

Freedom of Speech: Does this Freedom Apply to Musicians?

The Basics

Time Required

2-3 class periods

Subject Areas

12th Grade Government

Contemporary America, 1968-present

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

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The Lesson

Introduction

Ice-T is an American Rapper. Prior to taking his stand against Tipper Gore in the song “Freedom of Speech”, he was publicly ostracized by the government for singing “Cop Killer.” Scandal surrounding government officials’ denouncement of the song led Ice-T to be banned from performing live, to be investigated by the FBI, and to lose his contract with his record label because some felt he was calling the youth to arms through the song. Gore worked with the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) who argued that “certain music was a hazard to the mental health of American youth.” Other PMRC propaganda went as far as to condemn certain forms of music as being "secondary forms of child abuse." The PMRC tried to censor music and took their case to the Senate.

After the Senate hearings, music companies were pressured to voluntarily label music CDs with a parental advisory if the CD contained explicit lyrics. Many musicians were not happy with labeling their music.

In 1989, Ice-T wrote a song attacking Tipper Gore, a lead member of the PMRC, for introducing the Parental Advisory sticker that was to be used on music CDs. Ice-T argued that music is covered under the First Amendment’s Freedom of Speech.

Guiding Questions

What is the Bill of Rights?

How important are those rights in modern America?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Understand and explain the First Amendment to the Constitution
- Compare and contrast, through classroom discussion, the ideas of the PMRC and Ice-T regarding the censorship of music
- Work collaboratively to create a graphic organizer (for pre-writing purposes) supporting or opposing the use of Parental Advisories on music and defend whether or not their use falls under the First Amendment
- Write an essay defending either the position of the PMRC or Ice-T regarding the use of Parental Advisories on music while citing the First Amendment

Preparation Instructions

Song used in lesson:

- “Freedom of Speech,” Ice T, *The Iceberg: Freedom of Speech...Just Watch What You Say* (1989). Lyrics can be accessed at: <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/ice-t/freedom-of-speech.html>

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE LYRICS IN THIS SONG ARE GRAPHIC AND MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE FOR ALL SCHOOL SETTINGS.

Lesson Activities

Introductory learning activities:

- HW the night before – Students will read the ACLU article “Popular Music Under Siege.” Additionally, they will need to research and be able to identify the following terms/people: FCC, Tipper Gore, PMRC, Ice T.
- Students will complete a journal entry discussing what they believe the First Amendment, particularly “Freedom of Speech,” means.
- Students will be called upon to share their journal responses, which will lead into a classroom discussion regarding this topic.
- Students will participate in a classroom review of the Bill of Rights – specifically the First Amendment.
- Copies of the lyrics will be distributed to students prior to listening to the song in class.

Song discussion questions and activities:

Ice-T’s “Freedom of Speech” will be played in class. After listening to the song, students will be asked to answer the following questions through a classroom discussion to insure that students understand the information and arguments being presented in the song:

- What is the FCC, and what role do they play in the music industry?
- Who is Ice-T referring to when he says “Gore” in his song?
- What is the PMRC and what association do they have with the music industry?
- Why does he specifically address Tipper Gore in his Freedom of Speech Song?
- Why does Ice-T think they are being “suppressed”?
- What does “we ain’t the problems, we ain’t the villains” refer to?
- Why did Ice-T refuse to change his lyrics during his performance in Columbus, Georgia?
- Why did Ice-T write “Freedom of Speech”?
- How do you think the public reacted to this song?

- How do you think the PMRC reacted to this song?
- Is there a need for the Parents Music Resource Center and its Parental Advisory for music?
- What impact have Parental Advisories had upon the sales of CDs? Do parents monitor the purchase of their children's music CDs? Can people under 18 easily purchase CDs with Parental Advisories?
- Are the Parental Advisories helping to monitor what young people hear and saving them from the abuse of the poor language in many of today's songs as intended by the PMRC?

Assessment

Students will write an expository essay answering and defending the following questions:

- Does the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights apply to music lyrics?
- To what extent should the government be involved in monitoring music lyrics?
- Is there a need for the Parents Music Resource Center and its Parental Advisory for music?

Students will need to secure a position and defend it in their essay.

Extending the Lesson

- Students will break up into groups of 5 as previously determined by the teacher. Each group will be assigned the task to develop a graphic organizer (using *Inspiration* if available) to support the views of the PMRC or the views of Ice-T using the First Amendment as their basis. (15 minutes)
- Each group will make a 5-minute presentation to the class (using their graphic organizer) regarding their assigned side of the topic. (6 groups – 30 minutes)
- Presentations will be followed by an open-forum debate regarding the First Amendment, the PMRC and the song. This activity will allow students to express their opinions, and/or acquire clarification, regarding this issue. (15 minutes)

Resources

Lyrics

“Freedom of Speech” available at

<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/ice-t/freedom-of-speech.html>

Other Resources

“Popular Music Under Siege”

This article provides background information on music labeling and the debate public debate between Ice-T and the PMRC regarding this issue. Students will be asked to read this article prior to the lesson.

Information about the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) : <http://www.philagora.org/about-the-world/pmrc1.htm>

This website provides detailed information regarding the PMRC and the attempts they made to inform – or censor – music. It cites specific examples of censored album covers and lyrics.