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ADJUDICATION NO: 29 /A/2013

PROGRAMME NAME: **SONG LYRICS – BLURRED LINES**

DATE OF BROADCAST: **5 NOVEMBER AT 15:18.**

BROADCASTER: **RSG**

COMPLAINANT: **LOTTERING**

COMPLAINT

Lyrics of song promote sexual violence against women.

APPLICABLE RULES

4 (1) Broadcasting service licensees must not broadcast material which, judged within context, sanctions, promotes or glamorises violence or unlawful conduct based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or mental or physical disability.

4 (2) Broadcasting service licensees must not broadcast material which, judged within context, amounts to (a) propaganda for war; (b) incitement of imminent violence or (c) the advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, religion or gender and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

5 Exclusions: Clause 4 does not apply to:

(1) a broadcast which, judged within context, amounts to a *bona fide* scientific, documentary, dramatic, artistic or religious broadcast.

ADJUDICATION

[1] The Registrar received a complaint regarding song lyrics that allegedly promote sexual violence against women.

[2] **The complaint reads as follows:**

"I am an English speaking listener and listen to your program most afternoons. On the whole, I find the content very good and enjoy most of the music. I notice that the song "Blurred Lines" has become quite a favourite on the program and realise that the riff and rhythm are very "catchy". I wonder, though, whether you and the people who select the music at RSG have actually listened to, or read the words. I am sending them to you, anyway. The "Rape-culture" lingo is very clear and needs no explanation. In a country (or any country for that matter) where violence against women is endemic, is this a message that RSG wants to promote? This is the reason; apparently, that a British university has banned it's being played on campus."

ROBIN THICKE LYRICS
(feat. T.I. & Pharrell Williams)

[Intro: Pharrell]
Everybody get up
Everybody get up
Hey, hey, hey
Hey, hey, hey
Hey, hey, hey

[Verse 1: Robin Thicke]
If you can't hear what I'm trying to say
If you can't read from the same page
Maybe I'm going deaf,
Maybe I'm going blind
Maybe I'm out of my mind
[Pharrell:] **Everybody get up**

[Pre-chorus: Robin Thicke]
OK now he was close, tried to domesticate you
But you're an animal, baby, it's in your nature
Just let me liberate you

Hey, hey, hey
You don't need no papers
Hey, hey, hey
That man is not your maker

[Chorus: Robin Thicke]
And that's why I'm gon' take a good girl
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it
You're a good girl
Can't let it get past me
You're far from plastic
Talk about getting blasted
I hate these blurred lines
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it
But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty
Go ahead, get at me
[Pharrell:] **Everybody get up**

[Verse 2: Robin Thicke]
What do they make dreams for
When you got them jeans on
What do we need steam for
You the hottest bitch in this place
I feel so lucky
Hey, hey, hey
You wanna hug me
Hey, hey, hey
What rhymes with hug me?
Hey, hey, hey

[Pre-chorus: Robin Thicke]
OK now he was close, tried to domesticate you
But you're an animal, baby it's in your nature
Just let me liberate you
Hey, hey, hey
You don't need no papers
Hey, hey, hey
That man is not your maker
Hey, hey, hey

[Chorus: Robin Thicke]
And that's why I'm gon' take a good girl
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it
You're a good girl
Can't let it get past me
You're far from plastic
Talk about getting blasted
[Pharrell:] **Everybody get up**
I hate these blurred lines
I know you want it
I hate them lines
I know you want it
I hate them lines
I know you want it
But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty
Go ahead, get at me

[Verse 3: T.I.]
One thing I ask of you
Let me be the one you back that ass to
Go, from Malibu, to Paris, boo
Yeah, I had a bitch, but she ain't bad as you
So hit me up when you pass through
I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two
Swag on, even when you dress casual
I mean it's almost unbearable
In a hundred years not dare, would I
Pull a Pharside let you pass me by
Nothing like your last guy, he too square for you
He don't smack that ass and pull your hair like that
So I just watch and wait for you to salute
But you didn't pick
Not many women can refuse this pimpin'
I'm a nice guy, but don't get it if you get with me

[Bridge: Robin Thicke]
Shake the vibe, get down, get up
Do it like it hurt, like it hurt
What you don't like work?

[Pre-chorus: Robin Thicke]
Baby can you breathe? I got this from Jamaica

It always works for me, Dakota to Decatur, uh huh
No more pretending
Hey, hey, hey
Cause now you winning
Hey, hey, hey
Here's our beginning

[Chorus: Robin Thicke]
I always wanted a good girl
(Pharrell: Everybody get up)
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it
You're a good girl
Can't let it get past me
You're far from plastic
Talk about getting blasted
I hate these blurred lines
(Pharrell: Everybody get up)
I know you want it
I know you want it
I know you want it
But you're a good girl
The way you grab me
Must wanna get nasty
Go ahead, get at me

[Outro: Pharrell]
Everybody get up
Everybody get up
Hey, hey, hey
Hey, hey, hey
Hey, hey, hey

[3] **The Broadcaster responded as follows:**

1. The Blurred Lines song featuring. T.I. & Pharrell Williams is a global international Top 10 hit. It does not promote rape and violence as suggested by the complainant. There are no explicit references to violent sexual activity or violence.

