey, June 10, 1919). The speech is also available in *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974*, ed. by Philip S. Foner (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1978), 62-65. The speech was also reprinted in the University’s paper, the *Targum*, the following day. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 26-27. As Robeson pursued his singing and acting career with increasing international attention following his graduation, he said very little regarding the paradoxes and barriers that blacks faced as “inferior” citizens.

¹⁴ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 16.

¹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.J. McClurg, 1903).

¹⁶ The assessment appeared in the *New York News* by Edgar G. Brown on April 25, 1925. Similar reviews appeared on the same day, with the *New York World* describing Robeson’s voice as “infinite,” and the *New York Evening Post* claiming it was “luscious.” The *New York Times* also featured a glowing review, praising Robeson’s performance for having “an overwhelming inward conviction.” See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁹ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 223.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

²¹ Robeson took residence in London since 1927 and only appeared in the United States for concerts and film projects, so as a result the federal government could view him at a comfortable distance.

²² Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23. Subsequent Freedom of Information Acts motions have resulted in the FBI making available some of the thousands of documents they filed on him. Most are available on-line at [http://vault.fbi.gov/Paul Robeson, Sr.](http://vault.fbi.gov/Paul%20Robeson,%20Sr.) (last accessed July 10, 2013).

²⁴ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 238-239.

²⁵ The memos between Hoover and the New York Field Office are available in the first part of the FBI’s Freedom of Information Act released files on Robeson, pages 57 and 60. They are available on-line at [http://vault.fbi.gov/Paul Robeson, Sr.](http://vault.fbi.gov/Paul%20Robeson,%20Sr.) (accessed June 26, 2013). See also Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 53-54.

²⁶ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 254.

²⁷ Paul Robeson, “If We Must Sacrifice,” in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1978), 221.

²⁸ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 357.

²⁹ Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 144-145. Prior to the Paris Peace Conference, Robeson attended a London protest of racist South African government policies. It was at that protest where he was introduced to the Coordinating Committee of Colonial Peoples and asked to attend the Paris Peace Conference.

³⁰ As Murali Balaji notes, it has been difficult for historians to verify the actual speaking text of what Robeson said that day, but there is a general consensus that the subsequent AP report was inaccurate. Robeson has provided parts that have been offered as more “accurate” of what was said that day in later interviews and writings, including his book *Here I Stand*. See Murali Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics of W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 437.

³¹ The full text of the AP dispatch is available at the Paul Robeson Archives at Howard University. See Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 342.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 145.

³⁴ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups*. 81st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949): 479-483.

³⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” November 3, 1949, http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1949&_f=md001427 (last accessed June 26, 2013).

³⁶ Located roughly fifty miles from Manhattan, Peekskill was a popular get-away for many leftist groups in the communist movement.

³⁷ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 364. In addition to the voices in the *Star*, the town supervisor in charge of the concert’s picnic grounds location, the Joint Veteran’s Council, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce all dismissed the concert as “un-American” and called for “group action” to “discourage” it.

³⁸ Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Robeson*, 167-170. Although no casualties were reported, twelve people required hospitalization for serious injuries.

³⁹ Paul Robeson, “My Answer,” in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1978), 229.

⁴⁰ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 368.

⁴¹ For an eyewitness account of the riots at Peekskill see Howard Fast, *Peekskill USA* (Washington, D.C.: Civil Rights Congress, 1951). Fast, a writer and friend of Robeson vacationing in Peekskill at the time, agreed to help coordinate and sponsor the show. He was one of the many people physically attacked by the mob at the first riot, and he later returned to the second re-scheduled concert.

⁴² Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 370.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁴⁴ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 389.

⁴⁵ In his testimony during the hearings about the Communist infiltration of minority groups, HUAC investigator Alvin W. Stokes claimed that Robeson represented a “black Stalin.” Informer Manning Johnson testified that Robeson was “the voice of the Kremlin.” See the House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups*, 81st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949): 426-432. See also Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 162-163.

⁴⁶ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of United States Passports*, 84th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955): 4491. Members present at the hearings were Chairman Walter, Representatives Clyde Doyle (D-California), Bernard W. Kearney (R-New York), and Gordon Scherer (R-Ohio), as well as HUAC lead counsel Richard Arens and HUAC investigator Donald T. Appell.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4494.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4495-4498.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4498.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4499.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4504.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4508. Robeson made this statement several times before his hearing. The statement was also quoted by Arens, to which Robeson replied, “That is right, and that is still not here.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4506.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4509.

⁵⁸ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 442. Only the House of Representatives had the power to vote an actual contempt charge, but the legal grounds for a contempt charge were narrow: failure to appear or failure to answer the committee’s questions. Robeson did answer the committee’s questions, but Chairman Walter argued that Robeson’s “entire conduct” and “personal attacks on the Committee” warranted grounds for contempt citations.

⁵⁹ David King Dunaway, *“How Can I Keep From Singing?”: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard Books, 2008), 50.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 188.

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- ⁶¹ Minna Bromberg and Gary Alan Fine, “Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations,” *Social Forces* 80 (2002): 1140.
- ⁶² Almanac Singers, “Ballad of October 16th,” *Songs for John Doe*, Keynote Records (LP), 1941.
- ⁶³ Carl Friedrich, “The Poison In Our System,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1941, 668.
- ⁶⁴ Almanac Singers, “Dear Mr. President,” *Dear Mr. President*, Keynote Records (LP), 1942.
- ⁶⁵ Allan M. Winkler, *“To Everything There is a Season”: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32-33.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁶⁷ Cited from an early People’s Songs recruitment document. See Lieberman, “*My Song is My Weapon*,” 68.
- ⁶⁸ Pete Seeger, in *The Incomplete Folksinger*, ed. Jo Metcalf Schwartz (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 20.
- ⁶⁹ Edwin E. Gordon, “Cultivating Songs of the People,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1946, 5.
- ⁷⁰ “Roll the Union On,” *Fortune*, November 1946, 184.
- ⁷¹ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 20.
- ⁷² The “Hollywood Ten” were Alvah Bessie (screenwriter); Herbert Biberman (screenwriter and director); Lester Cole (screenwriter); Edward Dmytryk (director); Ring Lardner Jr. (screenwriter); John Howard Lawson (screenwriter); Albert Maltz (screenwriter); Samuel Ornitz (screenwriter); Adrian Scott (producer and screenwriter); and Dalton Trumbo (screenwriter). They were blacklisted for supposedly spreading communist messages in their Hollywood films. When they appeared before HUAC on October 27, 1947, they cited their First Amendment right to free speech and refused to answer any questions about their political affiliations. The House of Representatives cited each for contempt of Congress on November 25, 1947. After a series of failed appeals, each member of the “Hollywood Ten” began serving one-year prison sentences. See Navasky, *Naming Names*, 78-85.
- ⁷³ Dunaway, “*How Can I Keep From Singing?*,” 142-144.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 146-150.
- ⁷⁶ Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 20-21.
- ⁷⁷ Winkler, “*To Everything There is a Season*,” 57-65.
- ⁷⁸ While in Dayton, Ohio on assignment investigating the communist recruitment of young people, Matusow, a paid informer for the FBI, testified on February 25, 1952 about the communist use of folk music before the Ohio House Un-American Activities Committee—a joint committee of state representatives and senators charged with finding communist infiltration in Ohio. The committee was

based on the federal government's HUAC, and its members had sweeping powers to question Ohioans about their ties to communism. In his testimony, Matusow named Pete Seeger several times, as well as the Weavers—who had just performed in Cleveland and Akron—saying that they entertained communists and worked to recruit members to the Communist Party. His testimony is available in full on-line at http://antiochcollege.org/antiochiana/songs_from_the_stacks/songs_from_the_stacks_072811.html (accessed June 26, 2013).

⁷⁹ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing?*, 187.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

⁸¹ Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season*, 69.

⁸² Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing?*, 188.

⁸³ Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season*, 71-73.

⁸⁴ From 1951 to 1954, Matusow named more than 200 people as communists or communist sympathizers, consulting with and testifying for the Justice Department, the Subversive Activities Control Board, the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, the New York City Board of Education, and HUAC. For a time, Matusow was even a household name as an aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy. He eventually recanted his testimony in his 1955 autobiography *False Witness* (New York: Cameron & Kahn, 1955). In his account, Matusow detailed how Roy Cohn, then an assistant U.S. attorney in New York, asked him to testify about his knowledge and conversations with prominent Russian authors in an upcoming Smith Act trial. Matusow claimed he lied, and that Cohn had ordered it. Instead of prosecuting Cohn or Matusow for perjuring himself (which would have required reopening hundreds of cases), the House of Representatives prosecuted Matusow for perjury in his story about Cohn. Matusow was eventually found guilty of perjury and sentenced to a five-year prison sentence. See Navasky, *Naming Names*, 40-41.

⁸⁵ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 196-199.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁸⁷ Winkler, *To Everything There is a Season*, 78.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* See also Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 202-203.

⁸⁹ Present at this meeting were Representatives Gordon Scherer (D-Ohio), Edwin Willis (D-Louisiana), Chairman Walter, and chief counsel Frank Tavenner, Jr..

⁹⁰ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area*. 84th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955): 2447.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 2448.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2449.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2454.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2456.

⁹⁶ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing*, 214.

⁹⁷ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area*. 84th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955): 2455.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 2456.

⁹⁹ Winkler, "To Everything There is a Season," 81-86.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 86-87. For more on Seeger's role in the civil rights movement, see *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, directed by Jim Brown (2007; New York: Weinstein Company Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

¹⁰² Herbert W. Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 6.

¹⁰³ Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 370.

¹⁰⁴ Balaji, *Professor and the Pupil*, 374.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 404.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 390-391.

¹⁰⁷ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 167.

¹⁰⁸ *Here I Stand* was not only an attempt by Robeson to explain his controversial views following his HUAC appearance, but also a proposed political program for blacks. Chapter titles include "The Time is Now" and "The Power of Negro Action." See Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 74-111.

¹⁰⁹ Dunaway, "How Can I Keep From Singing," 222.

¹¹⁰ Philip S. Foner, "Paul Robeson: Great Artist, Great American," in *Paul Robeson Speaks*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1978), 24.

¹¹¹ Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil*, 434.

¹¹² Paul Robeson was awarded a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on April 9, 1978. Robeson's official Hollywood Walk of Fame induction is available on-line at <http://www.walkoffame.com/paul-robeson> (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹³ Peter Applebome, "From the Valley of Obscurity, Robeson's Baritone Rings Out; 22 Years After His Death, Actor-Activist Gets a Grammy," *New York Times*, February 25, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/25/arts/valley-obscurity-robeson-s-baritone-rings-22-years-after-his-death-actor.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Balaji, *The Professor and the Pupil*, 433.

¹¹⁵ Alec Wilkinson, "Profiles: The Protest Singer," *New Yorker*, April 17, 2006, 44. It is also available on-line at www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417fa_fact_wilkinson (accessed June 26, 2013). For Wilkinson's biography on Seeger, see Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (New York: Random House, 2009).

¹¹⁶ According to the Grammy's official website, a Lifetime Achievement Award is only bestowed on individuals who "during their lifetimes have made creative contributions of outstanding artistic significance to the field of [musical] recording." See on-line at <http://www.grammy.org/recording-academy/awards/lifetime-awards> (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹⁷ Pete Seeger's Kennedy Center's entry is available online at www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity_id=3798&source_type=A (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹⁸ The National Medal of Arts' purpose is available on online at <http://www.nea.gov/honors/medals/> (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹⁹ Belafonte's induction speech of Seeger into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is available online at <https://rockhall.com/story-of-rock/video-series/video/8833/> (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹²⁰ Maria Puente and Elysa Gardner, "Inauguration Opening Concert Celebrates Art of the Possible." *USA Today*, January 9, 2009, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2009-01-18-inaug-concert_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip (accessed June 26, 2013). The performance included two verses not often included in the song—one about a "private property" sign the narrator disregards and the other making a reference to a Depression-era relief office. Neither rare inclusion prompted criticism of Seeger or Obama.

Chapter 3:

Taming the Pelvis: Elvis Presley and the Emergence of Rock 'n' Roll

On August 16, 1977 rock 'n' roll's biggest star, Elvis Presley, was discovered dead on the bathroom floor of his Graceland mansion. The next day President Jimmy Carter released a statement claiming Elvis's death deprived "our country a part of itself," because Elvis "was a symbol to people the world over of the vitality, rebelliousness, and good humor" of the American spirit. Carter described Elvis's emergence twenty years earlier as "unprecedented," claiming that his fusion of white country and black rhythm-and-blues "permanently changed the face of American culture."¹ Carter's assessment was astute, but it ignored the shock and moral outrage that initially greeted Elvis and his music in the 1950s. At first, Elvis's brand of rock 'n' roll music was belittled as "hillbilly" music, while later his performances were criticized for being too sexually suggestive and arousing. Elvis himself was first mocked as "The Hillbilly Cat," then later ridiculed as "Elvis the Pelvis."

Of course, Elvis was not the only rocker criticized for promoting rebellious or sexually promiscuous behavior.² Yet, as music historians Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave have argued, "no performer in the early years of rock and roll was subjected to a greater amount of invective and verbal assault than was Elvis Presley."³ As rock 'n' roll's biggest star and most recognizable icon, Elvis became a lightning rod for many of the fears and anxieties of the time, and the moral panic he provoked reveals a great deal about American society and the political and cultural values of the 1950s. The moral panic over Elvis also teaches lessons about the rhetorical maneuvers available to popular musicians and the recording industry to mitigate or even to

capitalize on controversies over their music. Viewed as little more than a “hillbilly” singer when he first started performing in the South in 1954, Elvis capitalized on the growing popularity of rock ‘n’ roll by crafting a highly sexualized persona rooted in black rhythm-and-blues music. Although this new persona brought Elvis more popularity, it also caused a backlash. Elvis subsequently moderated his image, serving willingly in the U.S. Army from 1958 to 1960 and crafting a new image as a patriotic, all-American boy. Upon his return from the Army, Elvis solidified that image by appearing in a series of wholesome Hollywood films and recording soft love ballads for their soundtracks. Instead of capitalizing on rock ‘n’ roll's rebellious reputation, he distanced himself from the genre, taking a hiatus from performing live until 1969.

Music critics disagree about the precise origins of the term “rock ‘n’ roll,” but by 1955 it had become clearly distinguished from “pop,” “rhythm-and-blues,” and “country-western” on the *Billboard* charts. Rock ‘n’ roll was not so much a brand new sound, but an amalgamation of many musical traditions, including rhythm-and-blues, gospel, jazz, and country. In many ways, the early career of Elvis reflected these diverse roots: Elvis could switch from being a howler or a crooner to singing the blues or Southern country or gospel music. The musical templates Elvis borrowed from were well-established, but in the early 1950s the popularity of some of those styles was largely limited to regional markets in the South. Prior to the emergence of Elvis, the major recording labels—RCA, Mercury, Columbia, Capitol, and Decca—regarded at least one of the precursors to rock ‘n’ roll, rhythm-and-blues, as a form of “race” music, leaving that market to small independent labels that signed mostly black artists.⁴

Equally important to the development of rock ‘n’ roll were the lingering political and social effects of the Red Scare and the Cold War. Although the Senate rebuked Senator Joseph McCarthy on December 2, 1954, the fears and suspicions that fueled McCarthyism persisted. In

addition, America's racial tensions had been exacerbated by the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v Board of Education*, which ruled segregated schools illegal. In 1955, the murder of Emmett Till further fueled racial tensions, and the Montgomery bus boycott began later that same year. Within this context, rock 'n' roll represented, for some Americans at least, a threat from "lower-class outsiders," even an "atavistic presence" that was creeping into American homes through radio and television sets.⁵ Elvis in particular seemed a threat because he not only embraced the sounds of "black" music, but also incorporated the dress and sexually suggestive movements of black rhythm-and-blues performers.

In this chapter, I examine how Elvis Presley fueled the 1950s rhetoric of moral panic by combining the styles and sounds of black rhythm-and-blues with the white but lower-class traditions of country-western music. In the process, Elvis symbolized the integration of black and working-class white cultures and amplified the perceived threat posed by stereotypical notions of both as savage and animalistic. Both rock 'n' roll in general and Elvis in particular thus became scapegoats for a variety of political and social problems, ranging from juvenile delinquency, to sexual promiscuity, to social upheaval—as manifested in what some critics labeled "rock riots." Elvis and other rockers were also blamed for destroying families by turning teenagers into mindless followers of pop culture. According to the critics, Elvis and rock music encouraged teenagers to "rock around the clock" instead of tending to their familial and other "adult" responsibilities.⁶ Whereas Robeson and Seeger were criticized for the explicit political content of their lyrics and their protest activities, Elvis attracted criticism more for the *sound* of his music and for his sexualized live *performances*. In responding to the criticism, Elvis toned down his image and, unlike either Robeson or Seeger, willingly embraced a patriotic persona.

Ultimately, he cultivated a new Hollywood image as a wholesome, all-American boy who gave up stardom to serve his country as a lowly Army private.

I begin this chapter by returning to the early days of Elvis's career, when he first began to attract national attention. This first phase of his career began when Elvis walked into Sun Records to record "That's Alright (Mama)" on July 5, 1954, and ended when he signed with RCA in 1956. Coinciding with the emergence of rock 'n' roll, this first phase of Elvis's career began with his limited success as a local country-western singer. When Elvis played his first public show at the Overton Park Shell in Memphis on July 30, 1954, the girls in the audience began to scream whenever Elvis moved his legs. Unlike other country-western singers, however, Elvis drew criticism for his infusion of black rhythm-and-blues into his moves and music. After he recorded his first record, some stations were hesitant to play his music because, as Sun Records owner Sam Phillips recalled, it defied easy classification and sounded too "ragged."⁷ For the most part, however, Elvis attracted little attention and sparked little controversy during this time because he was seen primarily as a country-western singer. During this time, Elvis became known not as a rock singer but as "The Hillbilly Cat."

In the second section of the chapter, I examine Elvis's emergence as a rock 'n' roll star after he signed with RCA in 1956. With the help of his new manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker, Elvis was able to reach a much larger audience. At the same time, his image became more controversial and sexualized, as critics focused on his rebellious persona, his bodily movements, and the frenzied responses of his fans. Elvis became a popular recording star during this time, earning high ratings for his television performances, but he also developed a controversial reputation as "Elvis the Pelvis"—an image that focused on his physical anatomy and his bodily

movements on stage. “Elvis the Pelvis” inspired a moral panic rooted not in his music but in his persona as “the rebellious rock ‘n’ roller with the snarl on his lips and the moves in his hips”⁸

In the third section of this chapter, I analyze how, after he joined the Army in 1958, Elvis transformed his image from a rebellious rock star to an “All-American” crooner. Prior to his service in the Army, Elvis starred in *Love Me Tender* (1956), *Loving You* (1957), and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957). Although these movies capitalized on Elvis’s rebellious image, they also marked the beginning of his transformation into a major Hollywood star. In 1957, while filming *King Creole*, Elvis received his draft notification. During this period, Elvis was shown in the media proudly receiving his Army haircut and reporting for duty. While stationed in Germany, the press reported that Elvis refused to accept any special treatment, and when he returned home he took up where he left off, filming *G.I. Blues*. The movie, a musical comedy about American soldiers in Germany, reflected Elvis’s new patriotic persona, which included a more broadly appealing image as a sensitive, upstanding, and romantic all-American boy.

The moral panic over rock ‘n’ roll in the early years of Elvis’s career can tell us much about how the values and culture of the United States were rhetorically constructed and contested in the 1950s. It sheds additional light on how popular music can either challenge or reinforce accepted social norms. According to historian James Gilbert, the 1950s were characterized by a struggle “over the uses of popular culture to determine who would speak, to what audience, and for what purpose.” At the center of that struggle was Elvis Presley, a rock ‘n’ roll singer who both unsettled and reassured a nation living in an “age of anxiety.”⁹

Before Graceland: Elvis as “The Hillbilly Cat”

The musical origins of rock ‘n’ roll cannot be discussed without reference to black rhythm-and-blues and white country-western music. Although critics have disagreed over which musical tradition played a bigger role in the sound and image of Elvis,¹⁰ all have acknowledged that these two musical traditions together helped shape the sound of Elvis and rock ‘n’ roll in the mid-1950s. Growing up in Memphis, Elvis was exposed to a great deal of country-western music via local festivals and radio programs, but he was also exposed to black gospel and rhythm-and-blues.¹¹ Rhythm-and-blues, argued cultural critic Greil Marcus, was particularly important to the early sound and image of Elvis, because it provided more excitement and variety than the “twangs and laments” of country music. It was music that had “beat, sex, and celebration,” as well as a stunning “roar of horns and electric guitars.”¹²

During this time, Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Records, was growing tired of popular music that featured adult crooners like Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, and Tony Bennett. Phillips was eager to sign new talent, and he believed that “the Negroes were the only ones who had any freshness left in their music.”¹³ As such, Phillips tried to develop black talent during the 1950s, helping to launch the careers of such legendary stars as Howlin’ Wolf and B.B. King. The problem was that rhythm-and-blues, which was then known as “race music,” did not appeal to white audiences and was therefore not commercially viable. Marion Keisker, Phillips’s colleague at Sun, remembered him saying over and over, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.”¹⁴

Elvis would eventually become that “white man” with the “Negro sound.” When Elvis partnered with guitarist Scotty Moore and stand-up bass player Bill Black to record the ballad

“Without You,”¹⁵ the sessions proved grueling and appeared headed for failure. Then Elvis spontaneously broke into his version of Arthur “Big Boy” Moore’s 1948 blues hit, “That’s Alright (Mama),” ripping through the song with his unique vocalization and hiccup gyrations. Moore and Black quickly joined in. Finally, Phillips stopped the band and asked them to start from the top so that he could record it. Unlike the original, Elvis’s rendition of “That’s Alright (Mama)” was, according to Moore, “sort of raw and ragged.”¹⁶ Music scholar Paul Friedlander similarly described Elvis’s vocal style as “raw, emotive, and slurred,” with a blending of “the blues” and the “strummed rhythm guitar of country.” Moore’s guitar playing also fused country-western and rhythm-and-blues music by combining syncopated finger picking and single-string, bent-notes style of the blues. A few days later, Elvis and his new band recorded another song, a bluegrass number by Bill Monroe entitled “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” Once again Elvis and the others changed the sound of the original by employing a new technique, this time an echo effect on the guitars and vocals that Sam Phillips dubbed “slap-back.”¹⁷

The juxtaposition of black rhythm-and-blues and white country music became Elvis’s signature sound early in his career. He would go on to release four more two-sided singles for Sun over the next year, each with a country-western song on one side and a rhythm-and-blues tune on the other. In September of 1954, he released a cover of Wynonie Harris’s 1948 rhythm-and-blues hit, “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” backed by a cover of pop-country singer Patti Page’s 1950 hit, “I Don’t Care If The Sun Don’t Shine.” In December of the same year Elvis released “Milkcow Blues Boogie” backed by a country song about lost love, “You’re A Heartbreaker.” The following April the band released the sexually suggestive rhythm-and-blues song, “Baby Let’s Play House,” backed with another country tale of love lost, “I’m Left, You’re Right, She’s Gone.” And in August 1955 came the country tune “I Forgot To Remember To Forget,” backed

by an old rhythm-and-blues standard, “Mystery Train.” Over this same year-and-a-half period, Elvis became an increasingly important figure on the country scene, as evidenced by a 1955 disc jockey poll in *Billboard* that named him the top “up and coming” country-western artist.¹⁸

Shortly after the release of “That’s All Right” and “Blue Moon of Kentucky,”¹⁹ Elvis embarked on a series of concert performances and radio appearances in the South. His first public performance was on July 30, 1954 at the Overton Park Shell in Memphis. Billed as a “hillbilly hoedown,” the show attracted little attention outside Memphis, and Elvis was so new to the music scene that one newspaper ad mistakenly identified him as “Ellis Presley.” By September of the same year, however, both “That’s All Right” and “Blue Moon of Kentucky” had made it to the *Billboard* charts, and Elvis began receiving invitations to appear on country-music radio programs. In October of 1954, he appeared on the *Grand Ole Opry* and the *Louisiana Hayride*, which were two of the most popular country radio programs at the time. Although he was nervous before each performance and considered the *Opry* appearance a “personal failure,” both appearances resulted in widespread radio play and began to establish Elvis as a genuine “star” of country music.

