

Limits of music and the G8 in solving poverty

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND, JULY 2, 2005 – I am watching telly as they say here, tuning into Live 8, live from London's Hyde Park, with Robbie Williams once more rock, rock, rocking us as we flash back and flash forward with another mega-rock show for a big cause.

Many thought that singer Bob Geldof's time came and went, but now, 20 years later, it's back again as billions tune into a string of concerts attended by over a million and a half being held in ten cities on four continents described as THE LONG WALK TO JUSTICE. The familiar bands are back singing for Africa but this time as only one part of a larger campaign, and not just a charitable one and ostensibly demanding a real change in the world. There are also other more important players this time around but the pop concert drew far more detailed attention than the political activists did. Virtually all the British media played it up big with commemorative sections.

There were leading NGOs and lobbyists advocating for controls on climate change, fairer trade, debt reduction and more aid. They have come up with policy proposals that already seem to be embraced by some G-8 governments but are unlikely to win the backing of George Bush who made it clear in a British TV interview that he is coming to advance the interests of the USA, not Africa.

Using celebrities and the media as well as protests called MAKE POVERTY HISTORY, organizers have mobilized hundreds of thousands to take to the streets as they did here in Edinburgh Saturday. (More protests are slated this week.)

They came by train and by car and by literally hundreds of coaches, older church people and swarms of students and young activists eager to send a message to the world leaders descending on Gleneagles early next week. Some in the anarchist 'black block' wrapped in bandanas and chanting revolutionary slogans were blocked by cops from joining the march. Most poured into the streets peacefully with placards and good cheer. There was even a hysterical battalion of young costumed circus-like characters in camouflage get-up

organized as the ‘CLANDESTINE INSURGENT REBEL CLOWN ARMY.’ (True!)

The demo, 18 people across, paraded around town in waves for hours. They marched through blocked off main streets and then back to a meadow where activists groups set up tents to sell their wares and stages to talk politics and play political songs. I heard Billy Bragg, saw Bianca Jagger and chatted with economist-writer Noreena Hertz about great it is that people are finally marching for global economic justice and not just against the policies or wars they hate. There was a sense of heady optimism in the air as in ‘we are putting the issues of the poor on the public agenda and forcing powerful governments from the rich world to respond.’

And as I write these words, back on the TV, the WHO punctuate the point by declaring “we won’t be fooled again’ as the lucky fans who scored tickets raise their fists in the air like they did when they first heard the song. Throughout the world artists endorsed calls for action on the issue.

Speaking to a concert in Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela said it would be a crime against humanity if governments ignored the demands of the public. “Do not look the other way,” he demanded. “We want action.” His was the only real political statement I heard in two hours of prime-time programming that kept calling it “the day that changed the world although images of Africa’s distress were shown.”

But there is something else going on here that the BBC was not drawing attention to – its presenters are more into sappy and banal rock star adoration like asking the likes of George Michael if he is going to tour again than exploring the larger meaning and mission of the show. Artists and TV presenters saying “what a great day” was a diversion from the objective. (I am told the BBC feared it would be accused of compromising its “neutrality” if he offered more serious coverage that might be taken as advocacy.”

Yes a Christ-like Bono proclaimed they were there not for charity but for “justice” but little detail was offered about what that means in the songs or from the stage where entertainment was dominant and edification virtually non-existent. True fans know in general terms what the show was for but couldn’t more have been done to educate the audience?

At the same time, the visibility that TV stations have given the issue inspired 26 million people to access the Live 8 website and add their names to a list of supporters. How many of those supporters will become activists

remains to be seen. Will they heed Geldof's earlier call to "converge" on the G-8 or just go home agreeing with his later post show pronouncement of "JOB DONE"?

As far as I can tell, those plans for a million to march on the summit are not as detailed as the logistics that made the concert so successful. Rock stars are showmen who organize events, not revolutions, even if Madonna asked the audience if they were ready for a revolution.

The more relevant question is: have the rock stars been seduced by Tony Blair who is desperate to recast an image battered by his association with Bush and bloodshed in Basra? Have they been deceived by politicians used to making pledges that they don't honor (as in the case of the Tsunami) while thinking they have persuaded the politicians to new levels of caring and commitment? Geldof was part of an Africa Commission chaired by Blair which calls for change but in a free market-pro private sector direction. There is an alternative commission and many writers who challenge this logic and question its impact.

