Censorship

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, ratified in 1791, holds, in part, that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech." As clear as that language appears, it has never stopped many who have been sworn to uphold the right of free speech from singling out Hip Hop as a culture unworthy of First Amendment protection. The history of the censorship of rap music is nearly as long as the history of the genre itself and has not tainted pandering politicians alone. Rap's often violent "gangsta" style, which was frequently condemned beginning in the late 1980s, has been the focus of concerned parents, panic-prone record labels, and plain old racists since young white listeners first became fans.[1]

An early example of the heightened scrutiny imposed on rap music was the letter condemning N.W.A's anti-police lyrics that F.B.I. Assistant Director Mitch Ahlerich sent to Priority Records on Department of Justice letterhead in August 1989.[2] It was the first and, so far, only time that the F.B.I. has ever publicly spoken out against artistic expression. Ahlerich's letter incited police boycotts, created security issues on N.W.A's tour, and may have instigated the police shutdown of one N.W.A concert when the group began performing the song, "Fuck tha Police." Gangsta rap was not the only aspect of Hip Hop culture that was targeted by the justice system. Another example was the Florida obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew, a Miami bass group whose sexually explicit 1990 album, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, was temporarily banned, resulting in the arrest of not just 2 Live Crew, but also retailers who dared to sell their

[1] The hook for Tupac Shakur' 1996 song, "They Don't Give a Fuck About Us," suggests that the American establishment feared the influence that rap music has: "Now if I choose to ride, thuggin' till the day I die / Nobody gives a fuck about us / But when I start to rise, a hero in their children's eyes / Now they give a fuck about us."

[2] Ahlerich's letter argued that "[a]dvocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exception to such action," and "recordings such as the one from N.W.A are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers."

records. Not all of the pressure was exerted to curb the content of recorded lyrics either. Professor Griff was unceremoniously booted from the politically-charged rap group Public Enemy in 1989 because of a media firestorm that ignited when Griff told the *Washington Times* that "The Jews are wicked. And we can prove this."

American hostility toward rap music increased throughout the 1990s, peaking every election cycle as politicians rushed to scapegoat music that was reflective of society's ills, rather than address the ills themselves. 1992 was an especially controversial year. That March, Ice-T's rap / metal group Body Count put out the blistering first-person narrative, "Cop Killer," as a protest against police brutality, the vicious 1991 beating of Rodney King by Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno, and Rolando Solano of the Los Angeles Police Department in particular.[3] United States Attorney General William P. Barr declared "Cop Killer," and Time Warner Entertainment's promotion of it, "reprehensible" and more than sixty members of Congress condemned it, including Republican Susan Molinari, who suggested that the song's content fell outside of the First Amendment's protection. The subsequent boycott of Warner Bros. led Ice-T to voluntarily pull Body Count's self-titled debut from stores, reissue it without "Cop Killer," and depart for Priority Records when Warner got cold feet about releasing his follow-up album, *Home Invasion*. Republicans were not the only ones who felt that rap music's messages were ripe for denunciation. Democratic Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, who was in the middle of a presidential campaign against incumbent Republican George H.W. Bush and was anxious to assuage more conservative elements of the electorate, spoke out against

[3] Ice-T became a veteran in the war against rap music years before "Cop Killer." His 1987 album, *Rhyme Pays*, was the first to be sold with a "Parental Advisory" sticker on its packaging. The stickers were pioneered by Tipper Gore, who cofounded the Parents' Music Resource Center and is the wife of former Vice President Al Gore.

emcee Sister Souljah, comparing her anti-police rhetoric to former Klu Klux Klan Imperial Wizard David Duke's racist hate speech. President Clinton's statements against rap music and its practitioners during the 1990s undoubtedly played a role in fomenting the skepticism many Hip Hop artists and fans have felt about him and his wife, Hillary, in the decades since.