Elvis, of course, was more than just a country-western singer. In addition to the gospel and rhythm-and-blues influences on his vocal and musical style, Elvis moved on stage like no country singer before him. Shaking his hips, legs, and body with increasing frequency as he gained experience performing live, he communicated sexuality—something traditional country-western singers simply did not do. In short, Elvis's *image* and *movements* reinforced the blackness of his persona. With his oversized gabardine trousers, brightly colored shirts with the collars turned up, loud ties, and skinny belts with buckles turned on the side, Elvis not only moved but dressed like a black rhythm-and-blues musician. And the sexual connotations of that

persona were obvious. As his guitarist Scotty Moore put it, the pants Elvis and his band wore “made it look like all hell was going on under there” when they shook their legs. When playing live, Elvis “would back off from the mike and be playing and shaking, and the crowd would just go wild.” According to Moore, Elvis initially thought that audiences were “actually making fun of him,” but before long he realized they loved his sexually suggestive gyrations.²⁰

By the end of 1954, Elvis realized the image he projected—eyes shut, finger pointing out towards the audience, his legs and hips shaking—was literally arousing the audience: “I did a little more, and the more I did, the wilder they went.”²¹ At a 1955 Gator Bowl show in Jacksonville, Florida, for example, Elvis ended his show by announcing to the more than 14,000 concert-goers: “Girls, I’ll see you all backstage.”²² Pandemonium erupted as thousands of shrieking female fans chased the musicians from the stage, literally ripping the clothes from Elvis’s back as police struggled to get him to safety.



Figure 3.1: Elvis and his clothes in action

Yet during the early years, Elvis and his band for the most part remained the little known regional act known as “The Hillbilly Cat and the Blue Moon Boys.” “Hillbilly Cat” packaged Elvis as a country-western singer, and according to Elvis biographer Susan M. Doll, there was

little “bad publicity in the South” during this time “concerning the sexuality of his performing style or the possible negative influence on teenagers.”²³ All that would change by 1956, however, as two interrelated events took Elvis’s career in a different direction. First, “Colonel” Tom Parker replaced Bob Neal as Elvis’s manager. Before working in the entertainment industry, Parker had earned his living as a “carnival barker and hustler,” which clearly influenced his methods of promoting and merchandising Elvis.²⁴ Second, Parker negotiated Elvis’s release from Sun Records and sold his contract to a major label, RCA. These two changes brought Elvis a wider audience, more attention from the national media, and the opportunity to appear on television and in Hollywood movies. Along with this increased attention and commercial success, however, came more criticism. Indeed, a moral panic ensued, including a campaign to rid the airwaves of Elvis and rock ‘n’ roll in general.

From “The Hillbilly Cat” to “Elvis the Pelvis”: Attacking Elvis and Rock ‘n’ Roll

On January 27, 1956 RCA released its first Elvis single, “Heartbreak Hotel,” backed with “I Was the One.” Unlike the songs Elvis recorded at Sun Studios, “Heartbreak Hotel” was a new song written specifically for him by Tommy Durden and Mae Boren. In addition to his usual band of Moore on guitar, Black on bass, and D.J. Fontana on drums, Elvis was joined by guitarist Chet Atkins and pianist Floyd Cramer. By April 1956, “Heartbreak Hotel” had sold more than one million copies, making Elvis’s first RCA recording a Gold Record.

In addition to “Heartbreak Hotel,” Elvis released his first album, *Elvis Presley*, on March 23, 1956. Containing covers of songs by Carl Perkins’s (“Blue Suede Shoes”), Little Richard (“Tutti-Frutti”), and Ray Charles (“I Got A Woman”), the album remained number one on

Billboard's pop album charts for ten weeks. Less than four months later the album sales reached more than 300,000—a figure that represented the “greatest sales totals in the record trade since the invention of the revolutionary LP.”²⁵ Elvis’s newfound popularity prompted Paramount Pictures to offer him a screen test and sign him to a seven-year contract. Less than half a year after signing with RCA, Elvis was positioned to capitalize on the new craze known as rock ‘n’ roll.

Following the success of his first RCA recordings, Elvis and his handlers, most notably his manager Colonel Parker, arranged a series of nationally televised appearances for the singer. With the success of “Heartbreak Hotel,” Elvis was guaranteed to attract an audience, especially among teens. In 1956 alone, Elvis appeared several times on the Dorsey Brothers’ *Stage Show*, twice on *The Milton Berle Show*, once on *The Steve Allen Show*, and twice on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.²⁶ These appearances on television further established Elvis as a national figure, but they also attracted more criticism of the “blackness” of his sound and his sexualized image on stage.

Before Elvis's emergence as a national star, black rhythm-and-blues artists had been criticized for obscene lyrics—for what *Variety* had labeled “leer-ics” in a three-part series on the problem in 1955. Songs like Ray Charles’s “I Got A Woman” (which Elvis had covered on his first album), “Sixty Minute Man” by the Dominoes, “Honey Love” by the Drifters, and “Good Rockin’ Tonight” by Roy Brown had all been banned from radio stations across the country for their sexually suggestive lyrics.²⁷ “Sixty Minute Man,” for example, contained the following sexual imagery: “There'll be fifteen minutes of kissin'/Then you'll holler "Please don't stop" (Don't stop!)/There'll be fifteen minutes of teasin'/Fifteen minutes of squeezin'/And fifteen minutes of blowin' my top.” Critics were so concerned with the sexual lyrics of popular music that Democratic Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada and Republican Representative Ruth

Thompson of Michigan introduced bills seeking to ban certain records deemed pornographic. Although the bills did not become law, the furor over “leer-ics” caused many radio programmers and popular musicians to censor their own programs in the interest of “good taste.”²⁸

At the same time black musicians were being criticized for their “leer-ics,” the press began to report violent incidents at rock ‘n’ roll concerts—incidents they labeled “rock riots.” According to these reports, the frenzied beat of rock ‘n’ roll music was driving otherwise normal young people to behave badly, even violently. In a *New York Times* article published just after Elvis released his first album, Dr. Francis J. Braceland, a psychiatrist at one of the nation’s first mental health centers, the Institute of Living, called rock ‘n’ roll “cannibalistic and tribalistic,” describing the music as a “communicable disease” responsible for “adolescent rebellion.”²⁹ Similarly, *Time* magazine reported that rock ‘n’ roll had the “primitive qualities of the blues with malice,” with an “unrelenting, socking syncopation” that sounded like “a bull whip.” Such music, the newsmagazine concluded, consisted of the band members moving “violently to the beat while roughly chanting either a near-nonsense phrase or a moronic lyric in hillbilly idiom.”³⁰

According to its critics, the “primitive qualities” of rock ‘n’ roll not only caused teenagers to erupt in violence, but also contributed to the racial problem in America. The *New York Times*, for instance, reported on a fight between “white and Negro boys and girls” following a “rock ‘n’ roll show” featuring “a majority of Negro performers.” The article informed readers that Kenneth Myers, a 15 year-old white male, was stabbed and thrown onto the tracks of the subway after the show. Myers came within inches of losing his life but was able to climb back onto the platform just seconds before a train roared into the station. According to Police Lieutenant Francis Gannon, “The fight was senseless. There was no good reason for it,

but we expect difficulty every time a rock 'n' roll show comes in." Gannon added, "The Negro youths were responsible for it."³¹

Within this context, Elvis's appearances on several highly rated television shows sparked immediate controversy. After Elvis's first appearance on CBS's *Stage Show*, the network was flooded with "wires, calls, and letters denouncing the show and threatening reprisals."³² Elvis's next television appearances, on *The Milton Berle Show* in April and June, produced an even greater backlash. During the first appearance, Elvis performed "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Blue Suede Shoes." On his next appearance however, he played "Hound Dog" for the first time on television. Performing without a guitar, Elvis shocked the audience with his "burlesque-queen" version of the song, "bumping and grinding into a half-speed ending that fueled an uproar in the next day's press."³³

Criticisms of Elvis focused on his sexualized movements rather than his lyrics, which were not dirty or obscene at all. Entertainment critic Jack Gould, for example, described the singer as "the virtuoso of the hootchy-kootchy." In Gould's view, Elvis had only one specialty in his repertoire, "the body that heretofore has been primarily identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway."³⁴ Other critics echoed Gould's assessment. Writing for the *Journal-American*, television critic Jack O'Brien said Elvis "wiggled and wiggled" with the "abdominal gyrations" of a male burlesque dancer. O'Brien also implicitly connected those movements to black savagery, arguing that Elvis made up for his "vocal shortcomings" by performing the "weirdest and plainly suggestive animation short of an aborigine's mating dance." The *New York Daily News's* Ben Gross offered an even harsher criticism, writing that "Elvis, who rotates his pelvis, was appalling musically." Describing the

singer's "exhibition" as "suggestive and vulgar," Gross concluded that Elvis's music was "tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos."³⁵

As the criticisms escalated, Elvis continued to appear on television, but he was forced to tone down his image. On July 1, for example, he appeared on *The Steve Allen Show*, which was attempting to catch *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the ratings. But while Allen wanted the ratings boost afforded by Elvis's appearance, he did not want the controversy. So instead of allowing Elvis to rip through "Hound Dog" in his usual sexually suggestive style, Allen had Presley perform the song in a tuxedo, singing to a basset hound. The attire and the setting subdued Elvis's image and sexuality and was reportedly embarrassing to the young singer. Nevertheless, the show was a huge success, marking the only time that Allen beat Sullivan in the ratings.



Figure 3.2: Elvis sings to a basset hound on the Steve Allen Show

After the success of Elvis's appearance on *The Steve Allen Show*, Sullivan reconsidered his earlier refusal to book the singer and scheduled him for two appearances. The first, on September 9, was the famous show featuring camera shots of Elvis from the waist up. The audience at home could hear the reactions of the audience as Elvis moved, but they were deprived of actually seeing his hips and pelvis shake. During his second appearance, on October 28, Elvis performed "Don't Be Cruel," "Love Me Tender," "Love Me," and "Hound Dog." This

time, the camera showed Elvis's entire body as he performed. An astounding 80.6% of the American television audience watched the show,³⁶ making it the highest rated show in history up to that time.

Media critics like the *New York Times*' Jack Gould seemed to appreciate the more "subdued" Elvis on Ed Sullivan's show, but that did little to silence concerns over the effects of rock 'n' roll on young people. Joan Beck of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, for example, still cited expert opinion linking rock 'n' roll to juvenile delinquency and mob violence. Quoting Dr. Freda Kehm, director of the Association for Family Living, Beck reported that teenagers flocked to Elvis because they were "shatteringly insecure" and failed to have enough "confidence" to "break away" from their peers' adulation of Elvis. According to Kehm, this "fan-ism" was a "safety valve" for a "maturing girl's confusing emotions," and it also was responsible for "an alarming succession of rock 'n' roll riots and pointless violence."³⁷ Gould went even farther, writing in the *New York Times* that Elvis "injected movements of the tongue and indulged in wordless singing" that was not only "distasteful" but contributed to a culture of irresponsibility among youth. Accusing broadcasters of "exploiting teen-agers" by popularizing the music, Gould argued that rock 'n' roll music rendered young people incapable of coping with "congested schools, early dating, the appeals of the car, military service, acceptance by the right crowd, sex and the normal parental pressures." The issue of whether rock music ought to be aired was not an issue of free speech, according to Gould, but simply one of demanding that broadcasters exhibit "good sense and display responsibility."³⁸

Thus, the critics accused "Elvis the Pelvis"³⁹—a moniker that belittled Elvis while focusing exclusively on his anatomy—of promoting everything from teenage irresponsibility to the "sheer violence" of the so-called "rock riots."⁴⁰ Trying to make sense of the Elvis

phenomenon, media outlets like *Time* magazine struggled for ways to describe both his physical appearance and his music. “Is it a sausage? It is certainly smooth and damp looking,” the newsmagazine reported, “but who ever heard of a 172-lb. sausage 6 ft. tall?” *Time* went on to describe Elvis’s music as a sort of “low-down rhythm” that combined “boogie and hillbilly, rock ‘n’ roll and something known only to Elvis and his Pelvis.”⁴¹ But teenagers knew what they liked, and as they acquired more disposable income they exercised more power in determining the “stars” of popular music.⁴² For Elvis, that required a sort of rhetorical balancing act, as the rebellious, sexualized image that made him popular inspired criticism from the media and from television and record producers. If Elvis hoped to broaden his appeal beyond the screaming teens who appeared at his concerts, he needed to moderate his image and avoid such criticism.

Under the direction of Parker, Elvis did just that in the last stage of his career. The process began when he signed with RCA and began recording songs written specifically for him. Moving away from the country and blues roots of his career, his repertoire at RCA included more pop songs and ballads, such as “Love Me Tender,” and even a Christmas album. Meanwhile, he cultivated a more polite and accommodating persona, becoming the “new” and more “dignified” Elvis who sang “Hound Dog” to a basset hound on the *Steve Allen Show*.⁴³ This more “dignified” Elvis was not far removed from the *real* Elvis, according to most accounts. Elvis was raised to be polite and generous to people. He showed respect by calling his elders “sir” or “ma’am,” and he prided himself on being a good son to his parents, especially his mother Gladys.⁴⁴ His image as a notorious rock ‘n’ roller was just that—an image. It may well have been more consistent with his real personality when he represented the American Cancer Society in a series of printed promotional ads urging Americans to “fight cancer with a checkup and a check.”⁴⁵

Unlike Robeson and Seeger, then, Elvis was not one to stand up to his critics, responding confrontationally. Guided by his manager Parker, Elvis chose instead to soften his “bad boy” image, slowly stripping away the trappings of a rock ‘n’ roll rebel and cultivating a new image as an all-American boy. For some, that transformation was accompanied by a decline in the quality of his music, but it nevertheless brought Elvis an even wider audience for his music and the chance to become a Hollywood star. By moderating his image, he was able to successfully transform his image from “Elvis the Pelvis,” the rebellious rock-and-roller, to “Private Presley,” an ordinary, polite, and patriotic young American citizen who offended almost no one.

Taming Elvis: From Teenage Rebel to All-American Boy

Elvis appeared in four Hollywood films before he was drafted into the Army in 1958: *Love Me Tender* in 1956, *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock* in 1957, and *King Creole* in 1958. In each of these movies, Elvis, Parker, and Hollywood producer Hal B. Wallis, who signed Elvis to his first acting contract, capitalized on the young singer's popularity. Elvis played only a small supporting role in *Love Me Tender*, released on November 21, 1956. The film was originally entitled *Reno Brothers*, but was renamed to capitalize on the popularity of Elvis's hit song. In the movie, Elvis played Clint Reno, whose brother Vance leaves home to fight for the Confederate Army in the Civil War. When Clint receives word that his older brother Vance has died in battle, he marries Vance's fiancée, Cathy. When it turns out that Vance had not been killed, he returns home and a gunfight ensues, killing Clint. It was one of the few times Elvis's character died on-screen, and it was the last time he did not have the lead role in one of his movies. The critics panned the film, but it was the eighth highest grossing film of 1956.⁴⁶

In crafting a Hollywood image for Elvis, producers followed a formulaic pattern of portraying him as something of a rebel or a “bad guy” who becomes, in the end, the hero of the film. In his most iconic film, *Jailhouse Rock*, for example, Elvis played Vince Everett, who is sent to prison for manslaughter following a bar brawl over a girl. While in prison, Vince shares a cell with Hunk Houghton, a former country-western musician and promoter who teaches Vince how to play the guitar. Impressed with his raw talent, Hunk includes Vince in a televised performance arranged by the Warden, and after he is released Vince finds success in the music business with the help of Peggy van Alden, a young record promoter. Vince quickly becomes a star, much like Elvis himself did, but the success goes to his head and he threatens to cut ties with Peggy. Hunk, now out of prison and part of the singer's entourage, physically assaults Vince, who refuses to fight back. The altercation causes a serious career-ending injury to Vince, but he forgives his friend and he wins Peggy back with an acoustic love ballad. He is a changed man who, despite losing his career, now appreciates the more important things in life. Like many of Elvis's films, *Jailhouse Rock* was popular but panned by critics.

Following his break-out performance in *Jailhouse Rock*, Elvis played a similar role in his next film: *King Creole*. As in *Jailhouse Rock*, Elvis's character in this film, Danny Fisher, begins as something of a rebel and juvenile delinquent. After flunking out of school twice, he takes a job as a musician at a seedy nightclub, the King Creole. While there, a mobster (played by Walter Matthau) tries to lure the young singer to his rival club, and in the process, into a life of crime. As he did in *Jailhouse Rock*, however, Elvis's character fights the mobster's advances, and he ultimately turns his back on his old ways and sets out to show his family that he can be a mature and successful performer. The role was important because it not only marked Elvis's

most dramatic role to date, but also because Elvis received his draft notice during production of the film.

On December 10, 1957 Elvis received notification from the Memphis Draft Board that he would be drafted into the Army. Although entertainers had often been afforded a special duties pass by the military to perform during their service, Parker insisted that Elvis receive no special treatment. By serving his country as a regular soldier, Parker believed the controversy surrounding Elvis would fade and he could return to his career an even bigger star. Behind the scenes Parker and Paramount wrote to the Memphis draft board seeking a temporary deferment for Elvis so he could complete filming of *King Creole*.⁴⁷ While Parker and producer Hal B. Wallis worked behind the scenes to get the deferment, the young singer reported to the draft board to pick up his notice in person on December 20, 1957.

On March 24, 1958, Elvis reported for duty, accompanied by his family, dozens of reporters, and hundreds of fans. He then boarded a bus to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. Newsreel footage of subsequent events showed Elvis proudly getting his Army haircut and being sized for his uniform at Fort Chaffee, like any other able-bodied young male. At a press conference at Fort Chaffee, Elvis informed reporters that he would be serving his country in Germany, just like any other soldier. He went on to explain that his eagerness to serve was based only on his sense of fairness: "It's only right that the draft applies to everybody alike. Rich or poor, there should be no exceptions."⁴⁸

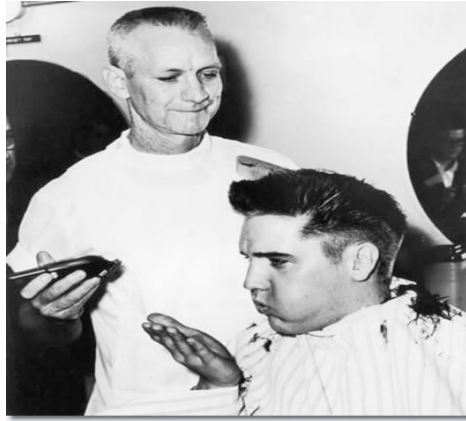


Figure 3.3: Elvis gets a new haircut

Elvis served in the Third Armored Division in Germany from March 1958 until March 1960. During his service, the media back home reported that Elvis was a good soldier and got along well with the other men in his unit. While in the Army, Elvis returned to the United States only twice. In the summer of 1958, he took a two-week leave and returned to Graceland, where he recorded enough material to satisfy Parker and RCA until he was discharged in 1960. The second trip came following the death of his mother, Gladys, a tragedy that prompted him to say, “Everything I have is gone.”⁴⁹ As Elvis served without complaint or special treatment in Germany, America came to view him not as a teenage rebel but as a humble, dedicated, and hardworking All-American boy. As the *New York Times* commented, he had gone from being the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” to “Pvt. Presley,” and he deserved praise for turning his back on his lucrative entertainment income and humbly accepting his standard Army pay.⁵⁰

Upon his discharge from the Army, Parker and RCA immediately capitalized on his new patriotic image. Within days of his discharge, Paramount Pictures and producer Hal B. Wallis announced that Elvis would return to Hollywood to film *G.I. Blues*, a movie about U.S. soldiers in Germany. No longer was Elvis the teenage rebel; he was now the good soldier, vowing for the affection of a young lady not with his fisticuffs or loud music, but with soft ballads and the polite behavior expected of a good American soldier. Instead of pictures of Elvis in his long-haired,

sexually charged live performances, the press now featured Elvis with his hair and sideburns cut, proudly wearing his military uniform. The *New York Times* reported that Elvis enjoyed his Army experience so much he was “never going to grow back the long sideburns that were his trade-mark.” “The Army has been a great experience for me and I wouldn’t have missed it,” Elvis told reporters upon his discharge. Elvis had no gripes about his service, and he eagerly embraced his new wholesome, all-American image.⁵¹



Figure 3.4: Elvis before the Army



Figure 3.5: Elvis after the Army

Former Elvis critics, like Ed Sullivan and Frank Sinatra, now welcomed Elvis back with open arms. Sinatra even hosted a television special for ABC, *Welcome Home Elvis*. The show was watched by nearly half the country and featured Elvis singing in his Army uniform.⁵² Instead of swaying his hips and curling his lips, the post-Army Elvis was now praised for being more “subdued.” In a review of *G.I. Blues* in the *New York Times*, film critic Bosley Crowther described Elvis as “a reformed wriggler,” observing that the Army had “taken that indecent swivel out of his hips and turned him into a good, clean, trustworthy, upstanding American young man.”⁵³ *Life* magazine echoed this view in an October 10, 1960 article, reporting that Elvis was “no longer the sneering, hip-twitching symbol of the untamed beast that resides in 17-year-old breasts.” According to *Life*, Elvis had come back from the Army as an “easygoing” and “unassuming” young man.⁵⁴ Instead of “Elvis the Pelvis”—the dangerous rocker who invaded

the homes of suburban families and threatened to corrupt their teenagers—Elvis’s time as an “ordinary soldier” had transformed the young musician into an upstanding, clean, and trustworthy all-American boy who courted the ladies not with sexually suggestive gyrations but with soft, romantic love ballads.

