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Art After Midnight: Satan and the New Censorship

When people stopped paying attention to the more obvious racy lyrics of pop songs, the hundreds of profane words America started spewing backwards again. The Stones were among the first to use backmasking as a recording technique. The whole thing revolved around the alleged death of Paul McCartney for a couple of months in the late fifties, virtually every pop radio station in the country revealed their discs, supposedly planted within Beatles records, that "poor" Paul was dead. For some reason, John, George and Ringo didn't want to come right out and tell the world that Paul was dead. Instead, they had turned it into an all-star game.

You may recall some of its evidence. The song we hear the album of it. Paul was dead at the station as well as with the other side. The former played "200 W" essentially would have been around the globe.

place of evidence with combined individuals in the trash Revolution Sunday through the album The Beatles (1968), better known as The White Album.

Number 2 is a unique example placed in the key perhaps the most widely based example of this genre. The phrase "number one" is repeated over and over throughout the work. When I was in the military, I saw, "Just me on this one." Twenty one years later, I still can't figure out how these words could be so common to the individual, but there is no doubt that the Stones had my doubts about the man. If you listen to the two sides on The White Album, the chorus is there, but the sampled voices are obviously distorted. On the other hand, the Beatles had used backmasking two years earlier in the song "Back in the U.S.S.R." The last portion of that song became a hoped and repeated backmasking effect from the vocal line in the last part of the song. There's no doubt about this one. In the sound game we heard forward, it's quite obvious that what you're hearing is a reproduction.

On the 1970 cover of the song of the album Paulist Tony Lundgren - look to the album's title - duplicated the effect precisely. The "number one" on the Beatles record, however, would completely reveal as "number one" and more than a little strange as "turn me on dead man." The set is the end of I'm So Dead sound strange any which way.

After the tremendous amount of attention focused on The White Album, I've begun to

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the third message from the album - in fact, the last Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones were covering the same or part of their message.

After a while, the lyrics clearly the meaning by the "backmasked message" indicated. The next time more attention was focused on backmasking in its more frequent manner was in 1968, thanks to the efforts of Tony Lundgren.

C o m m e n t a r y
A u d i o

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 obscene 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.'"¹

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 Kingsmen'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 KPFK 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 complainant was an Orange County minister.

1. *US News and World Report*, October 28, 1985, p.47

Other stations cited in the April 1987 FCC action included KCSB in Santa Barbara 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 the Reverend Donald E. 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-again's jumped on another bandwagon in their crusade against filth: unmasking Satan's evil messages in rock music.

> To Page 12

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Art After Midnight: Satan and the New Censorship

When people stopped paying attention to the more obvious nasty lyrics of pop songs, the turntables of preachers across America started spinning backwards again. The Beatles were among the first to use backmasking as a recording technique. The whole thing revolved around the alleged death of Paul McCartney. For a couple of months in the late sixties, virtually every pop radio station in the country revealed new clues, supposedly planted within Beatles records, that "proved" Paul was dead. For some reason, John, George, and Ringo didn't want to come right out and tell the world that Paul was dead: instead, they had turned it into an elaborate game.

You may recall some of the evidence. The cover art for the album *Abbey Road* contained a wealth of it. Paul was barefoot – an obvious reference to his status as a cadaver. He was out of step with the other three Beatles crossing the street. The license plate on the car to their right read "28 IF" indicating that if Paul were alive, he would have been 28 years old. Disc jockeys around the globe began playing Beatles records backwards on their shows. The best-known piece of evidence was contained (backwards) in the track *Revolution Number 9* from the album *The Beatles* (1968), better known as *The White Album*.

Number 9 is a *musique concrète* piece – to this day perhaps the most widely heard example of that genre. The phrase "number nine" is repeated over and over throughout the work. Play it backwards and it says, "turn me on, dead man." Twenty plus years later, I still can't figure out how three syllables forward become five backward, but there it is. At the end of the track *I'm So Tired* on the same album, John mumbles something unintelligible. Play it backwards and it becomes "Paul is a dead man." Honest!

The Beatles, of course, issued flat out denials that Paul was dead, or that there were any backmasked messages in the records at all. At any rate, a lot of records were sold as a result of the controversy. And a lot of people took the whole thing very seriously. I remember, as a teenager in Boston, watching a television special starring the high-powered attorney, F. Lee Bailey, dedicated to determining the "truth" about Paul through a thorough examination of the evidence. The iconography was laid out for viewers to decide for themselves.

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 topsy-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 any which 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 Adrenalin O.D., Grim Reaper and Iron Maiden were alleged to have backmasked satanic messages in their records. Gore's organization commissioned the Institute for Bioacoustical 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 backmasked 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 audiotape *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."² 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-again 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,"³ New York State Council on the Arts chair Kitty Carlisle Hart 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. ■

2. Dan and Steve Peters, *Rock's Hidden Persuaders: The Truth About Backmasking*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 56

3. *New York Post*, March 16, 1988, p.1