

## The Pied Piper

He plays his flute and when they hear the music, the children come running. He is an ice cream truck. His simple tunes are irresistible to young children, who all know that if they quickly follow, boundless pleasure will await. What they don't know is that the sweet melodies of his piccolo are a harbinger of their impending doom. He is a kidnapper who lures children away from their homes to places unknown.

The Pied Piper, as he is known, is not just a legend of medieval European lore. He is a singer who released a Christmas album in 2016. His name is Robert Kelly, most popularly known as R Kelly.

In an episode of Aaron McGruder's satirical cartoon *The Boondocks* called "The Trial of R Kelly," a local lawyer prosecutes R Kelly for urinating on a 14-year-old girl. Riley, one of the main characters, comes staunchly to R Kelly's defense. In a famous monologue, he says:

"Oh yes, the victim! At what point does personal responsibility become a factor in this equation? ... I see [urine] coming, I move. She saw [urine] coming, she stayed. And why should I have to miss out on the next R Kelly album just for that?!"

In this ripped-from-the-headlines episode, Riley's older brother Huey and Prosecutor Tom Dubois seem to be the only voices of reason who can see that this victim-blaming is absurd, and that there should be no defense for an adult who engaged in a sexual relationship with a child too young to consent.

The episode ends with R Kelly getting acquitted, then singing to screaming fans who protested outside of the courtroom for his release.

The events in this episode of a cartoon are, unfortunately, not too far from reality. Far too many of us have consistently turned a blind eye to Kelly's behaviours, despite the fact that he has a long history of alleged sexual assault and pedophilia.

R Kelly mentored fourteen-year-old Aaliyah and produced her entire first album titled—interestingly enough—*Age Ain't Nothing But a Number*. He famously married Aaliyah when she was only 15 years old. He was 28, nearly twice Aaliyah's age.

In 1996, R Kelly was accused of rape by a woman who was under-aged at the time of their sexual relationship. In 2002, a video surfaced that showed R Kelly in the middle of inappropriate sexual behaviours with a fourteen year old girl—the video that was the subject of the satirical Boondocks episode. In 2017, R Kelly was exposed for having held young women in his home and forcing them to be his in-home girlfriends. Former partners of his detail their experiences in relationships with him, characterized by emotional abuse and sexual violence. Kelly was found at the center of numerous allegations of possession of child pornography, sexual assault, and domestic violence. However, while activists and survivors were speaking up, their voices were muffled by the consistent rotation of Kelly's music.

Last month, the six-part docuseries *Surviving R Kelly* aired on [Lifetime](#). The series highlighted the first hand stories of Kelly's alleged victims, and featured accounts from his relatives, staff members, celebrities who have worked with him, and other associates of R Kelly. The accounts were jarring. For many, the docuseries was the record scratch needed to prompt people to [#MuteRKelly](#).

#MuteRKelly is a movement sparked by a 2017 petition written by Atlanta Arts Administrator Oronike Odeleye "to get R. Kelly's music off of Atlanta airwaves." Organizers amplified the message of Odeleye's

petition, and a movement was born. Their website features a timeline of R Kelly's allegations and a FAQ section that addresses the reasons that we should put a stop to his music.

This is a man who dubbed himself the "Pied Piper of R&B," in reference to the folk story described above. This is a man who married a 15 year old girl (who knew how old she was if and when they started having a sexual relationship). This is a man who was caught on tape assaulting a 14 year old. What more did we need to know for us to recognize R Kelly's abusive and predatory behaviours?!

Despite the mountains of stories, allegations, and evidence that we have seen about his behaviours, there are still people lining up to buy tickets to his shows and fund his predatory lifestyle. Since the docuseries, people have still jumped to his defense, fans even shouting "take me hostage" at a sold out club appearance in January. Many people have blamed the victims, labeling them as a bunch of "fast" girls who were asking for it. Celebrities and listeners alike have taken the stance that R Kelly is not alone in his behaviours, so it is unfair that he become a target for the anti-sexual violence movement. Defenses like this are unacceptable. The implication is that rather than to be outraged about the prevalence of sexual violence in the music industry and in society altogether, and rather than hold people accountable for their actions, we should throw our hands up and call it quits because there are just so many perpetrators. These comments of support condone sexual violence and silence victims.

Much of the reluctance to denounce R Kelly comes from the fact that he made hit after hit. You probably played "Step in the Name of Love" at your family cookout. You sang "World's Greatest" in your elementary school chorus. You jammed to the "Ignition" remix in your car. It feels too hard to give up listening to music that has been so great to us, even when the musician has undoubtedly been so awful to us. So we dismiss all that we know about R Kelly so we can continue to guiltlessly listen to his music.

But the time for this to stop is long overdue. We need to call a spade a spade. R Kelly is not just a great musician. R Kelly is a powerful figure with a decades long history of abusive and pedophilic behaviours. We should never be reluctant to acknowledge violence just because the perpetrator is famous or talented. There are countless victims who have to struggle with the reality of their experiences with him, who are reminded of the trauma he inflicted upon them with every lyric we sing. I'm not saying that you *have* to burn all his CDs, but something must be done to make it clear that we do not silently condone his egregious behaviours. By ignoring his actions with nary a word of criticism, we suggest to him and others like him that sexual violence and domestic abuse are ok. To make it clear: sexual violence and domestic abuse are *never* ok and should *never* be tolerated, accepted, or implicitly condoned.

The Katie Brown Educational Program teaches participants about what consent, respect, and equality look like in a relationship, in contrast to sexual violence, coercion, and power manipulation. As part of our definition of consent, all partners must be of legal consenting age and must be equals (meaning that one party should not be intimidated by another party's status, influence, or power). Everyone deserves to have agency over their own body, and to be in relationships that are free of violence. A