13 'Pushin' Too Hard'

Moral panics

Particular genres of popular music have sparked controversy and opposition, both on their emergence and sporadically since: rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, psychedelic rock in the late 1960s, disco and punk in the 1970s, heavy metal and gangsta rap in the 1980s and rave culture in the 1990s, to name only the better known examples (see Martin and Seagrave, 1988; Winfield and Davidson, 1999). Criticism has been variously on the influence of such genres on youthful values, attitudes and behaviour through the music's (perceived) sexuality and sexism, nihilism and violence, obscenity, black magic and anti-Christian nature. The political edge of popular music has been partly the result of this hostile reaction often accorded to the music and its associated causes and followers, helping to politicize the musicians and their fans.

While such episodes are a standard part of the history of popular music – music hall, jazz and other new forms of popular music were also all stigmatized in their day – rarely are their nature and cultural significance more fully teased out. I argue here that they have constituted a form of moral panic – the social concern generated by them was greatly exaggerated and the perceived threat to social harmony was by no means as ominous as many regarded it. Attempts to control and regulate popular music genres such as rock and rap are significant as part of the ongoing contestation of cultural hegemony, particularly with the emergence of the New Right.

Moral panic and regulation

The episodes dealt with here have been chosen for their value in illuminating different facets of the reaction to popular music, at particular historical moments. First, the New Zealand reaction to rock 'n' roll in the 1950s exemplifies the characteristic concerns displayed internationally towards the new form of popular music: antipathy towards it as music, the antisocial behaviour linked to concerts and rock movies and, most importantly, the associations with juvenile delinquency. Second, the issues of obscenity and free speech are examined in the light of the establishment of the PMRC and the celebrated court action against American band the Dead Kennedys in 1986–1987 and controversies surrounding the lyrics of songs by 2 Live Crew (1990) and Ice-T (1992). Third, attempts to

link the Columbine massacre of 1999 to the influence of Marilyn Manson illustrate the ongoing tendency to blame 'rock' for deeper social problems. These case studies illustrate the utility of the concept of moral panic to examine how music, as a central form of popular culture, becomes invested with ideological significance.

To place such opposition to popular music in context, it is important to acknowledge that popular culture in general has historically been the target of censure, condemnation and regulation. In the 1950s, for example, psychologist Frederic Wertham's influential bestseller, *Seduction of the Innocent*, argued for a direct causal connection between comic books and juvenile delinquency. Concern over new media and the activities of their youthful consumers seems to periodically reach a peak, frequently associated with 'boundary crises', periods of ambiguity and strain in society, which lead to attempts to more clearly establish moral boundaries. In many instances, such boundary crises are forms of 'moral panic', a concept that was widely utilized in British sociology of deviance and new criminology studies of the 1970s. This writing drew on labelling theory, associated with the American sociologist Howard Becker, who argued that societies and social groups 'create deviance by making those rules whose infraction comprises deviance and by applying them to particular people, and labeling them as outsiders' (Becker, 1997: 9); that is, deviance is considered to be a social construct. The mass media are the major source for the labelling process, as they transmit and legitimate such labels, for example Cohen's 'folk devils', and contribute to the legitimation of social control. Labelling theory is evident in popular music studies of various subcultures and their perceived 'antisocial' behaviours.

The concept of moral panic was popularized by sociologist Stanley Cohen's now classic study of mods and rockers in the UK, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Cohen states that a period of moral panic occurs when:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.
>
> (Cohen, 1980: 9)

The second stage of Cohen's view of moral panic is particularly significant, involving as it does the repudiation of the 'common-sense' view that the media simply report what happens. Cohen's own case study of the 1960s' clashes between mods and rockers in the UK (the 'folk devils' of his title) showed up just such a process of the selection and presentation of news. The media coverage of the clashes simplified their causes, labelled and stigmatized the youth involved, whipped up public feeling and encouraged a retributive, deterrent approach by those in authority. (For a helpful discussion of the subsequent application of the concept of moral panic, see Critcher, 2003.)

