

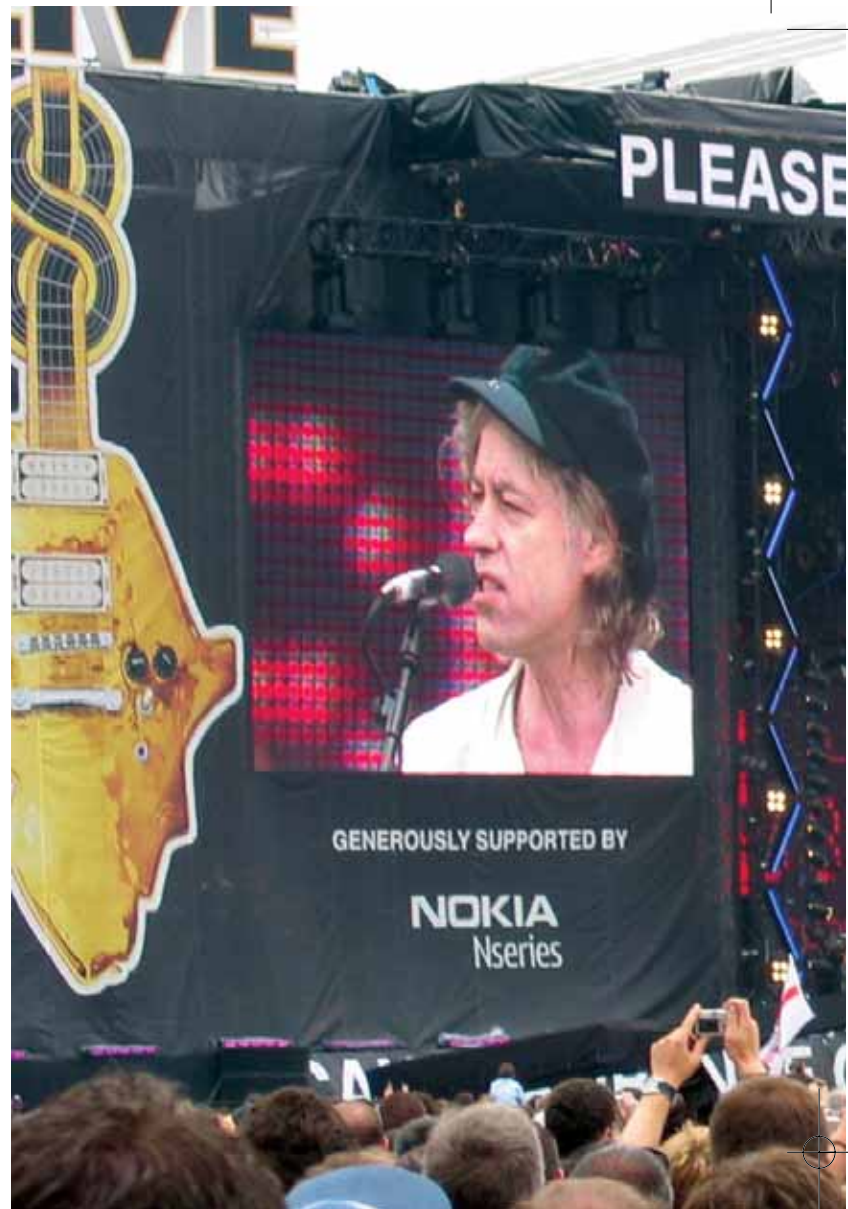
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PROTEST, POLITICS AND POP
JAMES PANTON

Pop Goes Politics

Cool mega music events might seem to produce cool politics too, but they are far less effective at connecting politicians with their voters and creating a sound debate on the issues.

The Live Earth concerts on July 7, organised by former United States Vice President Al Gore, are already drumming-up dissent.



