

Music and Censorship ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Artists should be given free reign in the creation and display of their works regardless if these said pieces of work offend or disparage some – or even – all persons’ beliefs and values. Artists should be able to create, write and perform and use whatever it is that drives them to accomplish the works that they do. Sometimes artists choose to use their work as a forum for their political and religious beliefs and ideas. This is no different than politicians and religious leaders using their positions to promote their ideologies. There is no reason why an artist cannot use their freedom of expression in their songs, books, or art. Suppressing freedom is damaging to the individual freedoms that are the basic civil rights of all citizens. If even just one person is allowed to voice his/her opinions and concerns – regardless of what form they choose to use – then every person shall be able to do the same if he/she so desires. There is no guarantee that anyone else will pay attention if the message is not appealing. However, it is the right of every American citizen to practice free speech including various forms of artistic expression.

After the United States Constitution had been written, some of the Founding Fathers wanted to ratify it to exclude such items as the Bill of Rights – including the first amendment - to guarantee rights to all of its citizens. Not all Americans approved of the new Constitution, arguing that it gave too much power to a centralized, federal government and that it lacked a bill of rights to protect citizens against the coercive powers of the state. The *Federalist Papers* were started by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison to argue for these ratifications to the United States Constitution. These publications attempted to finesse the country towards their way of thinking. Eventually the desire for a stable federal government and the promise of the prompt addition of the bill of rights, brought ratification from the required majority of states.

With that said, this is still a country comprised of “We the people” and artists are certainly a part of that citizenry. Every voice shall be heard no matter how that voice is parlayed whether it is via a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., a novel by Mark Twain, a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe or a song by Green Day. In Rolling Stone magazine’s issue 1039, Eddie Vedder was asked if free speech is in danger. He replied, “Absolutely, at the hands of those in power – big corporations... It doesn’t seem like a far stretch – that our daily communication and access to information can be controlled and monitored...” In August 2007, Vedder’s band Pearl Jam performed in Chicago at Lollapalooza which was being broadcasted by AT&T. While playing their song “Daughter,” they interjected riffs from Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” altering lyrics to criticize President George Bush. No one who saw the broadcast heard more than the first line because AT&T had censored the rest of it. After receiving a lot of flack, the company apologized for its action, stating that it had made a mistake and changed current company policy to respect freedom of expression and “believes it is a foundation of our free society to express differing points of view.” AT&T stated they will not terminate, disconnect or suspend service because of the views anyone expresses on public policy matters, political issues or political campaigns.

Madonna is an artist who is no stranger to controversy with her work. Her video for "Like a Prayer" caused a commotion with the Catholic Church. The video contained images of stigmata, burning crosses and a rape scene which offended many Catholics. Madonna should have the right to articulate how she wants to show the meaning of her music. The American government and society ought not to interfere with her dalliances. Their responsibility to artists as well as the rest of its inhabitants is to permit unalienable natural rights that it supposedly stands for. As Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong said, "I'm a musician and I want to say positive things. If it's about self-indulgent depression or overthrowing the government, it's gotta come from my heart." Perhaps this freedom enhances the artist's ability to make his/her audience think. Without this right to free speech, the country may never have changed and grown. Even if the message is one that not everyone agrees with, it still put forth a new or different perspective worth at least a second glance or listen. A country cannot prosper without respecting the diversity of its people.

Artists' responsibility to society is to maintain their integrity with their work. No matter what the message is from the artist, it should reflect the artist's own beliefs and values. If this message should attract an audience and inspire them to think or act differently, then there should be no interference from the government or institutions that lead the country. The only exception may be if a law was broken - unless of course - it is the law that is being questioned. Even if the message repulses an audience, then maybe this is the intent of the artist. Sometimes people need to see the reality in things even if those things are ugly. That may be the only way to get people motivated to change. If they are not inclined to do so, they have the option to turn it off or look away or create something in protest of it.