

The 10 most x-rated records

Some were deemed a threat to public morals, others might harm national security. But for whatever bizarre reason, all of them were banned

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1. Je t'aime (moi non plus) by Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin (1969)

Arch provocateur Gainsbourg had scored several racy hit duets in France with national icon Brigitte Bardot (his then lover), but global infamy arrived only after his coupling with Birkin, a gamine 20 years his junior and the true love of his life. Setting his salacious, Gauloise stained drawl against Birkin's orgasmic panting and a doodling baroque organ borrowed from his classically trained youth, 'Je T'Aime' was the pop equivalent of an Emmanuelle movie. It notched up bans in Spain, Sweden, Brazil and Britain - where it became the first banned number one - but not in Italy, despite plus ça vilification from the Vatican.

2. 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday (1940)

When jazz's first lady chose to cover a song about southern lynch mobs, her producer and label balked while her mother thought Billie was courting death. Holiday insisted, 'Strange Fruit' came out on another label and despite no airplay, it became a hit. Atlantic founder Ahmet Ertegun later described it as 'a declaration of war... the beginning of the civil rights movement'.

3. 'God save the Queen' by the Sex Pistols (1977)

No swearing, smut or politics - the Pistols managed a total ban entirely on attitude. While the nation supplicated to the Queen's 'mad parade', the spiky tops provided a rare voice of dissent. Bawling 'No Future',

they outsold Rod Stewart in Jubilee week, but strangely he topped the charts, not them. It wasn't quite decapitating King Charles, but it remains one of British pop's finest hours.

4. 'What a Wonderful World' by Louis Armstrong (1968)

Following the 9/11 attacks, Clear Channel Communications issued an advisory memo to its 1,300 US radio stations listing some 150 'inappropriate' songs. Alongside such predictable proscriptions as Edwin Starr's 'War' and the Cure's 'Killing an Arab', the list included Phil Collins's 'Something in the air' and this, Armstrong's avuncular hymn to children and flowers.

5. 'Jazz from Hell' by Frank Zappa (1986)

Tipper Gore, wife of future Vice President Al, headed the PMRC, a music and morals campaign in the US in the Eighties. Dubbing Gore and her sidekicks 'the Mothers of Prevention', Zappa likened their strategy to 'treating dandruff by decapitation'. To prove his point, the authorities slapped an 'Explicit Lyrics' sticker on this album of diabolically dense... instrumentals.

6. 'Straight outta Compton' by N.W.A. (1989)

When the LA hip-hoppers included a protest against police brutality on their debut album ('Fuck Tha Police', obviously), police harassed their tours, MTV banned their video, radio stations wouldn't touch them. The results: the album sold three million, the 1992 Rodney King case confirmed LAPD brutality, and chief rapper Ice Cube became a family film star.

7. 'Back in the USSR' by the Beatles (1968)

Moscow's Ministry of Truth prohibited the Beatles as 'an alien ideology'. In the gloom of the Evil Empire, the Fabs' jaunty pop yelled colour and freedom, and this playful spoof of Chuck Berry's 'Back in the USA' became underground Russia's anthem. In the US, the right-wing John Birch Society claimed the track was 'fomenting Communism'. Of a sort, comrade.

8. 'Another Brick in the Wall' by Pink Floyd (1980)

Under apartheid, the South African government placed sales embargoes on protest songs like Peter Gabriel's

'Biko' (and, bizarrely, 'Jesus Christ Superstar'). Floyd's concept album *The Wall* also made the list after young black South Africa adopted 'Another Brick' and its 'We don't need no thought control' chorus for a national schools boycott. Credibility at last.

9. 'Tell Laura I Love Her' by Ray Peterson (1960)

A rash of 'death discs' like Jody Reynolds's 'Endless Sleep', Mark Dinning's 'Teen Angel' and this car-crash weepie provoked fears that pop was glamourising death. Despite a widespread ban for its morbidity, 'Tell Laura' made top five in the US. Its UK label refused to release it, allowing home boy Ricky Valance a ban-free run to number one with a lesser cover version.

10. 'Give Ireland back to the Irish' by Wings (1972)

Paul McCartney's response to Derry's murderous Bloody Sunday was more polite interruption than protest song ('Great Britain, you are tremendous' doesn't exactly smoulder), but was banned in both Britain and Ireland. A sarky McCartney followed up with the anodyne 'Mary Had a Little Lamb', only to be banned again for the pothead/sexnut lyrics of 'Hi Hi Hi'.

Making the law

Neil Spencer explains his choice of the songs they didn't want you to hear.

Ever since the first wax cylinders and shellac discs appeared in the 1880s, assorted powers-that-be have tried to control what people can hear on them. Popular music hall ditties like 'The Old Man's Drunk Again' were surely not fit for the new medium. Likewise, when radio arrived, censorship was necessary to protect public morals from pollution by, say, jazz and its decadent 'jungle rhythms'.

Lyrics have been the usual cause of bans, with sex and smut at the top of the list, followed by swearing, political comment, and drug references. Violence, morbidity, blasphemy and occultism have also featured, as has product placement in cases like Paul Simon's 'Kodachrome'. Songwriters have long played catch-me-if-you-can with the censors - witness the 'it' in 1920s tunes like 'Everybody's Doing It' or bawdy Bessie Smith lyrics like 'I need a hot dog for my roll'. 'Je T'Aime (Moi Non Plus)' is here to represent the records

banned for sexual content, from the good - Max Romeo's 'Wet Dream' and Frankie's 'Relax' - to the pitiful (anything by Judge Dread).

No drug songs made the cut, because the best - say Cab Calloway's 'Reefer Man' or Bob Marley's 'Kaya' - were never banned, while those that were, like D-Mob's 'Acieed', were too dumb or, like John Denver's 'Rocky Mountain High', weren't drug songs at all. Calculated attempts to shock have all also been excluded, so no space for George Michael's 'I Want Your Sex', the Prodigy's 'Smack My Bitch Up' or Marilyn Manson's 'Satiated by Satan'. (OK, I made up that last one.) Songs banned for swearing also don't feature, being too numerous and too uninteresting. Besides, when you have a number one with 40 uses of the f-word, like Eamon's bleep-laden 'Fuck It', this particular shibboleth seems to have been accommodated.

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