Examining the historical relationship between youth, 'antisocial' attitudes and behaviours and popular music means considering culture as a political issue. At a deeper level, moral panics around new media are episodes in cultural politics and the continual reconstitution and contestation of cultural hegemony. Underpinning debates over popular fiction, comics, film, television, video and popular music genres and performers are a series of assumptions about popular or 'mass' culture, which is frequently seen as diametrically opposed to a 'high' culture tradition. This dichotomy is a doubtful basis for evaluating particular forms of culture. The whole notion of a 'high–low' culture distinction must be regarded as a social construct, resting on class-based value judgements. It is more appropriate to view particular cultural forms in terms of both their formal qualities and their social function for consumers, while keeping in mind the salient point that any evaluation must be in terms relevant to the group that produces and appreciates it. This is particularly the case with popular music. With these general points in mind, I now turn to examples of music and moral panics.

Rock 'n' roll: the devil's music

The music industry and the social context of the early 1950s were ready for rock 'n' roll. With fuller employment, general economic prosperity and their emergence as an important consumer group, teenagers began to demand their own music and clothes and to develop a generation-based identity. Before 1956 popular music was dominated by American sounds, epitomized by the recurrent image of the 'crooner'. The music was largely safe, solid stuff, what Nic Cohn terms 'the palais age – the golden era of the big bands, when everything was soft, warm, sentimental, when everything was make believe' (Cohn, 1970: 11). There was little here for young people to identify with, although riot-provoking performers like Johnny Ray represented prototypes for rock.

Although rock music began with rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, as Tosches (1984) documents, it had been evolving well prior to this and was hardly the sole creation of Elvis Presley and Alan Freed. The phrase 'rock 'n' roll' itself was popularized with its sexual connotations in the music of the 1920s and was basically 'a mixture of two traditions: Negro rhythm and blues and white romantic crooning, coloured beat and white sentiment' (Cohn 1970: 11). Negro rhythm and blues was good-time music, danceable and unpretentious. While highly popular on rhythm and blues charts and radio stations, it received little airplay on white radio stations and was frequently banned because of the sexual innuendo of 1950s' R&B songs such as Hank Ballard's 'Work With Me Annie', Billy Ward's 'Sixty Minute Man' and the Penguins' 'Baby Let Me Bang Your Box'. It is this link between sex and rock 'n' roll – the devil's music – that underpinned the moral reaction to its popularization in the 1950s.

In April 1954 Bill Haley made 'Rock Around the Clock'. The record was a hit in America, then worldwide, eventually selling 15 million copies. While it did not

start rock 'n' roll, it did represent a critical symbol in the popularization of the new musical form. 'Rock Around the Clock' was featured in the MGM movie *Blackboard Jungle*, the story of a young teacher at a tough New York school. The success of the film with teenage audiences, and the popularity of Haley's song (Miller, 1999: 87–94), led to Haley's being signed to make a film of his own. *Rock Around the Clock* (1956) told how Bill Haley and his band popularized rock 'n' roll, but the thin story was really a showcase for the rock acts on the soundtrack. The film proved enormously popular internationally, but attracted controversy over its effect on audiences. In Britain, for example, local councils banned showings of the film following riots in some cinemas. According to contemporary press reports, in the Gaiety Cinema, Manchester:

> gangs of teenage youths and their girlfriends danced in the aisles, vaulted up on to the stage, and turned fire hoses on the manager when he tried to restore order. After the programme, they surged into city streets in a wild stampede, bringing traffic to a standstill in the centre of town and pounding a rock 'n' roll rhythm on buses and cars with their fists.

Haley was an unlikely hero for youth to emulate, since his image (old, balding, chubby) hardly matched the music, but others were waiting in the wings. In this brief overview, complex developments must be reduced to their key moments. The success of Haley was one, the emergence of Chuck Berry and Little Richard another. Elvis Presley's was the biggest yet:

> His big contribution was that he brought it home just how economically powerful teenagers could really be. Before Elvis, rock had been a feature of vague rebellion. Once he'd happened, it immediately became solid, self-contained, and then it spawned its own style in clothes and language and sex, a total independence in almost everything – all the things that are now taken for granted.
>
> (Cohn, 1970: 23)

Cohn is overly enthusiastic about teenagers' independence, but by the end of 1957 Elvis had grown into an annual US$20 million industry and the process of homogenization of both 'the King' and the music had begun.