Elvis’s transformation could not have come at a better time for the pop music industry. While Elvis was in the Army, popular rock music disc jockey Alan Freed was fired for accepting money from record companies to play certain rock ‘n’ roll records, Chuck Berry was jailed for two years for violating the Mann Act by transporting a minor across state lines for “immoral reasons,” and Jerry Lee Lewis was excoriated in the press for marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin.⁵⁵ Perhaps more importantly, America was about to be overrun by the “British Invasion,” with bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones inspiring yet another moral panic. Compared to all of these rock delinquents, Elvis was now seen as a role model: an upstanding citizen, a loyal and thoughtful young man, humble and grateful for his success. Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper was among the many arbiters of popular culture who approved of Elvis’s new image, writing that he had been “smart to simmer down that torrid act of his.”⁵⁶

Following his return from the Army, Elvis took a seven-year hiatus from live performances to focus on his new career as Hollywood’s all-American boy. Over the remainder of his career, he would make twenty-six more Hollywood films—almost all musical comedies—most of which included soundtracks recorded by Elvis himself. These soundtracks represented a clear departure from the loud, rebellious, and sexually suggestive performances of his early career. Now Elvis became a new kind of performer, an adult-approved singer of pop songs, ballads, and even gospel hymns and other sacred music. Although Elvis became something of a caricature of himself in his later years—a bloated, kitschy Las Vegas crooner in a white jump

suit—many still remember him as the hip-shaking, rebellious rocker who mesmerized them in their youth. At a moment in history when sex was not discussed in polite company, and when white suburbanites felt threatened by race-mixing and rebellious youth, Elvis changed the world of popular culture—and inspired a moral panic—with his rock ‘n’ roll music and his gyrating hips.

Conclusion

Elvis Presley remains one of the biggest icons of rock ‘n’ roll. His musical journey from the 1950s through the 1970s won him millions of fans around the world, many of who have devoted their lives to preserving his legacy. Whether that means impersonating him in Las Vegas or joining the more than 600,000 people a year who flock to his home in Graceland (the second most visited house after the White House),⁵⁷ it all adds up to making Elvis one of the most important figures in American cultural life. Commenting to the press shortly after his death, President Carter embraced Elvis as a symbol of America itself, an embodiment of the American Dream. A poor Southern boy who made it big through sheer determination and hard-work, Elvis had come to embody not only America but the personal values our culture celebrates in the ideal citizen: humility, respectfulness, loyalty, and success. Unlike Robeson and Seeger, Elvis did not challenge authority or question his country’s domestic or foreign policies, but instead “grew up,” put the rebelliousness of his youth behind him, and became a “good” American. For making these “right” choices, Elvis was rewarded handsomely by the media and the culture industry. While Robeson and Seeger were blacklisted, Elvis became rich beyond imagination and still stands as one of the biggest cultural icons in the history of popular music.

It is therefore easy to forget that Elvis himself was once the target of self-appointed arbiters of public morality and the inspiration for a significant moral panic over teenage sex, race-mixing, and juvenile delinquency. In contrast to another pop star of the time, Pat Boone, Elvis seemed threatening, unclean, immoral, and dangerous. While Boone invoked the Bible and claimed to have kissed no one but his wife,⁵⁸ Elvis responded to a question about marriage by reinforcing his sexually promiscuous image: “Why buy a cow when you can get milk through the fence?”⁵⁹ Today, of course, Boone is but a footnote in rock history. For a time, however, Boone was actually more popular than Elvis,⁶⁰ and it’s difficult to say whether it was Elvis’s “rebel” image or his subsequent transformation to “all-American boy” that ultimately made him the bigger star.

The impact of Elvis’s music and live performances upon the sexual politics and popular culture in America can not be overstated. “Before Elvis,” John Lennon once declared, “there was nothing.”⁶¹ Guitarist Brian Setzer of the Stray Cats has called Elvis “the original cool,” and his music—especially during the period 1954 through 1957—has impacted every “musician alive today.”⁶² Even composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein has proclaimed Elvis “the greatest cultural force of the twentieth century.”⁶³ But what was it about Elvis and his music that accounts for his status as a cultural icon? Was it the provocative sexual imagery and the tone of his early music and performances, or his transformation into a loyal and patriotic “all-American” boy? Whatever the explanation, it’s clear that Elvis played a “vanguard role” in the creation of “a youth-oriented popular culture” founded on “new music that would henceforth differentiate young Americans from the older generation.”⁶⁴

Elvis’s music and performances shocked many Americans in an “age of anxiety.” It forced them to confront their own values and sexual mores, and it wrestled control over popular

music from the hands of adults and defined a new role for young people as major consumers of popular culture. To some adults, the seemingly unrestrained sexuality of Elvis in the mid-1950s was “at most a tantalizing fantasy, a forbidden indulgence beyond rationalization.”⁶⁵ Elvis’s challenge to traditional values, and the anxiety and moral panic his music and performances provoked, offer a glimpse into a time when moral authorities still had the power to censor the music of young people.

Those moral authorities—in the press, in the music industry, and in Hollywood film—no doubt had a lot to do with Elvis’s transformation from rebellious teenage rock star to an all-American Hollywood star. But so too did young music consumers, who had a lot of say about how the sounds of popular music evolved. Music is a site where social norms are negotiated and sometimes challenged, and the industry, music critics, young people, and even their parents all play a role in that process. Elvis’s early music clearly challenged prevailing social norms, but ultimately his music functioned to *reinforce* more traditional social norms in the 1950s. In the end, Elvis’s message to young people was that it was acceptable to be a “hound dog” and a “rebel” for a time, but eventually you need to grow up and become an upstanding, productive, and patriotic citizen.

Endnotes

¹ Jimmy Carter, “Statement by the President on the Death of Elvis Presley,” August 17, 1977. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid+7969> (accessed June 27, 2013).

² Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 1993), 2-26. For example, Link Wray's “Rumble” (which had no lyrics), Jerry Lee Lewis's “Great Balls of Fire,” and Little Richard's “Tutti-Frutti” were all censored and banned from radio for being too violent and sexual.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵ Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954-1984* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 39.

⁶ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 7-8.

⁷ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1994), 112-114. Phillips would fill his car with records and travel to various radio stations in the South to try and convince disc jockeys to play his records. When it came time to promote Elvis's first record, according to Guralnick, "it was not an easy vision to fulfill." Phillips was told by several disc jockeys that they would not play Elvis's record. T. Tommy Cutrer, the top country disc jockey at KCIJ in Shreveport, Louisiana, told Phillips that if he played Elvis's record on the air, "they'll run me out of town."

⁸ Susan M. Doll, *Understanding Elvis: Southern Roots vs. Star Image* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 51.

⁹ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

¹⁰ Most accounts of Elvis reference the fact that his musical background was a blend of country-western, rhythm-and-blues, gospel, and pop music. Some take this issue as a point of debate about which style was more prominent in the emergence of Elvis. Susan Doll, for example, makes the case that it was Elvis's "southern roots" through country-western music that shaped his image and music. Glenn C. Altschuler, on the other hand, places more emphasis on white and black race relations surrounding rock 'n' roll. Both accounts are helpful, but my point in this chapter is not to make an argument over which sound—rhythm-and-blues or country music—played a bigger role in Elvis's music. Rather I only wish to acknowledge what all critics have, that both traditions of music were influential components of rock music. See Doll, *Understanding Elvis* and Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 11-30.

¹² Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: Penguin Group, 1997), 139.

¹³ Blaine T. Browne and Robert C. Cottrell, *Modern American Lives: Individuals and Issues in American History Since 1945* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 70-71.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Prior to this, Elvis had visited Sun Studios to record four self-financed demos: "My Happiness" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin" on July 18, 1953 and "I'll Never Stand in Your Way" and "It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You" on January 4, 1954. When Phillips needed a singer for the ballad "It Wouldn't Be the Same Without You," his assistant Keisker recalled Elvis's demo of the song and recommend him. Although it got Phillips's attention, "Without You" was not released commercially by Sun Records. Doll, *Elvis: American Idol*, 50-51.

¹⁶ Guralnick, *Mystery Train*, 95-97.

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- ¹⁷ Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 45.
- ¹⁸ Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 29.
- ¹⁹ The word “Mama” was dropped from the title of Elvis’s version of “That’s Alright (Mama).”
- ²⁰ Guralnick, *Mystery Train*, 108.
- ²¹ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 30.
- ²² Browne and Cottrell, *Modern American Lives*, 74.
- ²³ Doll, *Understanding Elvis*, 58.
- ²⁴ Before Elvis, Parker managed country singer Eddy Arnold. Parker relied on “barnstorming,” which meant “a barrage of publicity, including radio announcements, promotion from local disc jockeys and newspapers, and handbills plastered on barns and fence posts. In addition, Parker introduced Arnold to the William Morris Agency, which helped spread Arnold’s image to a wider audience most country singers were not usually afforded. Parker even managed to get Arnold into two low-budget Hollywood movies, *Feudin’ Rhythm* and *Hoedown*. “For Parker,” wrote Doll, “Eddy Arnold served as a dry run for Elvis Presley.” See Doll, *Understanding Elvis*, 61-63.
- ²⁵ William Leonard, “Presley Sings For a Fast Buck!,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1956, G27.
- ²⁶ At the time of Elvis’s first appearance, the show was officially titled *Toast of the Town*, but it was commonly referred to as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The name change was made official on September 25, 1955.
- ²⁷ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 15-26.
- ²⁸ John E. Semonche, *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media* (Lanham, MD, 2007): 156.
- ²⁹ Dr. Francis J. Braceland was cited in “Rock-and-Roll Called ‘Communicable Disease’,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1956, 33.
- ³⁰ “Music: Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby,” *Time*, June 18, 1956, 54.
- ³¹ “Rock 'n' Roll Fight Hospitalizes Youth,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1957, 23.
- ³² Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 62.
- ³³ Ernst Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley: A Life in Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 49.
- ³⁴ Jack Gould, “TV: New Phenomenon: Elvis Presley Rises to Fame as Vocalist Who Is Virtuoso of Hootchy-Kootchy,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1956, 67.
- ³⁵ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 62-63.

³⁶ Jorgensen, *Elvis Presley: A Life in Music*, 68.

³⁷ Joan Beck, "Teens' Emotion Over Elvis a Search for Security," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1956, B1.

³⁸ Jack Gould, "Elvis Presley: Tomorrow Night on Television—'The Lord Don't Play Favorites,'" *New York Times*, September 16, 1956, X13.

³⁹ Dave Marsh, *Elvis* (New York: Times Books, 1982), 100. According to Marsh, "Elvis the Pelvis" became an "epithet on the lips of the nation's adults" following Elvis's appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. The insult was also used by the mainstream press to criticize Elvis, forcing a rare public expression of bitterness from the young singer when he told *TV Guide* magazine that: "It's one of the most childish expressions I ever heard, comin' from an adult."

⁴⁰ William Leonard, "Elvis Presley...: He's TNT for TEENS!," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 1, 1956, F10.

⁴¹ "Cinema: The New Pictures," *Time*, November 26, 1956.

⁴² Indeed, the young Americans coming to age in the 1950s constituted a new consumer group, a trend that fueled Elvis's rise to fame. A 1956 *Scholastic* magazine survey revealed 13 millions teens lived in America and had a combined income of seven billion dollars a year. The average teenager earned \$10.55 a week, a figure close to what the disposable income was for American families fifteen years earlier. In addition, portable record players, introduced in 1948 by RCA, were more affordable and could be purchased on payment plans, making it easier for teens to control where and when they listened to music.

⁴³ Publicity ads appearing during this time made it clear a "new" Elvis would be featured on The Steve Allen Show."

⁴⁴ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 473-481. Several articles during 1956 mentioned that Presley could be polite off-stage. On July 1, 1956, for example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that even though Elvis was "TNT for TEENS" on-stage, off-stage he was a "mild, polite young man, completely untemperamental [sic], obliging with interviewers, and considerate of the people he works with."

⁴⁵ Doll, *Understanding Elvis*, 92.

⁴⁶ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Culture Takes a Holiday," *New York Times*, November 16, 1956, 22. In his review, Crowther described the film as a "slight case of the horse opera with the heavens," adding Elvis's dramatic contributions were "not a great deal more impressive than that of one of the slaving nags." For more on the negative reception of *Love Me Tender*, see Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 362-363.

⁴⁷ "Presley Asks Delay: Singer Requests Stay in His Army Induction Jan. 20," *New York Times*, December 25, 1957, 37.

⁴⁸ "King of Rock 'n' Roll Becomes Pvt. Presley," *New York Times*, March 25, 1958, 28.

⁴⁹ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 478.

⁵⁰ "Presley to Net \$9.86 on Final Army Pay," *New York Times*, March 5, 1960, 40.

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- ⁵¹ “Presley Set to Become Sideburn-Less Civilian,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1960, 42.
- ⁵² Doll, *Understanding Elvis*, 128.
- ⁵³ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Elvis—A Reformed Wiggler,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1960, 28.
- ⁵⁴ “Rock—a-Bye Role for Presley: Ex-Soldier Elvis Plays a G.I. Baby-Sitter,” *Life*, October 10, 1960, 121.
- ⁵⁵ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 72-97.
- ⁵⁶ Schirmer’s Visual Library, *Elvis Presley: The Rebel Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 110.
- ⁵⁷ See the official web-site for Graceland, available on-line at <http://www.elvis.com/about-epe/> (accessed June 27, 2013).
- ⁵⁸ Pat Boone, *Twixt Twelve and Twenty* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958).
- ⁵⁹ “Music: Teeners’ Hero,” *Time*, May 14, 1956.
- ⁶⁰ In a survey of Illinois high school students by sociologist James Coleman in 1957, 45.2% responded that Boone was their favorite singer, compared to roughly 20% who named Elvis. The study was published in James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education* (New York: Crowell-Collier Publishing, 1961). Although Boone is likewise considered an icon of the 1950s, he was celebrated for much different reasons. Unlike Elvis, who celebrated a “rebel” image early in his career and eventually turned to a lifestyle of drugs, alcohol, and women, Boone stayed married, is a father, and remains a devout Christian at the time of this writing.
- ⁶¹ Browne and Cottrell, *Modern American Lives*, 72.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 80.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4:

Popular Music and Parental Authority: “Porn Rock” and the Parents Music Resource Center

In late 1984, Mary Elizabeth “Tipper” Gore, wife of then Tennessee Democratic Senator Al Gore, walked into a record store with her daughter Karenna to purchase *Purple Rain*, the new album by the recording artist known as Prince.¹ Upon returning home, Gore was horrified by the sexual lyrics, especially in the song “Darling Nikki”: “I knew a girl named Nikki/I guess you could say she was a sex fiend/I met her in a hotel lobby/Masturbating with a magazine.”² Soon after, Gore reached out to other mothers, like Susan Baker, who had a similar reaction to Sheena Easton’s hit single “Sugar Walls,” which included the following lyrics: “The blood races to your private spots, lets me know there’s a fire, can’t fight passion when passion is hot, temperatures rise inside my sugar walls.”³

As Gore would write later in her book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, the rise of blatant sexuality in popular music motivated her to recruit several other “Washington Wives” to form the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). These women included Baker, wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker; Pam Howard, wife of Washington realtor Raymond Howard; and Sally Nevius, wife of Washington City Council Chairman John Nevius. In addition to the “Washington Wives,” the PMRC partnered with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (the National PTA), a group that tried earlier in the decade to address the same issue with little success.⁴ One of the PMRC’s first acts was to write to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) outlining their complaints. The group identified fifteen songs by popular musicians that they deemed the “Filthy Fifteen.”⁵ The group proposed that songs containing profane or sexually explicit material be labeled “X”; songs with reference to the occult should

carry an “O” rating; songs with drugs or alcohol themes a “D/A” label; and songs considered violent marked with a “V” label. The “Filthy Fifteen” was just a starting point for the PMRC however, as they quickly expanded the targets of their attacks to include other artists, as well as a rapidly expanding new medium—music videos and MTV.

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

Figure 4.1: The PMRC's "Filthy Fifteen"

The PMRC denied that they wanted censorship but instead made several demands of the RIAA and the music industry: print lyrics on album covers; keep explicit covers under the counter; establish a uniform industry-wide review panel for records; create a ratings system for concerts and videos; reassess the contracts of performers who engage in violent or explicitly sexual behavior on stage; prohibit “backward masking”⁶; and establish a citizens’ watchdog group to pressure broadcasters not to air “questionable material.”⁷ In less than half a year following their letter to the RIAA, more than 150 newspaper editorials were written about the PMRC.⁸ Furthermore, the moral panic spawned by the PMRC landed the group on the covers of national magazines, including *Newsweek* and *People*, and representatives of the group appeared on *Donahue*, *Good Morning America*, NBC’s *Today*, *The CBS Morning News*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and the evening news of all three major television networks.⁹

Although the PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic echoed the panic over Elvis's sexually suggestive performances in the 1950s, the PMRC raised anxieties over how this explicit material was not only "pornographic" but also might socialize kids to view violence, drugs, and alcohol as acceptable. The group even raised fears that popular music might be promoting belief in the Devil. Citing several high-profile cases where teenagers took their own lives while listening to artists like Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne, the PMRC even blamed popular music for an increase in teenage suicides. In the past, these problems might have been blamed on bad parenting.¹⁰ But as parents themselves, the leaders of the PMRC refused to take the blame for the problems of young people, and their rhetoric of moral panic raised questions not only about what should be considered "decent" or "obscene" but also about parental responsibility and the power of popular music to shape the moral values of youth. Unlike earlier critics of popular music, the critics of "porn rock" were not politicians nor music critics but mothers. As such, they had a special claim to caring deeply about the well-being of America's children.

The PMRC was successful in drawing attention to what it considered obscene "porn rock." On September 19, 1985, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held hearings on the lyrical content of popular music, with a view toward finding ways to address the PMRC's concerns.¹¹ Several members of the Senate Committee, including Senator Al Gore (D—Tennessee), had direct ties with the PMRC, which only furthered the view that the group had considerable clout in Washington. Attracting unusually large crowds to the Senate chambers, the proceedings attracted extensive media coverage and widespread national attention. In opposition to the PMRC, a number of notable figures from the music and recording industries testified before the committee, including musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider.

Throughout the controversy, the PMRC insisted that they were not advocating censorship, but merely wanted the recording industry to help parents identify questionable material. Senator John Danforth (R—Missouri), chairman of the committee, echoed this theme in his opening statements: “The reason for this hearing is not to promote any legislation. Indeed, I do not know of any suggestion that any legislation be passed.”¹² However others, like Senator Ernest Hollings (D—South Carolina), clearly hoped to find some way to censor or even ban some of the material. Hollings argued that the music in question was “outrageous filth,” and he conceded that if there were “some way constitutionally to do away with it, I would.”¹³ Hollings’s statements, made before any evidence or testimony was presented, seemed to confirm the worst fears of the PMRC's critics—that the hearings were rigged to favor the PMRC viewpoint, and that they represented the first step down a slippery slope toward censoring popular music.

In this chapter I argue that what was at stake in these debates was not just the labeling of “obscene” music, but also a larger controversy over what constituted good parenting. In addition, the hearings raised difficult questions about who or what should be blamed for deviant or even criminal behavior among young people. Throughout the 1980s, issues of teenage suicide, sex, and drug use were a source of great concern and even panic for American parents.¹⁴ Even the National Education Association, the liberal teachers' union, blamed popular music for difficult problems like teenage suicide, arguing that many teen suicides were “linked to depression fueled by fatalistic music and lyrics.”¹⁵ By attacking the lyrics and images of “porn rock,” elected leaders and members of the Washington establishment, like the PMRC, could direct deliberation over the social problems associated with young people in the 1980s toward an easy scapegoat: popular culture. If popular music could be blamed for moral and civic decay,

then that might deflect attention from the possible failures of parents, teachers, and governmental policies.

In this chapter, I show how these debates over how to label popular music subverted genuine deliberation over the problems facing America's youth in the 1980s by scapegoating popular music and oversimplifying complex problems like teenage promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and suicide. Deploying an epideictic rhetoric of blame that deflected attention from parents and schools to popular music, the PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic may have made parents and adults feel better about "doing something," but it did little to uncover and address the real causes of social deviancy among America's youth. I begin by describing and analyzing the rise of "porn rock," focusing on its context and its early critics. With the rise of this new type of rock music, the mothers of the PMRC capitalized on the moment to blame the music industry for corrupting America's children. In this section I introduce the musicians who were the targets of the PMRC's campaign, and I analyze how these critics articulated and publicized their protests.

In the second section of the chapter, I examine the congressional hearing over porn rock in 1985. In this section, I describe how the PMRC made the case that popular music was corrupting America's kids, and I examine the rebuttals and counterarguments of the musicians and corporate executives who defended the industry. In analyzing the hearings before a committee of the U.S. Senate, I show how the blame for complex social problems shifted back and forth between the two sides as the hearings unfolded. With each side deflecting blame for the problems of young people, productive deliberations became impossible, and the hearings ultimately produced no real solutions. In the end, the PMRC was successful in persuading the industry to adopt a system of warning labels and the industry avoided any real censorship by

appearing responsive to the PMRC's demands. But lost in the compromise were any real solutions to the problems that inspired the PMRC's campaign in the first place.

