Bob's Secret: Dylan responds to Chinese censorship allegations

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After being criticized for allegedly allowing Chinese bureaucrats to preapprove his set lists for concerts in Shanghai and Beijing last month, Bob Dylan disputed any artistic compromise in comments posted on his website Friday morning. www.bobdylan.com/news/my-fans-and-followers

Minnesota’s favorite music son (with all apologies to Prince) took heat in part because his set lists were conspicuously bereft of his well-known protest songs such as *The Times They Are a-Changin’*, suggesting that the Hibbing native deferred to his politically repressive hosts.

Criticism came from a bevy of different sources, from British music magazine *Mojo* to Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times*. The Old Gray Lady put the reluctant Voice of a Generation’s supposed kowtowing on par with Beyoncé cavorting for the Qaddafi family and Elton John swallowing his dignity whole to play noted homophobe Rush Limbaugh’s wedding.

query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1DC1039F933A25757C0A9679D8B63&ref=maureendowd

In a rare response to critics, Mr. Dylan implied that news of censorship was news to him, explaining that “[i]f there were any songs, verses or lines censored, nobody ever told me about it and we played all the songs that we intended to play.”

It would indeed be deeply disappointing and disturbing if the Conscience of the ‘60s, admittedly a crown Mr. Dylan has never worn easily or enthusiastically, bowed to censorship. His explanation that the younger Chinese audience would not be as familiar with his older, infinitely more popular and recognizable songs than they would be with material from his last couple of albums strains credulity.

But Mr. Dylan has always been an enigmatic artist. He has 34 studio albums alone to choose songs from and has compiled eclectic set lists for decades. Moreover, Mr. Dylan did not play *The Times They Are a-Changin’* in liberal Australia after he left Asia, nor at the last show he played in North America before heading to the East.

Further, his relationship with the press has always been contentious. His prickly temperament and refusal to be anything other than his own artist have been major catalysts behind affixing the “sell out” label since he had the temerity of plugging in his guitar.

The argument that he is a “sell out” in this particular instance is predicated heavily on something probably only Mr. Dylan knows. Call it Bob’s Secret.