The new music provoked considerable criticism, with many older musicians contemptuous of rock 'n' roll, and conservative commentators regarding it as a moral threat:

> Viewed as a social phenomenon, the current craze for rock 'n' roll material is one of the most terrifying things ever to have happened to popular music. Musically speaking, of course, the whole thing is laughable. It is a monstrous threat, both to the moral acceptance and the artistic emancipation of jazz. Let us oppose it to the end.
>
> (British jazzman, Steve Race, in Rogers, 1982: 18)

Rock 'n' roll 'down under'

Although necessarily brief, this capsule view of the early history of rock 'n' roll is apposite, since the New Zealand experience I now turn to followed developments overseas, illustrating the rapid establishment of rock as an international phenomenon. This can be seen through New Zealand's response to the film *Rock Around the Clock* and the emergence of the antipodean folk devil, the 'bodgie' (the quotes here are from contemporary press reports). The local reaction in each case contained elements of a moral panic, with youth once again being constructed as posing a social problem.

As with their overseas counterparts, by the mid-1950s New Zealand youth were more visible and more affluent. Contemporary press advertising reflected increased awareness of youth as a distinctive market, particularly for clothes and records. Dances and concerts catering for youth increased and the nationally broadcast Lever Hit Parade began in November 1955.

In late 1956 *Rock Around the Clock* arrived in New Zealand and was approved for general exhibition by the film censor, who noted that 'a somewhat compulsive rhythm pervaded the film but otherwise there was nothing unusual about it'. Anticipation of similar scenes in New Zealand to the riots accompanying screenings of the film overseas were rarely met. Despite press headlines such as 'Larrikins Take Over After Film' and 'Rock 'n' Roll Addicts in Minor Disturbance', the crowds attending screenings were, in fact, generally restrained. Indeed, there was almost an air of disappointment. The police, prepared for trouble, were present at and following some screenings, but were rarely needed. In Auckland, the country's main centre:

> in spite of a few policemen standing by, and the expectancy that had booked the cinema out, the first night's showing passed off with nothing more rowdy than some adolescent hand-clapping, some whistling and stamping, a little squealing in the rain after the show, and one charge of obstruction.

This was in spite of the cinema's provocative publicity for the film, which included a foyer display of press cuttings of the riots produced by the film overseas!

For most observers, rock 'n' roll was at worst a safety valve and a passing craze: 'It does invite one to dance with hypnotic abandon and self-display, but to listen to it is more monotonous than boogie-woogie'! As occurred overseas, there was a tendency to see rock 'n' roll as:

> not a very attractive art form for those whose tastes have made any progress towards maturity. Prime requisites appear to be that the words – or sounds – should be meaningless and repetitive, while any semblance of melody is hastily and noisily murdered.

Generally, however, the press ignored the new phenomenon, while popular music on the radio remained largely confined to the numerous Maori show bands of the day, supplemented by a bit of jazz.

New Zealand's first real rock 'n' roll hero emerged in 1957: Johnny Devlin, an 18-year-old bank clerk. Devlin was a self-conscious Presley imitator, a natural singer and showman. His first record, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy', became the most successful local single of the 1950s. Successful tours, including a hugely successful five-month national tour during 1958, saw sell-out houses, Devlin mobbed by screaming girls and several incidents of damage to theatres and injuries to the police protecting the singer. While the tour subsequently assumed almost mythic proportions in the history of rock 'n' roll in New Zealand, there was clearly an element of media promotional hype present. Devlin, for example, wore lightly stitched clothing to facilitate the incidents where the fans 'ripped the clothes from his back'.

If both *Rock Around the Clock* and Johnny Devlin's concerts failed to measure up as local moral panics, the bodgies represented New Zealand's very own folk devils of the 1950s. Bodgies and 'widgies', their female companions, were the local equivalent of the English teddy boys, adopting similar styles:

> The males wore unusual and exaggerated haircuts. All went to extremes in the style of suits worn. The trousers were all much tighter in the legs than usual. Some favoured extreme shortness of leg exposing garishly coloured socks. Coats, when worn, were fuller in cut and much longer than is normal by conservative standards, while all favoured brightly coloured shirts, pullovers or wind-breakers, and neckerchiefs.
>
> (Manning, 1958: 9)

Although Manning makes little reference to the leisure pursuits of the group, other sources indicate that as in Britain rock 'n' roll was the musical style the bodgies most strongly identified with: Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochrane joining earlier heroes like Haley.

