

# Live to Rock

## THE FILTHY FIFTEEN

THEY WERE LABELLED FILTHY, AND THEIR MUSIC WAS SAID TO INCITE VIOLENCE AND DRUGS IN THE YOUTH OF TODAY, OR AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT THE HOLLYWOOD WIVES WOULD HAVE YOU BELIEVE...

FEATURE BY PUGS



It was over thirty years ago now that the very essence of rock and roll was put on trial when in 1985 an American Committee was formed known as the Parents Music Resource Centre (PMRC), driven by a group of four women labelled the 'Hollywood Wives'. This was a direct reference to their husband's connections with government in Washington DC. The women who founded the PMRC are Timmer Gore, wife of senator and later Vice President Al Gore, Susan Baker, wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker, Pam Howar, wife of Washington Realtor Raymond Howar and Sally Nevius, wife of former Washington City Council chairman John Nevius. Not a bad group to draw on for power - and their sole purpose was aimed at increasing parental control over the access of children to music that was deemed to have violent, drug related or sexual themes via a labelling system on albums with Parental Advisory stickers. Basically they were offended by a couple of songs they heard and thought they'd lead a crusade against the rock and roll industry.

As a method of combating this alleged problem, the PMRC suggested a voluntary move by the RIAA and the music industry to develop 'guidelines or a rating system' similar to the MPAA film rating system. Additional suggestions from the PMRC that appeared in an article in the Washington Post included: printing warnings and lyrics on album covers, forcing record stores to put albums with explicit covers under the counters, pressuring television stations not to broadcast explicit songs or videos, re-assessing the contracts of musicians who performed violently or sexually in concert, and creating a panel to set industry standards.

This very article led to the removal of rock music and magazines from some of the largest American stores including Wal-Mart and J. C. Penney.

It should have been a storm in a teacup, but with their connections to power, their twisted crusade soon gathered momentum, and predominately in their sights were a group of 15 artists labelled the 'Filthy Fifteen'. And the mix of musicians was quite broad consisting of Twisted Sister, Prince, Judas Priest, Motley Crue, W.A.S.P, Madonna, Def Leppard, Black Sabbath and our very own AC/DC. The full list of musicians and songs that were targeted can be found at the end of the article, but it was clear that the wheels were now well and truly in motion.

In August 1985, 19 record companies agreed to put 'Parental Guidance: Explicit Lyrics' labels on albums to warn consumers of explicit lyrical content. Before the labels could be put into place, the Senate agreed to hold a hearing on so-called 'porn rock', which began on September 19, 1985, when representatives from the PMRC, musicians Dee Snider, Frank Zappa and John Denver along with Senators Paula Hawkins and Al Gore testified before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. It was apparently aimed at 'the subject of the content of certain sound recordings and suggestions that recording packages be labelled to provide a warning to prospective purchasers of sexually explicit or other potentially offensive content.'

Sounds like a lot of horseshit doesn't it? Well in hindsight it was, but unfortunately these few individuals were hell bent on pursuing this ridiculous belief that rock and roll lyrics were harmful and suggestive to young audiences, completely overlooking the fact that they had been clearly misconstrued.

The circus all kicked off with Paula Hawkins presenting three record covers to the board, Pyromania by Def Leppard, W.O.W. by Wendy O. Williams and W.A.S.P. by W.A.S.P. along with the music videos 'Hot for Teacher' by Van Halen, and 'We're Not Gonna Take It' by Twisted Sister, commenting: "Much has changed since Elvis' seemingly innocent times. Subtleties, suggestions, and innuendo have given way to overt expressions and descriptions of often violent sexual acts, drug taking, and flirtations with the occult. The record album covers to me are self-explanatory."

Susan Baker then testified that, "There certainly are many causes for these ills in our society, but it is our contention that the pervasive messages aimed at children which promote and glorify suicide, rape, sadomasochism, and so on, have to be numbered among the contributing factors."

Tipper Gore then took the stand and asked record companies to voluntarily "place a warning label on music products inappropriate for younger children due to explicit sexual or violent lyrics."

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In addition, Dr. Joe Stuessy, a music professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, spoke regarding the power of music to influence behaviour. He argued that heavy metal was different from earlier forms of music such as jazz and rock and roll because it “had as one of its central elements the element of hatred.”