Tupac Shakur, who always denied being a "gangsta" rapper, became one of Hip Hop's "most wanted" for those opposed to rap's free expression in the early 1990s. His 1991 debut, *2Pacalypse Now*, contains a number of songs depicting violence against police officers. Because Tupac was not as well-known a rap artist as Ice-T, Ice Cube, or Chuck D at that time, he initially flew under the radar of the genre's enemies. That changed when drug dealer Ronald Ray Howard murdered Texas State Trooper Bill Davidson while allegedly listening to *2Pacalypse Now* in April of 1992. The subsequent trial of Howard, who argued that Tupac's lyrics drove him into a homicidal rage, provoked condemnation of Tupac's music by Vice-President Dan Quayle, former National Security Counsel Staff Member Oliver North, and others who advocated the banning of *2Pacalypse Now*. Tupac, who was vindicated following his death in the civil case filed against him by Davidson's widow, was saddened, although not surprised, by the American government's enmity toward his art. He sampled Quayle's statement that "There is absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published. It has no place in our society" on "Pac's Theme," an interlude off *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z…*, his 1993 follow-up to *2Pacalypse Now*.[4]

Tupac's *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z…* is a good example of how external politics led to voluntary censorship within the music industry. When Tupac first turned his sophomore album

[4] A scene involving one of Dan Quayle's statements about *2Pacalypse Now* was included in the 2017 Tupac biopic, *All Eyez On Me*.

in to Interscope Records in 1992, it was filled with direct attacks on public officials and police officers. The original, never-released, version of "Holler If Ya Hear Me," for example, has an even more hostile Tupac performance than the one fans are more familiar with. On that original recording, Tupac threatened the officers who assaulted Rodney King by name, criticized black ministers who preached for peace during the Los Angeles riots, and mocked the non-violent methods used by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. After seeing Warner Bros. go through the ringer for releasing "Cop Killer," Interscope executives refused to release the album as Tupac originally envisioned it. The censorship did not cease even after Tupac had turned in an album that Interscope deemed satisfactory. The music video for the reworked lead single, "Holler If Ya Hear Me," was also edited to avoid controversy. According to the video's director, Stephen Ashley Blake, the video's original cut included a brief scene where Tupac shoots a police officer in order to free a young black girl who is sitting in the back of the officer's car. Blake told the website *2Pac-Forum* in 2014 that Interscope was "very nervous" about the scene because of the ongoing Ronald Ray Howard trial and ordered him to cut it.[5]

Unsurprisingly, the censorship of rap music did not end with the election of Bill Clinton in November 1992. In 1993, the year that *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z…* was released, a reference to the shooting of police officers was edited from "Definition of a Thug Nigga," Tupac's song on the *Poetic Justice* soundtrack. In 1994, a mid-term election year, William Bennett, the former Security of Education under Ronald Reagan and "drug czar" under George H.W. Bush, teamed

[5] Tupac discussed the censorship of the "Holler If Ya Hear Me" music video in an interview taken around the time of *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...*'s release: "My record company and all them, they cut it. So the video you see on TV ain't the one that I made so I don't like that video. I'mma say go buy my album but that ain't my video. That's some shit that they concocted to make a nigga be quiet . . . In my video it was supposed to be niggas shootin' the motherfuckin' police 'cause the police be shootin' motherfuckin' niggas. So that's what I was talkin' 'bout but they cut it and wouldn't let me do it because the police run this country."

with Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, Democratic Senator Sam Nunn, and C. Delores Tucker, an activist who marched in Selma, Alabama and was the first black woman to be Pennsylvania's Secretary of State, to hold congressional hearings on rap music. Of the many albums that the hearings deemed "pornographic smut," two in particular came under heavy fire: Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* and Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle*,[6] both of which were released by Death Row Records with the help of Interscope. Tucker saved some of her strongest criticism for Tupac, however. When Tupac was nominated for Best Actor for his performance in *Poetic Justice* at the NAACP Image Awards, Tucker demonstrated outside the ceremony. Tucker also purchased shares of Time-Warner Entertainment stock so that she could protest its stake in Interscope at shareholder meetings. Her efforts paid off. In 1995, Time Warner sold off its interest in Interscope before Death Row's release of Tha Dogg Pound's album, *Dogg Food*.[7]