IN JUST 24 HOURS ON SATURDAY JULY 7 MORE THAN A hundred and fifty of the world's top musicians will play at concerts spanning all seven continents, while the music is simultaneously broadcast around the world on television, radio and the internet. But Live Earth, as this pop extravaganza is called, is more than just an excuse for a party. According to the organisers, it will 'use the global reach of music' to 'engage more than two billion people' in 'a call to action to combat the climate crisis'. Indeed, the concerts will 'mark the beginning of a multi-year mass persuasion campaign to move individuals, corporations and governments to solve the climate crisis'. Wow.

Organised by former United States Vice-President Al Gore and Live 8 producer Kevin Wall, pretty much everyone who is anyone from the world of pop celebrity seems to have been signed up to appear.

Although the use of pop to 'do politics' on this global scale is a relatively recent development, pop stars with a conscience have been talking politics through music almost ever since pop music was invented. Bob Dylan did not start the trend - The Cutty Wren is the first political protest song I have come across, dating from the English peasant revolt of 1381.

But Dylan certainly made pop protest fashionable, warning senators and congressmen that 1950s political apathy was over: 'There's a battle outside and it's raging / And the times they are a changing.' Pete Seeger resurrected, and Joan Baez made famous, an old gospel ditty, We Shall Overcome, which, cheesy as it might seem now, was a call to action for any self-respecting civil rights activist in the 1960s.

And while in 1969 Neil Young made a less than subtle attack on the racism of his eponymous Southern Man, it was John Lennon



and Yoko Ono who really captured the potential for celebrity-led pop-protest with their week-long 'bed-ins' to protest against US imperialism in Vietnam. The simple message: 'All we are saying is: Give Peace a Chance'.

It is this appeal of pop and celebrity, combined with the commercial weight of mass marketing, that sets the stage for events like Live Earth. Pop music is business, and in a consumerist age, politics needs to be marketed: so what better marriage than pop and politics?

Although there are earlier examples of pop concerts doing politics, it was Live Aid in 1985 that really brought the business of pop, the marketing allure of celebrity, and the political message together. Concerts in London and Philadelphia, and performances in Sydney and Moscow for Live Aid saw one of the largest scale satellite, television and radio link-ups of all time, with estimates of up to 1.5 billion people in one hundred countries witnessing the event. It eventually raised \$100 million for charity.

Of course, there was nothing very subtle about its political message: Feed the World was the chorus, and also the political sound bite. 'People are dying now. Just give us your money NOW!' was how organiser Bob Geldof chose to drive the message home.

Policy Free Zone

Live Aid did not result in any greater understanding of the social and political context of the famine in Ethiopia. And in the

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grand scheme of things, Live Aid also failed to make any significant contribution to the miserable conditions of underdevelopment in which a great many Ethiopians lived. But it raised money to help people who were dying, and let people around the world know that there was a problem. Maybe that is as much as we can hope for?

This is perhaps the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of pop stars doing politics through pop concerts: there can be nothing very subtle about it; there is no room for debate or argument. There is no need to really work out what one thinks, or to get to grips with a complex political reality. Most importantly, there is no space for disagreement. If people are dying then people have to be saved – it is as simple as that.

This all seems remarkably appropriate for a political age in which managerialism has replaced political contest, and sound bites have become the preferred method of political communication. In reality, pop politics is the politics of sound bites taken to its logical extreme.

Dylan may have sold many millions of records, and Lennon may have been the biggest celebrity of his day, but they both understood themselves to be engaged in a rather subversive, radical, anti-establishment kind of politics. So too did the establishment!

By contrast, when Bob Geldof and Bono launched Live 8 around the 2005 G8 Gleneagles summit of leading economies, as part of the campaign to Make Poverty History, politicians seemed to be falling over themselves to sign up to the cause. There may be nothing very new in pop stars talking politics, but something odd is surely happening when they are courted at the highest levels of national government. Anyone chancing on the coverage of that summit might have been forgiven for thinking that aging



rockers Geldof and Bono were British government spokesmen on Africa – designer jeans, wrap-around sunglasses and all.