“Porn Rock” and the Decay of the American Nuclear Family

It is tempting to romanticize the 1980s—like the 1950s—as an era of national unity and prosperity, a time when teenagers acquired their own personal Walkmans, watched movies like *E.T.*, and viewed the future as so bright that, in the words of one pop song, “you had to wear shades.”¹⁶ Just as the romanticized 1950s is a myth, however, such a view of the 1980s is misguided, as it overlooks the political and social turmoil of the decade. The 1980s brought increasing scrutiny of greed on Wall Street, the AIDS epidemic, a War on Drugs, and continued racial and class strife. Tom Wolfe's book, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, as well as Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*, captured many of these tensions, particularly the greed and deception that seemed to dominate this era.¹⁷

It was within this context that the PMRC chose to go after popular musicians for using explicitly sexual and/or violent images. Troubled by many of the social trends of their day, the mothers of the PMRC chose to blame popular music, thereby deflecting attention from deeper structural problems rooted in class, race, and gender. One of the PMRC's biggest concerns was how popular musicians were using sexuality to promote and distribute their music, but they also objected to what they considered to be violent and even anti-religious themes and images. Speaking on behalf of all outraged mothers, Gore claimed “the graphic sex and violence” described in popular music were simply “too much for us to handle.”¹⁸

Starting in the 1980s, artists like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper became famous for wearing underwear as their stage costumes, cloaking their performances in more explicit sexual imagery. Although musicians from the 1950s to the 1970s had been attacked for sexually suggestive songs, they certainly did not wear underwear on stage! Making matters worse was the fact that many of these artists were women, apparently unashamed of exploiting their sexuality in song and dress. Cyndi Lauper's "She Bop," a song about female masturbation, and Sheena Easton's "Sugar Walls," about female sexual excitement, were two of the most famous examples of women talking about sex, their bodies, and sexual fulfillment. It was one thing, according to the PMRC, to discuss "the birds and the bees," but it was another matter entirely to discuss masturbation, orgasmic climaxes, and sexual empowerment. Conservative journalist George Will agreed with the PMRC that these sorts of songs constituted "a plague of messages about sexual promiscuity, bisexuality, [and] incest" which "de-moralized" young people, making them "incapable of shame and embarrassment." If young people could no longer "blush," no longer feel shame or embarrassment, Will suggested in reflecting on the larger political significance of such music, then they were "unsuited for self-government."¹⁹

Of course, female artists were not the only targets of the PMRC and their allies. Male artists like Judas Priest encouraged women to "eat me alive," while a group called W.A.S.P. encouraged its listeners to "fuck like a beast." These and similar artists, according to Gore and the PMRC, promoted "sodomasochism, killing, [and] raping as an apparently normal way to relate to women."²⁰ In addition, some artists, like Twisted Sister and Mötley Crüe, dressed in women's clothing and wore make-up, crafting an androgynous image that pushed the boundaries of sexuality far beyond the days of the Beatles's "I Want to Hold Your Hand." As Gore pointed out in her book, bands like Judas Priest and Mötley Crüe not only promoted deviant behavior in

their music, but also became teen idols through magazine features that celebrated their deviant sexual behaviors and drug use.²¹

Among the troubling incidents cited by the PMRC (and later submitted as part of a set of written evidence submitted to the Senate committee) was a radio contest in San Antonio, during which young people were invited to describe what they would be willing to do in order to win free tickets and backstage passes to meet Mötley Crüe.²² The following answers, reported by Bob Greene in *Esquire* magazine, shocked the PMRC and their allies. From a sixteen-year-old girl: “First, I would tie you up, spread-eagle and naked, with leather straps. Then I’d shave all the hair off of your chest, and if I should nick you I’ll suck up all the blood as it slowly trickles over your body. Next I’ll cover your body with motion lotion to get things really heated up. When it gets *too* hot, I’ll cover your body in crushed ice and lay on top of you to melt it down and cool you off. Then I’ll do things to your body with my tongue that you never thought humanly possible.” From a fifteen-year-old girl: “I’d do it with the Crüe till black and blue is all you can see.” From a thirteen-year-old girl: “I’d leave my tits to Mötley Crüe.” Others, including young boys, also wrote that they would give the band money or anything else they wanted, just for the chance to meet them. According to the PMRC, these sorts of reactions to “porn rock” were the rule and not the exception. Mötley Crüe's contest, in the PMRC's view, represented the widespread practice of exploiting teenagers’ hormones to sell records and concert tickets.

The fact that popular musicians were not hiding their sexuality was evident in the PMRC’s list of the worst offenders in popular music, the “Filthy Fifteen,” which labeled nine of the fifteen songs as “X” for explicit sexual and/or profane content. The other six songs targeted mostly heavy metal acts, which they claimed was the first type of popular music to openly

preach *hate* in its lyrics.²³ Songs like “Possessed” by Venom and “Into the Coven” by Mercyful Fate even preached belief in the occult, according to the PMRC, while other songs like “Bastard” by Mötley Crüe and “We’re Not Gonna Take It” by Twisted Sister, promoted both hatred *and* violence. The other two heavy metal songs, “Trashed” by Black Sabbath and “High ’n’ Dry” by Def Leppard, made the PMRC’s “Filthy Fifteen” because they advocated drug and alcohol use.

Although the range of the PMRC’s targets was broad in terms of the artists’ sounds, gender, and popularity, they all came together in the PMRC’s rhetoric of moral panic. As Gore told the *Washington Post* in June of 1985, “The children really don’t have a choice. They flip through the record bin and they see a cover with a nude woman gagged and chained to a motorcycle, or another one simulating masturbation with a light bulb. There’s one record—platinum, yet—with a song called ‘Eat Me Alive’ that is about oral sex at gunpoint. Some of it I can’t bring myself to talk about. It’s simply gone too far, and it has to be stopped; at least we have a right to know what’s on an album so we can exercise some control.”²⁴

In the eyes of the PMRC and their allies, mass culture—and specifically popular music—had a tremendous effect on young people and their values. Unless parents demanded better, their children would be conditioned to view violence, gratuitous sex, and drug use as socially acceptable. At stake for Gore and her allies were the lives of children, for presumably young people were powerless to resist such messages. Underlying this reasoning was a deeper fear that parents would lose authority and control over their children. As more and more parents had to work multiple jobs in pursuit of the American Dream, children spent more time unsupervised, and much of that time they spent listening to music or watching TV. Yet instead of entertaining—much less educating—young people, popular culture was instead providing an X-rated education in sex, drugs, and violence. In the process, the moral and emotional health of

young people was being destroyed. That, according to the PMRC, was the threat posed by “porn rock.”

Rock Music or Parenting? The Congressional Hearings over Porn Rock

“Much has changed since Elvis’ seemingly innocent times,” began Senator Paula Hawkins (R—Florida), the first witness before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation during its hearings on the threat posed by popular music.²⁵ According to Hawkins, popular music had crossed the threshold of “good taste” and had become a threat to the health and well-being of America's young people. What was once couched in subtleties, suggestive imagery, or innuendo was now explicit and direct, including “overt expressions and descriptions of often violent sexual acts, drug taking, and flirtations with the occult.”²⁶ Extending her focus beyond lyrics to album covers and music videos, Hawkins identified three album covers that illustrated the problem: Def Leppard’s *Pyromania*, Wendy O. Williams’s *W.O.W.*, and W.A.S.P.’s *Animal (F**k Like a Beast)*.



Figure 4.2: Def Leppard's *Pyromania*

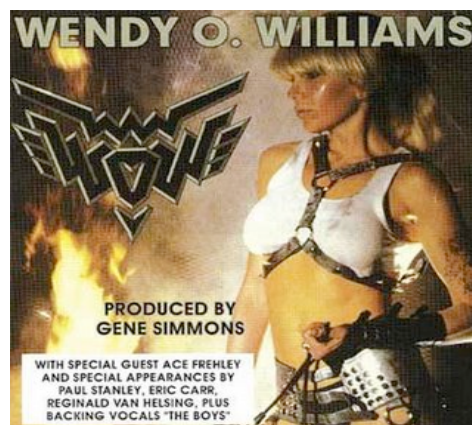


Figure 4.3: Wendy O. Williams's *W.O.W.*

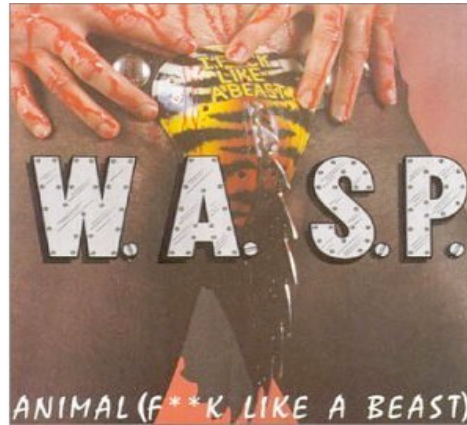


Figure 4.4: W.A.S.P.'s *Animal (F**k Like a Beast)*

Pyromania, which was number two on Billboard's top albums for six straight months after its release, featured an illustration of a large building on fire with a sniper target over it. The other two album covers, *W.O.W.* and *Animal (F**k Like a Beast)*, contained what Hawkins considered violent sexual imagery. *W.O.W.*'s album cover featured lead singer Wendy O. Williams in sadomasochist imagery, wearing a harness and holding a whip, while the cover of W.A.S.P.'s *Animal (F**k Like a Beast)* featured a close-up of a man's crotch with a large saw protruding out of it and blood on the man's hands. In addition, Hawkins showed two music videos, "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen and "We're Not Going to Take It" by Twisted Sister. These, she claimed, also vividly demonstrated the violent and hyper-sexualized nature of much of the day's popular music.

Hawkins did not specifically analyze what each album cover or video communicated. Instead, she let them speak for themselves, declaring that there could be "no question about the message" they were sending and insisting that parents needed help in keeping such messages away from their children. Hawkins empathized with the "hopelessness" that many parents felt in dealing with children who refused to "listen" to their warnings about such material. In summarizing her case against popular music, Hawkins concluded that "Mr. Chairman, 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.”²⁷

Following Hawkins’s opening testimony, PMRC members Susan Baker, Pamela Howar, Sally Nevius, Tipper Gore, and Jeff Ling all testified before the committee, reiterating many of the same arguments that they had made in the PMRC’s public campaign against “porn rock.” In their testimony, these PMRC advocates argued that “porn rock” was not limited to the fringes of the industry, but was evident in many of the most commercially successful recordings. Prince’s “Darling Nikki,” which had sold more than 10 million copies, and Mötley Crüe’s “Shout at the Devil,” which sold 2 million copies, described sex, violence and brutality against women. Baker suggested that increases in teen pregnancies, suicides, and rapes could all be attributed to this new trend in music, and that parents had “no way of knowing” what sort of messages might be contained in their children’s music.²⁸

Jeff Ling, a minister and self-proclaimed “rock music expert,” followed Baker’s testimony with a slide show on the violent and sexual contents of lyrics. Quoting lyrics from AC/DC’s “Shoot to Thrill,” Metallica’s “Faith in Black,” and Ozzy Osbourne’s “Suicide Solution,” Ling flatly asserted that all of these songs promoted violence or suicide. Further solidifying the connection between the lyrics and violence, Ling quoted from another AC/DC song, “Squealer”: “She said she had never been balled before, and I don’t think she’ll ball no more. Fixed her good.” He then identified Richard Ramirez, the serial killer known as the Night Stalker, as one of AC/DC’s biggest fans. Ling also tried to connect the lyrics of popular music to violence by quoting songs by heavy metal acts Judas Priest, Great White, Mötley Crüe, Abattoir,

Impaler, W.A.S.P., and Piledriver. In each instance, Ling quoted snippets of lyrics that mentioned murder, dismemberment, rape, or bodily mutilation.²⁹

Neither Baker nor Ling cited specific studies or any other sort of empirical evidence linking song lyrics to violence, suicide, rape, teenage pregnancy, or any other form of social deviance. By quoting the most extreme examples of popular music that emphasized such themes, however, the PMRC and its allies made an emotionally compelling case for the negative effects of popular music. For critics of popular music, like the PMRC, kids were blank slates, easily influenced by their media experiences, including their music. They could not be expected to critically evaluate such messages or distinguish reality from fantasy. In addition, parents could not easily counter the messages their children got from such music, for in many cases parents were too busy to police their children's media consumption and were unaware that their children were listening to such songs.

The PMRC denied that their goal was to censor such music. Their goal, they said, was simply to get "more information" to parents so that they could do a better job monitoring what their children might be exposed to in their music and music videos.³⁰ This strategy was important because it allowed the PMRC to deflect questions about free speech and instead place the burden of responsibility on the recording industry. When the industry talked about the rights of musicians, the PMRC could claim that they had no intention of "censoring" music but simply wanted better information so parents could assist their children in making more responsible consumer choices. Gore made that point clear in her testimony as she called for the new labeling system that the PMRC was proposing: "We are asking the recording industry to voluntarily assist parents who are concerned by placing a warning label on music products inappropriate for younger children due to explicit sexual or violent lyrics."³¹ As part of that labeling process, the

PMRC called upon the industry to police itself by establishing a review board that would review all the music coming out of the industry and determine the appropriate rating for particular albums and videos.

The Senate committee seemed to agree with the critics of “porn rock” that young people were being poisoned by such music, that “porn rock” posed a threat to the moral fabric of the country, and that something therefore needed to be done. Even as they questioned critics of the PMRC campaign, they insisted that all who testify acknowledge the seriousness of the problem and, if they disagreed with the PMRC’s proposals, offer their own solution for how parents could best deal with the problem. Instead of backing away from these challenges, some of those testifying in opposition to the PMRC, including musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider, all argued that they too were parents and were concerned with the well-being of their children. But rejecting the PMRC's calls for record labeling and review panels, they argued that the best solution rested not in regulating popular culture but in better parenting.

Zappa was by far the most confrontational of those testifying against the PMRC’s proposals during the hearings. Although his music was not specifically criticized by the PMRC, Zappa used the opportunity to lambaste the group’s campaign, framing the hearings as an assault on the First Amendment rights of musicians. Describing the PMRC’s plan as “an ill-conceived piece of nonsense,” he said that their list of demands of the record industry read like “an instruction manual for some sinister kind of toilet training program to house-break all composers and performers because of the lyrics of a few.” Zappa concluded that sarcastic comparison with a shout of righteous indignation: “Ladies, how dare you?” Zappa went on to argue that the recording industry could not be trusted to police itself, as the industry was more concerned with a new tax on blank tapes and home recording devices than it was with the content of the music.

The proposed new tax was “so ridiculous,” according to Zappa, that the only way it could be passed was “to keep the public’s mind on something else: Porn rock.” Zappa also declared it improper that Al Gore, the husband of the PMRC founder, served on the committee that was considering both the blank tape tax and his wife's proposals for reviewing and labeling music content.³²

Zappa then offered his own solution to the problem of parental supervision of explicit lyrics: let the record companies or the federal government pay the costs of printing lyrics on albums, and require parents to actually read those lyrics and listen to the music their children purchased. Zappa agreed that parents needed guidance, but he objected to “the tactics used by these people in order to achieve the goal.” Senator Gore responded that he was a fan of Zappa's music, and he praised the rock musician for his “very articulate and forceful” testimony. Instead of truly engaging Zappa's arguments, however, Gore amplified the *concerns* of parents, not their *responsibilities*. Accusing Zappa of leaving the impression that “parents were just silly to be concerned at all,” Gore sidestepped Zappa’s argument that parents also bore the ultimate responsibility for their children’s musical tastes.³³

Following Senator Gore, other members of the Senate committee likewise rushed to dismiss Zappa's testimony. Senator Slade Gorton (R—Washington), for example, found Zappa’s testimony “boorish,” as well as “incredibly and insensitively insulting to the people that were here previously.”³⁴ Senator J. James Exon (D—Nebraska) followed by asking Zappa if he thought parents had “the right and the obligation to mold the psychological development of their children?”³⁵ Again the question seemed designed to force Zappa into agreeing that the PMRC was only doing what responsible parents *should* do. Zappa replied he understood their motivations, but that he was “opposed to the rating system because if you put a rating on the

record it goes directly to the character of the people who made the record.”³⁶ Zappa reiterated his argument that the responsibility to decide what was or was not threatening to their children had to rest with parents, not government legislation. To that Exxon replied that “unless the industry clean[ed] up their act,” there would “likely be legislation.” Senator Hollings then interjected that he too expected the hearings to result in “regulations or some kind of legislation,” although he acknowledged that there were constitutional issues to overcome and that he would prefer “initiatives from the industry itself.”³⁷

Folk and country musician John Denver followed Zappa in testifying before the Senate committee. He seemed a friendlier, more wholesome witness, but he too spoke out against the whole idea of a ratings board. For Denver, like Zappa, the issue was one of parental responsibility, and he was “strongly opposed to censorship of any kind in our society or anywhere else in the world.” He recalled how his song “Rocky Mountain High” and his film “Oh God” were both criticized and even banned in some places because misguided zealots considered the former an invitation to get high and the latter disrespectful toward God and Christianity. According to Denver, “Rocky Mountain High” was simply an ode to the spectacular mountain scenery in his home state, while the movie was “a small effort to spread [the Lord’s] message that we are here for each other and not against each other.”³⁸ Like Zappa, Denver argued that the issue boiled down to who has the power to decide what is or is not offensive. Denver was about as far as you could get from “porn rock,” but he, like Zappa, feared that labeling records was the first step toward censorship and the imposition of one group’s moral views on everybody else.

In comparison to Zappa, Denver was polite and restrained throughout his testimony, never getting angry or pointing his finger at committee members (something Zappa did

repeatedly). He also did not question the motives or the concerns of the PMRC but instead acknowledged that the issue was of great concern to parents. Instead of calling for government intervention, however, Denver—the father of two—claimed that the problem was rooted in the failure of some parents to live up to their responsibilities: “The problem, Mr. Chairman, in my opinion has to do with our willingness as parents to take responsibility for the upbringing of our children, to pay attention to their interests, to respond to their needs, and to recognize that we as parents and as individuals have a greater influence on our children and on each other than anything else could possibly have.”³⁹ Whereas Zappa suggested that the government or the recording industry might shoulder the costs of printing song lyrics on albums covers, Denver emphasized that the problem of explicit material could be solved only by parents becoming more involved with their children. Instead of viewing their children's music as something mysterious and alien—something parents had done since the time of Elvis—parents needed to listen to the music their children were buying and play a bigger role in helping them to make good choices.

Not surprisingly, the Senate committee responded more favorably to Denver than to Frank Zappa. According to Senator Hollings, however, the problem was that they were not talking about the music of “clean-cut John Denvers.” Instead, they were talking about music that promoted sex, violence, and drug use. The public was demanding action, Hollings told Denver, “through the FCC or otherwise. I do not think the American public is going to go along just with a nice hearing up in Washington.”⁴⁰ Denver replied that legislation built upon a foundation of fear was bound to be ineffective. Senator Gore then tried to get Denver to admit that heavy metal music in particular was too focused on sex, violence, and the occult. Denver agreed that a lot of heavy metal had disturbing lyrics, yet he refused to criticize the artists, insisting that popular music was “the medium which most specifically tells us what is going on

in young people's minds, not what is being put into them but what reflects what they are interested in."⁴¹

Dee Snider, lead singer of the heavy metal band Twisted Sister, appeared as the final musician called to testify before the Senate committee investigating "porn rock." Appearing in a black t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and his frizzled long yellow hair spread around his face, Snider was the only musician to testify who actually had been named to the "Filthy Fifteen" by the PMRC. Like Zappa and Denver before him, Snider claimed that he did not believe labeling or government intervention was the answer to explicit material, and he echoed the earlier witnesses' emphasis on parental responsibility. Although his look was by far the most radical of the three musicians, Snider began by noting that he was married, had a three year-old son, and was a practicing Christian. He also abstained from smoking, drinking, and taking illegal drugs. Snider's rhetoric, while not as confrontational as Zappa's, sounded a "more personal note," since he was the only one of the three whose own music had come under attack by the PMRC. Speaking as a target of the campaign, Snider devoted his testimony to demonstrating "how unfair the whole concept of lyrical interpretation and judgment can be and how many times this can amount to little more than character assassination."⁴²

Like the witnesses before him, Snider was pressed to concede the importance of the PMRC's call for action. When asked if parents should know if a song glorifies incest (a la Prince's "Sister), Snider responded yes, but that this could be accomplished by looking at the album art, reading the titles of songs, or actually listening to the music. If parents then disapproved of the material, they could return it to the music store. Snider admitted that even he didn't know "half the things that are on half the albums" he owned, and he noted that people often bought music not for the lyrics but for the sound. He was a huge AC/DC fan, for example,

but Snider insisted that, as a Christian, he did not “want to go to hell” or “be damned for all time.”⁴³ While the PMRC seemed to suggest that children were helpless to resist the messages of “porn rock,” Snider was suggesting that not all kids paid close attention to the lyrics, and even if they did that did not mean they automatically embraced beliefs and values contrary to what they had learned from their parents. According to Snider, it was possible for kids to like the sound of some music while ignoring or even rejecting the messages contained in the lyrics.

The Senate committee, however, were not persuaded by Snider’s arguments. As Senator Gore began his remarks, Snider interrupted: “Excuse me. Are you going to tell me you are a big fan of my music as well?” As the laughter died down, Senator Gore responded, “No, I am not a fan of your music. I am aware that Frank Zappa and John Denver cover quite a spectrum, and I do enjoy them both. I am not, however, a fan of Twisted Sister and I will readily say that.” To make the point even more obvious, Senator Gore then asked Snider about the name of his fan club, “SMF Fans of Twisted Sister.” Snider replied without missing a beat: “Sick Mother Fucking Fans of Twisted Sister.” Calling that “an interesting choice,” Gore then tried to undercut Snider’s testimony by suggesting that it was inappropriate for him to portray himself as “a very wholesome kind of performer.”⁴⁴ It was one thing for Denver to protest labeling; he was, in fact, a “clean-cut” performer. It was quite another for Snider and his band Twisted Sister to protest, for their music was indeed “filthy” and posed a threat to the moral education of America’s children.

The debate between Senator Gore and Snider continued on the issue of what would be “reasonable” for parents to do in light of the threat posed by obscene or violent rock music. Senator Gore brought up how sexually suggestive songs from Prince’s *Purple Rain* might escape a parent’s detection based just on the album art or song titles. Snider responded that this might

be one of those cases where the parent would need to actually “sit down and listen to every song on the album.” Although this was the same argument that Zappa and Denver had made, the Senators now pushed back harder against this effort to shift responsibility back on to the parents. Senators Gore and John D. Rockefeller (D—West Virginia) argued that parents simply did not have the time to listen to all the music their children brought home. Senator Gore claimed that even “if you love your child” and are concerned about “unnecessary exposure to inappropriate material,” you “need a little help” in detecting material that might be threatening. According to Senator Gore, it was “totally unreasonable” to ask parents “to sit down and listen to every single song in the albums that their children buy in order to fulfill their responsibilities as parents.”⁴⁵ Parents needed help in determining which artists and which albums posed a threat to their children, and that is why he supported the efforts of the PMRC.

In the end, the Senate Commerce Committee refused to allow Snider or any of the other critics of the PMRC’s campaign to shift the blame for the problems of youth to their parents. Repeatedly justifying their concern with this issue, they portrayed themselves as busy, honest, and hard-working citizens who simply needed more information to do their jobs as parents. According to their remarks, *they* were the victims, not the musicians, because *they* were the ones faced with handling “tough” situations. These “tough situations,” as described in Senator Rockefeller’s remarks, included working full-time jobs while trying to raise their kids in a culture that made that job more difficult. Senator Rockefeller asked: “What about families where both parents have to work, which is an increasing phenomenon in this country now, because they have to survive?” The whole notion of parents sitting down and listening to “record after record, tape after tape” after working long hours was, according to Rockefeller, “just a little bit naïve and unrealistic.”⁴⁶ In response, Snider reiterated that he did not think it was

unrealistic for parents to listen to the music their children purchased, suggesting that it likely would involve only two or three albums a month. In any case, Snider concluded, government intervention or industry labeling would not work. If any legislation was passed, he concluded, it should do no more than “force retail stores to allow people to return products that they are not satisfied with: satisfaction guaranteed.”⁴⁷

The committee seemed unpersuaded. On the assumption that popular music was in fact to blame for promoting sex and violence among young people, they blamed the artists and the recording industry for a variety of social problems while never really asking *why* their kids listened to such music or *why* sex, violence, and substance abuse were such prominent themes in American culture generally. Instead, it was assumed from the start that “porn rock” was, in fact, obscene and pornographic, and that the public needed help protecting children from such material. According to its critics, “porn rock” had no redeeming social value, and it was polluting the minds of teenagers, encouraging them to commit suicide, abuse drugs, disrespect women, and even worship the Devil. “Porn rock” was a dangerous influence on teens, and parents needed all the help they could get in protecting their children from these X-rated materials.

The PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic thus proved effective in bringing about governmental pressure on the popular music business. Portraying themselves not as censors but as concerned parents, the PMRC succeeded in its effort to provide the “information” parents needed to help their children be more careful consumers. Moreover, they shifted the burden of proof to the musicians and recording industry officials, suggesting that it was up to them to prove that their music was *not* harming young people. As a result, the recording industry went on the

defensive and eventually the PMRC got its way: the recording industry adopted a voluntary labeling policy and began more vigorously policing itself.

Conclusion

On November 1, 1985, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., a joint press conference was held by representatives of the recording industry and the PMRC to announce that they had reached an agreement. That agreement gave the record companies two options for dealing with explicit material. The first was that they could apply a sticker to the album which read: “Explicit Lyrics – Parental Advisory” (see Figure 4.5). The second option was to print the lyrics on the album cover so that the consumer could decide whether they were too explicit or offensive. Since cassette tapes were too small for complete lyrics, they would include a sticker reading “See LP for Lyrics.” Twenty-two of the forty-eight record companies represented by the RIAA, accounting for eighty-five percent of all music sales in America, agreed to the deal. The record companies avoided real “censorship,” since the agreement did not ban explicit lyrics, nor did it even provide any definition of “obscene” or “explicit” materials. There also were no governmental enforcement mechanisms established to assure compliance. As such, the advisory label could be applied at the discretion of the record company. Nevertheless, the PMRC heralded the agreement as a major victory in their on-going campaign against “porn rock.”⁴⁸



Figure 4.5: A version of the parental warning label used today

Tipper Gore claimed that she was not bothered by the lack of any clear definition of “explicit” in the agreement, telling reporters the PMRC had “faith that they (the recording industry) will make judgments with the concern of the parents with young children in mind.”⁴⁹ At the same time, members of the PMRC spoke in public meetings around the country to provide parents with up-to-date information about “porn rock.” The Parent Teacher Association even agreed to sponsor such events to all of their fifty state chapters. As a result of the PMRC's efforts, major retail chain stores, including JC Penney, Sears, and Wal-Mart, announced that they would no longer sell records with the warning stickers. Musicians who had records with a warning label also had a difficult time getting radio airplay, according to rock music critics Linda Martin and Terry Segrave. Because their potentially “offensive” songs were now “unofficially blacklisted,” radio stations did not want to take the risk or screen the material themselves.⁵⁰

The PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic was effective in at least two ways. First, the PMRC's rhetoric positioned concerned parents at the front of the culture war. In the “Just Say No” rhetorical climate of the Reagan era, the PMRC took advantage of a rhetorical opportunity to say “no” to another supposed threat to children and their families. These debates in some measure shifted responsibility for that threat from the parents themselves to the musicians and

music industry officials who produced the music. Listening to every single song on every single album was too much to ask even the most conscientious parents, according to the PMRC and its supporters in Congress. According to the PMRC and those members of Congress who took up their cause, parents needed “help” in policing “explicit” music and other threats to their children.

While the PMRC’s broad range of targets—from Madonna, Sheena Easton, Prince, and Cyndi Lauper to W.A.S.P., Venom, Twisted Sister, and AC/DC—may have made it impractical to set up review panels to screen lyrics, the least the industry could do was to voluntarily label “explicit” lyrics and ask radio stations not to play the most violent or obscene music. By shifting blame for the problems of young people from their parents to popular music, critics of “porn rock” successfully positioned themselves as victims and shamed the music industry into regulating itself. Instead of using the hearings as an opportunity for serious deliberation over the social ills affecting young people, the PMRC used the publicity over the hearings to pressure the industry into regulating itself. Nobody seemed to ask *why* young people were attracted to such music. Instead, the critics of popular music engaged in an epideictic rhetoric of *blame*, making the recording industry the scapegoat for a whole host of problems affecting young people, from sexual promiscuity to drug use, violence, and suicide. And it worked; apparently concerned that all the bad publicity might affect their profits, the recording industry agreed to a system of voluntary labeling.

Although it is debatable whether the advisory stickers now appearing on some albums actually have any deterrent effect, the PMRC was a rhetorical success as a social movement. The attacks against popular music, as I have demonstrated in my previous chapters, originated long before “porn rock,” but the PMRC managed to broaden the critique to encompass virtually every problem besetting young people, and their critique carried sufficient weight to inspire

congressional hearings and record labeling. In addition to galvanizing concerned parents and bringing the issue of “porn rock” to national attention, the group’s focus on popular music also contributed to a larger climate of moral judgment that would soon extend to another, more political type of music that had just begun to emerge at this time: gangsta rap. Like the PMRC, critics of this newly emerging genre of music, rooted in urban African-American culture, argued that the music contributed to a wide range of social maladies, including gang activity, violence against women, and negative stereotyping of African-Americans. In the final chapter of this study, I take a closer look at the rhetoric of gangsta rap and the moral panic it inspired in the 1990s.

Endnotes

¹ Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 17-19. This story was recounted several times by Gore and other members of the PMRC to the public through interviews and press coverage of their actions.

² Gore, *Raising PG Kids*, 17. “Darling Niki” is the second song on Prince and the Revolution’s *Purple Rain*; music and lyrics by Prince. See Prince and the Revolution, “Darling Niki,” *Purple Rain*, Warner Brothers Records (LP), 1984.

³ As told to Patrick Goldstein, “Parents Warn: Take the Sex and Shock Out of Rock,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 1985. See also Sheena Easton, “Sugar Walls,” *Private Heaven*, EMI America Records (LP), 1984. Goldstein’s article was also presented to the committee by the PMRC as evidence during the hearings about porn rock. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 17-20.

⁴ Gore, *Raising PG Kids*, 23. The National PTA had written to 32 record companies in 1984 about labeling explicit sexual and/or violent material, but they had only received three responses. All three refused to discuss the issue further. Although the PTA was not successful in their campaign, they advised the PMRC to not deal with the companies on an individual basis, and instead launch a “grass-roots media campaign” against the entire recording industry.

⁵ The PMRC identified fifteen songs they deemed obscene and sent it not only to the RIAA, but also used many of them as part of their case for rating records. These fifteen songs (and the reason they caused

concern) were: Prince's "Darling Nikki" (sex); Sheena Easton's "Sugar Walls" (sex); Judas Priest's "Eat Me Alive" (sex); Vanity's "Strap on Robbie Baby" (sex); Mötley Crüe's "Bastard" (violence); AC/DC's "Let Me Put My Love into You" (sex); Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It" (violence); Madonna's "Dress You Up" (sex); W.A.S.P.'s "Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)" (sex/language); Def Leppard's "High 'n' Dry (Saturday Night)" (drug and alcohol use); Mercyful Fate's "Into the Coven" (occult); Black Sabbath's "Trashed" (drug and alcohol use); Mary Jane Girls's "In My House" (sex); Venom's "Possessed" (occult); and Cyndi Lauper's "She Bop" (sex). Eric Nuzum, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 21.

⁶ "Backward masking" is the term for placing hidden messages into a song that can be heard by spinning the record in the opposite direction. The most famously cited instance is the Beatles's "Revolution 9," which some claimed stated "turn me on, dead man" when played backwards. Conspiracy theorists used this as confirmation of the rumor Paul McCartney was dead and replaced with a look alike. Most record producers and artists said they never used this method, and whatever "noises" listeners heard when playing the track backwards were misinterpreted or coincidental.

⁷ Maria Fontenot and Chad Harris, "Building a Better PIG: A Historical Survey of the PMRC and its Tactics," *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (2010): 573.

⁸ Nuzum, *Parental Advisory*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ These instances were reported in the media and included in the PMRC's evidence to Congress. It was also reported and discussed in Gore's *PG Kids*. See Gore, *PG Kids*, 106-116.

¹¹ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985).

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Gore, *PG Kids*, 81-116.

¹⁵ Stewart Powell, "What Entertainers Are Doing to Your Kids," *U.S. News & World Report*, October 28, 1985, 46-49.

¹⁶ The reference is to the song "The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades" by Timbuk3. The song was released in 1986 on I.R.S. Records and remained in the Top 20 in the United States for most of the year. Although Pat MacDonald later claimed the song was a "grim" outlook on the future, the song was mostly adopted as a graduation theme song.

¹⁷ See Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987); and *Wall Street*, directed by Oliver Stone (1987; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

¹⁸ Gore, *Raising PG Kids*, 18.

¹⁹ George F. Will, “No One Blushes Anymore,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 1985, D7. This article was also presented to the committee by the PMRC as evidence during the hearings about porn rock. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 20-21.

²⁰ As told to Julia Malone, “Washington Wives Use Influence to Target Sex, Drugs in Rock Music,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 23, 1985, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1985/0823/arock.html> (accessed June 27, 2013). This article was also presented to the committee by the PMRC as evidence during the hearings about porn rock. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 21-22.

²¹ Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, 223-227.

²² Bob Greene, “American—Words of Love—From Today’s Teenagers, a Different Kind of Fan Mail,” *Esquire*, May 1984. This article was also presented to the committee by the PMRC as evidence during the hearings about porn rock. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 26-28.

²³ The PMRC made sure to voice this concern during the hearings, enlisting Dr. Joe Stuessy of the University of Texas at San Antonio who testified that, “Today’s heavy metal music is categorically different from previous forms of popular music. It contains elements of hatred, a meanness of spirit. Its principle themes are . . . extreme violence, extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion and Satanism.” See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 117.

²⁴ As told to William Raspberry, “Filth on the Air,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 1985. This article was also presented to the committee by the PMRC as evidence during the hearings about porn rock. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 24-25.

²⁵ Although not a member of the PMRC, Hawkins was called to testify because she was very active in the realm of child welfare. She was an important figure in advocating and passing the 1982 Missing Children’s Act and in 1984 she spoke at the third National Conference on Sexual Victimization of Children, surprising listeners when she disclosed that she was a victim of sexual abuse as a child. In her opening statement, she informed her audience that as the chairman of the Children, Family, Drugs, and Alcohol Subcommittee, child welfare and the role of the media was “a subject that I am very familiar with.” See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 5.

²⁶ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985): 6-10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

²⁹ Ibid., 13-17.

³⁰ Ibid., 67. According to the Chairman, “What the *mothers* are saying is that they do not have sufficient information. They want to know more, they want to be more informed. They do not want less information. They do not want censorship. They want more information. They want to know.”

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Ibid., 52-54.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 58.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 61.

³⁸ Ibid., 65-68.

³⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68-69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.

⁴² Ibid., 73.

⁴³ Ibid., 75-76.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 77-78.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁸ Dennis Wharton, “RIAA, PMRC reach accord on record lyrics; labels agree to use stickers or print words,” *Variety*, November 6, 1985. See also Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 305-307.

⁴⁹ Penny Pagano, “Warnings or lyrics will be printed on record albums,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1985, http://articles.latimes.com/1985-11-02/news/mn-1078_1_record-albums (accessed June 27, 2013).

⁵⁰ Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 309.

Chapter 5:

The Critique of Gangsta Rap and the Voices of Black America

Armed with signs reading “Gangsta Rap is Rape” and “Ban Gangsta Rap,” C. Delores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women (NPCBW), was joined by thirty supporters as they marched and chanted “Children need peace in the Hood. Stop the Gangsta Rap.” The demonstration took place outside a Sam Goody record store in Washington, D.C., on January 15, 1994. Tucker, a proud black female activist who had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement, had launched a national boycott of gangsta rap. After being arrested for blocking the entrance to the store, she was asked whether the effort was worth the punishment. “Yes it is,” Tucker said while being taken away in handcuffs. “I marched with Dr. King in Selma and I'd rather die than have the children hear this.”¹ It was not the first time Tucker and her allies had been arrested for protesting in front of record stores. On December 21, 1993, Tucker and four others had been arrested after blocking the entrance to a Wiz record store in Washington, D.C. Stating that her crusade was “against misogynist lyrics and gangsta rap,” Tucker argued that such music was destroying black culture. At a press conference before the protest, she demanded that record companies stop selling “such cultural garbage” and pledged to fight on: “We must not let the pornography rap be played in our homes this Christmas or ever.”²

Like the Parents Music Resource Center, Tucker and the NPCBW were successful at persuading Congress to hold hearings on the threat posed by gangsta rap. Tucker and the NPCBW, in their call for congressional hearings, also had the support of the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Organization of Women, the Coalition of Labor Union Women,

former Secretary of Education William Bennett, and the Parents Teacher Association.³

According to Tucker, she and her allies represented more than 8 million concerned citizens.⁴

The rhetoric of moral panic over gangsta rap, like the PMRC's campaign against “porn rock,” portrayed the music as a destructive influence on the youth of America, with effects ranging from the degradation of women to the promotion of drug abuse and gang violence. Critics of gangsta rap also complained that the music portrayed African-Americans in stereotypical ways—as drug dealers, pimps, thugs, cop killers, and woman haters.

In this chapter, I argue that the critique of gangsta rap, like the attack on “porn rock,” functioned to divert attention away from the very real problems that concerned those who produced the music itself—violence, guns, poverty, racism, sexism, gangs, drugs, and unequal educational and job opportunities. By scapegoating artists who rapped about these problems, the critics of gangsta rap diverted attention from their more fundamental causes, such as bad parenting, racial discrimination, and misguided governmental policies. Instead of raising awareness of these problems in the African-American community, the debate over gangsta rap focused attention on a different racially tinged question: who speaks for the African-American community, and what constitutes a “good” and “bad” black person? Inspired by the rhetoric of the PMRC,⁵ leaders within the black community, including Tucker and Grammy Award-winning singer Dionne Warwick, sounded many of the same themes as the concerned parents of the PMRC, complaining about the “pornographic” and violent content of the music. But their complaints about the stereotyping of blacks broke new ground, accusing black artists of destroying their own culture by reinforcing Amos 'n Andy images of blacks as “scheming, bumbling buffoons.”⁶ Tucker and her allies even went so far as to label gangsta rappers “Uncle Toms” because they were allegedly damaging the “humanity and morality” of the African-

American community and “poisoning” the minds of black youngsters for their own personal profit.⁷

I begin this chapter by discussing the origins of gangsta rap, its growing popularity in the 1990s, and the controversies that erupted over the lyrics and imagery of the music. In this section I analyze how rap music, which originated as a type of party music, evolved into the more hard-edged style of gangsta rap in the late 1980s. Emphasizing themes of sex, violence, and criminal behavior, gangsta rap became an immediate target of white, conservative cultural warriors. Following the riots in Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, gangsta rap became an easy scapegoat for the violence, and during the 1992 presidential campaign both Republican Vice-President Dan Quayle and Democratic Governor Bill Clinton criticized gangsta rap for exacerbating the problems of the African-American community. Following the presidential election, Tucker continued the campaign against gangsta rap, eventually persuading the United States Congress to hold hearings on the music.

Over the span of less than half a year in 1994, members of Congress convened for three different hearings on gangsta rap. On February 11 and May 5, a subcommittee of the House committee on Energy and Commerce held hearings, presumably investigating the effects of gangsta rap on young people. Less than two weeks later, on February 23, a subcommittee on the Senate Judiciary Committee held similar hearings and urged the record industry to take action. In this chapter, I focus specifically on the first House hearing and the Senate hearing,⁸ analyzing how the debate over gangsta rap supplanted genuine deliberations over the real problems faced by minority communities with a rhetoric of moral panic. In addition, I analyze how critics of gangsta rap incorporated a new element into moral panics over popular music—a dispute over whether the artists really spoke for their race. By accusing gangsta rappers of stereotyping

African-Americans, critics of the music questioned the legitimacy of rappers as spokesmen for the black community and diverted attention from the problems described in the music's lyrics. The defenders of gangsta rap, on the other hand, were placed in the difficult rhetorical situation of acknowledging their discomfort with some of the lyrical content of the music while trying to refocus attention on the problems plaguing the black community.

The Rise of Gangsta Rap

“Gangsta rap” is a sub-genre of rap music, which generally is viewed as part of the larger hip-hop culture. Rap music, according to Professor of Africana Studies Michael Eric Dyson, “is a form of profound musical, cultural and social creativity. It expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair, hopelessness and genocide that presently besiege the black community.” Rap is, according to Dyson, a “form of cultural resistance” that “transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people.”⁹ Prior to the emergence of “gangsta rap,” cultural anthropologist Tayannah Lee McQuillar has argued, rap and hip-hop music took one of two trajectories: party music or politically conscious rap. Grandmaster Flash, with his 1982 song “The Message,” was among the first to integrate both, speaking directly from the streets about issues facing young black people while maintaining a party beat in the music.¹⁰

With the rise of “gangsta rap,” rap music became more controversial even within the African-American community. The lyrics struck many as demeaning to women and celebratory towards gangs and other street criminals. For some critics, “gangsta rap” represented a type of

music that defined “good” and “bad” African-Americans in unhealthy ways and focused too much attention on issues of racism, sexism, and violence in the black community. Although a few of the early “gangsta rap” artists actually did identify with gangs, the label “gangsta rap” was applied to many rappers who had no real connection to gangs or other street criminals, even though their music appropriated the language of the street with explicit lyrics about sex or violence. In effect, all rappers were lumped together as “gangsta rappers,” at least by critics who considered the music dangerous or obscene. Although Tucker attempted to carry on the PMRC's tradition of criticizing popular music as “audio pornography,” there was much more to the controversy over “gangsta rap” than sexually explicit lyrics. What really concerned its critics, both black and white, were the racial issues raised by the music—its alleged celebration of black criminality, its demeaning attitude toward black women, and its causal attitude towards the violence that plagued African-American communities at the time.

Some rappers, however, purposefully identified themselves with the label “gangsta rap.” With the influx of crack cocaine into the ghettos of New York and Los Angeles, these hip-hop artists went from describing the ills of ghetto life to songs that celebrated slinging “rocks” and pimping girls from the corner. Schoolly D and Ice-T were two of the earliest rappers embodying this new gangsta persona, transforming the largely positive and fun messages in early hip-hop into more violent and explicit depictions of life on the street. In his song “P.S.K. What Does it Mean?,” released in 1985, for example, Schoolly D rapped about getting high and picking up a “whore”:

*Drivin in my car down the avenue
Towin on a j, sippin on some brew
Turn around, see the fly young lady
Pull to the curb and park my Mercedes
Sayin, "Fly lady, now you're lookin real nice
Sweeter than honey, sugar and spice"
Told her my name was MC Schoolly D*

*All about makin that cash money
She said, "Schoolly D, I know your game
Heard about you in the hall of fame"
I said, "Mama, mama, I tell you no lies
Cause all I wanna do is to get you high
And eh - lay you down and do the body rock
To the wall, to the corner," got into the car
Took a little trip to a fancy bar
Copped some brew, some j, some coke
Tell you now, brother, this ain't no joke
She got me to the crib, she laid me on the bed
I fucked her from my toes to the top of my head
I finally realized the girl was a whore
Gave her ten dollars, she asked me for some more¹¹*

Ice-T, who along with Schoolly D helped to launch gangsta rap, wrote an even more violent and explicit song in 1986, "6 In the Mornin'." In this song, Ice-T rapped about being chased from his house by the police, hiding guns, and shooting rivals. At one point in the song, Ice-T described beating down a "bitch":

*Kicked around some stories 'bout the night before
Posse'd to the corner where the fly girls chill
Through action at some freaks until one bitch got ill
She started actin' stupid
Simply would not quit
Called us all punk pussies said we all weren't shit
As we walked over to her hoe continued to speak
So we beat the bitch down in the god damn street
But just livin' in the city is a serious task
Bitch din't know what hit her
Didn't have time to ask¹²*

Schoolly D and Ice-T clearly marked a departure from hip-hop as it had been performed up until that time, but it wasn't until the emergence of Niggaz With Attitudez (N.W.A.) that gangsta rap attracted widespread attention. Although many radio stations refused to play it, N.W.A.'s 1988 debut album, *Straight Outta Compton*, spread through underground channels and established the West Coast as fertile grounds for this music. Consisting of future rap stars Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and Easy-E, N.W.A.'s first album immediately drew the ire of cultural warriors because of songs like "Gangsta Gangsta" and "Parental Discretion Iz Advised." The most

controversial song on the album, “Fuck Tha Police,” was a direct call for standing up to the injustice, brutality, and racism of the American criminal justice system. In the song, Ice Cube rapped: “Fuck tha police/Comin straight from the underground/Young nigga got it bad cuz I'm brown/And not the other color so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority.”¹³

At the urging of Focus on the Family and other conservative groups, Milt Ahlerich, the Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, sent a stern letter to N.W.A.'s record company expressing law enforcement's concerns about the song. Shortly after its release, law enforcement groups also organized a boycott of the group, and some police officials even threatened to arrest the members of the band if they performed the song live since it was an incitement to violence.¹⁴ These pressures, as well as internal disputes over the group's royalties and future directions, eventually persuaded Ice Cube to embark on a solo career in 1989. In May 1990, Cube released *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, which was an instant hit despite the critics' complaints about misogyny and racism in the lyrics. That same year, Cube released an Extended Play record, *Kill at Will*, which became the first rap EP to go both Gold and Platinum. Cube followed this by appearing in the critically acclaimed John Singleton film, *Boys 'N the Hood*. In the film, Cube played “Doughboy,” one of a group of young African-American friends trying to survive the streets of South Central Los Angeles. Unlike his two close childhood friends, Cube's character in the film brings loaded firearms to parties, refers to women as “bitches” or “hos,” and actively participates in gang-life.

The film was significant for Cube and for gangsta rap because it brought many of the themes of the music to a larger commercial audience: young black kids growing up without fathers, the influx of drugs and alcohol into the ghettos, black-on-black violence, and the degradation of women. Cube followed this with his second full-length album, the even more

popular and controversial *Death Certificate*. On the liner notes accompanying the CD, Cube wrote that many blacks were “mentally dead” because they had “limited knowledge of self,” which caused a “nigga mentality.” Even more provocative than his previous work, the album opened with a song imagining Ice Cube’s own funeral, where a preacher proclaims, “he was the wrong nigga to fuck with.”¹⁵ Another song depicted a summer vacation in which Cube escapes the pressures of law enforcement by slinging “rocks” in a new location. The album also included “No Vaseline,” a profanity-laced track in which Cube attacked his former partners in N.W.A. for being untalented and money-hungry. Between his three early albums and his role in *Boyz 'N the Hood*, Cube established himself as a leading figure in the gangsta rap movement—a movement that launched a frontal assault on the values of white mainstream America.

