Kevin Concannon, "Art After Midnight: Satan and the New Censorship," 
*Media Arts*, Spring/Summer 1989, pp. 10/12.
ART AFTER MIDNIGHT:
SATAN AND THE NEW CENSORSHIP
Kevin Concannon

What do Senators Paul Simon and Albert Gore Jr. have in common? They’re both failed Presidential candidates, and both of them are married to women affiliated with the Washington-based Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), an association at the helm of the New Censorship. In June of 1985, the PMRC thrust itself into the spotlight using Ed Meese’s Commission on Pornography as the vehicle for its campaign against porn rock. With the national PTA at its side, the PMRC carried the banner of “family values” — now painfully familiar to us from recent election campaigns — and began an intensive lobbying and press effort designed to force these values into the throats, ears and eyes of all Americans.

Within three months, the PMRC was at the center of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications hearings on porn rock, up against Frank Zappa, John Denver and Twisted Sister’s Dee Snyder. More headlines followed, as did a deal with the Recording Industry Association of America in which the trade group agreed to label records with “explicit lyrics.” Faced with the Constitution as obstacle, the PMRC could have hoped for little more. As it turned out, few companies complied with the agreement.

If few record company executives take the PMRC seriously, other people do — particularly preachers. Recognizing a strategic opportunity when it hit them in the faces, the Washington wives hired an “interdenominational” minister (who happened to be a former rock musician) as a consultant. The Reverend Jeff Lind worked the Congressional crowd with an audio-visual presentation on the obscenity and corrupting influence of rock musicians on America’s children.

While no legislators have yet figured out a way to legally censor records, inroads have been paved. The mayor and city council of San Antonio, Texas have passed a law banning children under thirteen from attending any concert deemed sexually offensive. Cleveland’s city council, in a similar action, passed a resolution urging radio stations not to play songs with offensive sexual or obscene lyrics. Says Susan Baker (wife of Secretary of State James Baker): “We’re not saying artists can’t write what they want to write about. But we are saying, ‘Goodness gracious, we have a right to protect our children from trash.'”

The last time such an intensive investigation focused on rock music was in 1963 when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) spent a month listening to the King’smen’s “Louie Louie” only to determine that the song was unintelligible and therefore not obscene. Today’s legislators of morality might have remembered this episode and realized that talking with record companies will get them nowhere.

Records are sold through radio airplay, and radio regulators get much faster results in the land of the free. Tipper (Mrs. Albert) Gore’s Christian connection paid off in April 1987. Responding to public complaints, the FCC adopted new measures to severely curtail the use of explicit language about sex and bodily functions on radio, television and telephone communications under the Commission’s jurisdiction.

One of the first victims of the new restraints was radio station KFJK in Los Angeles, threatened with criminal prosecution for its broadcast of Jerker, or the Helping Hand, a radio drama about a Vietnam veteran and an AIDS patient who fall in love over the telephone. The FCC called the program indecent for its graphic depiction of homosexual sex acts. The complaint was an Orange County minister.


Other stations cited in the April 1987 FCC action included KGSR in San Antonio for playing a song describing anal and oral intercourse, and WYSP in Philadelphia for the crude and suggestive remarks of radio personality Howard Stern. In what might be considered evidence of the fairness of the “community standards” policy maintained by the FCC, the New York carrier of the same Stern show was not cited. Many of the complaints came from organizations such as the National Federation for Decency run by Reverend D. Wildmon.

Pacifica Foundation, the owners of KPFK, sued the FCC, calling the Commission’s action illegal. Within a few weeks, the Commission announced that it would not penalize the stations because of the late hour of the broadcasts. The definition of indecent material as “that which depicts or describes — in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards or the broadcast medium — sexual or excretory activities or organs,” apparently has a lot to do with timing. While the Commission’s custom had been to allow “indecent” programming after 10 pm, the new edict defines the “safe harbor” for indecent airwaves as after midnight and before 6 am, “to conform with changing family schedules.”

Until its recent actions, the Commission had not cited a broadcaster for indecency since 1976, when “seven dirty words” were prohibited. The doctrine of the “seven dirty words” was upheld in 1978 by the Supreme Court in a battle over the broadcast of the famous George Carlin comedy skit of the same name. Still, the religious right wasn’t satisfied with the knowledge that, without radio airplay, records won’t sell. Thus the grassroots born-agains jumped on another bandwagon in their crusade against filth: unmasking Satan’s evil messages in rock music.

Kevin Concannon produces radio broadcasts about artists and writes frequently about sound art and phonograph records by visual artists. He serves as coordinator of special programs for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond.

