The Analysis of Frank Zappa’s

Rock Censorship Testimony

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In his testimony to the US Senate in 1985, American composer Frank Zappa addresses the issue of record labeling by offering his point of view on the subject. Often, Mr. Zappa’s opinion had no relation to the topic at hand, referencing off-topic issues and groups, unlike his testimonial predecessor Dee Snider of Twisted Sister. Mr. Zappa’s testimony, while nicely constructed and beneficial from a certain point of view, is a poor one with linguistic truths, ethos and pathos scattered throughout, often misused. From an analytical standpoint, Mr. Zappa and his testimony are the only ill-conceived pieces of nonsense here.

Frank Zappa’s testimony must have its ups if it has its downs. If this testimony were on the issue of the PMRC, Mr. Zappa would receive an A. He goes into great depth concerning the members of the PMRC, who happen to all be wives of men employed in Washington D.C, “I asked how many other DC wives are non-members of an organization that raises money by mail, has a tax-exempt status and seems intent on running the Constitution of the United States through the family paper shredder” (Zappa, 1985, 6:15). Mr. Zappa believes that the PMRC has only one goal and that is to ignore rights listed in the Constitution and criticize and persuade artists to change the subjects of their songs, and their name almost says the same thing; the Parents Music Resource Center. Still while not the issue, Mr. Zappa makes it known in the above quote that he is not overly fond of the PMRC, calling them “...an ill-conceived piece of nonsense which fails to deliver…” (Zappa, 1985, 4:09), saying that the PMRC has no real point and the ‘goals’ they claim are theirs, while a goal with a positive connotation, have an intent on making the lives of some others worse.

In his seemingly pointless one-sided battle with the PMRC, Mr. Zappa fortunately uses some linguistic truths cleverly. Such being euphemisms “Apparently, they insist on purchasing the works of contemporary recording artists” (Zappa, 1985, 4:51), dysphemisms “…by the wives of Big Brother” (Zappa, 1985, 7:23), and devil terms “What if the next bunch of Washington Wives demands a large yellow ‘J’ on all material written or performed by Jews” (Zappa, 1985, 8:57), “How long before composers and performers are told to wear a festive little PMRC armband with their scarlet letter on it” (Zappa, 1985, 9:33) to combat the PMRC. I have noticed in his testimony that Mr. Zappa often uses devil terms in what seems as a better way to get his point across. Mr. Zappa may have realized himself that he does not talk very much about the actual issue at hand, so using these devil terms will, in general, just grab the attention of the hearing audience no matter what the topic is. This can be used as a prime example of a such fallacy of pathos, where Mr. Zappa is using fear to appeal to the audience. His statements are irrelevant to the topic at hand. While everyone in that room knew already why Mr. Zappa was testifying and what the issue was, this strategy did nothing to help his effort.

Mr. Zappa continues a small win streak of positive things to come out of his testimonial when he compares rock stars and musicians to actors and actresses. “People who act in films are higher to pretend, no matter how the film was rated, it won’t hurt them personally. Since many musicians write and perform their own material and stand by their art, whether you like it or not” (Zappa, 1985, 9:15). The point Mr. Zappa is trying to convey here is that films are rated certain ratings because of the content of the film. The actors in that film are portraying a character with the characteristics that give the film that rating, so when that actor comes off screen they are almost nowhere near the same person they were on screen. Their art is acting, pretending to be someone they are not. Rock musicians and artists, however, see the music they create as their art, and just like an actor or actress they stand by it with everything they have. Mr. Zappa begs the question that, if the PMRC, were to rate the musicians for their possibly ‘crude’ material, why won’t they do it for actors and actresses as well.

Mr. Zappa could have possibly had the same effect that Mr. Snider had on the audience using his ethos, or his credibility. In the beginning of his testimony, Mr. Snider says that he is a member of a heavy metal band “I do play in and write the songs for a rock and roll band named Twisted Sister, that is classified as heavy metal” (Snider, 1985, 1:25). While this puts him in a light to be criticized by the members of the Senate especially for his clothing, at least it puts his name out there to be a stronger reference.

Mr. Zappa’s ethos is very mysterious to those who are unfamiliar with his name. “These are my personal observations and opinions. I speak on behalf of no group or professional organization” (Zappa, 1985, 4:00). This piece, Mr. Zappa’s introduction before his testimony, is probably the most important part. It is designed, like all introductions, to introduce the speaker to the audience. While he does this, Mr. Zappa does so in a very mysterious manner, almost one where anyone who was unfamiliar with his name would think he is just a regular man, who feels a certain way about record labeling. While yes, he may not have been a member of a musical group at the time, he still made music and did so under his name. So, proclaiming that, “I speak on behalf of no group or professional organization” (Zappa, 1985, 4:00) only hurts Mr. Zappa and his ethos.

Mr. Zappa’s testimony is a strong one. He has all of his information in the right place. He is ready to prove a point and take action, but he is just in the wrong Senate hearing room. If there was anything to improve Mr. Zappa’s testimony, it would be just a simple reference to the topic at hand. While addressing the general opposing side of the issue, it does nothing for him when he does not address the problem at hand.

In conclusion, Mr. Zappa expresses his opinions on varying topics quite well and nicely structured. He uses ethos, pathos, and few linguistic truths to a nice extent, but while I am sure that he feels very strong on the issue of record labeling, seldom is it mentioned in his testimony. Mr. Zappa has quite a bit to learn from Mr. Snider on this issue.

Reference Page

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