Dr. Dre also had success as a solo artist after leaving N.W.A.. Signing with Suge Knight’s new label Death Row Records, Dre released the highly successful album *The Chronic* in 1992. Featuring guest artist Snoop Doggy Dogg on several tracks, the album ushered in a “g-funk” sound, combining elements of hip-hop and funk. The album, named after a potent form of marijuana, celebrated drinking, carrying guns, and getting high. Songs off the album, like “Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang,” “A Nigga Witta Gun,” and “The \$20 Sack Pyramid,” further reinforced the ethos and mythos of gangsta rap as criminal, violent, and obsessed with drugs and sex.

Ice Cube and Dr. Dre were two of the biggest early stars of gangsta rap, but it was the second wave of artists, particularly Tupac Shakur (2Pac) and Snoop Doggy Dogg (Snoop), who attracted the most attention and criticism. 2Pac became a lightning rod for controversy because of his frequent troubles with the law. *2Pacocalypse Now* (1991), which featured the cop-killing fantasy song “Soulja's Story,” was criticized by Vice-President Dan Quayle and others for

allegedly urging young people to murder police officers. Following that album, 2Pac released *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z* (1993), *Thug Life* (1994), *Me Against the World* (1995), and *All Eyez on Me* (1996). In addition, he made note-worthy appearances in the films *Juice* (1992), where he played a gang-banging drug dealer, *Poetic Justice* (1993), and *Above the Rim* (1994). During this time, 2Pac was arrested for shooting two off-duty police officers, beating film director Allen Hughes, and sexually abusing a young woman in his New York City hotel. For the latter crime, 2Pac was found guilty of sexual assault and served eleven months in prison. While 2Pac was behind bars, *Me Against the World* went to number one on the *Billboard* charts, marking the first time an artist in prison had an album on the *Billboard* top 200. Following his release from prison, 2Pac signed with the now-popular gangsta rap label Death Row Records,¹⁶ which already had signed Dr. Dre, Snoop, and Ice Cube.

After 2Pac, Snoop was the most frequently criticized gangsta rap artist, especially for his album *Doggystyle*. Snoop came to prominence because of his contributions to Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, but his 1993 solo debut, *Doggystyle*, shared many of the same “g-funk” sounds. Rapping in a relaxed, laid-back style, Snoop discussed casual sex, smoking pot, gun play, drug dealing, and pimping. Like 2Pac, Snoop also had troubles with the law. The most sensational of Snoop's run-ins with the law occurred when he was arrested for murdering 25-year-old Philip Woldemariam, a suspected drug dealer and rival gang member, while recording *Doggystyle* in 1992. Although Snoop was subsequently acquitted of the charges, critics like Tucker claimed he was “obsessed with being a G', a gangster, a lawbreaker who smokes dope and kills with impunity.”¹⁷ Snoop's lyrics also focused on black-on-black crime in the inner cities, and many of his songs contained lyrics derogatory towards women, including frequent use of terms such as “bitches” and “hos.” Despite criticisms from the cultural warriors, *Doggystyle* was certified four

times platinum by the RIAA on May 31, 1994, and while he was awaiting trial for murder, Snoop's 1994 album, *Murder Was The Case*, reached number one on the *Billboard* charts.¹⁸

An important moment in the history of gangsta rap came in 1992, when a number of conservative commentators blamed rappers for the riots in South Central Los Angeles following the acquittal of four white police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King. During the 1992 presidential campaign, for example, Vice-President Dan Quayle blamed the Los Angeles riots on the “poverty of values” in the black community, although his remarks on the subject were overshadowed by his criticism of the fictional TV character Murphy Brown for having a baby out of wedlock.¹⁹ Some four months after his Murphy Brown speech, Quayle returned to the theme, focusing more specifically on the dangers of rap music, including direct criticism of 2Pac and his album *2Pacocalypse Now*. After a speech in Houston, Quayle told reporters that 2Pac's album should be yanked from record stores because it had “no reason” to exist in our society.²⁰ Quayle pointed specifically to the song “Soulja's Story,” which featured the following lyrics: “Only fifteen and got problems/Cops on my tail, so I bail til I dodge 'em/They finally pull me over and I laugh/“Remember Rodney King?”/And I blast on his punk ass.” The song then elaborated on the theme of killing a cop: “Keep my shit cocked, cause the cops got a glock too/What the fuck would you do—drop them or let 'em drop you?/ I chose droppin the cop.”²¹

The controversy over “Soulja's Story” escalated into a major issue during the 1992 presidential campaign for two reasons. First, a murder case in Houston, in which a young black male was accused of killing a police officer after listening to 2Pac's album, implied a casual link between rap music and violence. Labeled the “rap killer” by the *Houston Chronicle*, Ronald Ray Howard's defense was that the combination of his violent upbringing and the effects of gangsta

rap motivated him to commit the crime.²² The jury rejected the defense and sentenced Howard to death, but that did little to end the debate over whether, in fact, gangsta rap *caused* violence and other forms of anti-social behavior. Second, Sister Souljah, the politically conscious rap artist who had inspired 2Pac's song, was quoted in the *Washington Post* as seemingly justifying the actions of the rioters in Los Angeles. In an interview, Souljah stated that “if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? White people, this Government and that Mayor were well aware of the fact that black people were dying everyday in Los Angeles under gang violence. So, if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person?”²³

In the wake of Souljah's remarks, Bill Clinton joined Quayle in criticizing Sister Souljah and rap music. Appearing before a gathering of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition a day after Sister Souljah had appeared as part of a panel on race relations, Clinton claimed that the female rapper's “comments before and after Los Angeles were filled with a kind of hatred you do not honor.” Clinton also criticized Souljah for dividing the country, referring to a statement she made in her most recent music video: “If there are any good white people, I haven't met them.”²⁴ Acknowledging that his audience probably disagreed with some of his views, Clinton went on to say that Souljah's approach was akin to “pointing the finger at one another across racial lines. If we do that, we're dead.”²⁵ Following the speech, black leaders like Mississippi Democratic Congressman Mike Espy praised Clinton for his comments: “Any attempt to encourage actions that would threaten the lives of anyone is something we ought to condemn.”²⁶

Clinton's comments about Sister Souljah reflected the almost universal condemnation of gangsta rap from politicians on both the right and the left, from both black and white leaders, and from groups representing police, women's groups, and others. Clinton's decision to speak out

against gangsta rap to an audience of African-American leaders was, to some minds, courageous, but it also reflected his realization that even many within the black community were concerned about the messages sent by gangsta rap. Following the 1992 election, C. Delores Tucker thus found widespread support for her renewed effort to persuade record companies and retail outlets to stop producing and selling gangsta rap. Renewing her attempts to put pressure on the industry, Tucker staged several high-profile protests outside records stores, finally persuading members of the United States Congress to take notice and hold hearings on the content and effects of gangsta rap.

Over a span of about six months in 1994, the United States Congress actually held three different sets of hearings on gangsta rap. On February 11 and May 5, a subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce—the Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness—held hearings on what Chairwoman Cardiss Collins, a Democratic Representative of Illinois, described as “morally offensive, sexually explicit, violent and misogynist lyrics of gangsta rap.”²⁷ Collins reminded the audience that the government had a legitimate interest in “protecting its youngest citizens” and that the subcommittee would be considering “voluntary measures” the record industry could take to exercise “greater responsibility.”²⁸ Less than two weeks later, on February 23, a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee—the Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice—held similar hearings, again urging the industry to take action “before the Government intrudes too deeply and raises the specter of censorship.”²⁹ Tucker and her group were largely responsible for inspiring the hearings, according to spokespeople for both subcommittees, and she testified before both regarding the ill effects of “gangsta rap.” As in the hearings over music labeling in the 1980s, however, there were also witnesses defending gangsta rap and speaking out against government

interference in the music industry. Although a few of these witnesses attempted to defend gangsta rap, only one actual rapper, Yolanda (“Yo-Yo”) Martinez, appeared before Congress in defense of the music.

“I Come to You in the Spirit of Dr. King”: The Congressional Hearings Over Gangsta Rap

The first congressional hearings on gangsta rap began on February 11 before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Featuring testimony by Tucker and Don Cornelius, creator of “Soul Train,” the hearings began with the case *against* gangsta rap, with Tucker and Cornelius distinguishing between “good” black music and “bad” black music. Whitney Houston, whose name was mentioned on several occasions during the hearings, was cited as a “good” black artist, while “bad” black artists, like The Geto Boys, rapped about murder and rape.³⁰ Representatives of the music industry, including David Harleston, President of Rush Associated Labels, and Ernie Singleton, President of the Black Music Division of MCA Records, testified they were bothered by some of the themes and lyrics addressed in gangsta rap. But they insisted that it wasn't their job to police the lyrics. Only Yo-Yo, a female rapper who had worked with Ice Cube on *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, and Maxine Waters, an African-American Member of Congress, offered any sort of defense of rap.

On the second day of these hearings, which took place on May 5, witnesses continued to discuss the role of the music industry in policing itself. The day included testimony from the creators of the PBS show, *In the Mix*, as well as from Paris Eley, Senior Vice-President of Motown Records. Others on the list of witnesses included: Fred Evans, Principal of Gaithersburg (MD) high school; Robin Kelley, professor of History and African American

Studies at the University of Michigan; and Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise* and assistant professor of History and Africana Studies at the New York University. This second day of the hearings was supposed to be an open “forum” on the issue, but it again became mostly an exercise in assigning blame for “bad” rap music. Dominated by witnesses critical of gangsta rap, the hearings rarely delved into the conditions that gave rise to the anger and hostility evident in the music and functioned instead to help clarify the boundaries of “good” and “bad” black music.

As the first witness called by the House subcommittee on February 11, Tucker told the audience that she was there to put the “nation on notice.”³¹ Tucker then invoked the ethos of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., telling the packed hearing room “I come to you in the spirit of Dr. King.”³² The strategy of invoking King was important to Tucker's case because she hoped to align her cause with the civil rights movement and imply that the great civil rights leader would have disapproved of these young rappers. Tucker claimed the lyrics of gangsta rap glorified violence and denigrated women and was nothing more than “pornographic smut.” She then unveiled a poster of the album art for Snoop's *Doggystyle* (see Figure 5.1). Tucker argued that it was smut like this that “encourages and motivates our youth to commit violent behavior, to use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sexual acts.”³³

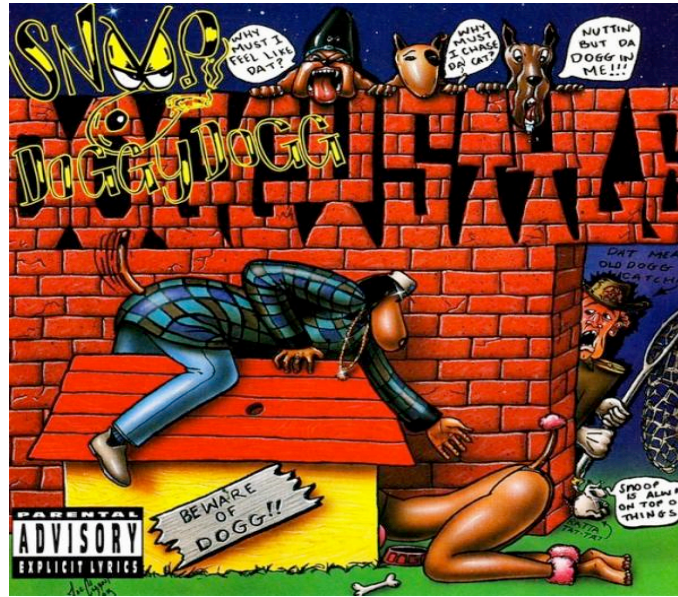


Figure 5.1: Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Doggystyle"

With the album art of *Doggystyle* prominently on display, Tucker declared: “Enough is enough. I am here today to put the nation on notice that the proliferation of violence and unacceptable sexual messages in our youth's music is due in large part to the avarice of the record industry. The record industry is now demanding in many of their contracts that these messages of degradation be in the music of the artist. The record industry is out of control.”³⁴ Tucker argued that African-Americans had suffered through more than 400 years of exploitation at the hands of the slave-masters, and now the record companies were using “lyrics out of the mouth of our own children” to undermine the last remaining strength of the black family—its moral foundation. In Tucker's view, those who cited the First Amendment in defense of gangsta rap were misguided because the Constitution did not protect speech that was obscene and “dehumanizing to women.”³⁵ For Tucker, the First Amendment did not protect the “right to poison our children's minds and poison their values.”³⁶

In the question-and-answer session following her opening statements, Tucker remained insistent that gangsta rap could be blamed for the proliferation of violence and the mistreatment

of women in America. She argued that the intent of the First Amendment was “to provide citizens with the opportunity to redress the injustices of the government,” not to justify “pornographic or explicit sex and other acts” in the lyrics of gangsta rap.³⁷ Arguing that the lyrics of these gangsta rappers were inciting young people to violence, Tucker cited the lyrics of The Geto Boys' “Mind of a Lunatic,” which she had also included in packets presented to members of the subcommittee. In that rap, young listeners were urged to “cut her throat, rape her, and then 'F her',” and elsewhere in the rap to “get a gun, ride in a car, and shoot her. Take a gun and do whatever you want to do—kill a cop.”³⁸ According to Tucker, these sorts of lyrics had no First Amendment protections and deserved to be banned.

Other opponents of gangsta rap testifying before the House subcommittee were equally bothered by the music's lyrics and themes but argued that the industry should censor itself. Joseph Madison, a syndicated talk show host in Washington, D.C., argued that the music industry should be given “an opportunity to police itself.”³⁹ Most of the witnesses from the music industry agreed, although some tried to deflect blame by claiming they were already monitoring and taking responsibility for their releases. Ernie Singleton, president of the Black Music Division of MCA Records, for example, stated that the industry did not “underestimate the significance and the importance of our social responsibilities and our role as *good corporate citizens*.”⁴⁰ Trying to deflect the blame, however, Singleton claimed that “violence was here long before rap music and much longer than the gangsta rap music has been here. Rap artists verbalize their reality. They do not celebrate that reality.”⁴¹ In the question-and-answer session following his testimony, Singleton urged the subcommittee to stop “point[ing] fingers” and instead “identify the real problems.” Singleton implored, “Let's not put a Band-Aid on what appears to be broke.”⁴² Yet the subcommittee was not persuaded by Singleton's call for

addressing the “real problems” that gave rise to gangsta rap. Instead, they were more convinced by the rhetoric of moral panic utilized by Tucker and her allies.

Defenders of gangsta rap were in a rhetorically difficult position, attempting to reverse the causal logic so many within the government and popular media seemed to embrace: that gangsta rap was causing otherwise good young people to do bad things. For those trying to defend gangsta rap, the blame for violence, sexism, and racism rested with the larger society—the entire American culture—which had for too long ignored violence and sexism in minority communities. Yolanda “Yo-Yo” Whitaker, the only rapper invited to testify, made this point forcefully, declaring: “Rap cannot be the scapegoat.” According to Yo-Yo, the real problems facing minorities were “jobs, education, home discipline, teen pregnancy, AIDS, and homelessness.” Since she was from “the hood,” she could say from first-hand experience that “violence didn't start from a cassette tape that someone popped into a home or car stereo system.”⁴³ Yo-Yo thus attempted to reframe the hearings as an opportunity to discuss the real problems faced by African-Americans. The subcommittee, however, seemed unpersuaded.

The only other voice that defended gangsta rap was that of another Member of Congress, California Democratic Representative Maxine Waters. As the representative for South Central Los Angeles, Waters argued that rappers were documenting the realities of their lives, and she argued that instead of attacking them, “we must listen.”⁴⁴ Waters claimed to have first-hand experience going into the ghettos and talking with rap artists. After citing a verse from Snoop's “Murder Was the Case,” Waters argued that rappers like Snoop, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Yo-Yo provided important insights into life on the streets and deserved to be heard. While she respected the fact that people were bothered by the lyrics of these songs, Waters claimed to be “more bothered and grieved by the painful landscape revealed by these songs which tell story after story

about young black men losing their fight simply to survive in our rich Nation.”⁴⁵ Passionate in her defense of gangsta rap, Waters argued for community outreach programs to help at-risk youths, programs that might “transform” these young artists into more positive voices of the black community.⁴⁶ In her words, gangsta rappers were not “cold-blooded, non-caring criminals,” but merely “young people who have been isolated and denied the opportunity to say who they are.”⁴⁷ After Waters opening statement, however, the hearings adjourned, ending any possibility of more in-depth deliberation over the larger issues she had raised.

The second hearing on gangsta rap took place less than two weeks later in the Senate, before a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Like the earlier hearings in the House, the examination of gangsta rap in the Senate was not about developing or debating solutions to the problems raised by gangsta music, but about assigning blame for the offensive lyrics. As in the earlier hearing, critics of the music argued that gangsta rap was causing teens to turn to violence and to degrade women. Defenders of gangsta rap acknowledged that the lyrics were explicit and misogynistic at times, but argued that these lyrics reflected the reality of the world the rappers lived in.

Herbert Kohl, a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin, chaired the Senate hearings, which were entitled “Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music.” Kohl began by stating that the music industry needed to address the problem of gangsta rap itself “before Government intrudes too deeply and raises the specter of censorship.”⁴⁸ Following Kohl, Republican Senator William S. Cohen of Maine stated that rap songs depicted every woman as “a ho, nothing more than a cavity that has got to be either ripped or filled by a train, a gang rape.”⁴⁹ According to Cohen, the issue at stake in the debate was who defended the voice of black America. He noted the irony of the hearings taking place during “Black History

Month,” not to mention at a time when *Time* magazine was featuring Louis Farrakhan on its cover with a story about his message of hatred towards “Jews, Catholics, homosexuals, and the white community.”⁵⁰ For Cohen, the only difference between Farrakhan's rhetoric and the messages of gangsta rap was that the latter was only “degrading black women and not the greater society at large.”⁵¹ Cohen was followed by Tucker's close friend, Democratic Senator Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois, who made it clear that while she wanted to hold these hearings, she did not favor “government censorship.”⁵² Again, these opening statements established the boundaries of the subcommittee's deliberations, suggesting that the subcommittee was not interested in the social problems underlying the music, but mostly in persuading those in the music industry to be more responsible corporate citizens.

California Representative Waters, who testified at the end of the first House hearing, delivered her opening statement immediately following Moseley-Braun's remarks. She claimed that we needed “to find a way to embrace them [gangsta rappers] and to transform them.”⁵³ She named many of the same artists she did in her House appearance, and again she also discussed some of the outreach programs she had overseen in California. As in the House hearings, Waters was the only politician who spoke in defense of gangsta rappers, suggesting that rappers could somehow be “transformed” into productive citizens. Instead of accepting Waters's invitation, however, most of those involved in the Senate hearings focused on pointing fingers of blame and raising the threat of censorship. Following Waters's opening statement, the subcommittee heard from a panel consisting of C. Delores Tucker; Dr. Robert Phillips, the Deputy Medical Director of the American Psychiatric Association; Michael Eric Dyson, professor of Sociology at Brown University; Ron Stallworth, a law enforcement officer from Utah who specialized in gangs; and Daryl James, the founder of the publication *Rap Sheet*.

Tucker followed Waters, and not surprisingly, she again argued for legislation. Invoking King's ethos once more, she cited Coretta Scott King's State of the Dream address, where the widow of the celebrated civil rights leader lamented that so many young people looked up to recording artists for inspiration and motivation. The sad and degrading imagery promoted by gangsta rap, according to Tucker, was negatively influencing children, and it was "our moral responsibility to halt the sale of not just gangsta rap, but porno rap."⁵⁴ Again she referred to the music as "pornographic smut," and she insisted that such "smut" motivated youths "to commit violent behavior, use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sex acts."⁵⁵

Gangsta rap, in Tucker's view, was clearly behind the rise in violence and drug-use within the black community. She cited two cases in which an adolescent killed another teen while trying to emulate Snoop and his song "Serial Killa." "The first three things to note about gangsta rap," she emphasized, was that it was "obscene, obscene, obscene."⁵⁶ She also claimed that "racism and greed" were the sustaining forces behind gangsta rap, and that by not regulating it society was "validating antisocial behavior."⁵⁷ Thus, Tucker made the case for using "the full authority of government" to "restrict access" to these albums and videos.⁵⁸ Gangsta rap was preventing young blacks from growing up to be "productive citizens," she concluded, and "banning the sale of gangster rap to our children" was "one preventative action Congress" could take that would "curb violence."⁵⁹ Gangsta rap, according to Tucker and her allies, molded young listeners in ways that were unsuitable for future participation in America's democracy. In their view, there was nothing wrong with the American Dream, but they contested the way gangsta rappers framed financial success in terms of violence and hyper-masculinity.

Following Tucker, the Deputy Medical Director of the American Psychiatric Association, Dr. Robert Phillips, testified before the Senate subcommittee. Taking a clinical approach to

violence, Phillips argued that “children are born with the innate capacity and desire to imitate our behavior as adults.” When they listened to violent rap lyrics, they were being conditioned that it was ok to rape and murder women.⁶⁰ In other words, rap music desensitized young people to violence, according to Phillips, and “freedom of speech does not relieve artists, recording executives, or broadcasters of their responsibility to serve the public interest.”⁶¹ Phillips closed by saying the American Psychiatric Association believed that “violent and demeaning musical lyrics have a deleterious effect on our youth and place at grave risk the mental health and welfare of themselves and our communities.”⁶² As such, Phillips pledged that he and the APA would continue to support efforts to regulate such music, as they considered the urban violence it inspired to be “the number one public health crisis in this country.”⁶³

Following these witnesses, the subcommittee heard from Michael Eric Dyson, professor of sociology at Brown University; Ron Stallworth, a law enforcement officer from Utah; and Darryl James, founder of *Rap Sheet*. All of these witnesses attempted, in some measure, to deflect some of the criticisms that had been leveled at gangsta rap and the artists who produced the music. Drawing applause several times during his opening statement, Dyson argued that “the real vulgarity” at issue in these hearings was “not simply gangsta rap lyrics,” but “the social and economic conditions that we allow to continue to fester in the under-belly of post-modern cultural collapse.”⁶⁴ Sergeant Stallworth, who some may have expected to speak out against gangsta rap, instead urged the subcommittee to “listen” to the “cry for help” in the music.⁶⁵ Stallworth conceded that some of the music's themes were objectionable, but he urged the subcommittee to hold the “fat-cat music executives” who financed the music responsible, not the artists themselves. Similarly, James urged the subcommittee, in effect, to avoid blaming the victims, for in his view, gangsta rap represented “a community long ignored and unheard.”⁶⁶

James's defense of the music probed more deeply into the *causes* of the anger and violence in the genre, as he complained about the Reagan administration's elimination of programs to help poor people. At the same time, he lamented the lack of leadership and role models within the African-Americans community, arguing that “frustrated men and women” like the Reverend Jesse Jackson and C. Delores Tucker “misrepresent themselves as representatives of the masses who only serve to fan the flames of controversy.” To his mind, their crusade against gangsta rap was doing their own people a disservice: “The final result is nothing more than waves of media exposure, with no meaningful steps toward understanding and compassion.”⁶⁷

By organizing the hearings into “panels,” the subcommittee was able to pit witnesses against each other. In the first panel, for example, Brown University professor Michael Dyson and the American Psychiatric Association's Deputy Medical Director, Dr. Robert Phillips, had very different perspectives. This created tension between them, with Phillips insisting that Dyson's defense of gangsta rap was “nonsense.” Dyson, who was trying to make the point that American culture has long had a tradition of violence for profit, was forced to debate Phillips instead of the subcommittee. Phillips insisted that gangsta rap was “doing today what centuries of oppression could not do” to “African-American communities.”⁶⁸ Senator Moseley-Braun interrupted the exchange to make it clear that the purpose of this hearing was not “to *blame the victims*.”⁶⁹ But, in fact, blame was a major theme in the hearings, as witnesses pointed fingers of blame at everyone from the artists, to the record industry, to the Reagan Administration.