Is this campaign serious about transforming power relations and redistributing wealth and resources or is it content to wrest symbolic concessions that look good but in real terms are not very significant?

These questions were raised by a third force in this movement – the popular stop the war campaign. The Make Poverty History wouldn't allow them to march with their own banners in the big parade or speak at their rally inviting suspicion that the Blairites were stage-managing the protests from the shadows.

(The British government actually funded some of the organizing undertaken by Oxfam, which now has former staffers advising Blair's people while ex-government functionaries now work with the charity.) Tony Blair Chancellor Gordon Brown supported the protests. Was there a deal here between the popsters and the pols that we don't know about?

The Stop the War coalitions suggests there was. They want to make both war and poverty history and argue that the former contributes to the latter pointing to all the money spent on the world's militaries and the destruction of Iraq and the growing impoverishment of its people.

They say that the G-8 is not the solution but the problem and the rich nations are rich by keeping the poor nations poor. "Tony Blair has forged a false consensus promoting the idea that we have a shared view of what's wrong and

how to make it right,” argued George Monbiot, the brilliant Guardian columnist who contends that the people protesting and the people in power are enemies with different world views and needs. He says that the Bushes and the Blairs are promoting an illusion that they care as deeply as the people pressing them to act. The former are promoting the neo-liberal agenda that the protesters are resisting.

The high point of their rally was a fiery address by Member of Parliament George Galloway who now runs the RESPECT Party and devastated US Senator Norm Coleman (R-Mn) who accused him of profiting from the UN’s Oil for Food Program. Galloway made mincemeat of his accusation and today was one of the few speakers to challenge Sir Bob Geldof and what he mocked as “Sir Bono, because he soon will be” for playing up to and lobbying Bush and Blair rather than confronting and denouncing them as war criminals.

They were critical of how Blair is posing as Africa’s champion while deflecting debate about the ongoing war that is eating up resources and lives. Their slogan is “It takes Respect to Get Respect.” And Blair is not someone they respect.

“We are here to spoil the party and bust its illusions,” he said to on-their-feet activists who cheered him wildly. RESPECT insists that the debt relief that has been announced is only a quarter of the amount of money spent in invading Iraq. They note that the amount pledged by the US is less than the amount spent annually on cat and dog food, and that Britain is selling arms to many of the poorest countries in the world.

In other words, while the music was often sensational (if overly western and classic) and the passion strong, there are powerful interests in conflict so that making poverty history will require a far more fundamental transformation than most of the marchers and the musicians seem to realize. This concern was ignored and downplayed in most of the feel good media outlets I saw as conservative newspapers like the Daily Mail fashionably praised demonstrators whom they usually dismiss.

All the new found concern for Africa has driven the bloodshed in Iraq off the airwaves and the G-8 agenda. (The Sunday OBSERVER brought Iraq back with a report that Britain is helping to subsidize horrendous torture and human rights abuse in Iraq that sounds like it came from Saddam’s playbook.)

Live 8 ended with a nostalgic grand finale sing-along of “Hey Jude,” a song that Sir Paul McCartney wrote for John Lennon’s son Julian. No one reminded

viewers that it was McCartney who organized a pro-patriotic post 911 concert in New York that jeered those who called for peace. His own song urged a “fight for freedom,” a slogan the Bush Administration adopted as the battle cry of its GWOT (Global War on Terror.)

And yet at the same time, these forces that are now debating ending poverty in the parks, and in alternative summits are raising issues that have been relatively invisible in our mainstream politics and the media.

Expectations for change are high, as is hope that the G8 will rise to the moment. That’s asking a lot from politicians who have on the whole done so little for so long to help so many even as more debt will be canceled and aid increased. Note also that G8 is not a representative body even of economic power – China and Brazil are excluded.

Its now up to the media to track what happens now, to separate the heroes from the hypocrites, to assess the political impact and follow-up on whether the poor of the world will be, as many expect, disappointed and forgotten again. What is needed writes one columnist in Britain is more rage, not rock.

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