It seemed a lot of reading between the lines and finding meanings in the lyrics that weren't even there, which was clearly illustrated in the testimonies of the three men chosen to represent the rock industry. First off it was musician and producer Frank Zappa, who asserted that, “the PMRC proposal is an ill-conceived piece of nonsense which fails to deliver any real benefits to children, infringes the civil liberties of people who are not children, and promises to keep the courts busy for years dealing with the interpretation and enforcement problems inherent in the proposal's design.” Zappa had also earlier stated about the Senate's agreement to hold a hearing on the matter that, “A couple of blowjobs here and there and Bingo!—you get a hearing!”

Next on the stand was folk rock musician John Denver who clearly stated he was “strongly opposed to censorship of any kind in our society or anywhere else in the world”, and that in his experience censors often misinterpret music, as was the case with his song ‘Rocky Mountain High’. In addition, Denver expressed his belief that censorship is counterproductive: “That which is denied becomes that which is most desired, and that which is hidden becomes that which is most interesting. Consequently, a great deal of time and energy is spent trying to get at what is being kept from you.” It shocked the PMRC board, as many of them expected Denver to take their side, thinking he would also be offended by the lyrics – they were clearly mistaken.

The final individual to give his testimony was Twisted Sister's frontman Dee Snider, and would prove to be the most effective. After both Denver and Zappa had appeared to give their testimonies in suits, Dee walked into the courtroom wearing jeans and a black t-shirt cut into a tank top, looking like he was just about to walk on stage – which in essence he was, and probably the biggest stage of his career. The magnitude of the event wasn't lost on him either, he could tell how serious it all was when he first turned up to a scene of bedlam. There were protestors, satellite trucks, news and camera crews lining the entire street. But he sucked it up and took it all in his stride, because for Snider, he knew this was the perfect opportunity to show the world that he wasn't the dumb, aggressive metal head degenerate that the PMRC thought he was. They, including Al Gore weren't ready for him, but he was ready for them!

He kicked straight into gear, and his confident and articulate representation surprised everyone. And once he got going, he didn't hold back, knowing he was not only speaking out for Twisted Sister, but was also representing countless other bands and musicians who like him, had the same beliefs – it was clearly a witch-hunt! He was nothing short of scintillating, testifying that he didn't support RIAA President Gortikov's unnecessary and unfortunate decision to agree to a so-called generic label on some selected records. Like John Denver, Snider felt that his music had been misinterpreted. He defended the Twisted Sister songs ‘Under the Blade’, which had been interpreted as referring to sadomasochism, bondage, and rape, along with ‘We're Not Gonna Take It’, which had been accused of promoting violence. In reference to ‘Under the Blade’, a song Snider claimed was written about an impending surgery for one of the band members, that “the only sadomasochism, bondage, and rape in this song is in the mind of Ms. Gore!”

He also stated that, “Ms. Gore was looking for sadomasochism and bondage, and she found it. Someone looking for surgical references would have found it as well.” Snider concluded that the “full responsibility for defending my children falls on the shoulders of my wife and I, because there is no one else capable of making these judgments for us.”

It was a brilliant representation of not only himself but also the rock industry, and one that should have had more of an impact. But here's where it gets interesting - in their infinite wisdom, the pen pushers celebrated their victory, with a new law brought in for a Parental Advisory Sticker to be placed on albums deemed to contain explicit language. Believe it or not, this actually took place before the hearing even ended. The labels were generic though, unlike the original idea of a descriptive label categorising the explicit lyrics.

It did have an immediate effect, with many record stores refusing to sell albums containing the label (most notably Wal-Mart), and others limited sales of those albums to adults. One of the first albums to receive the ‘Parental Advisory’ sticker was Frank Zappa's Grammy-winning album ‘Jazz from Hell’, presumably for the use of the word ‘Hell’ in its title but also for the song ‘G-Spot Tornado’, even though funnily enough it was only a collection of instrumental pieces and contained no lyrics whatsoever. Nice one! But here's the kicker.

Over the next few years, it turned out that by having the warning label on your album it actually helped increase sales. So in fact it had an opposite effect, with bands now purposely recording explicit lyrics just to get the label on their album.

Understandably the entire rock industry was pissed off, especially considering how these women abused their access to power to achieve their objective. I mean okay, everyone's entitled to their own opinion, but this just wasn't a fair playing field, and was never meant to be, which was the government's intention right from the start. But what came next was a bombardment of direct attacks on the PMRC from some very high profile rock stars.

