

Commentary

TWO CRUSADERS



During the racial unrest of the late '80s there was a period of special fear among Black children in the Atlanta area. There were pervasive and systematic kidnappings and killing of Black children. Simultaneously, there was a highly publicized national effort to purge rock and roll music, which some religious leaders deemed satanic. Both the endangering of Black children, and the efforts of some church organizations to burn rock and roll related material in highly publicized ceremonial bonfires, were major stories. I compared both in my monthly public radio commentaries. Thanks to my highly principled and courageous producer, Mara Tapp, Minnesota Public Radio let me comment. My understanding is that this was rebroadcast among public radio groups, particularly in the South and on Black oriented private radio stations. I know it was distributed in Black churches.

This was the most controversial, and probably most disruptive, editorial commentary I delivered over the years, but it meant a lot to the Black community, and to me. I believe what I predicted regarding both "crusades" has come to pass.

There are a couple of crusades going on these days.

One of the crusades is being marshaled by the snappily dressed evangelist, Reverend Damien Anderson. He has launched a crusade against "Satanic" rock and roll. He organized a number of his young parishioners to burn piles of rock and roll paraphernalia. The other local crusade involves an equally sharply-dressed and powerfully voiced minister, the Reverend Walter Battle. Reverend Battle is a Black minister who is bringing young Black children up from Atlanta to Minnesota. They spend time here with his church and at a camp in Northern Minnesota. I was struck by the contrast between what these two men are trying to accomplish.

As near as I can tell, Reverend Anderson wants young people to be afraid of some dark force spinning around inside rock and roll record jackets. Conversely, Reverend Battle is telling young Black children, who have been subjected to fear and terror unparalleled in recent American history, not to be afraid. As I see it, one minister is trying to keep young people from being overcome with fear and the other is trying to scare them. I suppose I'm being a little unfair. Maybe Satan really is involved in rock and roll. Based on my own taste in music, I would guess that they disco in hell or possibly polka. But they may listen to rock and roll or, more to the point, be harmed because of their listening habits. I don't pretend to know.

If Reverend Anderson wants to buy records and then deface and burn the jackets, I guess that's his business. But there's something about burning artwork that strikes me as wrong, maybe even obscene. I suppose I think of those religious moralists of the Reformation that ran around smashing genitals off Renaissance art, or maybe I remember other movements in more recent history that started out by trying to incinerate images of things they didn't like. To me, burning a book is a sin; burning a piece of art—even if you don't like it—doesn't seem much better. But that's me, and Reverend Anderson has a right to do what he wants, just like I have the right to say I don't like it.

Reverend Anderson must see himself living in a demonic world full of dark, wicked things lurking behind Walmart's audiovisual displays. I'm sort of sorry for him...but more than that, I'm sorry for what he's doing to the young people who trust him.

On the other side, there is the enthusiasm and brightness of Reverend Battle and what he's giving to some frightened Black children. Remember when you were little? You were three feet high and the world was full of giants who were smarter and stronger than you. They could hurt you whenever they wanted. Evil powers clamored outside your bedroom window on stormy nights and you needed a parent or someone you loved to tell you that the world really wasn't full of things that hated you and



would hurt you. Unfortunately, that's not happening to little Black kids in Atlanta. Parents, police and teachers are saying very different things. "Somewhere," they tell their children, "somewhere there is a faceless person, man or woman, Black or White, old or young, who stalks the city to hurt you." This is no childhood nightmare. It's the worst childhood fantasy lurking in the back of your mind come true, for the Black children of Atlanta.



The Reverend Battle must have sensed this and, with a spirit of creativity and compassion, he's showing them in the best way he can that there's a world out there that thinks they're precious, that they're loved and respected. He's telling them they're safe in the outside world and that they can live beyond terror and thrive as loved young Americans.

Two very different crusades.

In the end, I expect Reverend Anderson's movement will pass into history or maybe even sub-history, just like the people who decided Elvis Presley was the anti-Christ. But Reverend Battle—there's someone special, because what he's building is the foundation for living, healthy, secure children.

I don't think Reverend Anderson can destroy an idea or concept in art with a torch, but I do believe that Reverend Battle can light a candle that will brighten the lives of frightened children.