Manning's was an openly hostile study; it is subtitled 'A Study in Psychological Abnormality'. The New Zealand public and press largely shared his view of bodgies as juvenile delinquents who posed a social threat. The bodgie soon became a national bogey man, with alarmist newspaper reports about bodgie behaviour. During 1958 one Wellington paper reported that 'the parade of brutality' by bodgies and widgies had reached such a peak that many parents were 'fearful of allowing their children out at night'. Gender inscribed these discourses: the hysteria provoked by Devlin was a predominantly female phenomenon, which received little serious criticism; the male bodgie was a different matter: 'When they are not feeling in too violent a mood they confine their activities to pushing people off footpaths. When looking for thrills, they fight among themselves, often with knives and bicycle chains' (press reports). Bodgies became identified with hooliganism or vandalism and parliament debated the problem. Young compulsory military trainees on leave harassed and beat up bodgies, forcibly taking over bodgie milk bars in central Auckland, while incoming trainees with bodgie haircuts were initially left unshorn, resulting in harassment.

The bodgie threat was clearly an exaggerated one. In conformist New Zealand of the late 1950s, bodgies and widgies stood out. The surprising fact was not that New Zealand had young delinquents, 'but that they are relatively such a small group' (NZ *Listener*, editorial, 18 April 1958).

Rock, free speech and the New Right

During the mid-1980s a general trend towards censorship emerged in the US, headed by well-organized and well-financed pressure groups from the 'New Right', seeking to impose censorship on musicians, filmmakers and writers whose points of view they neither agreed with nor approved of. While the 'New Right' is a complex network of political, secular and religious organizations rather than a unified grouping, it exerted considerable influence through its letter writing and petition campaigns, its television and radio programmes and the publications of its ideological think-tanks. The various New Right groups recognized that shared public concerns with social issues can be successfully mobilized to achieve and maintain political support and solidarity.

Such conservative groups have historically targeted youth subcultures, most notably punk and rock music as a threat to traditional 'family' values (Martin and Seagrave, 1988: Chapter 21). The music is perceived as embodying a range of negative influences, which need to be regulated and controlled. It is claimed that rock is:

> the single most powerful tool with which Satan communicates his evil message. MURDER MUSIC has led millions of young people into alcoholism, abortion, crime, drug addiction, incest, prostitution, sadomasochism, satanic worshipping, sexual promiscuity, suicide and much more. MURDER MUSIC has to be STOPPED NOW! The moral fiber of our country and young lives are at stake!
>
> ('Rock deprogrammer', Pastor Fletcher Brothers,
> abridged from Denselow 1990: 264)

Initially the anti-rock campaign was spearheaded by fundamentalist Christian groups, aligned with powerful right-wing pressure groups sponsored by television evangelists, such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell. While pushing for stricter censorship legislation, such groups enjoyed more success through pressure on the music producers and distributors. Tele-evangelist Jimmy Swaggart, after equating rock with 'pornography and degenerative filth which denigrates all the values we hold sacred and is destructive to youth', met with company representatives of the Wal-Mart discount chain, whose 800 outlets subsequently stopped stocking rock and teen magazines and albums by a number of bands, including Ozzy Osbourne and Mötley Crüe, because of their alleged 'satanic' and 'pornographic' content (Kennedy, 1990: 135).

The PMRC

The New Right attack on rock and free speech was boosted by the formation, in 1985, of the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC). Headed by a group of

'Washington wives' – most were married to Senators or Congressmen – who were also 'born-again' Christians, the PMRC dedicated itself to 'cleaning up' rock music, which it saw as potentially harmful to young people, terming it 'secondary child abuse'. One of the founding members, Tipper Gore, became involved because she had bought her eight-year-old daughter a copy of Prince's album *Purple Rain* and found that one of its songs, 'Darling Nicki', referred to masturbation ('I met her in a hotel lobby, masturbating with a magazine').

The PMRC published a *Rock Music Report*, condemning what it claimed to be the five major themes in the music: rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion, violence-nihilism and the occult. It started a highly organized letter-writing campaign and began arguing for the implementation of a ratings system for records, similar to that used in the cinema. The PMRC also sent copies of lyrics of songs it saw as objectionable to programme directors at radio and television stations, to be screened for 'offensive material' and pressed record companies to reassess the contracts of artists who featured violence, substance abuse or explicit sexuality in their recorded work or concerts.