After the first panel concluded, the subcommittee heard from two more panels of witnesses. Neither of those panels included even a single gangsta rapper. Combining record executives and other members of the record industry, two of the most significant voices to appear that day were Hilary Rosen, executive vice president of the Recording Industry Association of

America (RIAA), and singer Dionne Warwick. As the representative for the recording industry, Rosen retold the story of the PMRC's campaign and the RIAA's agreement to go along with their proposal to label albums. Rosen told the subcommittee that the RIAA had oversight of more than 90% of the music sold, but she noted that most of gangsta rap came from independent labels like Death Row Records, which had distribution deals with larger labels. This was important, according to Rosen, because independents could not be monitored as closely as the bigger labels. By claiming that record companies were not a "single community," then, Rosen suggested that the RIAA had limited power to enforce its policy of voluntary labeling. The RIAA certainly was concerned about the obscenity and violence in some of the gangsta rap music, she concluded, but there was nothing much they could do about it beyond urging compliance with their program of voluntary labeling.

Following Rosen singer Dionne Warwick testified before the Senate subcommittee. Claiming to speak on behalf of all black women, she claimed that it was her moral responsibility to protest the "dignifying of pornography and obscenity" in gangsta rap. She stated: "In short, I am tired and I have had enough." According to Warwick, films like *Boyz 'N the Hood* did not convey "the totality of our experience as African-Americans."⁷⁰ There were "good" and "bad" African-Americans, and gangsta rap and the films it inspired focused only on the "bad" African-Americans. One of the worst offenders, according to Warwick, was Snoop. Warwick said she disagreed "100 percent" with her "girl-friend" Maxine Waters, and she lambasted Snoop as a "little boy" who went around calling women "bitches" and "hoes." Ridiculing Snoop, she further noted that this "little boy" couldn't even "spell gangster." According to Warwick, Snoop should not be rapping but instead "should be in school."⁷¹

Following the congressional hearings on gangsta rap, the RIAA did not change its policy on labeling, but the pressures applied by Tucker and her allies persuaded some record companies and some retail outlets to drop these artists. More importantly, major record labels like Time Warner dropped their distribution rights with their small rap labels like Death Row Records, for example, and record retailers like Wal-Mart decided not to carry records released by “gangsta rappers.” Despite these measures, rap music continued to increase in popularity as second-wave artists like 2Pac and Snoop released multiplatinum albums. As with the case of 2Pac and Ice Cube, some of these artists even began attracting new listeners in more mainstream venues and through Hollywood movies. As a result, in the words of the prominent African-American record executive Sylvia Rhone, rap music became “the force drawing consumers into record stores.”⁷²

Conclusion

Americans love gangsters, so long as they are white and glamorized by Hollywood. Films like *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, and *Goodfellas*, as well as television shows like *The Sopranos* and *Boardwalk Empire*, not only captivate audiences, but have also earned critical praise and awards from film critics. Starting with Ice-T and N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* however, black rappers co-opted white gangster culture and were met with invective and disgust from black leaders, government officials, and law enforcement. Much as the introduction of rock 'n' roll raised concerns that black music might infiltrate white suburbs and influence white youth, gangsta rap raised concern among cultural warriors because two-thirds of the audience consisted of white suburban teenagers.⁷³ Thus, according to Michael Eric Dyson, gangsta rap, in the eyes of its critics, needed to be regulated because it was the only “means” for “many white

Americans” to “come into contact with black life.” Since most of rap music's messages were “pornographic representations and brutal stereotypes of black culture,” critics of the music claimed that, if left unregulated, its effects would be “especially harmful.”⁷⁴

Public Enemy's Chuck D once said that rap music was the “CNN for black people.”⁷⁵ Through the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the music chronicled the growing problems with crack cocaine, gang violence, and poverty in many African-American communities. Rap music and hip-hop culture provided a space for young African-Americans to express their despair and hope for a better day. As a rhetoric of moral panic erupted over the music, however, the problems that inspired the rappers were overshadowed by a debate over who to blame for the music itself. As such, the debates over gangsta rap became, in the words of Ted Koppel, a “dialogue of the deaf.”⁷⁶ One side of the debate was shocked by the social conditions rap exposed, while others opposed the way those conditions were described in the music. The two sides were not really talking to one another, however, and there was no real attempt to find common ground.

In the aftermath of the Rodney King beating and the subsequent L.A. Riots, gangsta rap provided a useful scapegoat for members of the political and cultural establishments looking for easy explanations. Rather than confronting the structures of racial tension in America, advocates of conservative “family values” blamed gangsta rap for society's ills and demanded that Congress look into the problem. Those congressional hearings might have provided a space for thoughtful deliberations about the social problems documented in gangsta rap, but instead they became forums for finger-pointing by various interests involved in the debate. At the first House hearing on the subject, Chairwoman Collins declared: “I don't believe you can legislate morality.”⁷⁷ Thus, it came as little surprise when the hearings resulted in no new legislation, and

the music industry was left to police itself with the policy it had already adopted: voluntary labeling.

The hearings before Congress were not designed to help shape new legislation, but rather to shame the rappers and the music industry into better policing itself. Like the PMRC's campaign against "porn rock" a few years earlier, the campaign against gangsta rap was an attempt to get the musicians and record company to clean up their own act. Yet while the PMRC's campaign was waged by mostly white, upper-to-middle class mothers, the most prominent critics of gangsta rap were African-American leaders. The campaign against gangsta rap certainly echoed the PMRC's concerns about popular music that was explicitly violent and sexual, but the critics of gangsta rap added a new rhetorical element to the rhetoric of moral panic—a dispute over who spoke for the black race. In the view of its critics, gangsta rap was responsible for demeaning black women in particular and for reinforcing stereotypes of black males as criminal savages bent on destroying their own communities. The *New Republic's* David Samuels made this point well when he wrote that gangsta rap's appeal was based on "an age-old image of blackness: a foreign, sexually charged and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society" were "defined and defied."⁷⁸

Gangsta rap was music by and for African-Americans, yet in the final analysis it celebrated the "person adult Americans of all races feared most, the violent black street criminal, armed and dangerous."⁷⁹ Although many of gangsta rap's critics claimed they did not advocate censorship, the fact that the hearings were held in the United States Congress certainly raised the possibility, and the critics of the music did argue that government had a responsibility to protect young people from such obscene and violent material. As the recording industry continued to respond to the complaints of cultural warriors throughout the 1990s, there were fewer and fewer

politically conscious rappers giving voice to the problems facing African-Americans in the United States. By appeasing the critics of gangsta rap, the record industry was able to protect its profits, but they narrowed the space for protest music—a space that would be narrowed even further after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the Conclusion to this study, I will discuss further this narrowing of the cultural space for dissent in America and reflect on how all of these debates over popular music have framed and reframed what it means to be a “good citizen” in America.

Endnotes

¹ Nicole Weisensee, “Gangsta Rap Protested, Delores Tucker, Others Arrested Near D.C. Record Store,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, January 13, 1994, 6.

² Gretchen Lacharite, “Gangsta Rap' Protest Gets 5 Arrested,” *Washington Times*, December 22, 1993, C3.

³ *Ibid.* Even though not every group listed here sent members to testify at the Congressional hearings, each group did publicly support and campaign on behalf of Tucker and the NPCBW.

⁴ Tucker stated this fact in her testimony before the House of Representatives. See U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce. *Music Lyrics and Commerce*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 6.

⁵ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 4.

⁶ Paul Delaney, “Amos 'n Andy In Nikes,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/11/opinion/amos-n-andy-in-nikes.html> (accessed July 2, 2013).

⁷ James T. Jones IV, “Gangstas Under Fire/Rap Sales Stand Up To Backlash,” *USA Today*, February 3, 1994, 1D. “I call the rappers Uncle Toms,” C. Delores Tucker told the *USA Today*. “They're being used by the masters in the record industry to project negative images of us. These kids are being paid to call us names.”

⁸ The second House hearing, which occurred days after the L.A. Riots on May 5, 1994, was more of a follow-up to the first House hearing. The second hearing was much shorter in length and echoed many of the claims already made in the earlier hearings, while featuring none of the witness who testified in the first House or Senate hearing.

⁹ Dyson made this assessment of rap music in his written statement to the Senate. See U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 31.

¹⁰ Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *When Rap Music Had A Conscience: The Artists, Organizations, and Historical Events That Inspired and Influenced the "Golden Age" of Hip-Hop from 1987 to 1996* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007).

¹¹ Schoolly D, "P.S.K., What Does it Mean?," *Schoolly D*, Jive Records (CD), 1986.

¹² Ice-T, "6 'N the Morning," *Rhyme Pays*, Sire Records (CD), 1987.

¹³ N.W.A., "Fuck Tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records (CD), 1988.

¹⁴ Nuzum, *Parental Advisory*, 111.

¹⁵ Ice Cube, "The Funeral," *Death Certificate*, Priority Records (CD), 1991.

¹⁶ Death Row Records owner Suge Knight played a major role in bailing 2Pac out of prison after his case was granted an appeal. However, as part of the bailout, 2Pac was required by Knight to become a part of the Death Row family.

¹⁷ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Rap, Black Rage, and Racial Difference," *Enculturation* 2.2 (1999), http://enculturation.gmu.edu/2_2/best-kellner.html (accessed July 2, 2013).

¹⁸ David Diallo, "Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg," in *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture*, ed. Mickey Hess (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 327.

¹⁹ See Jill M. Weber, "James Danforth Quayle, III, 'Murphy Brown Speech' (19 May 1992)," *Voices of Democracy* (2009): 83, <http://umvod.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/weber-clinton.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2013).

²⁰ Alan Bernstein and Mark Smith, "Quayle Takes Aim At Clinton In Visit; Hollywood Is Issue In Speech," *Houston Chronicle*, September 23, 1992, A3.

²¹ Tupac Shakur, "Soulja's Story," *2Pacocalypse Now*, Interscope Records (CD), 1992.

²² Roy Bragg and Ross Ramsey, "Jury Recommends Death Sentence For Rap Killer," *Houston Chronicle*, July 14, 1993, A1.

²³ Anthony Lewis, "Abroad at Home; Black and White," *New York Times*, June 18, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/18/opinion/abroad-at-home-black-and-white.html> (accessed July 2, 2013).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Gwen Ifill, "The 1992 Election: Democrats, Clinton at Meeting; Warmth and Some Friction," *New York Times*, June 14, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/14/us/the-1992-campaign-democrats-clinton-at-jackson-meeting-warmth-and-some-friction.html> (accessed July 2, 2013).

²⁶ Lewis, “Abroad at Home,” *New York Times*.

²⁷ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce. *Music Lyrics and Commerce*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 2.

³⁰ During the hearings, Tucker praised Whitney Houston and cited the lyrics to one of her hit songs, “Greatest Love of All” (1985). She also cited lyrics from The Geto Boys’s song “Mind of a Lunatic” (1989), which were also included in materials distributed by Tucker and her allies to the subcommittee.

³¹ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce. *Music Lyrics and Commerce*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁸ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷² Quoted in Chuck Philips, "Hip-Hop Has Really Got the House Jumpin'," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1997, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-hiphopphilips24june2497,0,5819169.story> (accessed July 2, 2013).

⁷³ By 1998, SoundScan, an electronic device for tracking record sales, reported "white suburban teenagers" accounted for two-thirds of the sales of rap music. See Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, 5.

⁷⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 181-182.

⁷⁵ Jeff Chang, "Chuck D – Rapping the vote: the Former Public Enemy front man on the political power of hip-hop," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2004, <http://motherjones.com/media/2004/09/chuck-d> (accessed July 2, 2013).

⁷⁶ Michael MacCambridge, "Were the Rappers Right? Music Warned of Black Rage Long Before the L.A. Riots," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 21, 1992, 1E.

⁷⁷ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Energy and Commerce. *Music Lyrics and Commerce*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 1.

⁷⁸ David Samuels, "The Rap on Rap: The 'Black Music' That Isn't Either," *New Republic*, November 11, 1991, 24.

⁷⁹ Mike Bygrave, "Dogg Kills Man (Allegedly); Night and Day," *Mail on Sunday* (London), December 12, 1993, 44.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the rhetorics of moral panic inspired by popular music in America since the 1950s. Starting with folk music during the Red Scare, both Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger were blacklisted for their alleged communist connections. Although both musicians sang “people’s songs,” their critiques of American racial and labor relations prompted their critics to label them communist sympathizers. The criticisms of Robeson and Seeger reflected fears that their music and their political protests might undermine patriotic sentiments essential to America’s political and economic policies during the Cold War. Following World War II, Americans were living in an “age of anxiety” that influenced not only the political rhetoric of the time, but also how people came to understand themselves and the world around them.¹ Of course, Robeson and Seeger were criticized for somewhat different reasons, and each used different rhetorical strategies to respond to their critics.

Robeson won praise early in his career because he kept his political views to himself. Although he resented the mistreatment of blacks in America, he remained mostly silent about the issue. Described as “proud and pleasant” early in his career, the criticism of Robeson escalated following his return from the Soviet Union in 1939, when he declared that he was no longer going to remain silent about racism in America.² As the moral panic over communism spread after World War II, Robeson refused to distance himself from the Soviet Union and instead remained vocal in his criticism of racism—prompting his critics to depict him as a Soviet dupe, the “voice of the Kremlin,” and even a “black Stalin.”³ After riots broke out at two of his

concerts in Peekskill, New York in 1949, the State Department revoked Robeson's passport and HUAC held hearings into the communist infiltration of minority groups.⁴

When HUAC subpoenaed Robeson in 1956, he used the opportunity to ridicule the committee and demand that the federal government address the problem of racism in America.⁵ Robeson refused to back away from his earlier protests, and his response made no attempt to appease his critics. Instead of answering questions about his political affiliations, Robeson cited his Fifth Amendment rights and lambasted the committee as the real "un-Americans." Although Robeson avoided contempt charges by taking the Fifth, his obvious disdain for the committee and his refusal to criticize communism and the Soviet Union hurt his concert bookings and made him a political liability to the emerging civil rights movement. When Robeson finally got his passport back in 1958, he moved to Europe to try to rebuild his career. After more than twenty years of intense criticism and constant monitoring, however, he suffered a nervous breakdown and never again regained his popularity.

The criticism of Seeger, on the other hand, did not focus on race but instead on his pro-labor and anti-war protests. In December 1940, Seeger formed the Almanac Singers, a "loosely organized" group of left-leaning folk musicians who were "trying to give back to the people the songs of the workers."⁶ During this time Seeger joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), criticized President Franklin Delano Roosevelt for warmongering, and generally remained silent regarding the Hitler-Stalin pact.⁷ After Hitler invaded Russia and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) came out in favor of Roosevelt's war effort, however, the Almanac Singers changed their tune, supporting Roosevelt and the war effort. Nevertheless, Seeger and the Almanac Singers continued to attract criticism for their earlier

protests and their alleged communist connections. Before long the band folded and Seeger was drafted into the U.S. Army.

After returning home from the Army, Seeger, like other progressives, was optimistic about the future of labor and racial relations in America. He organized a new band, the Weavers, in hopes of spreading the folk tradition, and their songs were less political and more commercially viable than those of the Almanac Singers. The band scored a commercial hit with a cover of Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene," and soon after they were booked for a continuing stint at an upper-class New York nightclub. Even though Seeger and the Weavers toned down their political protests, their earlier critiques of the government and their past affiliations with the communists continued to shadow them. When Harvey Matusow, a paid informant for the FBI, testified that Seeger was a communist who consciously used his songs to recruit young people to the CPUSA,⁸ Seeger and the Weavers were blacklisted. Soon after, as Seeger was trying to rebuild his career via smaller shows at school auditoriums, summer camps, and college campus, HUAC subpoenaed him.

Unlike Robeson, Seeger did not invoke the Fifth Amendment when called before HUAC to answer questions about the communist infiltration of the arts in the New York area.⁹ Instead, he politely invoked his right to free speech and association. In addition, Seeger remained calm and respectful throughout his HUAC appearance, respectfully addressing the members of the committee as "sir." Whereas Robeson lambasted the members of the committee and voiced protests against racism in America, Seeger retreated from his earlier pro-labor and anti-war protests. Although he was found guilty of contempt of Congress following his HUAC appearance, Seeger was able to continue his career because he did not challenge HUAC and

thereby avoided being labeled dangerously anti-American. More importantly, Seeger's rhetoric was a better fit with the moderate voices of the emerging civil rights movement.

At the same time Robeson and Seeger got caught up in the Red Scare, a new musician and a new style of music—Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll—invited a different sort of moral panic. Unlike the *political* concerns that prompted criticism of Robeson and Seeger, the complaints against Elvis Presley focused more on the *social* effects of his sound and his physical movements. Concerned that his gyrating hips and the frenzied tones of his rock 'n' roll might promote teenage promiscuity, juvenile delinquency, and even “rock riots,” critics of Elvis raised a common concern about popular music: that it might corrupt the morals of youth. For the first time ever, young people had enough spending money to dictate who the stars of popular culture would be. As such, critics feared that Elvis, along with other “rebels” of popular culture, like actors James Dean and Marlon Brando, would serve as unhealthy role models for young people, encouraging them to ignore their “adult” responsibilities as they “rocked around the clock.” Elvis himself initially capitalized on that “bad boy” image, but he quickly realized that he could build an even bigger audience by assuaging the concerns of his critics.

Early in his career Elvis attracted only regional attention in the South and drew little criticism. Although he integrated black rhythm-and-blues music and other styles into his repertoire, he was packaged by his handlers not as a rock 'n' roll singer, but as a country-western or hillbilly singer, as indicated by his moniker at the time, “The Hillbilly Cat.” All of that changed in 1956, when Elvis left Sun Records and signed with the major record label RCA. His first full-length album for RCA, *Elvis Presley*, was a hit. And with the help of his new manager, “Colonel” Tom Parker, Elvis was able to reach an even bigger audience in the years to come. He appeared on a series of widely watched television shows, including *The Steve Allen Show* and

The Ed Sullivan Show, and he made a series of successful Hollywood films, including *Love Me Tender* (1956), *Loving You* (1957), and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957). Yet throughout his rise to success, critics continued to raise concerns about Elvis's effects on young people, particularly the screaming teenage girls who were his biggest fans.

Critics of Elvis focused on his rebellious persona, his bodily movements, and the frenzied responses of his fans. Referring to him mockingly as "Elvis the Pelvis," they worried out loud over the possible influence of his music on impressionable teenagers. Concerned about sexual promiscuity, race-mixing, and juvenile delinquency, Elvis's critics engaged in a rhetoric of moral panic that had little to do with the politics of the 1950s but struck at the heart of prevailing social and cultural norms. It was a rhetoric of moral panic that was not so much about the music as about Elvis's physical appearance and his presence on stage. To his critics, Elvis was "the rebellious rock 'n' roller with the snarl on his lips and the moves in his hips."¹⁰

Unlike the other musicians in this study, Elvis responded to the rhetoric of moral panic by consciously toning down his rebellious persona and embracing a new romantic, "all-American" image. Even in the early Hollywood films that capitalized on his rebellious persona, Elvis was ultimately transformed by the end of the film, becoming the hero of the film and gaining the affection of his leading ladies not with his fisticuffs but with soft love ballads. Then, in 1958, Elvis was drafted into the U.S. Army, and his response solidified his transformation from rebellious teenager to "all-American" boy. Elvis could have accepted a special duty pass to perform for the troops, but instead he proudly embraced his duty as a soldier, just like everybody else. After being stationed in Germany, he returned home in 1960 as "Private Presley," and he quickly exploited his new patriotic image by filming *G.I. Blues*, a film that intentionally reflected his new Army image.¹¹ In addition, Elvis took a hiatus from performing live to focus on his film

career, which eventually included more than twenty-six films, almost all musical-comedies that required him to perform softer, less sexually suggestive music. Although some complained that he lost his musical edge, Elvis was widely praised for the changes he made in both his sound and his persona. Still remembered as “The King” of rock ‘n’ roll today, Elvis consciously turned his back on the music that made him popular and instead embraced a persona that reflected the prevailing social and cultural norms of the time.

Almost thirty years after the criticism of Elvis and rock ‘n’ roll, new self-appointed arbiters of cultural taste—Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC)—led a new campaign against allegedly pornographic lyrics of some popular music. Against a backdrop of increasing rates of teen pregnancy and substance abuse, the PMRC capitalized on the “Just Say No” rhetorical climate of the time by calling for stricter regulation of what they considered “obscene” popular music. The mothers of the PMRC identified fifteen songs—songs they dubbed the “Filthy Fifteen”—and demanded that the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) place warning labels on these and other releases with similarly “explicit” sexual or violent content.¹² Although the PMRC’s rhetoric of moral panic echoed the panic over Elvis’s sexually suggestive performances, the PMRC raised new anxieties over how this explicit material was not only “pornographic” but also socialized kids to view violence, drugs, and alcohol as acceptable. Unlike earlier critics of popular music, the critics of “porn rock” were not politicians nor music critics but mothers, and as such they had a special claim to caring deeply about the well-being of America's children.

The PMRC’s rhetoric of moral panic was so successful in drawing attention to “porn rock” that in 1985, the Senate held hearings on the lyrical content of popular music.¹³ Several members of the Senate Committee, including Senator Al Gore, had direct ties with the PMRC,

which only furthered the view that the group had considerable clout in Washington. In opposition to the PMRC, musicians Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider all testified that a warning label would infringe upon a musician's free speech and eventually result in censorship. The mothers of the PMRC insisted they were not advocating censorship, but merely wanted the recording industry to help parents identify questionable material. In response, Zappa, Denver, and Snider all acknowledged the PMRC's concern but insisted that it was up to parents to actually *listen* to the music and decide for themselves what might be inappropriate for their children. Following the Senate hearings, no federal regulations were passed, but the RIAA did appease the PMRC by agreeing to voluntarily label records they deemed to have "explicit" lyrics—a label that is still used today.