Interscope felt the heat of the congressional hearings as much as any other label and, once again, Tupac bore the brunt of the American government's disdain for rap music. As with *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z…*, Tupac's Thug Life project, entitled *Volume 1* and released in September 1994, was altered out of fear of political retribution. Apparently, one of the victims of the revisions was "Runnin'," one of the few collaborations between Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G. before they fell out in 1995. Because of its lyrics related to police officers, the song was removed from *Volume 1*, robbing listeners of one of its era's most historically significant recordings. Although "Runnin'" ultimately appeared on the *One Million Strong* compilation

[6] Joe Cool's cartoon artwork inside *Doggystyle*'s liner notes was singled out by those giving testimony to Congress during the hearings.

[7] Priority Records stepped in for Time-Warner for *Dogg Food*'s release on October 31, 1995. Death Row C.E.O. Suge Knight, who accused Tucker of being a Philadelphia slumlord, claimed that her "grandstanding" was all part of a plan to gain influence over Death Row and convince it to split from Interscope. Suge filed a civil action against Tucker in 1996 that alleged that she engaged in contractual interference, extortion, and unfair business practices.

released by SOLAR Records to celebrate the Million Man March,[8] the song was cheated of its commercial potential until it was remixed by Eminem for the *Tupac: Resurrection* soundtrack in 2003.

When Tupac signed to Death Row Records following his release from prison in October 1995, one of the reasons he gave for his decision was his belief that, unlike Interscope, Death Row would not censor his lyrics. He was right. Suge Knight never impeded Tupac's ability to respond to critics, no matter how powerful they were. Tupac's rebukes of C. Delores Tucker, Bill Clinton, and Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole on his Death Row debut, *All Eyez On Me*, evidence the artistic freedom he enjoyed at his new home.[9] There were lines that even Death Row could not cross, however. Method Man's verse on "Got My Mind Made Up," track four on disc one of *All Eyez On Me*, was censored – the bar, "Like Hitler, sticking up Jews with German Lugers," can be heard as it was originally recorded on a bootleg of *All Eyez On Me*'s demo mixes.[10]

C. Delores Tucker's attacks against Tupac did not end upon his death in September 1996. She filed a $10 million lawsuit against Tupac's estate a year later, shamefully claiming, among

[8] The Million Man March was an organized gathering of African-American men on the National Mall of Washington, D.C. on October 16, 1995 that was initiated by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and was intended to "convey to the world a vastly different picture of the Black male." Tupac, who was released from prison just three days prior to the march, did not attend but told journalist Kevin Powell that he supported its cause.

[9] Tupac was not the only rap artist who took shots at C. Delores Tucker over the years. Jay-Z ("Threat"), Eminem ("Rap Game"), Lil' Wayne ("Million Dollar Baby"), and others disrespected her in songs that were recorded after Tupac's death.

[10] Even an artist as powerful as Michael Jackson could not get away with using Jewish pejoratives. His 1995 album, *HIStory: Past, Present and Future – Book I*, was pulled, censored, and reissued shortly after its release because of lines like "Jew me, sue me" and "Kick me, kike me" on "They Don't Care About Us." Similarly, Jay-Z was criticized, although not censored, in 2017 for asking, "You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America? This how they did it," on "The Story of O.J."

other things, that Tupac's derogatory references toward her on *All Eyez On Me* caused a "loss of consortium" with her husband. Because of her lawsuit, Tucker's name was removed from "How Do U Want It," one of Tupac's most popular songs, on the 1998 Tupac compilation, *Greatest Hits*. One year after *Greatest Hits* was released, United States District Judge Ronald L. Buckwalter threw out Tucker's case, finding that, "There is a vast difference between being annoyed and/or embarrassed on the one hand, and being disgraced and ridiculed to the extent that one's reputation is harmed and lowered in the estimation of the community, on the other."'[11]