All these measures were aimed at encouraging self-censorship in the music industry and the group's tactics met with considerable success. The high point of its efforts was the 1985 US Senate Commerce Committee hearings on the influence of music (see Denselow, 1990: Chapter 10). No legislation came out of the hearings, but the Record Industry Association of America voluntarily responded by introducing a generic 'Parents' Advisory Explicit Lyrics' label to appear on albums deemed to warrant it, a practice that became widespread during the 1990s. The next major focus for the PMRC was the Dead Kennedys' obscenity trial during 1986–1987.

Penis Landscape

In December 1985 a 13-year-old girl bought a copy of the Dead Kennedys' album *Frankenchrist* (Alternative Tentacles, 1985) from a record shop in the San Fernando Valley in California. The record contained a poster entitled 'Penis Landscape' by Swiss surrealist artist H.R. Giger, best known for his Oscar-winning work on the sets of the film *Alien*. The work was a detail from a larger painting, *Landscape #20, Where Are We Coming From?* and depicted male appendages arranged in neat rows. Jello Biafra, the Dead Kennedys' lead singer, explained that he had included the print because: 'The painting portrayed to me a vortex of exploitation and I realized that the same theme ran through the album.' The band put an 'alternative' warning sticker on the album: 'WARNING: the fold-out to this album contains a work of art by H.R. Giger that some people may find shocking, repulsive or offensive. Life can sometimes be that way.' The girl's parents saw it differently and complained to the State Attorney General's Office that it was 'pornographic'. In April 1986 police raided Jello Biafra's home and the office of Alternative Tentacles Records, the label founded by the Dead Kennedys, looking for obscene material. None was found, but in June Biafra was eventually charged with distributing harmful material to minors and the case finally went to trial in August 1987.

The Dead Kennedys had been the subject of controversy and the target of New Right censorship before. Formed in San Francisco in 1978, the band played a form of punk thrash music with politically hard-edged lyrics. Their first single 'California Über Alles' was a satirical attack on State Governor Jerry Brown, and included lines like 'Your kids will meditate in school' and 'You will jog for the master race'. Later work included 'Holiday in Cambodia' about the horrors of the Pol Pot regime and the anti-alcohol warning 'Too Drunk To Fuck', which gained chart success despite its title and the subsequent lack of radio airplay. Shunned by the mainstream record companies, while their name alone practically ensured commercial failure in the US, the Dead Kennedys' records enjoyed considerable success in the European 'indie' charts. Albums including *Bedtime for Democracy* tackled political subjects such as Reagan's foreign policy and the US censorship lobby, satirized MTV and attacked American business involvement in South Africa. While the groups punk thrash backing and Biafra's breakneck lyrics often made the lyrics almost unintelligible, this was hardly work to endear the band to the establishment.

Jello's trial in Los Angeles in 1987 was seen as a major test case for the censorship of popular music. Support from Frank Zappa and Little Steven and a series of benefit shows from European punk bands helped raise the $70,000 needed for defence costs. Biafra defended himself and was articulate in his opposition to censorship and his support for free speech. He argued that there was a danger that the US was returning to the climate of the 1950s, when anti-communist witch hunts led to the banning of an earlier political songwriter, Pete Seeger. The case ran for two weeks. The jury deadlocked (seven to five) in Jello's favour, but could make no further progress and the judge finally declared a mistrial (Kennedy, 1990: 144).

Even if it were a victory for free speech, the case had finished the Dead Kennedys. Already having internal problems, with Biafra tied up in the litigation process and prevented from performing, the group broke up in December 1986. Biafra went on to a career as a 'political performance artist', doing monologue style presentations such as 'Ollie North for President' – the PMRC remained active and moved on to new targets.

Rap

In the early 1990s rap music became the main target of the 'anti-rock, pro-censorship' lobby. The new genre had already been attacked from the left for its sexism and homophobia and was now criticized for its profanity and obscenity. A judge in Florida declared the rap group 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty as they Want to Be* to be obscene, the first such ruling for a recorded work in US history. Following this, a record store owner was arrested when he sold the album to an undercover police officer and three members of the band were arrested for performing material from the album at a concert with an 'adults' only' rating. The

band members were eventually acquitted of the obscenity charge but the conviction of the store owner was upheld.

