

The FCC is Watching You

Fifth Estate Collective

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The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), prompted by a 58-year-old commissioner who is a former FBI agent, issued a policy statement on March 6 warning radio stations against broadcasting song lyrics “tending to promote or glorify the use of illegal drugs.”

The dictum—based on an unspecified number of complaints the FCC said it has received about several songs—has angered and bewildered Detroit area FM and AM rock stations.

It has also brought denunciations of the move as another government attempt to repress young people and their culture.

“The FCC statement is an attempt to scare stations like WABX out of our kind of programming,” was the opinion of John Detz, WABX station manager.

Dick Kernan, operations director of WRIF said the issue is “more of a problem in people’s minds than an actual problem.” “It’s a reaction on the part of ‘middle American’ parents who have children they are worried about and it’s easier to say, ‘Well, our kids are on drugs because they hear it on the radio’ than to say ‘Well, our kids are on drugs because of us.’”

Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, 35, long a maverick on the FCC, was the sole dissenter in the 5–1 vote which many speculate may have been prompted by pressure from the White House.

In his dissenting opinion Johnson said that the FCC statement was intended to “censor by threat that which could not be constitutionally prohibited. Moreover, there is a serious question as to whether the FCC is really as concerned about drug abuse as it is about striking out blindly at a form of music that is symbolic of a culture which the majority (of the FCC) apparently fears in part, because it fails to understand it.”

Johnson went on to say that if the Commission was really concerned about the drug problem, they would not choose to ignore the nation’s number one drug abuse problem—alcohol.

Robert E. Lee, an 18-year-member of the commission and the man who first proposed an FCC policy on the so-called drug lyrics, was quick to say the policy statement is not an order—just a notice reminding broadcasters that they are responsible for what they broadcast.

Lee said that, although he doesn’t listen to rock music much, he has heard “songs that shouldn’t be on the air.” Lee would not name those songs, saying he didn’t want to get into “legal troubles.”

He said he didn’t know how many complaints the FCC has received about drug-oriented music, but guessed it might be in “the hundreds.”

In a later press statement, however, the commission named the songs they had received the most complaints about as: “Mellow Yellow” by Donovan, “White Rabbit” by the Jefferson Airplane, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” and “With a Little Help from My Friends” by the Beatles and “Along Came Mary” by the Association. All of the songs were played extensively on AM several years ago when they were popular.

Robert Cahill, administrative assistant to FCC chairman Burch, said that if a station does carry the songs that the FCC thinks tend to promote illegal drug use, its license could be questioned. But he said such questioning was “more of a possibility than a probability.”

However, the FCC's own press release on the statement—issued a week after the decision was made—said a station's usage of songs the FCC considers undesirable “raises serious questions as to whether continued operation of the station is in the interest of the public.”

Broadcasters in Detroit point out that the basic trip-up in the FCC policy statement is that it provides no guidelines about “undesirable” songs. As a result, stations are left to decide for themselves what to play and what not to play and with the responsibility to provide reasons for playing all of the songs they broadcast. Some broadcasters were also angered by the superficial, piddling approach the FCC has taken in the matter.

WABX's Detz's response bluntly was, “We are not going to alter our programming or eliminate songs from the library and will resist any attempt to force us to do so.”

WRIF's Kernan said, “Our station policy remains the same regarding the selection of music we play on the air.”

However, AM station managers and music directors said they will begin reviewing their record files to try to figure out which ones, if any, should be thrown out and to write down reasons for every one they air.

They say they have to do it in case somebody or the FCC complains about their programming. One can almost visualize an increased rock audience made up of right-wingers just waiting for a suggestive lyric to pop up.

Of course, the determination of what song lyrics presently advocate the use of outlawed drugs, and what don't, can reach levels of total absurdity. “Amphetamine Annie” by Canned Heat is a “3-minute, anti-drug spot,” one broadcaster said, “because it is down on speed.” Most broadcasters consider “Goddamn the Pusher Man” by Steppenwolf and “Heroin” by the Velvet Underground to be anti-drug songs, but some said they felt they were favorable towards drugs.

There are hundreds of more songs that older people like most of the FCC commissioners think of as “drug songs” which have no drug meaning to young people.

“The whole problem here,” according to Kernan, “is a problem in lifestyles. What one lifestyle finds drug-oriented, another lifestyle will not.”

What the FCC has attempted to do is to frighten the nation's radio stations to a political conformity that reflects their narrow views. It remains to be seen if they will be successful.

Stay tuned.



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