The past twenty years have shown little abatement of the censorship of rap music. After the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, a reference to the February 1993 bombing of the Twin Towers was often removed from The Notorious B.I.G.'s classic 1994 single, "Juicy." Continuing the 9/11 theme, Jadakiss' song, "Why," was edited by some radio stations because of lyrics blaming President George W. Bush for "knock[ing] down the Towers." Eminem, who was probably Hip Hop's most popular emcee in September 2001, has, like Tupac, been a frequent target of protest, political condemnation, and censorship because of his lyrical content. His verses for "My Name Is," the first song he recorded with Dr. Dre, were altered shortly before release in order to remove references to rape and sex with a junior high school teacher. Not all of Eminem's censored lyrics were so juvenile. His violent bars aimed at President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney on both "Rap Game" and "We as Americans," the latter of which sparked an investigation by the Secret Service, were also censored. Not all censorship of rap music is based on the controversial nature of lyrical content, however. In 2016, Nipsey Hu$$le's tribute to Tupac's "To Live & Die in L.A." on YG's "FDT

[11] A reference to C. Delores Tucker on Tupac's anti-censorship song, "Don't Stop," was released intact on *Pac's Life* in 2006, after Tucker's death in 2005.

[Fuck Donald Trump]" – "Black love, brown pride in the sets again" – was removed for a more mundane reason. "FDT" was added to YG's *Still Brazy* shortly before its June 2016 release date, and because of Afeni Shakur's passing that May, there was no time to obtain clearance from Tupac's estate.

The above relates the stories of just a few of the rap artists who have been attacked and censored over the years. The assault on their artistic expression has not stopped. They continue to be targeted for the content of their lyrics. Too violent, too misogynistic, too profane, and too anti-authority are a few of the reasons why Hip Hop artists have been criticized, boycotted, censored, banned, arrested, tried, and even imprisoned.[12] Fortunately, many rappers have refused to bow before authority and continue to share their worldviews despite the risks that they run by doing so. Tupac would be pleased – "You wanna censor somethin', motherfucker censor this! / My words are weapons and I'm steppin' to the silent / Wakin' up the masses, but you claim that I'm violent."

> *See also 2Pacalypse Now*; *All Eyez On Me*; *All Eyez On Me* (Film); **America**; Bootlegging of Tupac's Music; C-Bo; Death Row Records; "Definition of a Thug Nigga"; "Don't Stop"; Dr. Dre; Eminem; Gangsta Rap / G-Funk; "Got My Mind Made Up"; *Greatest Hits*; "How Do U Want It"; "Holler If Ya Hear Me"; Ice Cube; Ice-T; Interscope Records; Jadakiss; Jay-Z; Knight, Marion "Suge"; Litigation of Tupac; Los Angeles Riots (1992); *Loyal to the Game*; Method Man; The Notorious B.I.G.; "Pac's Theme"; *Poetic Justice* (Film and Soundtrack); **Politics**; Profanity; **Racism**; "Runnin'"; Sampling and Tupac's Music; Snoop Dogg; *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...*; Tha Dogg Pound; "They Don't Give a Fuck About Us"; Thug Life; T.I.; "To Live and Die in L.A."; *Tupac: Resurrection* (Film and Soundtrack); **Violence**; "Violent"; and *Volume 1*.

[12] Bay Area rap artist C-Bo was imprisoned in 1998 when his violent lyrics were found to violate one of the conditions of his parole. A set of facts arguably analogous to C-Bo's were litigated in America's justice system in a widely reported case in 2015. The issue in *Bell v. Itawamba County School Board* was whether or not a high school student's off-campus rap lyrics threatening teachers who had allegedly sexually assaulted his classmates were sufficient to justify his suspension from school. Rap stars Big Boi of OutKast, Killer Mike of Run the Jewels, and T.I. signed an Amicus Brief submitted to the United States Supreme Court in support of Bell's lawsuit against the school board. The Court declined to hear the case, thereby allowing the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals' decision upholding Bell's suspension to stand.