Our society today largely views censorship as a method that has disappeared from liberal cultures since the enlightenment with the exception of restrictions in time of war. The enlightenment served to cripple the intolerance of incisive religious and government leaders, but did not obliterate censorship altogether. Instead, the job of expurgating unacceptable ideas has simply fallen into new hands using new tactics. Censors now assume the guise of capitalist retailers and distributors, special-interest groups, and less influential but still passionate religious and government authorities. Their new techniques are market-censorship (dominating the marketplace), constituitive censorship (the control of language), power-knowledge (restricting knowledge), as well as the traditional regulative censorship (law). These new forces can be as equally effective as the forces of remote history. We notice the effect of post-enlightenment civilization as early as the nineteenth-century in the great Russian humanist Aleksandr Herzin. Herzin left his native country in protest of Czarist censorship only to feel "profound disillusionment with the extremely narrow limits of permission imposed on freedom of expression by market censorship in the West" (Jansen 1991).’

Music lyrics are essentially composed as poems, ballads, monologues, and the like, and set to music. They may take the form of actual spoken or sung sounds or of written words, as literature does. Any form of literature can be sung with musical accompaniment and become lyrics. Remove the music and we are left with literature. Lyrics are therefore a form literature. All the concepts that apply to literature can therefore apply to lyrics. This author shall employ such concepts, including laws regarding public speech and public press, in my analysis of music censorship. Censors throughout history are familiar with this association of music and the press, attacking each in similar fashion. Jeremy Collier, a seventeenth-century Englishman, thought that music was "almost as dangerous as gunpowder" and might require "looking after no less than the press" (Rodnitzky 1972).

Lyrics also constitute an art form. Musicians are artists who create something new using a certain amount of creativity. The result displays an aesthetic quality, though it may also have other emotional and analytical attributes. Lyrics can then be considered art and concepts concerning art may be applied to them, as this author chooses to do.

Before this author can discuss how and why music is being censored, it is vital to explain the significance of art in our lives. Picasso said, "All art is a lie that helps us to see the truth better." All art is a lie in that it attempts to imitate truth or to reveal something about reality outside the piece of art. Art can be a window, a passage way for our minds to perceive the external world. Art can also be a mirror, a way of looking out and perceiving ourselves. It is important for the images in the mirror to keep changing so they may accurately reflect ourselves. Peter Michelson said:

The responsibility of society, if it accepts poetry as a mode of knowledge, is to remain open to what poets of all genres, including the pornographic, have to say. Otherwise all mirrors will soon reflect the same imbecilic smile (Michelson 1971).

Someone once said, "Fish will be the last animal to discover water, simply because they are always immersed in it." Sometimes truth can be hard to examine because we have difficulty in recognizing it. We have difficulty in recognizing truth because we are constantly subjected to it and gradually become numb to it. Art, whether it be literature, theatre, visual arts, or music, by way of its difference from reality, gives us a mental pinch so that we may awake and perceive the truth with new eyes.

Art can communicate in ways that other media cannot. By manipulating the environment, art can link directly to the emotions. Sue Curry Jansen explained:

...it is also frequently the ragged cutting edge of emancipatory communication, for even in the most permissive times the artful evocations and contra-factuality of Aesopean mischief have a freer range than the language of theory (Jansen 1991).

And Herbert Marcuse noted:

Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle. Subject and objects encounter the appearance of the autonomy which is denied them in their society. The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life (Marcuse 1978).

Some may say that the music they consider offensive, rock n' roll and rap music, is not art at all because it is of a lesser quality and is therefore a lower form of entertainment. This opinion relies on the musical taste of the individual and is too subjective to concede. Besides, rap and rock n' roll, being within the genre of popular music, will have many more subjective patrons than will styles of "high art," such as classical music. Even if we accepted this view, based on the general complexity of classical music verses popular music, there is still a case to be made for simplicity:

...the danger exists then of assuming that the other audience, the audience one does not converse with, is more passive, more manipulated, more vulgar in taste, than may be the case. One can easily forget that things that strike the sophisticated person as trash may open new vistas for the unsophisticated; moreover, the very judgment of what is trash may be biased by one's own unsuspecting limitations, for instance, by one's class position or academic vested interest (Riesman 1950).

On a less profound, but no less important point, people gain pleasure from the arts. Indeed, to some people, art's sole purpose is to provide pleasure. Philosophers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant to John Stuart Mill have argued that happiness is our ultimate goal, the end to all our means. As Americans, we proclaim the "pursuit of happiness" is an inalienable right included in our Declaration of Independence. Music can improve the quality of our life and inspire great feelings within ourselves. Thoreau said, "When I hear music I fear no danger. I am invulnerable. I see no foe. I am related to the earliest times and to the latest" (Rodnitzky 1972).

Throughout the history of music, would-be censors have primarily targeted controversial lyrics as a problem, but there have been efforts to blame the actual music for causing society’s ills. Every unusual advancement has met with disputes, whether it be Johann Sebastian Bach’s complex counterpoint or heavy metal’s distorted guitars. In this century, jazz, bebop, swing, rock n' roll, and rap have all had detractors. Such attacks have traditionally been initiated by adults ready to attribute juvenile delinquency on a musical form that appeals almost exclusively to young people and which "few of its detractors comprehend" (Epstein 1990). There is definitely a factor of time at work here chiseling away at society’s standards of morality. When once Elvis’ pelvic gyration would not be televised, it is now an accepted entertainment technique. Bach’s adventuresome textures that threatened his employment can sound boring now. Today we become offended by explicit sex or violence or language pertaining to such threats to morality. Robert L. Gross pointed out:

...this controversy is a replay of the age old generation gap, in a new and, perhaps, more striking form. Iron Maiden may strike today’s adults as alien to their culture, but the author suspects that a similar reaction occurred when adults first heard the lyrics to "Good Golly, Miss Molly" (Gross 1990).

At one time these attacks were even racially motivated: In the 50s, petitions were circulated which said, "Don’t allow your children to buy Negro records." The petitions referred to the "raw unbridled passion" of screaming people with dark skin who were going to drive our children wild. Some things never go out of fashion in certain ideological camps. They are like tenets of the faith (Zappa 1988).

There are claims that contemporary efforts to censor music are racist, and this author has encountered more incidents involving black-oriented rap music than white-oriented hard rock music, where the second greatest number of attacks have been aimed. But when trying to ascertain such a prejudice, there is a difficulty in separating the number of attacks on each style of music from the overall content of each style. Rap music may be cited more often because it contains a greater amount of offensive material overall. A claim in either direction would require an independent study.

None of these music-related claims have been popularly accepted, largely due to the difficulty in providing tangible proof. Instances of Satanism have been attributed to drug abuse rather than music (Epstein 1990). Congressional subcommittee hearings of 1955 trying to associate rock music with juvenile delinquency were unsuccessful, as were the 1973 "Buckley report" on rock music and drug abuse and the 1985 senate hearings on obscenity in popular music (Epstein 1990). The 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (C.O.P.) report asserted that "it is obviously not possible, and never could be possible, to state that never on any occasion, under any conditions, did any erotic material ever contribute in any way to the likelihood of any individual committing a sex crime. Indeed, no such statement could be made about any kind of nonerotic material (Oboler 1974). An extensive study encompassing psychology, physiology, behavioral studies, sociology, and music would have to be done to prove a form of music is capable of causing harm. The researchers would have to be trained not only in research methods but in all these fields and the music involved. A willing, impartial musicologist proficient in the music of subcultures might be a rare find. Given these reasons it is clear why, to my knowledge, such a study has not been performed. The effects of music are still debatable.