

White Noise

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Student politicians at Sheffield University have decreed that their radio station shall not broadcast any music by angry, misogynist, gay-baiting hip-hop star Eminem. How student politics have changed. When I was a conservative Law student at the University of Western Australia, we would have insisted that they did. Those in search of an Eminem-free zone may find a bunker of political correctness - in the nastiest sense of the word - in their student union, within an institution devoted to the pursuit of truth and learning. Millions of young Brits, and their lecturers and parents and the ten million peers who bought The Marshall Mathers Album (that's Eminem's real name - M&M, those saccharine little pellets that come in plastic-coated brown-and-yellow packets) - can get on with being outraged and corrupted in the real world.

The boy's an angry, obnoxious, talented entertainer, albeit one who has managed to incite his own mother to sue him for suggesting that she did more drugs than 'he' (the artist), as he sang in his first Slim Shady album. But Eminem has a right to be angry and foul-mouthed: all youngsters do, who had lousy childhoods like his, who haven't had enough therapy, or years, to adapt and come to terms with it. At least his anger has a channel: he's become a millionaire. This emissary of Satan is a job-creating capitalist and the paying public is his therapist.

Protestors will meet Eminem when he comes to the UK this month. They will accuse him of being what he certainly is - outrageous, obscene, word-spitting, whose lyrics are replete with violence and self-harm - but do not perceive what he also is: a pop singer, earning millions for his multi-national backers, the companies that fund his publicity machine to support the image. Eminem is a Wizard of Oz, as likely to cause children to commit suicide, provoke pogroms or incite serial killings as Bill Haley, Sid Vicious and Kurt Cobain.

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The last two killed themselves, as the Victorian poet Chatterton did, and as all anguished adolescents think of doing.

Ultimately all the protests and the bans do is confirm the urbane lollipop's status as the top pop cultural icon of his age and the shortsightedness of censoriousness, as it always has been. Haven't the self-righteous young students noticed that thousands of rap albums before Eminem's were highly derogatory about minorities and women? Does it make a genuine difference that they were only black?

Their decision was particularly silly because, unlike the filthy, crime-glorifying lyrics of so much rap, the whole point of Eminem's music is his misanthropy. Eminem is the embodiment of the rage of young, white American males, but he does it so much more intelligently than the thrash bands and creators of loud, white noise. His Marshall Mathers Album is poetry. It is the howl of his generation. As it happens, it is the howl of a rather nasty person under enormous stress, trying to keep it together as a rather large golden carp in a fish-tank full of piranhas.

Most rappers celebrate criminality and simple sensationalism. Eminem sings great and hideous truth from a psychological vastness. His pain - and it seems and sounds real - gives us listening pleasure and keeps thousands in gainful employment. Poor bastard.

The student politicians have banned Eminem because the already vulnerable - women, gays, ethnic and religious minorities - have a right not to feel threatened or at risk, and that is absolutely right, in the workplace and at school. But what is the point of a university, if not to challenge assumptions and provoke debate? Of music, or poetry, if it cannot flow? What is the point of freedom of speech and expression, if it does not protect the words that most offend?