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John Denver

Senate Statement on Rock Lyrics & Record Labeling

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Honorable Chairman, Members of the Committee, ladies and gentlemen:

It's a great honor and a privilege to -- to appear before you this morning and to take advantage of the opportunity given me in our free society to speak my mind, to give voice to my opinions in a public forum in front of not only the leadership of our great country, but the press and the media, and through them, all who might be listening around our country and around the world.

I am here to address the issue of a possible rating system in the Recording Industry, labeling records where excesses of explicit sex or graphic violence have occurred and, furthermore, references to drugs and alcohol or the occult are included in the lyrics. These hearings have been called to determine whether or not the Government should intervene to enforce this practice.



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Mr. Chairman, this would approach censorship. May I be very clear that I am strongly opposed to censorship of any kind in our society, or anywhere else in the world.

I've had in my experience two encounters with th[is] sort of censorship. My song "Rocky Mountain High" was banned from many radio stations as a drug-related song.

This was obviously done by people who had never seen or been to the Rocky Mountains and also had never experienced the elation, the celebration of life, or the joy in living that one feels when he observes something as wondrous as the Perseides meteor shower, on a moonless and cloudless night, when there are so many stars that you have a shadow from the starlight, and you're out camping with your friends, your best friends, and introducing them to one of nature's most spectacular light shows for the very first time.

Obviously a clear case of misinterpretation.

Mr. Chairman, what assurance have I that any national panel to review my music would make any better judgment?

To my knowledge, my movie "Oh God!" was not banned in any theaters. However, some newspapers refused to print our advertisements, and some theaters refused to put the name of the film on the marquee. I don't believe that we were using the name of our Lord in vain. Quite the opposite, we were making a small effort to spread his message that we are here for each other and not against each other.

Discipline and self-restraint, when practiced by an individual, a family, or a company is an effective way to deal with this issue. The same thing when forced on a people by their government or, worse, by a self-appointed watchdog of public morals, is suppression and will not be tolerated in a democratic society.

Mr. Chairman, the suppression of the people of a society begins, in my mind, with the censorship of the written or spoken word. It was so in Nazi Germany. It is so in many places today where those in power are afraid of the consequences of an informed and educated people.



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In a matured and incredibly diverse society such as ours, the access to all perspectives of an issue becomes more and more important. Those things which in our experience are undesirable generally prove to be unfulfilling and sooner or later become boring. That process cannot and should not be stifled.

On the other hand, that which is denied becomes that which is most interesting. That which is hidden -- excuse me. 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. Our children, our people, our society and the world cannot afford this waste.

It was my pleasure to meet with radio programmers and broadcasters from all over the country this past week in Dallas. They expressed their concern about this issue and the direction in which it seemed to be going. They also expressed their willingness to practice the discipline and self-restraint that I mentioned earlier, especially when they were given direction by their listeners. Now, I believe this to be true because they're in business to please their listening audience.

I would like to acknowledge the PMRC for bringing this issue to the attention of not only our industry, but our Government and our people. It is obvious that we are dealing with a real problem which warrants our concern. I would like to point out, however, that we address ourselves not to the problem, but to the symptoms.

I suggest that explicit lyrics and graphic videos are not so far removed from what is seen on television every day and night, whether it be in the soap operas or on the news. That we should point our finger at the Recording Industry while watching the general public at a nationally televised baseball game chant, in unison, "The Blue Jays suck" is ludicrous.

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.



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To quote a wise old man from ancient China: "If there be righteousness," not self-righteousness -- that's is not part of the quote:

If there be righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character. If there be beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home. If there be harmony in the home, there will be order in the Nation. And if there be order in the Nation, there will be peace in the world.¹

I thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman -- excuse me -- if I may add a couple of personal words. I am a father of two children, both adopted. I have a lot of friends in the music business, other rock performers who have children also. And all of them, including myself, we have a great concern for our children. That's -- That's why I'm here today.

In my experience, sir, all over the world, one of the most interesting things about the music that -- that young people are listening to is it gives us as adults a very clear insight as to what is going on in their minds. We can know what they are thinking by listening to the music that they surround themselves with.

The people that I've had the opportunity to talk with, the troubled children, the teenagers who are considering suicide, what they expressed to me is a real frustration in their lives, an inability to communicate with their parents, an inability to understand or to envision any kind of a possible future because of the nuclear threat that we live under. They don't see things getting better economically. They don't see things getting better for the small businessman, for the small farmer. They do not see a future for themselves.

It is my opinion that it is out of this that some young people put a gun into their mouths and pull the trigger. We can turn this around, sir. We can address the reality of a problem and not deal with just the symptoms, and create not only a better world for our children but for ourselves and all of humanity. We can end hunger. We can rid the world of nuclear weapons. We can learn to live together as human beings on a planet that travels through the universe, living the example of peace and harmony among all people.

¹ Attributed to Confucius.