What was at stake in these debates was not just the labeling of "obscene" music, but also a larger controversy over what constituted good parenting. By attacking the lyrics and images of "porn rock," elected leaders and members of the Washington establishment, like the PMRC, directed deliberation over the social problems associated with young people in the 1980s toward an easy scapegoat: popular culture. Deploying an epideictic rhetoric of blame that deflected attention from parents and schools to popular music, the PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic may have made parents and adults feel better about bringing attention to the issue, but it did little to uncover and address the real causes of social deviancy among America's youth. The PMRC's rhetoric of moral panic was a success in that it positioned concerned parents at the front of the culture war, shifting the burden of responsibility from parents to musicians and the recording industry. It also broadened the critique of popular music to encompass virtually every problem besetting young people.

Almost a decade after the PMRC criticized popular music, a new type of music—gangsta rap—again prompted critics to complain about popular music that they deemed misogynistic, pro-gang, anti-police, and pro-violence. Led by C. Delores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women (NPCBW), the rhetoric of moral panic targeting gangsta rap echoed many of the themes voiced by the PMRC. Like the PMRC, Tucker and her allies called gangsta rap “pornographic,” but they added something new to the rhetoric of moral panic—a racial element that raised questions about who had the moral authority to speak on behalf of the African-American community. In the wake of the Rodney King beating and the L.A. Riots, critics blamed gangsta rap for rising racial tensions in America, claiming that its celebration of violence, gangs, and drugs were the *causes* and not the *effects* of the problems plaguing African-Americans. On the other hand, some like Representative Maxine Waters argued that while rappers like Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Snoop Doggy Dogg used explicit language, hip-hop culture and rap music reflected the lived realities of many young African-Americans living in America’s inner cities.

Like the PMRC, the critics of gangsta rap persuaded the United States Congress to hold hearings on rap music and what the music industry could do to clean up its act. Whereas the PMRC claimed that they did not advocate censorship and instead wanted the help of the recording industry, Tucker testified that gangsta rap corrupted the “moral foundation” of the black community and deserved to be banned. On the other side of the debate, defenders of gangsta rap argued that these artists were describing the hardships of living in the ghetto while members of the recording industry insisted they were doing everything they could with the labeling system they implemented as a result of the PMRC’s efforts. Although no new legislation or policies were enacted following the hearings on gangsta rap, Time Warner

Company agreed to stop distributing gangsta rap's most prominent record label—Death Row Records.

Tucker and her allies' rhetoric of moral panic shifted the discussion of problems within the black community away from issues of parenting to new questions about who had the moral authority to speak on behalf of the black community. Grammy Award-winning singer Dionne Warwick, who testified before the Senate, claimed that rappers like Snoop were ignorant and did not reflect the totality of the black experience in America.¹⁴ Since most of the kids who purchased gangsta rap music were white, Tucker and her allies argued that gangsta rappers were, in effect, "Uncle Toms" who were making money off betraying their own people.¹⁵ Despite the fact that rap was music by and for the urban black underclass—what Ethnomusicologist Cheryl L. Keyes called a musical form of "street consciousness"¹⁶—the rhetoric of moral panic utilized by Tucker and her allies shamed members of the black community for calling attention to their community's own problems. In the process, they contributed to a willful neglect of those problems, as the debate over gangsta rap diverted attention from the problems that gave rise to gangsta rap in the first place.

Popular Music and the Rhetoric of Moral Panic

This study of popular music and the rhetoric of moral panic contributes to our understanding of several important issues in the literature on rhetoric, music, cultural identity, and social movements. First, in the context of research suggesting that music doesn't communicate political or cultural ideology well,¹⁷ the most obvious, most culturally significant rhetorical "effects" of music are the kinds of moral panics I have described in this study.

Although it is debatable whether any of the cases I analyze, like the PMRC's campaign against "porn rock," caused people actually to "panic," the *rhetoric* of moral panic had obvious effects on the public discourse surrounding popular music, attributing all sorts of political and social ills to the songs and their lyrics. Even though musicians like Pete Seeger denied that music was an effective medium to mobilize people for change,¹⁸ critics of popular music since the Red Scare have argued that music does indeed influence the beliefs, moral values, and behaviors of people, particularly young people. And their arguments about the effects of music have been sufficiently persuasive to prompt governmental interventions and self-regulation by the music industry.

Music is often considered a site where people craft identities for themselves—what rhetorical scholars Deanna and Timothy Sellnow have termed their "illusion of life."¹⁹ On a broader scale, music also shapes our *cultural identity*, as music critics and other arbiters of popular culture debate the meaning and significance of various forms of popular art. Since at least the 1950s, critics have blamed popular music for a number of the problems that plague young people, from sexual promiscuity to drug abuse. They also have argued that music has undermined patriotism and failed to prepare young people for citizenship in our democracy. Although many of the musicians in this study, including Robeson, Seeger, Elvis, and 2Pac are celebrated today as part of America's rich cultural heritage,²⁰ they were, in their own day, considered dangerous to the nation's moral or political health. All were therefore subjected to various strategies of social control, from public shaming to the labeling of their records to limitations on their radio airplay.

In addition to being considered a site for identity construction, popular music is often considered an effective site for protest. During the 1960s, songs like "We Shall Overcome" and "The Times They Are a-Changing" became well-known anthems of the civil rights and anti-war

movements. They were songs that captured the political and social upheaval of the time. Following nearly fifty years of debate over popular music, however, the available space for protest music has narrowed considerably. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, popular musicians and the recording industry took it upon themselves to demonstrate their patriotism by staging two highly-watched tribute concerts: *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, and the *Concert for New York*.²¹ In addition, the recording industry promoted patriotic and pro-America songs by country-western singers like Alan Jackson and Toby Keith, propelling them into the mainstream spotlight.²² At the same time, musicians who protested against the country's policies or who spoke out against President George W. Bush and other leaders, like the country-western group the Dixie Chicks, saw their songs blacklisted from radio airplay and their CDs burned in protest at their concerts.²³

Instead of going on the defensive after the September 11th attacks, the music industry took a pro-active approach by censoring itself before any controversies could arise. Clear Channel Communications, a company that owned more than 1,000 radio stations at the time, distributed a memo to all of its radio stations listing 162 songs that were not to be played on the air following the 9/11 attacks. Although songs like "Seek and Destroy" by Metallica and "Suicide Solution" by Ozzy Osbourne could have been in poor taste following the attacks, songs like "Imagine" by John Lennon and "Peace Train" by Cat Stevens were targeted for their messages of peace and nonviolence.²⁴ This is not to say that songs about peace would have somehow influenced people's opinions about the attacks, but the quick maneuvers by the music industry in the wake of the attack do demonstrate the industry's sensitivity to criticisms about the politics of music. Although the existing rhetorical scholarship on music suggests it can reinforce solidarity within a social movement,²⁵ I have shown in this study how fears over the effects of

music on young people can be used to mobilize support for governmental intervention and greater restrictions on musical content.

The self-regulation of the music industry may have narrowed the available space for protest, but there remain many rich topics for further research into the relationship between music and popular culture. First, there are several case studies within the timeframe of this study that invite further investigation. In the 1960s, for example, the influx of British rock bands—what soon became known as the “British Invasion”—dramatically changed the American music scene, creating a new moral panic over the hysteria of teenage music fans at the live performances of these British supergroups. Unlike Elvis, many of these British bands embraced the 1960s counter-culture, and the Beatles in particular went through a series of dramatic changes in their look and sound as they experimented with drugs, Eastern religions, and “alternative lifestyles.” After the “British Invasion,” other new styles of music, like disco and punk in the 1970s and grunge in the 1990s, prompted still more waves of moral panic. Further research is needed in order to better understand how and why each of these new styles of music came to be seen as a threat, how the musicians responded, and what implications those debates had for the ongoing renegotiation of America’s cultural identity.

Second, the strategies of social control used by critics of popular music warrants further investigation. As this study has shown, critics of popular music have been quite successful over the years at spreading fears about popular music and inspiring governmental and industry action to restrict music deemed dangerous, particularly to young people. Indeed, they were so successful during the period examined in this study that it’s hard to imagine a moral panic inspired by American popular music today. Musicians and song-writers now seem to understand that there are certain boundaries that must not be crossed, and that crossing those boundaries is

likely to bring industry controls or even governmental intervention. In short, a sort of prior self-censorship now seems to exist within the music industry, with those who create the music avoiding those political, sexual, and social topics that have in the past inspired rhetorics of moral panic. That prior self-censorship, in turn, limits the value of music as a form of political and social critique, and it also may limit the ability of social movements to use music to promote social reform.

Finally, there remains much work to be done on how music has been deployed not only in social movements but in mainstream American politics. Politicians, of course, have always used popular music—some more effectively than others—in their political campaigns. As I described in Chapter 2, Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace used Pete Seeger’s folk music during the 1948 presidential campaign but with very little success. Sixty years later, however, President Barack Obama invited Seeger to sing the Woody Guthrie song, “This Land Is Your Land,” along with Bruce Springsteen at his 2008 inauguration. In addition, Obama has been effective at integrating hip-hop culture into his image, incorporating the music of rappers like Ludacris, Common, and Jay-Z into his campaigns without inspiring moral panics. Prior to Obama, President Bill Clinton also had been very successful at using popular music to attract young people and minority groups to his campaign. Clinton even appeared on the *Arsenio Hall Show* during the 1992 presidential campaign, playing Elvis’s “Heartbreak Hotel” on his saxophone while wearing dark sunglasses.²⁶

For Obama and Clinton, then, popular music has been an effective political tool, but for others, attempts to use popular music in campaigns have backfired. During the 2012 presidential campaign, for example, Republican Vice-President candidate Paul Ryan claimed that he was a fan of the political-rock band Rage Against the Machine, only to inspire the band’s co-founder

Tom Morello to denounce Ryan as the “embodiment of the machine our music has been raging against for two decades.”²⁷ During the same campaign, Twister Sister lead singer Dee Snider demanded that Ryan stop playing his band’s song, “We’re Not Gonna Take It,” for similar reasons.²⁸ Rock singer Tom Petty likewise protested against the use of his song, “American Girl,” by presidential candidate Michelle Bachmann during the 2012 Republican primaries, threatening litigation if she did not cease and desist from playing the song at her rallies.²⁹ Does this mean that only Democrats or only liberals can effectively deploy popular music in presidential campaigns? Does it mean that politicians who wish to deploy popular music in their campaigns must obtain not just copyright permissions but also the permission and approval of those who produced the music? These are significant questions about the role of popular music in American politics, and they warrant further investigation.

Of course, there are also further possibilities for research into the links between popular music and politics in other cultural contexts. In other countries, music plays an equally important role in politics and in shaping a particular nation’s cultural identity, but the political and social constraints in those countries are often very different. One of the more recent examples that comes to mind is the controversy surrounding the Russian feminist punk-rock band Pussy Riot, who drew criticism for their protests against Russian President Vladimir Putin. After performing a show at the largest Orthodox Church in Moscow on February 12, 2012, the band released a video on the Internet titled “Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!” Less than a month later, three members of the group were arrested and charged with hooliganism. On August 17, 2012, all three members were found guilty and sentenced to two-year prison sentences. Commenting on the sentence, Putin declared that the band “undermined the moral foundations” of the nation and “got what they asked for.”³⁰ Pussy Riot thus provides

just one example of how, in countries without our tradition of free speech, controversial music might be subjected to even tighter controls. There is some research on the politics of popular music in different cultures, such as Jordan's study of jazz music in France and King's study of reggae music in Jamaica,³¹ but we need more such intercultural research to better understand how popular music functions to shape politics and cultural identity in places with very different traditions of free speech and political tolerance.

In conclusion, this study has attempted to shed light on how and why popular music inspires rhetorics of moral panic, how popular musicians and the recording industry respond to such rhetoric, and how debates over popular music have reflected and helped reshape America's cultural identity. As Plato once wrote, new music is dangerous to society because it can move people to see and act in unforeseeable ways.³² As rhetorical critics, it is important for us to understand how music can move people in different ways, whether they are critics promoting fear of new forms of music and cultural expression, or musicians and record producers defending their art and livelihood. These debates over popular music can teach us lessons about the values and identity of our own culture, and they can teach us much about the cultural climate of particular moments in our history. In each of the case studies I analyzed, the critics of popular music were able to capitalize on the political and social tensions of their time with a rhetoric of moral panic that scapegoated popular music for many of the problems allegedly afflicting young people. And in each case the rhetoric of moral panic reflected an important assumption—that music has the power to change the way people think and act. That fact makes music an inherently *rhetorical* phenomenon—a phenomenon that invites close investigation into how popular music comes to be viewed as a threat that warrants public shaming, self-censorship, or even governmental intervention.

Endnotes

¹ Robert L. Scott, "Cold War and Rhetoric: Conceptually and Critically," in *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1990): 13.

² This assessment appeared in a New York *News* article by Edgar G. Brown on April 25, 1925. See also Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 80-97.

³ Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: Quest for Freedom, 1939-1976* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 4.

⁴ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups*. 81st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949).

⁵ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of United States Passports*, 84th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955).

⁶ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 188.

⁷ Minna Bromberg and Gary Alan Fine, "Resurrecting the Red: Pete Seeger and the Purification of Difficult Reputations," *Social Forces* 80 (2002): 1140.

⁸ His testimony is available on-line at http://antiochcollege.org/antiochiana/songs_from_the_stacks/songs_from_the_stacks_072811.html (accessed July 3, 2013). See also endnote 76 in Chapter 2 for more information about Matusow and his testimony.

⁹ U.S., Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities. *Investigation of Communist Activities, New York Area*. 84th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955).

¹⁰ Susan M. Doll, *Understanding Elvis: Southern Roots vs. Star Image* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 51.

¹¹ "King of Rock 'n' Roll Becomes Pvt. Presley," *New York Times*, March 25, 1958, 28.

¹² Eric Nuzum, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 21.

¹³ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. *Contents of Music and Lyrics of Records Hearing*. 99th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985).

¹⁴ U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary. *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994): 86.

¹⁵ James T. Jones IV, "Gangstas Under Fire/Rap Sales Stand Up to Backlash," *USA Today*, February 3, 1994, 1D. "I call the rappers Uncle Toms," NPCBW's C. Delores Tucker told the *USA Today*. "They're being used by the masters in the record industry to project negative images of us. These kids are being paid to call us names."

¹⁶ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

¹⁷ For those who claim music is not an effective medium for communicating ideology, see Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change," *Southern Communication Journal* 35 (1970): 295-302; G. P. Mohrmann and F. Eugene Scott, "Popular Music and World War II: The Rhetoric of Continuation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 145-156; J. Justin Gustainis and Dan F. Hahn, "While the Whole World Watched: Rhetorical Failures of Anti-War Protest," *Communication Quarterly* 36 (1988): 203-216; Stephen A. King, "The Co-optation of a 'Revolution': Rastafari, Reggae, and the Rhetoric of Social Control," *Howard Journal of Communication* 10 (1999): 77-95; and Sheryl Hunter, "Discursive Identity Formation of Suffrage Women: Reframing the 'Cult of True Womanhood' Through Song," *Western Journal of Communication* 70 (2006): 234-260. For those who claim music can be an effective medium for communicating ideology, see Cheryl Irwin Thomas, "'Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma': The Persuasiveness of Song," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 39 (1974):260-268; David A. Carter, "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 365-374; Alberto Gonzalez and John J. Makay, "Rhetorical Ascription and the Gospel According to Dylan," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 1-14; John David Bloodworth, "Communication in the Youth Counter Culture: Music as Expression," *Central States Speech Journal* 26 (1995): 304-309; and Lisa M. Chuang and John P. Hart, "Suburban American Punks and the Musical Rhetoric of *Green Day*'s 'Jesus of Suburbia'," *Communication Studies* 59 (2008): 183-201.

¹⁸ In an interview with his biographer Allan M. Winkler, Seeger said that it was a "failure to get unions to sing" that ultimately doomed his first folk music organization, People's Songs. Obviously Seeger did not abandoned his faith in the power of music, evidenced by his participation in the civil rights and anti-war social movements of the 1960s. See, Allan M. Winkler, *"To Everything There is a Season": Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 51.

¹⁹ Deanna and Timothy Sellnow. "The 'Illusion of Life' Rhetorical Perspective: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Music as Communication," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 395-415.

²⁰ In an effort to preserve America's sound recording history, the National Recording Preservation Act of 2000 was passed, which created the National Recording Preservation Board and the National Recording Registry. According to the Library of Congress's website, "recordings selected for the National Recording Registry are those that are culturally, historically or aesthetically important, and/or inform or reflect life in the United States." Members are appointed by the Librarian of Congress to select songs to the Registry, and starting in 2002 the Board selected 50 recordings for the first four years, and since 2007 have selected 25 recordings a year. Robeson's cast recordings for *Show Boat* and *Othello*, Seeger's "We Shall Overcome," Elvis's first Sun Sessions, Prince's *Purple Rain*, and Tupac's "Dear Mama" are all on the list. The complete list of the National Recording Registry is available on-line at <http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/nrpb/registry/> (accessed July 3, 2013).

²¹ On September 21, 2001, *America: A Tribute to Heroes* was broadcasted on more than thirty cable television networks and more than 8,000 radio stations. Filmed at undisclosed locations due to fear of terrorist attacks, the tribute featured performances by Bruce Springsteen, Sheryl Crow, Sting, Alicia Keys, the Dixie Chicks, and others and was soon “the largest single fund-raising event in history.” One month later, on October 21, the *Concert for New York* was held at Madison Square Garden. Headlined by Paul McCartney and featuring an array of American and British rock bands, the concert generated over 30 million dollars for the New York Fire Department. See Reebee Garofalo, “Pop Goes to War, 2001-2004: U.S. Popular Music After 9/11,” in *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, ed. Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3-26.

²² Days after the attack, Alan Jackson released “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” a song he had written after seeing the planes hit the World Trade Center. The song appeared on Jackson’s new album, *Drive*, and it immediately reached number one on the *Billboard* country charts. Similarly, Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” a song off his 2002 album *Unleashed* that celebrated his father’s military service in the wake of the attacks, was the number one song over the 4th of July weekend in 2002. Unlike Jackson’s song, Keith’s song expresses patriotic and military sentiments more strongly, claiming “An’ you’ll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A. ‘Cos we’ll put a boot in your ass, it’s the American way.”

²³ During the build up to America’s invasion of Iraq, the Dixie Chicks played a concert in London on March 30, 2003. Before playing their song “Travelin’ Soldier,” lead singer Natalie Maines, who along with the other members of the group are natives of Texas, said: “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” The comments drew an immediate backlash in America, and the group’s cover of Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide” went from number 10 on the *Billboard* Top 100 to 43 in a single week. The next week it dropped off the list entirely. In addition, many radio stations removed their songs from their playlists and anti-Dixie Chicks protests were organized outside the sites of several of their scheduled concerts. For more information on the controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks, see *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*, directed by Barbara Kopple (2006; New York: Weinstein Company Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

²⁴ Eliza Truitt, “It’s the End of the World as Clear Channel Knows It,” *Slate*, September 17, 2001, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/chatterbox/2001/09/its_the_end_of_the_world_as_clear_channel_knows_it.html (accessed July 3, 2013).

²⁵ Ralph E. Knupp, “A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Rhetorical Dimensions of Protest Music,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 46 (1981): 377-389.

²⁶ Walter Shapiro, “Clinton Plays it Cool,” *Time*, June 15, 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,975751,00.html> (accessed July 3, 2013).

²⁷ Tom Morello, “Op-Ed,” *Rolling Stone*, August 16, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/tom-morello-paul-ryan-is-the-embodiment-of-the-machine-our-music-rages-against-20120816> (accessed July 3, 2013).

²⁸ “Dee Snider Rips Paul Ryan for Using ‘We’re Not Gonna Take It’,” *Rolling Stone*, August 22, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/dee-snider-rips-paul-ryan-for-using-were-not-gonna-take-it-20120822> (accessed July 3, 2013).

²⁹ Andy Greene, “Tom Petty to Michele Bachmann: Quit Playing ‘American Girl’,” *Rolling Stone*, June 28, 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/tom-petty-tells-michele-bachmann-to-stop-playing-american-girl-20110628> (accessed July 3, 2013). Petty also successfully stopped Republican Party candidate George W. Bush from using his song “Won’t Back Down” during the 2000 presidential campaign.

³⁰ Miriam Elder, “Putin says Pussy Riot ‘Got What They Asked For’ as Jailed Women Appeal,” *Guardian*, October 8, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/08/putin-backs-pussy-riot-conviction> (accessed July 3, 2013).

³¹ For the debates surrounding jazz’s place in French society, see Matthew J. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2010). For the role of reggae music in Jamaica, see Stephen A. King, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

³² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 101-102.

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Winkler, Allan M. *"To Everything There Is a Season": Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Vita

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Education

Ph.D. Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, 2013.

Dissertation: "From the McCarthy Era to 'Gangsta Rap': The Rhetoric of Popular Music and Moral Panics in the United States." Committee: J. Michael Hogan (chair), Thomas Benson, Jeremy Engels, and Matthew Jordan.

M.A. Communication, California State University, Fresno, 2005.

Comprehensive Examination Paper: "Punk Rock Protest and Rhetoric."
Committee: Diane Blair (chair), Kevin Ayotte, and Kathy Adams.

Selected Conference Presentations

"Punk Feminism: Remembering Ari Up and Poly Styrene as Punk Feminist Icons," competitive paper presented at the Organization for Research on Women and Communication, Western States Communication Association Conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 20, 2012.

"Voicing Concern Over Porn Rock," paper presented at the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA, November 17, 2011.

"Don't Tread on Us': President Clinton's Address to the Nation Concerning the Air Strike on Baghdad June 21, 1993," competitive paper presented at the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL, November 18, 2009.

"Punk Rock Protest: Rethinking Rhetorical Processes," competitive paper presented at the National Communication Association, San Diego, CA November 22, 2008.

Invited Presentations

Invited Presentation, "'We're Not Gonna Take It': The Parents Music Resource Center's Campaign Against 'Porn Rock,'" presented at the Communication Arts and Sciences Colloquium, The Pennsylvania State University, February 24, 2012.

Invited Lecturer for Communication Arts and Sciences 175: Persuasion and Propaganda, "Shaping Patriotic Responses: Popular Music following 9/11," lecture presented at Pennsylvania State University, November 13, 2011.

Invited Lecturer for Communication Arts and Sciences 175: Persuasion and Propaganda, "Remembering 9/11 Through Music as Propaganda," lecture presented at The Pennsylvania State University, April 7, 2010.