

HIGH SOCIETY

Edited by Phil Sutcliffe

A SPOT of embarrassment down at the Beeb last week I hear; it seems that the chaps fell down on a bit of the jolly old protocol.

There was 'Top Of The Pops' telling the world that the words of Rod Stewart's new single 'Tonight's The Night' were too risqué, not to say obscene, for the tender ears of television viewers at the same time as Radio One's turntables were whirling it regularly as an official, certified 'Newspin'.

The following day the full horror of Roderick's lyrics, said to be about 'deflowering a virgin' (and if you were a virgin with a bunch of daffs you wouldn't want some yobbo in a tartan scarf to come and snatch them off you, would you? read on ...), were exposed to the world provoking a hasty Radio One 'Rethink' which relegated the song to the late night listening list (if you listen to the infamously lecherous JP you should have heard it by now).

The contradiction and contretemps was probably caused by TOTP's Brian Whitehouse not observing the unwritten pact to let his radio buddies know when pondering a decision like that which calls for a degree of unanimity within the Corpo.

And that in turn was caused by the lyrics to the song, promised to the Beeb by Rod's connections on the Friday, not arriving until the Tuesday morning, only 24 hours before the show was due to be filmed.

Apart from the floral aspects it appears that the most heinous line runs 'Spread your wings and let me come inside'. If that's rude then this young lady has feathers in some very ticklish places but, poetical metaphor though it is, sexual imagery paralleled in a million pop songs though it is, those words combined with the grunt-and-groan 'Je t'aime, je t'aime...' fadeout were deemed reason enough for the TOTP ban and the Radio One backtracking.

And, since I was on the line, the Radio One spokesperson said: "I might as well tell you this one too. We're not playing Donna Summer's new single 'Could It Be Magic' during the day either."

At which thought his resigned amusement slipped over into the statement that "If you say we've banned it this one will be a huge hit again and the next one will still be full of moaning and groaning."

And so on, ad infinitum. Which is the sort of absurdity that opponents of censorship delight in pointing out.

CENSORED

Examples of it are starting to breed like rabbits as publicists thwarted by the immovable objects of the Radio One playlist discover ways of turning the selection process against itself.

Same spokesman said: "A lot of records start selling despite not being on the air because a publicist rings up the papers and claims we've banned them."

"Generally when I check with the producers I find they simply haven't heard the record, or they have and they're not playing it because they think it's terrible."

So exactly how far is our listening controlled by 'censors' of any kind, who are they, what are their standards and how do they operate?

THE BEEB'S system is, in fact, the closest to democracy as the decisions involve a whole six people and they are all at active programme-making level rather than aged Puritans from 'upstairs' graven in the image of Lord Wreath (as the *Gateshead Post* used to spell it).

Executive producer Doreen Davis and producers Dave Tate (Noel Edmonds), Dave Atkey (Tony Blackburn), Ron Belchier (Johnny Walker), Paul Williams (David Hamilton) and Ted Beston (Dave Lee Travis) have a weekly playlist meeting.

The system dictates that you are throwing out the majority of new releases anyway for reasons that come down to the taste of individuals filtered through a group meeting.

Once in a while a record they think worth airplay musically (true, they said, of both Stewart and Summer) will be banned totally (rare, but applying to all Judge Dread's output so far) or put on the late-night-only list.

Their standards are virtually impossible to define — you just don't have to 'go over the top'.

CENSORED

The past week's result is that, for example, Billy Paul's almost sickeningly wholesome 'Let's Make a Baby' was restricted while the Beeb fired all guns on making Lou Reed's 'Walk On The Wild Side' his only UK single hit, presumably because nobody understood the sleazy hipper of the 'giving head' lyrics (whereas they do know where wings grow — screwing shoulder blades can be fun kids).

Strangely enough a couple of non-sexy examples show soft censorship in a much more appealing light. So they wouldn't play the Beatles' 'Lucy In The Sky' in the '60s, but there were no problems last year with Elton's version. This is known as 'being in tune with public taste' and proposes that the censors/selectors are not telling us what we want and like but responding to our wishes.

Then there's one which is a definite thumbs-up for the playlist boys. An MP objected to Steeley Span's 'All Around My Hat' as a traditional IRA song with heavy political implications — true or not the production team turned his protests away which was praiseworthy in the face of the hoo-ha an MP can create.

THE COMMERCIAL radio system seems to involve less debate, but also less hard-and-fast decisions. Individual stations are largely keepers of their own morals but they receive advice from the Independent Broadcasting Authority who are in turn subject to an Act of Parliament which makes it their duty to protect (well, what else could they have said?) 'good taste and decency'.

Rock v Censorship (continued)

Not tonight, Rod



Rod on the lookout for girls with bunches of daffodils.

That is, back to personal opinions. The men who adjudicate regularly are Bob Kennedy, radio officer, and his assistant Edwin Riddell. Overseeing them is John Thomson, director of radio.

They do actually have the power to order stations not to play a particular track but they have never had to exercise it they assured me. The outcome seems to be much the same as at the Beeb — Donna Summer and Billy Paul shuffled to the small hours (when a young person's thoughts can decently turn to indecency?).

THAT'S the radio, but censorship has also been finding its way into the shops in the past year. The most recent example was the refusal by WH Smiths and Boots to sell Alberto Y Lost Trios Paranoias' first album.

A fascinating little story emphasising how vague and haphazard the controls on rock are (it's all too silly for any exaggerated fears about conspiracies and authoritarianism).

Both companies criticise Transatlantic Records for breaking the tacit agreement between the record labels and the shops to give an early warning when something controversial is in the pipeline.

Again it became a case of the Press not only reporting but creating the news. Charles Down of Smiths said: "It wasn't until the *Sunday People* got on to us that we realised what the record was like and stopped selling it, which we had been doing unwittingly."

Boots were 'caught' the same way and said they had "read the riot act" to Transatlantic.

The reasoning in both cases is that they are family High Street stores with a reputation to maintain. But, of course, they are just as embroiled in paradoxes as the BBC and IBA.

CENSORED

Smiths sell soft porn magazines. In that area they put the block on all 'Men Only' which means they sell 'Mayfair'. And those amongst you who have salaciously perused the pages of that publication from time to time will know it quotes in full from the *Sounds Dictionary Of OK Naughty Words* (that is, all of them) in the foetid context of rubber fetishism, discipline and bondage, transvestism and lots of plain old screwing.

The 'Auntie Jane' who might have been shocked by the Albertos would surely grope for the smelling salts if she got a gander at that little lot.

Aubrey Ridley Thompson, ultimately the censor at Boots (though a lot of it is done by his chief buyers), is fully aware of the invidious position of the man whose taste is backed by power. He admitted to allowing rugby records with songs about hairs on someone's dicky-dido to be sold by Boots despite the protest of one irate grannie.

He said "Those songs were sung at Agincourt" but fully recognises it comes down to a matter of him thinking they are OK and the Albertos' album is depraved and the public having to like it or lump it: "Am I right? Whether or not I'm never going to win any points for doing it."

It would seem that Logic and the Censor are just never going to be more than nodding acquaintances as they pass by in opposite directions. — PHIL SUTCLIFFE.