

“No smoking” in music lyrics? Sorry, count me out

Written by Simon Chapman, Emeritus Professor in Public Health, University of Sydney

Ian Dury’s 1977 anthem [Sex and drugs and rock n’ roll](#) put it most simply:

Sex and drugs and rock and roll

Is all my brain and body need

Sex and drugs and rock and roll

Are very good indeed

Blues, rock and pop music have always been neck-deep in references that outraged each generation’s parents. Fact is, they told us, it will all lead to debauchery following exposure to what my late father would describe – with fingers in his ears – as “awful jungle rhythms” as he moved toward our home gramophone to take my [Loved Ones](#) and [Masters Apprentices](#) off and restore decorum with his [Mantovani](#) tranquillisers.

From Bessie Smith (1931) purring about [needing a little sugar in her bowl](#) , to the Swallow’s 1951 advice “it [ain’t the meat, it’s the motion](#)” and onto everyone’s favourite slow dancer from 1982, Marvin Gaye’s [Sexual Healing](#) , morals crusaders have despaired the devil has all the best tunes.

There are whole compilation albums of “best beer drinking songs” and uncounted references to smoking weed (particularly in reggae). But what are we to make of references to tobacco smoking in music which has also had a very long history? ([Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette](#)).

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The global mega-star Ed Sheeran seems to have a fondness for the lost years of teenage cigarette smoking. His new [Castle on the Hill](#) (12 million youtube views) is wistful about being “Fifteen years old and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes”. In

[The Sea](#)

he purrs reassuringly “You’re eating your fears [...] in a cigarette”. In

[Wake Me Up](#)

(“And I think you hate the smell of smoke [...] you always try to get me to stop” – with 11 million views) he nods at his girlfriend’s concern, but waves it away with a reference to her own drinking.

I’m often asked by interviewers “so after plain packaging and these tax increases, what’s the next big weapon we might use to reduce smoking?” The assumption behind the question is that if any policy had a sniff of a hope at driving smoking even further south than it already has reached, we should grab it with both hands.

We’ve seen this attitude in some advocates, particularly in the [United States](#), where a few have put in years of effort to try and have smoking scenes in movies trigger an adult R-rating.

The

[World Health](#)

[Organisation](#)

has issued the third edition of a report calling for the same.

These advocates argue there is abundant evidence smoking imagery in movies acts in much the same way imagery in tobacco advertising works to promote interest and intrigue in smoking. They even argue there’s a dose–response relationship between seeing movie scenes of smoking and the probability of smoking.

But I’m an unmovable heretic when it comes to public health arguments that insist the concerns that have had tobacco advertising outlawed in well over [100 nations](#) should permit governments to step over a line in the sand and also justify censorship and restrictive policies about smoking in cultural forms like movies, theatre, literature, and music.

I’ve argued my objections at length against the adult-rating of movies with smoking scenes. But my strongest objection is [this](#).

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The role of cinema and literature is not simply to promote overtly pro-social or health “oughts” but to have people also reflect on what is in society or in screenwriters’ imaginations. This includes a long list of disturbing, anti-social, dangerous and unhealthy realities. Numbered among these are domestic violence, animal cruelty, the exploitation of minorities, injustice, and neglect.

Whether for educational purpose, entertainment or the broader purpose of artistic expression, filmmakers have often depicted highly socially undesirable activities such as racial hatred and vilification (Schindler’s List, Mississippi Burning), genocide (Hotel Rwanda), gang violence (Romper Stomper, Clockwork Orange) and crime (choose from literally thousands).

It would be ridiculously simplistic to assume that by showing something most would regard as undesirable, a filmmaker’s purpose was always to endorse such activity. People learn in ways far more complex than being fed a continuous diet of wholesome role models. Many would deeply resent a view of movies that saw them as the equivalent of religious or moral instruction, to be controlled by those inhabiting the same values.

Authoritarian and despotic nations are fond of restricting cultural expression for political or religious fundamentalist reasons. But many relish not living under regimes like North Korea’s or Taliban justice where such propensities are well off the leash.

Courts have often agreed commercial speech is not the same as free speech, and laws accordingly restrict what can be said in marketing and advertising claims. Here, I have no objection to governments which ban tobacco advertising prosecuting efforts by the tobacco industry to promote smoking by paying movie producers to show smoking. This used to happen frequently, but I’ve seen no evidence it continues today. With Hollywood being located in California where smoking rates are now below 10% and anti-smoking sentiment very widespread, whistleblowers within the movie industry would have surely by now exposed such deals if they were occurring.

Another global music megastar, Passenger, also sings about smoking quite a lot. In [Twenty Seven](#) he laments “87,000 cigarettes have passed through these lungs [...] and every single day I wish I’d never smoked one”. In

[I Hate](#) : the food-for-thought “I hate stepping outside, for a smoke and some guy [...] coughs, like your

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lungs are his” and in

[Riding to New York](#)

: “He lit up a cigarette and began to talk [...] See the doctors told me that my body won’t hold me [...] My lungs are turning black [...] Been a Lucky Strike’s fool since I was at school”.

Perhaps, just perhaps, some of his fans may find these words trigger a desire to smoke. But most can see he’s hardly giving a message that is anything other than regretful about smoking (as are [90% of smokers](#)). And isn’t that good?

I’m sure there must be someone working in public health somewhere who secretly would like some dour committee to screen all music lyrics and red-pen all those they think might be harmful to someone. But I’ve never met them, or ever heard about them.

Smoking will kill [eight million people a year by 2030](#) and is on track to kill a billion this century. It would be nice if those whose every word and gesture are noted by millions acknowledged their special responsibilities to think about the impact of what they say and do about smoking. There are many ways we might encourage them to do this, but legislation should not be one.

When Rolling Stone Keith Richards swaggers to the front of the stage with a cigarette between his lips and power chords the riff in Jumpin’ Jack Flash, many would concede a few million rock star wannabes might get powerfully imprinted with a message that smoking can look iconic. But just as many and probably far more would probably love his work just as much if he decided to quit or not smoke in public.

The Pyongyang approach to helping musicians and film makers decide if they really need to think about their influence on the health of their fans is frankly absurd, which is why it has got little traction. Long may it be so.

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