

## "!ti od em edam nataS" ... does rock 'n' roll really make kids kill themselves?

April 10 2013, by Adrian North

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If the new Marilyn Manson video showed a young woman disembowelling herself with a large sword because she had lost her lover it would be banned instantly. But this same scene is tolerated nightly in opera house performances of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Credit: EPA/TOR Erik Schroder

As Jane Austen probably wanted to say, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good Black Sabbath CD must be in want of a shotgun.

We are so encultured to believe that [heavy metal music](#) induces teenage suicides that my father once gave me \$100 to buy clothes that weren't black: I bought sunglasses and survived. Nonetheless, countless rock stars and record stores have been sued by parents and protesters who claim that METAL HURTS KIDS.

Psychology is caricatured as the science of the mad, the sad, and the bad, and research on self-harming among metal fans illustrates this perfectly.

Even 20 years ago we knew that male Australian rock fans were twice as likely as other males to self-harm, and female rock fans were four times as likely as other females to do the same.

This level of "sadness" led conservatives to assume that the music must be "bad" and banned. Marilyn Manson's Florida concerts in the late 1990s were picketed by Christian groups who distributed a protest prayer against those, "Foul and evil spirits who have brought/The music group Marilyn Manson into Orlando" calling on Jesus to help, "So that they cannot sow lies/And spread discontent among our youth".

Fortunately, [psychological research](#) shows that they needn't have bothered. Teenage metal fans are also more likely than most to suffer neglectful parents. That's a much more credible explanation of why they're drawn to both self-harming and a musical subculture that expresses their disaffection with mainstream society that has failed them.

## **What's this song about?**

And if metal really causes suicide then a pre-condition is that young metal fans can correctly understand suicide-inducing lyrics. It turns out that they are actually no better at this than they are at applying mascara neatly.

One researcher [gave people a multiple choice test](#) in which they chose one out of the four possible answers as the "real" message contained in a song. One of these possible messages was the musician's own explanation of what the song was about: it was "the correct answer". People guessed the correct answer only 28% of the time: given that there were four options to choose from, my cat would get a score of 25%. If you still think we should censor rock then neither should you let your moggie listen to Ozzy.

[Another experiment](#) asked people to interpret the lyrics to Olivia Newton-John's Physical. Subtle lyrics like, "Physical/Physical/I wanna get physical/Let's get into physical/Let me hear your body talk" seem pretty unambiguous, but only 36% understood them, and another 36% of listeners thought the lyrics were instead just encouraging them to exercise more.

Aha though, cry protesters, the real problem is those messages sneakily recorded backwards into songs urging young people to, "Do it!".

Even back in the 1970s we convinced ourselves that Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven contained no fewer than six backward Satanic messages in less than 60 seconds. But claims like this actually do the Devil's own work for him.

[One experiment](#) played people a song, but first gave them one of three types of information. Group 1 were just asked to listen and record their reactions, Group 2 were told that the song contained backwards masked messages and asked them to write down those they heard, and Group 3 were told that those messages were specifically about Satan. No prizes for guessing what people heard.

Protesters should stop telling people that they can hear masked messages about Satan and suicide in metal. Replace "Parental Advisory" stickers

and "Explicit" labels in iTunes with a smiley face and the same music might instead cheer people up.

## The dangers of...opera?

Anti-metal protesters should also think twice about their own iTunes libraries.

[One piece of research](#) found that the frequency with which country was played on the radio in 49 American cities was related to the suicide rate among middle-aged white males. The "I lawst my dawg, I lawst my jawb" aesthetic of country is just as 'dangerous' as anything in rock.

Even more bizarrely, fans of opera are twice as accepting of suicide as a way of regaining lost honour than the rest of us; and elderly, well-educated female opera fans are most at risk. Want to ban rock? You must also shield Miss Marple from Mozart.

We treat metal unfairly. If the new Marilyn Manson video showed a young woman disemboweling herself with a large sword because she had lost her lover it would be banned instantly. But this same scene is tolerated nightly in opera house performances of Puccini's Madame Butterfly.

Justin Bieber's music makes me want to kill myself: can't we ban that instead?

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