



## SIMON FRITH Geldof's crusade

Everyone agrees that thanks to Bob Geldof's initiative and the fans' response, millions of pounds have been raised for Ethiopian famine relief; the question is what the Geldof crusade means for Britain. What's at issue in the argument about Live Aid is not the effect of charity but the meaning of a show.

Why this displacement from the politics of aid to the politics of pop? Partly because so many of Wembley's reporters, unaccustomed to rock, were overwhelmed by the day's emotionalism. But stadium shows are always emotional - Bob Geldof's genius has been to harness pop stars' skills at creating 'community' to charitable ends. The critical task is not to wallow in such emotionalism, but to examine how it works. Think, for example, of the different collective codes used on Band Aid's *Don't They Know It's Christmas*, a sentimental, British, sing-along Xmas hit, and USA for Africa's *We Are The World*, a black pop record exploiting the shared vocal commitment of gospel.

It's unarguable that the Wembley concert produced a powerful sense of community. The problem is what this community meant. David Edgar claims it for the Left by reference to right-wing writers' unease. This is to equate 'the Right' with a group of *Spectator* intellectuals whose hostility to mass culture was established many years ago by Paul Johnson's contempt for Beatles' fans. Such disdain for popular taste is, though, quite irrelevant to the activities of the really important right-wing ideologues, the cultural capitalists who shape popular taste in the first place.

Live Aid was a populist event, a public account of Britishness like Charles' and Di's wedding. What was being celebrated

was success. The criterion for admission to the stage was not rock and roll fervour nor even sales as such, but, as David Toop pointed out in *The Face*, the right recognition quotient - hence the appearance of all those over-the-hill 70s superstars, the absence of black Britons or reggae acts or anyone with 'minority' appeal.

There were good reasons for this fame game. Live Aid was a TV event and the acts had to grab the worldwide audience immediately. The show was a sustained television advertisement and its very success confirmed rock's integration into a particular sort of commercial process. Whatever the snuffy response of *The Spectator* lot, Live Aid had an instant place in *The Sun*/Radio 1/*Smash Hits* mythology - 'Bob Geldof,' as Eamon Andrews announced many months ago: 'this is your life'.

The point is not that Live Aid didn't have the sort of rock n'roll utopianism that Edgar expresses so stirringly, but that this utopianism is embedded in consumer capitalism. Edgar describes Live Aid as a reassertion of 60s ideology. 60s nostalgia I'd call it. What was moving about the day was the coming together of the successful 60s middle classes, fans and stars, to proclaim their continued idealism.

It was as if, after 10 years on the defensive, they were finally seeing off punk: spending money *can* be a form of moral righteousness.

A week later a different segment of the 60s generation gathered for the WOMAD festival. Here the counter-culture really lived: sex and drugs and small trade, anarchism, ecology and a view of the Third World as a source of wisdom, political example and cultural wealth, rather than as an object of pity. 'Send your money in!' beseeched Bob Geldof, 'or Africans will die'. 'Thanks to Africa,' went the Womad message, 'we can make

# The Global Juke Box?



music. Where else did rock n' roll come from?'

David Edgar asks what the Left can learn from Live Aid. My answer is: nothing. Let us just be heartened by how much Live Aid learned from the Left. It was a year of miners' benefits (several years of GLC shows) which made a charity record and concert the obvious answer to Bob Geldof's starting question: 'What can we do?' (And it doesn't take much cynicism to suggest that record companies, Fleet Street pop columnists and the more head-in-the-sand pop stars welcomed the chance to do good 'unpolitically'. What the rock Left realised long ago is that the difficulty is to make pop utopianism something more than a con-

sumer gesture. There's a problem of scale - local benefits are a much better source of group activity (political and musical) than big concerts, but the latter raise more money.

Edgar is right to suggest that pop music is the only mass medium that still carries radical messages. He's wrong to imply that this is the result of some sort of spontaneous class or age consciousness. The political use of music has meant long years of hard work and idealistic endeavour (emerging more obviously from the 70s and Rock Against Racism than the 60s). Live Aid drew on this idealism and gave it a huge public presence which may, as Edgar suggests, have embarrassed Thatcher. But it also confined it, defined pop activism as consumption, something that suits capital all too well. The Band Aid project was the best possible way to make money out of music for famine relief, but to celebrate it as good cultural politics is to take one step forward and two steps back.

