

"ICE-T: THE ISSUE IS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY"

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How did the company that publishes this magazine come to produce a record glorifying the murder of police?

I got my 12-gauge sawed off

I got my headlights turned off

I'm 'bout to bust some shots off

I'm 'bout to dust some cops off. . .

Die, Die, Die Pig, Die!

So go the lyrics to Cop Killer by the rapper Ice-T on the album Body Count. The album is released by Warner Bros. Records, part of the Time Warner media and entertainment conglomerate.

In a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece laying out the company's position, Time Warner Co-CEO Gerald Levin makes two defenses. First, Ice-T's Cop Killer is misunderstood. "It doesn't incite or glorify violence . . . It's his fictionalized attempt to get inside a character's head . . . Cop Killer is no more a call for gunning down the police than Frankie and Johnny is a summons for jilted lovers to shoot one another." Instead of "finding ways to silence the messenger," we should be "heeding the anguished cry contained in his message."

This defense is self-contradictory. Frankie and Johnny does not pretend to have a political "message" that must be "heeded." If Cop Killer has a message, it is that the murder of policemen is a justified response to police brutality. And not in self-defense, but in premeditated acts of revenge against random cops. ("I know your family's grievin' f—k 'em.") Killing policemen is a good thing—that is the plain meaning of the words, and no "larger understanding" of black culture, the rage of the streets or anything else can explain it away. This is not Ella Fitzgerald telling a story in a song. As in much of today's popular music, the line between performer and performance is purposely blurred. These are political sermonettes clearly intended to endorse the sentiments being expressed. Tracy Morrow (Ice-T) himself has said, "I scared the police, and they need to be scared." That seems clear.

The company's second defense of Cop Killer is the classic one of free expression: "We stand for creative freedom. We believe that the worth of what an artist or journalist has to say does not depend on preapproval from a government official or a corporate

editor." Of course Ice-T has the right to say whatever he wants. But that doesn't require any company to provide him an outlet. And it doesn't relieve a company of responsibility for the messages it chooses to promote. Judgment is not "censorship." Many an "anguished cry" goes unrecorded. This one was recorded, and promoted, because a successful artist under contract wanted to record it. Nothing wrong with making money, but a company cannot take the money and run from the responsibility.

The founder of Time, Henry Luce, would snort at the notion that his company should provide a value-free forum for the exchange of ideas. In Luce's system, editors were supposed to make value judgments and promote the truth as they saw it. Time has moved far from its old Lucean rigidity—far enough to allow for dissenting essays like this one. That evolution is a good thing, as long as it's not a handy excuse for abandoning all standards. No commercial enterprise need agree with every word that appears under its corporate imprimatur. If Time Warner now intends to be a "global force for encouraging the confrontation of ideas," that's swell. But a policy of allowing diverse viewpoints is not a moral free pass. Pro and con on national health care is one thing; pro and con on killing policemen is another.

A bit of sympathy is in order for Time Warner. It is indeed a "global force" with media tentacles around the world. If it imposes rigorous standards and values from the top, it gets accused of corporate censorship. If it doesn't, it gets accused of moral irresponsibility. A dilemma. But someone should have thought of that before deciding to become a global force.

And another genuine dilemma. Whatever the actual merits of Cop Killer, if Time Warner withdraws the album now the company will be perceived as giving in to outside pressure. That is a disastrous precedent for a global conglomerate. The Time-Warner merger of 1989 was supposed to produce corporate "synergy": the whole was supposed to be more than the sum of the parts. The Cop Killer controversy is an example of negative synergy. People get mad at Cop Killer and start boycotting the movie Batman Returns. A reviewer praises Cop Killer ("Tracy Morrow's poetry takes a switchblade and deftly slices life's jugular," etc.), and Time is accused of corruption instead of mere foolishness. Senior Time Warner executives find themselves under attack for—and defending—products of their company they neither honestly care for nor really understand, and doubtless weren't even aware of before controversy hit.

Anyway, it's absurd to discuss Cop Killer as part of the "confrontation of ideas"—or even as an authentic anguished cry of rage from the ghetto. Cop Killer is a cynical commercial concoction, designed to titillate its audience with imagery of violence. It merely exploits the authentic anguish of the inner city for further titillation. Tracy Morrow is in business for a buck, just like Time Warner. Cop Killer is an excellent joke on the white establishment, of which the company's anguished apologia ("Why can't we hear what rap is trying to tell us?") is the punch line.