Ice-T's recording ‘Freedom of Speech’ contains the lyrics, “Hey, PMRC, you stupid fuckin' arseholes. The sticker on the record is what makes 'em sell gold. Can't you see, you alcoholic idiots. The more you try to suppress us, the larger we get.”

The Megadeth song ‘Hook In Mouth’ from their 1988 album, ‘So Far, So Good, So What!’ is aimed directly at the P.M.R.C. while W.A.S.P.'s live album ‘Live, In The Raw’ includes the song ‘Harder, Faster’, which Blackie Lawless dedicates during the opening of the song to the PMRC. And on July 18th in 1993, Rage Against the Machine protested against the PMRC at Lollapalooza III by standing naked onstage with duct tape covering their mouths and the letters PMRC written on their chests. The band used up their 14-minute performance time without playing any songs with the only sound emitted being the audio feedback from Tom Morello and Tim Commerford's guitars. They later played a free show for disappointed fans.

New York based thrash band Anthrax wrote and composed a song called ‘Startin' Up A Posse’ for their 1991 release Attack of the Killer B's, which ridiculed members of the PMRC while seminal punk rock band The Ramones recorded ‘Censorshit’ on their 1992 album Mondo Bizarro, a song about how rock and rap albums are being censored by the PMRC. It mentions Frank Zappa and Ozzy Osbourne, and is directly addressed at Tipper Gore.

On the 2001 Dead Kennedys live album Mutiny on the Bay (recorded in a 1986 concert), during their song ‘M.T.V. - Get off the Air’, lead singer Jello Biafra tells the audience to “buy a homemade record instead, before the PMRC closes the stores down that sell ‘em.” Biafra had earlier been brought to trial on charges of ‘distributing harmful matter to minors’ in an incident involving the 1985 Dead Kennedys' album ‘Frankenchrist’, which featured an insert of H. R. Giger's Penis Landscape and a parody sticker on the front cover reading: WARNING: The inside fold out to this record cover is a work of art by H.R. Giger that some people may find shocking, repulsive or offensive. Life can sometimes be that way.

And Rapper Eminem directly referenced Tipper Gore and indirectly referenced the PMRC in ‘White America’, the opening song from his 2002 album ‘The Eminem Show’; where he referred to his mission as being – ‘To burn the flag and replace it with a Parental Advisory sticker! To spit liquor in the faces of this democracy of hypocrisy Fuck you, Ms. Cheney; Fuck you, Tipper Gore’.

It was clear they had hit a raw nerve – I mean who are they to put words in our mouths to insinuate there were darker forces lurking behind rock and roll lyrics that would inadvertently lead children to violence and drugs. Come on, I grew up living the life of a head banger, with posters of Iron Maiden, Slayer, W.A.S.P and Ozzy Osbourne plastered all over my bedroom walls, and my first stereo that I bought with my paper run money took a beating for years while my parents did their best to shut out the noise of death metal screeching up the hallways. Yet through all that time growing up, I never remember listening to the lyrics and thinking, ‘I might go and sacrifice a goat while drinking a schooner of lamb's blood...’ For fuck's sake! If you're already a psycho, you don't need a rock and roll tune to send you on a rampage of rape and murder.

Either way, the warning label to this day still remains. And although Snider's speech to Congress might not have saved rock and roll, or any other kind of music from advisory labels, he definitely left a lasting impression and also made it clear that he, like most of us, weren't gonna take it anymore! **LTR**



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Rank	Artist	Song	Category
1	Prince	“Darling Nikki”	Sex/Masturbation
2	Sheena Easton	“Sugar Walls”	Sex
3	Judas Priest	“Eat Me Alive”	Sex/Violence
4	Vanity	“Strap On ‘Robbie Baby’”	Sex
5	Mötley Crüe	“Bastard”	Violence/Language
6	AC/DC	“Let Me Put My Love Into You”	Sex
7	Twisted Sister	“We're Not Gonna Take It”	Violence
8	Madonna	“Dress You Up”	Sex
9	W.A.S.P.	“Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)”	Sex/Language/Violence
10	Def Leppard	“High ‘n’ Dry (Saturday Night)”	Drug and alcohol use
11	Mercyful Fate	“Into the Coven”	Occult
12	Black Sabbath	“Trashed”	Drug and alcohol use
13	Mary Jane Girls	“In My House”	Sex
14	Venom	“Possessed”	Occult
15	Cyndi Lauper	“She Bop”	Sex/Masturbation