The anti-authority political attitudes and values in some rap music also attracted the attention of the New Right. The Los Angeles rap group Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA) song 'Fuck tha Police' and Ice-T's song 'Cop Killer' both caused considerable controversy and calls to ban their performers' concerts and records. In the UK, in October 1990, gangsta rappers NWA released a single with a B-side 'She Swallowed It', dealing with oral sex. Many of the major department store chains and some music retailers refused to stock the record, conscious of the lack of clarity surrounding the 1959 Obscene Publications Act and fearing prosecution. In June 1991 NWA released a second album, *Efil4zaggin* (Niggaz 4 Life, backwards) in the UK, after it had already topped the American *Billboard* chart and sold nearly one million copies in its first week of release. The album contained a number of tracks featuring sexual degradation and extreme violence toward women, along with considerable swearing. The police raided the premises of Polygram, the record's UK distributor, and seized some 12,000 copies of the album and shops withdrew the album from sale. A prosecution followed, using the Obscene Publications Act's definition of an 'obscene article' as one which 'tend(s) to deprave and corrupt'. The high-profile court case revolved around free speech arguments versus claims that the record was obscene, especially in its portrayal of women. The magistrates who judged the case ruled that the album was not obscene under the terms of the act; the seized stock was returned and the album went back on sale (see Cloonan, 1996, for a detailed treatment of this episode and the associated issues).

Cop Killer

Ice-T's 'Cop Killer' (WB, 1992) is a revenge fantasy of the disempowered, in which the singer recounts getting ready to 'dust some cops off'. The warning sticker on the tape cassette version of the album *Body Count*, which includes 'Cop Killer', hardly appeased critics of the record: 'Warning: This tape contains material that may be offensive to someone out there!' It was claimed that the song glorified the murder of police and both President Bush and Vice-President Dan Quayle sided with law-enforcement groups in protesting Time-Warner's release of the record. Several US national record store chains stopped selling *Body Count* and in July 1992 Time-Warner pulled the song at Ice-T's request after police groups picketed the media conglomerate's shareholders meeting in Beverley Hills. Anxious to avoid governmental regulation, in September, Warner Music Group executives met with several of the rappers on the label, including Ice-T, and warned them to change their lyrics on some songs or find another label for their work (*Los Angeles Times*, 10 December 1992). Time-Warner's Sire Records delayed the release of Ice-T's *Home Invasion* album; the performer eventually changed labels and the album was released on Rhyme Syndicate/Virgin in 1993.

In New Zealand, in July 1992, the Police Commissioner unsuccessfully attempted to prevent an Ice-T concert in Auckland, arguing that 'Anyone who comes to this country preaching in obscene terms the killing of police, should not be welcome here.' Several record shop owners refused to stock the album containing the song. The local music industry, student radio stations and several leading music journalists responded by defending the song as a piece of 'role play', linking it with the singer's recent performance in the film *New Jack City* and the right to free speech. Undeterred, the police took *Body Count* and the song's publishers and distributors, Warners, to the Indecent Publications Tribunal, in an effort to get it banned under New Zealand's Indecent Publications Act. This was the first time in 20 years that a sound recording had come before this censorship body and the first ever case involving popular music (previous sound recording cases before the tribunal were 'readings' from erotic novels or memoirs!). As such, it created considerable interest, not least due to the appeal of rap among the country's Polynesian and Maori youth (see Chapter 11).

The case rehearsed familiar arguments around the influence of song lyrics. The police contended that:

> given the content of the songs, it is possible that people could be corrupted by hearing the sound recording, and in the case of the song 'Cop Killer' that some individuals may be exhorted to act with violence towards the Police. The course of conduct advocated in the song 'Cop Killer' is a direct threat to law enforcement personnel generally and causes grave concern to the police.
>
> (Mr H. Woods, Senior Legal Adviser for the New Zealand Police, cited in Indecent Publications Tribunal Decision No.100/92)

Defence submissions argued that the album offered a powerful treatment of the:

> sense of disenfranchisement and hopelessness that a large segment of American youth are faced with, and the violence that is bred in such an environment. It is a social commentary that we would like to believe is far removed from our society here in New Zealand. But whether this is so or not, the album has a validity and topicality as a reflection of the disenfranchised segment of our society.
>
> (Ms Karen Soich, Warner Brothers counsel, ibid.)

