The Progression Of Violence In Music Essay, Research Paper

A Condensed Progression of Violence in Music

In the late 1950s, Elvis Presley revolutionized the music industry and took the world by surprise. His rock-and-roll rhythms and gyrating style dance fascinated many teenagers yet disturbed many parents. When the singer appeared on Ed Sullivan’s variety show, Presley’s hips were kept out of the camera range because his movements were considered “too suggestive”. Reflecting on the Presley-Sullivan incident, numerous people are amused at the innocence of the time and the severity of the situation. Since the Elvis age, society has witnessed the correlation of music and violence and this trend is escalating at a quick rate. Today, people are increasingly concerned about how music might affect individuals and society as a whole; however, we can observe past trends, seen in 1969, to help determine the progression of violence generated from the music industry. In retrospect, 1969 was a year that possibly initiated the concept of using music to corrupt social values and employed music as a motive for violence. These trends, established in the late 1960s have heightened in severity and are partially responsible for today’s violence in music.

It is apparent that music has the power of influence, for the act of listening indirectly takes the listener away from other activities. The Parents Music Resource Center reports that American teenagers listen to an estimated 10,500 hours of rock music between the 7th and 12th grades alone – just 500 hours less than they spend in school over twelve years. It is clear that their listening time could be put towards other productive means, but the listener chooses to listen rather than engage in other activities. The frequency of exposure to music may create immediate or long-term effects. Immediate responses encompass emotional reactions during listening, and respective repercussions may take form in dreams or unnecessary excitement. The long-range effects concern the learning that is produced. One could learn from the song content, such as vocabulary or beliefs, and may result in the strengthening or weakening of certain personality traits including aggressiveness. Listeners actively select what music materials to which he/she will expose him/herself and will absorb material accordingly. The listener may appear calm while listening to stirring music but the fact is that he/she is sharing the musical experience with the musician to some extent. This allows the listener to identify with the artist. Since listeners tend to differently interpret musical experiences, the impact of music varies from one listener to the next . It is proven that music can assist in child development by creating distinguishable matter in which the child can further recognize as its repeated. Similarly, a grown adult can experience stability in music and if this music stimulates aggressive behavior chances are that repeated listening will heighten the aggression. Music’s power also resides in its lyrics. Lyrics can often penetrate the subconscious and this often creates unintended hostility. As psychologist, Linda Rocco once noted, “All societies are bound by the need to differentiate between assertion and aggression. Song and play bind individuals to predictable and discernable structures, while providing the brain with a necessary societal map for the practice of localized and globalized cooperation and peaceful interaction.” This verifies that music is an important factor for personal growth and if used incorrectly, can be detrimental to one’s sense of “peaceful interaction.”Many listeners have distorted interpretations of the musical experience. One of the most notorious examples of such listeners involves Charles Manson and his followers. Their story began on the morning of August 9, 1969, when a Beverly Hills housekeeper telephoned the police to report a murder at the secluded hillside residence of her employer, Hollywood starlet Sharon Tate and her husband, movie director Roman Polanski. She had come to clean up the house when she discovered the bodies of five people including Miss Tate, who was eight months pregnant. The word “pig” was scrawled in bold across the front door of the luxurious home. When the police arrived, they found what one called “a bloody mess.” Twenty-six-year-old Sharon Tate’s body lay in the living room of the house, a nylon rope tied tightly around her neck as though in preparation for a hanging. She had been stabbed sixteen times. Next to Tate on the floor lay the limp body of her close friend, 35-year-old Hollywood hair stylist Jay Sebring. He had been stabbed seven times and shot. A towel partially obscured the rope that had been tied around his neck and then had been draped over a beam on the ceiling.