> To Page 12
I've always had my doubts about the case. If you listen to the two bits on The White Album, the clues are there, but the mirrored voices are unnatural, distorted. On the other hand, the Beatles had used backmasking two years earlier in the song Rain. The last section of that song features a looped and reversed background effect from the vocal lines in the first part of the song. There's no doubt about this one. As the looped parts are heard forward, it's pretty obvious that what you're hearing is toppy-turvy.

On his 1976 cover of the song on the album Faithful Todd Rundgren — true to the album's title — duplicated the effect precisely. The "number nines" on the Beatles track, however, sound completely natural as "number nine" and more than a little strange as "turn me on dead man." The bit at the end of I'm So Tired sounds strange in any way.

After the tremendous amount of attention focused on The White Album, fans began to drive themselves crazy playing their records backwards. Sales zoomed. During my investigations for this article, several people insisted that Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven contained backmasked satanic messages. The only hidden satanic message that I could confirm, however, is that when the inside illustration is held against a mirror, and thus doubled to itself, an image of the devil emerges from the rocks. At the time, both Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones were pushing the occult as part of their package.

After a while, the frantic search for meaning by the rock-and-roll Panofskys subsided. The next time major attention was focused on backmasking in its more discreet context was in 1985, thanks to the efforts of Tipper Gore's PMRC. Hard-core heavy metal bands including Adrenaline O.D., Grim Reaper and Iron Maiden were alleged to have backmasked satanic messages in their records. Gore's organization commissioned the Institute for Biocoeutical Research to investigate the phenomenon. They came up with so little in the way of hard evidence that today the PMRC no longer discusses backmasking at all. (Perhaps they should have hired F. Lee Bailey.)

While there are indeed backmasked messages contained in records of that time, the few confirmed examples that I could find are far from satanic. Prince warns his listeners to prepare for the second coming in a backmasked message on the track Darling Nikki from the Purple Rain (1984) album. This one must have proved extremely troublesome for Gore. She started the PMRC, she says, because she purchased this record for her eight-year-old daughter, not realizing how sinful it was. In its forward direction, the song Darling Nikki introduces the title character "in a hotel lobby masturbating in a magazine." In Prince's backmasked message at the end of the track, he says: "Hello. How are you? I'm fine because I know the Lord's coming soon."

This is one of the very few backmasked messages to have surfaced since the Beatles' rumors spawned a bunch of deliberate backmask messages such as one by Electric Light Orchestra in the track Fire on High, which says, "The record is reversible but time is not. Turn back. Turn back." After the fuss kicked up by the PMRC, a lot of heavy metal bands, some of whom had been guilty of Satan glorification in the past, inserted backmasked messages designed to poke fun at Tipper. Many of them promoted the virtues of Jesus over Satan.

Led by the Reverends Dan and Steve Peters, a growing number of born-again preachers are touring audio-visual shows to college campuses on the subject of backmasking. While these shows generally begin with the well-known Beatles story and include a few legitimate examples in which the artists have cut a piece of tape out of their master and reinserted it backwards, these presentations focus on what they believe to be a more rampant and insidious phenomenon: satanic backward messages put into records by the devil himself.

While the preachers acknowledge that it would be virtually impossible to record something that made sense both backwards and forward deliberately, they maintain that, unbeknownst to the recording artists, the devil is inserting subliminal, backmasked messages into their records. And they want to censor these records as well. In 1982, California Assemblyman Philip Wyman actually proposed a law to mandate warning labels on records that contained subliminal messages.

In their book and companion audiocassette Rock's Hidden Persuader: The Truth About Backmasking, the Peters brothers state: "The complexity of these hidden messages seems to defy human innovation. It seems feasible, therefore, that the supernatural has sometimes been at work without the knowledge of the rock musicians or the recording technicians." As examples they cite Queen's song Another One Bites the Dust, which backward supposedly says, "Decide to smoke marijuana," and Electric Light Orchestra's Eldorado, which allegedly contains the reversed line "Christ, you're the nasty one, you're infernal."

These and many other examples on their tape will keep you scratching your head and holding your belly for hours. Is Michael Jackson a Satan worshiper? There are more people out there than you think who'll believe it. The born-agains are coming and they vote.

To date, there has been little concern or reaction from the arts community about all this. But we're next, and the crusade has begun. In response to a recent New York Post front page headline story about tax dollars being spent to "push gay way of life," New York State Council on the Arts chair Betty Harari and executive director Mary Hays were summoned to Albany to explain why they had funded a photography exhibition on transvestism, a lesbian feminist literary magazine, and a film on a gay rights march on Washington. Hart held the dogs at bay and even used the opportunity to request a higher allocation for the agency. Once again, the arts emerged relatively unharmed, but the lions are not getting any less hungry.