2. The Broadcasting Code is to be read in the light of the right to freedom of expression in section 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996. Hence incursions into freedom of expression need to be justified by a clear understanding of specific harm as a

result of broadcasts. A vague notion of subliminal messages is insufficient. We understand that some listeners may find the words of the song offensive however that does not justify a general finding which would have a substantially negative impact on freedom of expression in general.

3. It is our opinion that the song complained about when, judged within context, does not sanction, promote or glamorises violence or unlawful conduct.

We submit that there has been no contravention of the BCCSA Code."

EVALUATION

[4] It is the contention of the Complainant that the song promotes violence against women and promotes "rape culture" in a country where violence against women is rife. As such, the song should not be played on the airwaves.

[5] The Respondent argues that the song contains no explicit references to violent sex (rape), or to violence (against women). Furthermore, while some listeners may find the lyrics offensive, this is insufficient for a finding that limits freedom of expression.

[6] I listened to the song, which has reached number one spot in a number of countries, and seems ironically to have benefited from the negative publicity it has received. Firstly, the words, sung in an American rap-style, are frequently indistinct. The words themselves are somewhat vapid and vacuous, consisting of a series of refrains, the most repetitious of which is the statement "I know you want it". The words are sexually suggestive, implying that the woman wants sex. The lyrics of "Blurred Lines" are a crude contemporary variant of popular love songs, for example, the 1950s Muddy Waters song (popularised by singers such as Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones) "I wanna make love to you". However, the lyrics may be accused of expressing misogynistic feelings, yet as such they are no different from, and are indeed less hard-hitting than, the misogyny that is frequently evident in hip-hop songs by singers such as Eminem (this is well-documented: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Misogyny_in_hip_hop_culture). In comparison to the

latter genre, the lyrics of the song in question are relatively harmless and inoffensive, and in general carry no explicit threat of sexual violence. However, the same may perhaps not be said about the line "I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two" – which, if taken out of context, may be read as a threat. In my opinion, however, the line borders on parody, mocking typical male braggadocio regarding penis size. The line follows on, though not directly, from a description of the woman as "the hottest bitch in this place", describing her as "an animal" desiring copulation, an implied sexual urge that the singer is willing to satisfy, thereby setting the woman free, or liberating her, from her implied sexual frustration ("baby it's in your nature / Just let me liberate you"); as such, the latter may be read as a parody of feminism or women's liberation. It would, of course, be disingenuous to ignore the cumulative effect of these words, even though they are interspersed with dull, repetitive refrains and lyrics that dilute their effect. Nevertheless, to single them out and subject them to scrutiny in a way that does not naturally occur when actually listening to a song, is unrealistic and even unfair.

[7] The crucial question is whether the lyrics, such as those which apparently threaten sexual violence ("I'll give you something big enough to tear your ass in two"), promote or glamorise violence, or constitute advocacy of hatred, threatening imminent violence. The image may be construed as anal rape, though it could also be argued that the man is merely responding to the woman's seductive "come-on" ("I know you want it"). Crude and disgusting as the statement is, implying that a large penis will rupture the woman's anus, there is no obvious threat to rape her or commit violence against her, and so there can be no accusation that the words glamorise violence. Similarly, there is no advocacy of violence, as the lyrics contain no encouragement to rape. As argued above, the crude lines of the song are a response to what the singer perceives as the woman's animal-like seduction, expressing an animal instinct to copulate, which he offers to satisfy ("What rhymes with hug me?" – implying the request,"fuck me").

[8] While some people may perceive the lyrics as objectifying women and even degrading them, the language and imagery should be seen in broader context of the song, including its repetitive refrains, which have the effect of cushioning the effect of these barely audible words. Offensive they may indeed be to some listeners, but mere offensiveness is

not sufficient for a finding that the song has transgressed the Code. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that bona fide artistic works (however vapid they may be) are excluded from the usual requirements of Clause 4.

[9] The video has gained notoriety, and has even been banned by some student unions in the UK, mainly because of the visual images of scantily-clad women and male singers. But the video is not the same thing as the song, and without the accompanying visuals, the song loses much of its impact. In a recent article in the UK *Guardian*, "Blurred Lines" is described almost hyperbolically as "the biggest song of the year" and "the most controversial of the decade". It is important, however, not to be swept up in what seems to be a wave of disgust at the video, to avoid reading meanings into the essentially tedious lyrics, and instead to maintain rational objectivity. For what is at stake here is the hard-won principle of freedom of expression, and while this song is hardly an example of artistic genius, it does nevertheless fall into the category of art and entertainment, as argued above. There may indeed be little artistic merit in the song, a shallow attempt at entertainment, derivative of a whole genre of "love" songs, from romantic songs to vulgar R&B and hip-hop songs that insult women. But this particular should not become a scapegoat for what seems to be a backlash in some quarters regarding the issue of violence against women, despite this issue being one of public importance in South Africa.

[10] It is a sad reflection on our culture that language has become so debased that it has lost much of its meaning and effect, as well as its shock value, and that songwriters appear to push the envelope in attempts at gaining public attention. And yet, after due consideration, and in fairness to the songwriter and the principle of freedom of expression, I cannot conclude that the song promotes rape culture or violence against women.

In the result I find that there is no infringement of the Code.

DR LYNDA GILFILLAN
BCCSA COMMISSIONER