

OPINION

Pop Secrets

There are plenty of interesting stories still to be told in the history of the Franco regime

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Thanks to a sort of collective amnesia, fomented by obscure interests, there are still unexplored territories in the history of the Franco regime. Now an encyclopedic new book has shed light on a forgotten aspect of the regime's tenacious struggle against pop modernity. From The Beatles on down, everyone's work was subject to the censor's scissors.

Veneno en dosis camufladas (or, *Poison in camouflaged doses*), published by Milenio, is a tome of feverish erudition, in which Xavier Valiño reveals hundreds of cases of censorship, subtle or crude. Stuff we had never heard of. And of course we all knew about the relentless censorship of any and all songs with political content. Indeed, the title is drawn from a censor's reticent report on the "protest flamenco" songs of Manuel Gerena. What we didn't know so much about were the mechanisms of control over the recording companies.

Remember that many songs were sold in shops, but theoretically prohibited on the radio, being tolerated there only if their text was suitably modified. However there was a filter that came before the radio, where it was determined what records might be sold publicly in Spain.

This censoring machine worked at full speed from 1966 onward, until it slowed down and ground to a halt, after the Watchman of the West (Franco) finally went west in 1975. The ministerial archives in Alcalá de Henares hold tons of paper containing refusals of songs, appeals of record companies, and other official correspondence.

The watchdogs scrutinized the record covers but also the content, in whatever language. Valiño shows how implacable the screening was. It was applied equally to unknown groups from Amsterdam, and to English-language superstars.

Needless to say, they frowned on the reputed icons of the counterculture, such as Zappa and Dylan. Another one who raised their hackles was John Lennon. The average censor's bigot brain took it as a national insult to Spain that Lennon got married in Gibraltar. Accordingly, *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, which narrated this episode, was removed from several compilations. But the watchdogs also bit chunks out of Paul McCartney, the nice Beatle.

Valiño covers the interminable push-and-shove with the record companies, forced to fight for potentially top-selling artists. The squeakiest wheels got a little grease, in the form of favorable verdicts. There are vast long letters from CBS, tirelessly appealing against barbarous decisions, such as censoring six of the 14 songs in Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*. Arguing against another attempt at mutilation, the company alleged the peculiarities of the artist: "It must be kept in mind that Bob Dylan is an obscure singer in the English language, who is not easy to understand even for the Americans themselves, owing to his difficulty in pronunciation."

CBS also used the artistic defense. In a sexually repressed country, which forbade every contemporary representation of the human body, a loophole was found for Mati Klarwein's busy paintings, used by Santana, Miles Davis and the Chamber Brothers, full of opulent unclothed women.

On the other hand the Ministry of Information and Tourism said no to the discreet breasts of the temptress Eve on *Under the Jasmine Tree*, of the Modern Jazz Quartet, obliging Hispavox to invent an aseptic cover.

Yet Hispavox had tried to score Brownie points with the Ministry. In 1970 its president turned informer, reporting that he had received an offer to launch *Lie*, 12 songs by none other than Charles Manson. He proclaimed that he had rejected out of hand this "immoral deal," attaching a copy (and translation) of his correspondence with the US company. This report did not prevent *Lie* from finally being published by Movieplay, a firm related to (pay attention) the financial elite of Opus Dei. As has often been noted, our country's history is full of surprises.