Communication is King

Until recently, we might have expected serious politicians to look down on the rather unmediated politics of pop stars with a conscience. The pop singers could be left to strum three-minute political ditties while politicians got on with the more serious business of running the world. Well not any more.

For contemporary politicians who are unable to inspire large percentages of the population even to turn out to vote, and who feel themselves to lack the kind of legitimacy that can only come from a properly engaged democracy, pop politics is a perfect way to connect with the population at large and to give the sense that politics really can make a difference.

In a political world, in which communication is king, politicians seem to have discovered that pop stars can do a sound bite far better than they can. But this is where we ought to pause and reflect. For all the hype around Live 8, what was really achieved?

In spite of the buzz that comes from the sense that we can Make Poverty History, the actual result was rather uninspiring. The G8 finance ministers, for example, signed a deal to write-off the debt of eighteen countries, fourteen of them in Africa, which between them owed around \$40 billion. Yet given that most of the countries involved had been unable to pay interest on their loans, let alone begin to pay off the loans themselves, the result seemed more like a recognition of economic reality than a radical new policy agenda to Make Poverty History. Bono and Geldof seemed to be engaged in a very successful publicity exercise for British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown and the other G8 leaders.

A little reflection on the forthcoming Live Earth might be equally sobering. For one thing, despite the claim that the ultimate aim is 'to engage more than two billion people with a call to action to combat the climate crisis', the Live Earth website – which includes all the details we might need on the event: from where the proceeds will go, the Alliance for Climate Protection; how many songs each pop star will sing, yet to be determined; to

whether or not there will be public parking at the venue, no – gives absolutely no information about what, exactly, the climate crisis is, and nothing whatsoever about how a multi-venue pop extravaganza will equip two billion of us to resolve it. Presumably the answer to these questions is assumed to be obvious.

In reality, the debate about the 'climate crisis' is far from obvious. There are many who still doubt that it is nearly as severe as the hyperbole suggests, and there is much argument about exactly how to make sense of the changes in global temperatures that seem to be occurring. Still others have raised important questions about the rather miserabilist proposals that have come to dominate the advice on what we might do about it – from switching our televisions off stand-by to a general reduction in consumption. Live Earth, of course, will have no room for such subtleties.

Swaying to the Music

The problem is not really that the intricacies of political arguments cannot be explored during a pop concert. A better way to spoil a good concert would be difficult to imagine. The problem is that as the realm of serious political debate contracts, pop concerts become a model for how politicians communicate with the public. Attending a charity event, or worse, even watching it on television, becomes a way in which the citizenry is encouraged to become more politically engaged.

When the possibility of two billion people hearing a concert on radio comes to be understood as 'engaging' those people in a political action, then the Live Earth organisers have just received a quite exceptional mandate for their political campaign. And doubtless politicians all around the western world will be falling over themselves to show their support.

Although, in announcing his candidacy for the British Labour Party leadership, Brown claimed that: 'I do not believe that politics is about celebrity', it seems unlikely that he will do anything other than sign up wholeheartedly to the celebrity politics of Live Earth.

Some would argue that the importance of pop politics is the extent to which it politicises issues that would remain disguised, and that it reaches sections of the population politics might otherwise ignore. These are noble intentions, but they are sadly untrue.

Just as no-one could object to feeding the world or making poverty history, the idea that there is a global climate crisis which is the biggest threat humanity has yet faced has become a kind of unquestionable orthodoxy, a new morality around which we should organise our lives. These ideas are not coming into politics from the radical fringes, but are the dominant ideas around which politics now rotates.

At the same time, pop concert politics is not a novel approach that might engage the politically excluded or re-inspire the politically apathetic. On the contrary, it is increasingly becoming the model on which all political debate is conducted: the sound bites are short and clear, and the moral message is unassailable, and the engagement required by the citizens is nothing more than nodding our heads and swaying to the music. The more this becomes the norm, the further away we move from practicing the kind of politics that might really allow us to make poverty history, or resolve whatever crises the natural world throws up for us.

