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Censored songs teach speech rights

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 Page 1 of 1

The department of journalism and communication sponsored "Fight the Power: The Music That Changed America" as part of "Lehigh Celebrates the First" Monday night in Whitaker Auditorium.

"Fight the Power," presented by Ken Paulson, president and chief operating officer of the First Amendment Center in Washington, D.C., and at Vanderbilt University, examined music censorship and the songs that changed American history, as well as issues pertaining to the First Amendment for a crowd of students, professors and Bethlehem residents.

Paulson believes the biggest threat to First Amendment rights is complacency.

"The land of the free has become the home of those easily offended," Paulson said. "Most Americans can't tell you the five freedoms of the First Amendment. They want to limit speech in order to not make waves."

Paulson, a founder and former editor-in-chief of USA Today, began the presentation with video footage from his Emmy-nominated television program "Speaking Freely" that contained his interview with Chuck D of rap group Public Enemy.

This was used to show political voice in rap music.

Renowned musicians, Bill Lloyd of pop duo Foster and Lloyd; Ashley Cleveland, a three-time Grammy award-winning gospel singer; and Steve Miller Band keyboardist Joseph Wooten presented their renditions of censored songs, such as Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," and the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine."

Paulson said he began the presentation of "Fight the Power" with Chuck D to target a young audience.

"Too many young journalists tend to view free speech as being only about the press," Paulson said.

The presentation showed the power of words in songs, ranging from the civil rights movement and Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me," to the empowerment of women and Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman."

Paulson and the musicians covered songs censored for political correctness, including patriotic ballads heard daily, songs with drug references and sexual innuendos.

"Animal House" fans were intrigued to learn the meaning of the lyrics of "Louie Louie" by the Kingsmen, which was investigated by the F.B.I. when the unclarity of the words caused many to believe it was sexually suggestive.

Lisa Sweeney, '09 and graduate student, said she was shocked by what she learned from Paulson's presentation.

"I think it's something people take for granted," Sweeney said. "I didn't know the story behind [Sam Cooke's] "Long Time Coming" and I've heard it a few times before. I'm a history major and learning about the background to this music is fantastic."

Much like Cooke's song, many audience members were surprised to hear that Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" was actually a form of protesting the unfair distribution of wealth in America. Today, it is one of the United States' most famous folk songs.

Scott Wojciechowski, '09 and a graduate student, said he was surprised by the meaning of Guthrie's song, but was proud of the meaning, nonetheless.

"We are American," Wojciechowski said. "This and the fact that we can speak our minds are the features of the United States that make it great."

"Lehigh Celebrates the First" is sponsored by a \$5,000 grant from the Liberty Tree Initiative.

A tree was planted in front of Coppee Hall prior to the presentation. Kathy Olson, associate professor in the department of journalism and communication, applied for the grant and Lehigh was one of 10 schools to receive it.

Olson said Paulson initially offered to bring the presentation to Lehigh.

"He is with the First Amendment Center, which is part of the Liberty Tree Initiative," Olson said. "So, when we got the grant, he suggested that instead of a keynote speaker we bring the show here. I thought it was a great idea."

Paulson held a reception after the tree planting to speak with journalism students and professors.

He said the press today appears to be in trouble - news outlets are closing left and right. Paulson found some optimism for aspiring journalists.

"The current situation is very discouraging, but there will always be journalism," Paulson said.

Paulson said journalistic skills and an understanding of freedom of speech are more uncommon than people think.

"The quality of writing in America is actually quite poor," Paulson said. "Very few people have this skill set."