

## Artists Should Take Heed of Banned Books Week and Know Music Is in Similar Peril (Guest Column)

Amid a wave of book bans, a Dolly Parton and Miley Cyrus song was barred from an elementary school. More musicians need to get involved in stopping this.

BY JOANIE LEEDS



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Banned Books Week is here, and while book lovers everywhere rally against the censorship of our cherished stories, musicians like [Ariana Grande](#), [Idina Menzel](#) and [Yola](#) have added their names to the chorus of celebrities and activists in [an open letter](#) condemning the ominous threat of book bans. This impassioned message — led by the iconic [LeVar Burton](#) of *Reading Rainbow* fame and propelled by [moveon.org](#) — boldly declares about book bans that “It’s only a matter of time before they target other forms of art, expression, and entertainment.”

This point is exactly what I was afraid of as I began working on my latest album, *FREEDOM: Songs Inspired by Banned Picture Books*, and the reason why I want to get more musicians on board to join the movement against book bans.

As a Manhattanite, I wear many hats: touring musician, recording artist, early childhood music educator and mom to an eight-year-old bookworm. Over the past year, I've taken a dive deep into the disheartening world of book bans, especially books removed from school and library shelves. My connection to this issue deepened when I discovered that some of my daughter's beloved books, including *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong'o and *Alma and How She Got her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal, had been taken away in my own home state of Florida by Governor **Ron DeSantis** and spearheaded by his supporters in the right-wing group Moms for Liberty.

In the 2021-22 school year, First Amendment advocates PEN America reported that a shocking 317 children's picture books were banned. Most of these silenced stories belong to BIPOC authors, LGBTQIA+ individuals, books with Jewish themes or stories representing diverse cultural backgrounds. The fact that even our youngest readers aren't spared is truly devastating. Picture

books and children's music go hand-in-hand for young kids to learn about the world around them and build empathy for others.

When I set out to create songs for *FREEDOM*, I naively thought that only books were under threat from modern censorship, though I vaguely knew about the mid-20th century "banning of immoral music" as it pertained to censorship of jazz and rock & roll due to "provocative" dancing or promoting social change. Growing up in the 1980s, while devouring the shelves of CDs at my local Miami music store, I recall the infamous black and white Parental Advisory labels placed on the plastic because of explicit content. I honestly thought music censorship was a thing of the past and we were collectively cool when it came to free music (and I'm not talking about the Napster kind.)

When I recently visited the PEN America offices, I was shocked to learn about an elementary school in Waukesha, Wis., where they banned a **performance of the song** "Rainbowland" by **Dolly Parton** and **Miley Cyrus** for violating their "controversial content policy." Over the summer, the school board controversially dismissed first-grade teacher Melissa Tempel for daring to speak out against the musical ban — exercising her First Amendment rights outside of school hours on social media. Teachers in that district are also barred from wearing rainbows, discussing gender pronouns or even mentioning the word "anti-racist."

As a lyricist, educator, and mother, I can confidently say that there's nothing controversial about "Rainbowland" and its removal may be seen as an actionable blueprint from the right and a glimpse of what's coming our way in the land of the "free."

Book bans are just one piece of a larger plan to dismantle our education system and undermine the core of our democracy one art form at a time, all under the guise of "protecting children." By standing idle and failing to protect our First Amendment rights now, we are heading on a bleak path forward. It's only a matter of time before they come after our music, just as they've come after our bodily autonomy and voting rights.

Musicians, I urge you to join me in the fight against book bans, defending our First Amendment rights and safeguarding the personal freedoms of all Americans. Come stir up good trouble and take a stand! "We will not be banned!"

*Singer/songwriter Joanie Leeds won a 2020 Grammy Award for best children's album and in her new album, **FREEDOM**, released Sept. 15, she*

*and her band take on book banning through eight original songs that amplify love and inclusion.*