After reviewing the various submissions, and listening carefully to the album, the Tribunal concluded that 'the dominant effect of the album is complex'. While 'its lyrics are repugnant to most New Zealanders, it is a much bigger step to link those lyrics to subsequent anti-social behaviour' (ibid.). It found the song 'Cop Killer' to be 'not exhortatory', saw the album as displaying 'an honest purpose' and found *Body Count* not indecent.

These moral panics around popular music can be situated against the global emergence of a New Right, embracing free market politics and a moral cultural

conservatism. Lawrence Grossberg observes of this trend in the US: 'The new conservatism is, in a certain sense, a matter of public language, of what can be said, of the limits of the allowable. This has made culture into a crucial terrain on which struggles over power, and the politics of the nation, are waged' (Grossberg, 1992: 162).

As he concludes, this struggle involves a new form of regulation: 'a variety of attacks become tokens of a broader attack, not so much on the freedom of expression as on the freedom of distribution and circulation' (ibid.: 163). The earlier debates were reprised through the 1990s, in the controversy surrounding the work of performers such as Eminem, Dr Dre and Marilyn Manson.

In such a climate, the music industry moved further toward self-regulation. In 2000 white rapper Eminem's US chart-topping album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, was heavily criticized for its homophobic and misogynist lyrics. In what has become routine industry practice, the record label (Interscope/Universal) excised entire tracks to create an alternative album that parents can buy for their children, while extensively editing the lyrics in the remaining songs to eliminate references to drugs, violence, profanity and hate (*New York Times on the Web*, 1 August 2000).

Columbine and Marilyn Manson

The massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on 29 April 1999, resulted in 15 deaths and 23 injuries, some severe. The two young men responsible were students at the school and killed themselves at the end of their bloody rampage. News coverage of the shootings was intense. Speculation about its causes referred to the negative influence of violent media on youth, especially video games, neo-Nazi ideology and rock music (see the special forum in *Popular Music and Society*, 23, 3, Fall 1999). When it was revealed that the two boys who killed their classmates were Marilyn Manson fans, the band cancelled its American tour. (Ironically, at the same time, the National Rifle Association went ahead with its national meeting in Denver.) For some commentators, Marilyn Manson became the 'designated demon' for the Columbine massacre. Manson responded with an articulate statement in *Rolling Stone* ('Columbine: Whose Fault is It?', 24 June 1999: 23–4), observing that such simplistic associations missed the deeper reasons for the tragedy, which lay in youth disenchantment and alienation.

The latest in a succession of entertainers whose career is based on confrontation and shock value, Marilyn Manson (formerly Brian Warner) was accustomed to controversy. He and his band members play under aliases combining a famous woman's name with the last name of a serial killer; in Warner's case the well-known star Marilyn Monroe and Sharon Tate's murderer Charles Manson. The self-appointed 'Antichrist Superstar' (the title of the band's second album), has been termed 'one of rock's biggest personalities and smartest social commentators' (*Q*, January 2000: 118). In songs such as 'The Dope Show' and 'Beautiful People', he examined the underbelly of American life and popular culture. Their

highly theatrical act, reminiscent of that of Alice Cooper, was designed to shock audiences. Along with the songs, it gained the group a cult following in the mid-1990s, mainly among the goth subculture. During 1997–1998 *Antichrist Superstar* pushed them into the commercial mainstream, while Manson hit the headlines with his proclamations against organized religion. Their third album, *Mechanical Animals* (1998), topped the charts in a number of countries, but caused outrage when Manson appeared as a naked, sexless android on the cover and in the video for the single 'The Dope Show' (D. Dalton, 'Pleased to Meet You', *MOJO*, September 1999, provides an insightful analysis of Marilyn Manson's career and persona up until that time).

Controversy over particular musical styles, their performers and fans, continues to surface sporadically, with extreme metal providing the most recent example (Kahn-Harris, 2007: Chapter 2). The debates around their influence and the associated calls for the censorship of popular music and its performers are a reminder of the force of music as symbolic politics, operating in the cultural arena.

Further reading

State censorship of music, its performers and fans, is endemic in many non-western countries, but I have not had space to include this here; see:

Freemuse documents international instances of, and campaigns against, music censorship: www.freemuse.org

Cloonan, M. (1996) *Banned! Censorship of Popular Music in Britain: 1967–92*, Aldershot: Arena.

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