Two more bodies were found on the front lawn of the house, some fifty feet apart. Thirty-seven-year-old Wojiciech Frykowski, a friend of Roman Polanski, had been shot five times, stabbed fifty-one times, and bludgeoned thirteen times on the back of the head. His girlfriend, 26-year-old coffee heiress Abigail Folger, had been stabbed twenty-eight times. Both Folger and Frykowski had apparently tired to escape, but were caught while running away form the house. The fifth body, that of 18-year-old Steve Parent, was found slumped over the wheel of an automobile parked on the narrow road leading to the entry gate of the property. He had been stabbed once and shot four times. Roman Polanski was in London at the time of the slayings. At first a 19-year-old caretaker, William Garretson was charged for the slayings, however, subsequent events made it clear that he had slept through the entire massacre. The day following the Tate massacre, the 5-year old son of wealthy supermarket owner, Rosemary and Leno LaBianca, walked into his Los Angeles home to find his parents’ bloody bodies. Rosemary’s body lay in the master bedroom of the house and her hands tied behind her back with an electrical cord and a pillowcase pulled over her face. She had been stabbed 41 times. Leno’s body was sprawled across the living room carpet, his hands fastened behind his with a leather tong and his face covered with a bloody pillowcase. The killers had left a craving fork, protruding form his abdomen and had scratched the word “war” in his skin. He had been stabbed 27 times. Scribbled in blood on a living room wall were the words “Death to the pigs” and on the refrigerator door “Helter Skelter.”

Helter Skelter, a song title taken from the Beatles’ White Album, was inaccurately interpreted by Manson and its results are inconceivable. The Beatles have been known to be a form of communication that goes beyond music or pop celebrity. Especially in the ’60s, interpretations were made of the musical prophets of the day, with the Beatles being at the top of this list. Fueled and opened by drugs, the imagination spoke to reality and the lines were blurred. Music is often defined as that which moves or inspires a person, not what it moves that person to do. However, Manson claimed that music could inflict action. Manson was convinced that secret messages were hidden in the Beatles’ music. After listening obsessively to the album, Manson concluded that the Beatles were instructing him to begin the apocalypse. After Manson’s listening to the song, he had taken the term, Helter Skelter, to represent the war between blacks and whites, which he believed would shortly engulf the nation. He had no idea that the song’s lyrics, illustrated in Appendix A, were a reference to a fairground ride. Charlie had already decided that the Fab Four’s earlier song ‘Blackbird’ represented a call to the blacks of America to rise up against the whites. This theory continued with his interpretation of Helter Skelter. He preached that his followers, called “The Family”, must prepare to move to an isolated desert area in order to avoid the race war he felt would inevitably result in the victory of blacks over whites. Manson also believed that the victorious blacks would be ineffective in governing the country and would eventually be forced to ask him to rule. Bizarrely, John Lennon (rather than McCartney, the son’s composer) was called as a witness in the trial, but refused to attend. “What’s Helter Skelter” got to do with knifing somebody?” he complained. “I’ve never listened to the words properly, it was just a noise.”Paul McCartney explained the nature of Helter Skelter; “That came about because I read in Melody Maker that The Who had made some track or other that was the loudest, most raucous rock n’ roll, the dirtiest thing they’ve ever done. I didn’t know what track they were taking about but it made me think, ‘Right. Got to do it.’ And I totally got off on that one little sentence in the paper.”

Charlie was a Beatles fan. Beatles music played as day-to-day life performed itself out at Spahn Ranch, The Family’s headquarters, and other places Charlie lived. Being moved by the music and its experiences, they continued to make interpretations where applications to some to their lives became evident to them. They took names from the album (Sexie Sadie a.k.a. Susan Atkins) and expressions from lyrics punctuated all of their speech. It was said that Charlie would only quote from the bible or the Beatles. Some feel Manson believed that he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and that he was sent to fulfil Biblical prophecies about the Apocalypse and the Second Coming. In the Beatles music, particularly the White Album, he heard “clues” and “messages”. Some of the suggested interpretations that were allegedly made by the Family from The Beatles works appear in Appendix B. Manson never had a direct hand in the Tate/LaBianca slayings, but he orchestrated them through instructions to this followers. He hoped that blacks would be falsely accused and the race war he envisioned would commence. Instead, Manson and two of the female members of his family, 22-year-old Susan Atkins and 23-year-old Patricia Krenwinkel, were convicted on January 25, 1971 of seven counts of first-degree murder. A third follower, 21-year-old Leslie Van Houten, was convicted of two counts of first-degree murder. In the purely psychiatric view, mass murder is inevitably brought into play by some immediate and irrational psychological motivation. Motives are often complex and difficult to identify. Even in everyday life, what originally looks like inexplicable behavior may turn out to have an ulterior motive. What passes for craziness may in fact be craftiness or deceit. In the case of Charlie Manson, his psychological motivation was the music of the Beatles. To this day, nobody has come to the conclusion to whether Manson is indeed crazy, although the premise -violence influenced by music- will always exist.