## MARK FERRYMAN Beyond Lennonism

David Edgar was one of the few left commentators to concern him/herself with Live Aid. Most significantly, he did at least attempt to develop some strategic conception of 'Life beyond Live Aid'. However, the game was well and truly given away when *The Guardian* reprinted Edgar's article and changed the title to 'How Live Aid revived the 60s message'. David Edgar is quite simply an unashamedly ageing rockist. He continuously harks back to the 'Good Old Days', ie, the 60s, and in particular, Woodstock. For the benefit of the 68 generation, I'd just like to remind them that Woodstock took place 16 years ago. This isn't just point-scoring in the credibility stakes, but David Edgar does ask for it when he conjures up a forward-looking socialist vision, 1968! The Left has this obsession with looking backwards, it's about time we looked forward . . .

To map out a politico-cultural future needs more than fond memories, and I would suggest it requires three particular contributions that were clearly lacking from David Edgar's article. Firstly, whilst we have been quietly dropping (and some of us, not so quietly) the strictures of Leninism, our cultural sugar-daddies/mummies have still got this big hang-up with *Lennonism*. Nostalgia has got its

place but it can never take centre-stage. Instead, we need avant-guardism, a cultural practice that breaks barriers, attracts those at the edges of their respective cultural spaces, is exciting and fearlessly challenges the present.

Secondly, such a practice must be pluralist. Edgar gives his rockism away (along with his sex, race and age) when he states: 'rock and roll music - the only popular form with the faintest radical credentials that has ever gained significant purchase in the working class'. What about its avowed maleness, its attempted exclusion of women, except as performing/spectating accessories? What about its racism, that enabled it to rob and exploit so many black musicians and writers? And, most importantly, how about the radicalism of other musical forms with a mass audience; specifically reggae and soul. These are mass cultures every bit as radical as rock (and similarly flawed by sexism) but not treated as such by the Left. And by ignoring their significance we neatly mirror Geldof's excluding of major reggae and soul acts from *his* show. A politico-cultural future must be informed by both feminism and anti-racism, must challenge heterosexism and be accessible to people of all ages. These are not optional extras, but fundamentals.

Thirdly, the interventions that are seeking to create this future must be mass-based. We must engage the media with a new spirit of self-publicism. But this, in itself, cannot wish away decades of demobilisation. To build mass movements we have to empower people, there is all the difference in the world between an audience and a collectivity.

These three pillars are inseparable, each in itself could easily degenerate into yet another brand of exclusivism. But these aren't just critical musings, they could underpin an immediate project that is urgently needed. A series of massive events that seek to culturally project an anti-racist alternative to apartheid South Africa. Such a project requires the musical, artistic, dramatic, and many other skills of the avant-guardists, it demands a pluralism that opposes apartheid by engaging the racism of our own cultures, and can only succeed by empowering its initial audience into a collective anti-racist force. In short, a heady mix of a hegemonic project with a dash of the cult of activism.

*We welcome your contributions to the Viewpoint section. Please write not more than 600 words and send it to the editorial office by October 3.*



## Sheffield Bus Campaign VIDEO

### The Road to Ruin!

is in colour and lasts 25 minutes. Made for the Sheffield Bus Campaign, it is intended for public showings, and for use by trade unions and community groups. It is a vital weapon in the fight to keep bus transport public and locally controlled.

### The Road to Ruin!

has been designed to help defend bus transport in Sheffield against the Government's ill-conceived Transport Bill. The Bill - based on pilot schemes in Hereford, Norfolk and Devon - aims to deregulate and privatise public bus transport throughout Britain by October 1986.

### The Road to Ruin!

shows both the chaotic reality of the pilot scheme in Hereford and the massive support and appreciation of South Yorkshire's long-established progressive transport policies and cheap fares.

### INTERESTED IN THE VIDEO?

The video is available to buy or for hire. Copies of the video are available from:  
Sheffield Bus Campaign  
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Tel: 78688 ext 2238 or 2446.

The 'Road to Ruin' video was made for the Sheffield Bus Campaign, by Steel Bank Films with finance from Sheffield City Council.