

Voice Our Concern: Art-Centred Human Rights Education Programming

Name of organisation:
Amnesty International Irish Section

**Excerpt from Amnesty International Voice our Concern Module
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Workshop 3: Banned bands

Workshop Aims:

To encourage students to think about when one person's right, such as the right to freedom of expression, should be limited to protect another person's right, such as the right to be free from racial hatred and discrimination

- Prior to this workshop, ask students to bring to class any songs/music by bands that they find, or which have been banned or caused controversy for being, sexist, racist or homophobic. As well as recordings of the music they should, if possible, bring printed song lyrics.
- Begin by playing or discussing samples of the music and ask students why they think the lyrics are controversial.
 - o Have they been offended by these or any other lyrics? Why?
 - o Do they think sexist, racist or homophobic lyrics should be banned? Why?
 - o Whose right is more important: one person's right to freedom of expression, or another person's right to be free from persecution or discrimination brought about by lyrics encouraging a sexist, racist or homophobic attitude?
- Divide students into small groups and give each group the fact sheet 'Banned Bands' (follows). Ask each group to list four reasons why songs have been banned.
 - o What effect do they think the ban would have had?
- Explain that, in international human rights law, freedom of expression is not absolute (unlimited). Article 19.2 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, for example, states that freedom of expression may be restricted for:
 - o the respect of the rights and reputations of others, or
 - o the protection of national security or public order, or public health or morals

Further Activities

Hold a debate on the banning of a song with sexist lyrics, with students taking on these different roles:

- Parents opposed to sexually explicit lyrics
- Record company executive
- Music shop owner
- Fans of the band who think these lyrics are cool and funny
- A group of girls who are fed up with the terms boys have been using to refer to them since the record came out
- A DJ who refuses to play tracks with sexist lyrics
- Anti-censorship campaigners who believe, no matter what the lyrics are, the band have the right to be heard
- Find out about other bands and songs that have been banned or prosecuted.
- Research the role that music played in a political movement, for example, CND (1960s); Gay Liberation; Anti-Apartheid
- Write a song for a campaign you support

Workshop 3: Banned Bands: Fact Sheet

Fury against musicians who challenge tradition is nothing new. In the 19th century the waltz was denounced as immoral. In the 20th century, jazz – the first big breakthrough by black musicians – was attacked in the US and banned in Nazi Germany for being “savage” and “degenerate”. In the 1950s rock & roll – with its roots in black rhythm and blues – was condemned in the US as “jungle music”, threatening American civilisation. In Britain too, rock & roll was considered a threat to British youth. Music journalist Steve Race wrote in the Melody Maker in 1956 that “viewed as a social phenomenon, the current craze for Rock & Roll material is one of the most terrifying things to have happened to popular music.”

Music has often been censored for political reasons. The Nazis banned much classical music, especially by Jewish composers and performers. In the Soviet Union, under Stalin, some modern music was banned for being “decadent” and undermining the spirit of the nation. In the US in the 1950s, singer and actor Paul Robeson was banned from performing because he was a member of the Communist Party. In Greece, the 1967 military coup led to the imprisonment and torture of the internationally famous singer and composer Mikis Theodorakis, whose songs of freedom went on undermining the dictatorship. In Chile, political folksinger Victor Jara went on singing up to the moment of his murder as a prisoner in the Santiago Stadium in 1973. Under Pinochet’s regime even to mention Jara’s name was an offence.

Musical censorship is still alive and well. References to sex and drugs have led to many songs being banned from the radio, TV or from mainstream shops. Artists whose work has been banned include: Elvis Presley; Billie Holliday; The Rolling Stones; The Beatles; The Sex Pistols; John Lennon; Pink Floyd; Ice T; and Jello Biafra. In the US a group called “Parents Music Resource Center” pressurised the record industry in 1985 into putting

“Parental Advisory Stickers” on albums with “explicit lyrics”. Record dealers have been prosecuted for selling “stickered” albums to minors.

In 1990 the rap group “2 Live Crew” produced an album called “As Nasty as they Wanna Be” with sexually explicit and sexist lyrics. The band and a record store owner in Miami were prosecuted for obscenity, despite the First Amendment in the US Constitution which protects freedom of speech. This case was a challenge to people who opposed censorship: although they supported the Crew’s right to freedom of expression, it was difficult to defend lyrics which blatantly attacked women.

During the 1991 Gulf War the BBC compiled a list of tracks to be avoided, including “Boom Bang a Bang” by Lulu, “A Little Peace” by Nicole and “Light My Fire” by Jose Feliciano. The band Massive Attack was just referred to as Massive. DJ Giles Peterson was sacked by Jazz FM for playing 90 minutes of “peace music”. The music associated with New Age Travellers was even mentioned in law. The 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act proposed to outlaw – when played in certain circumstances – a genre of music: house...“defined as sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats”.