

"WHEN IT HITS YOU FEEL NO PAIN..."

Canada; Toronto-18 000
Montreal-65 000
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TOUR!



Sting

Tracy Chapman

Youssou N'dour

Bruce Springsteen

by Kwame Dawes

Peter Gabriel

Sting thinks Rock 'n' Roll is dying. To allow Rock 'n' Roll a productive old-age, Sting thinks energies should be channelled into demanding from that music-form, the social and political consciousness that it once had in its younger days. The reasoning is basic to mass advertising and politics: People want to see Rock stars (since, while Rock 'n' Roll may be dying the stars are still mega entities), so they will make every effort, pay any money to see their favorite star. Furthermore, they will sit through a political speech or an appeal for money, as long as their stars sing. Hence, causes look to profile themselves with popular stars, thus winning a ready platform and a ready audience.

In a *London Times* feature article (Oct. 15th), on the Amnesty International Tour's visit to Zimbabwe, Bryan Appleyard seems to question whether in fact concerts of this nature, in which audiences are obviously more interested in the Rock Star than in the message of the show do more harm than good to a given cause, or whether they serve simply as popularity mileage for artists. His reservations are not free of a clearly evident anti-American bias (he didn't find Springsteen very articulate or impressive) while much of what he responds to is directly related to the complications in ideology and pragmatism inherent in putting on a concert next door to the powerful country, South Africa. However, his observations led this writer to trying to grapple with the validity of concerts and tours of their nature in the realm of ideology and simple good sense.

One can formulate three types of concerts that would demand the kind of questioning being explored here. The first would be the concert that is aimed at bringing a number of people together to commune around music and in the process to celebrate a sense of community, good will and communality of purpose through such a gathering. In concerts like this, music is the central metaphor, one that suggests a universality of language in worship in such an event which is not unlike a religious experience. Many great concerts have been known to epitomize this kind of event and there are artists who feel terrible about a performance if such a quality of community is not achieved. Woodstock was like this: in Jamaica, the Massive Peace Concert in which Marley brought the two opposing party leaders on stage to shake hands (the first in public in years), was another such. Those who attend Dylan concerts now are aware of the striving for this in performance albeit with Dylan as the Christ-Priest figure.

In these events, the music is most often thought-provoking and certainly the kind of music that acknowledges the community as an individual.

Artists who have grown up in a tradition of community tend to write with a group in mind and so their concerts are a shared experience. The love song, made popular in North American often contravenes this sense of community because the concerts propagators of such music degenerates into a sexual dialogue between this single individual on stage and the isolated imaginations of an audience that does not really want to know that the person next to them is thinking the same private thoughts.

On the other hand, the mega stars - Michael Jackson, Alice Cooper, et al give us spectacles. We are there to see them, and our being there has all to do with that fact. The number of people in the audience says more about the star than about the audience and its relationships. The star is the thing.

Stars like these perform easily in the second category of social and political conscience raising events which would be the concert in which the said intent is to make money. The gate receipts go to a cause. Here, it is only important that people come. It does some good for the artist to be known as a benevolent guy or woman willing to sacrifice a high intake of funds for a cause. But sometimes the artist is paid in full, the gate net income is what goes to the cause. Concerts like these are unpretentious in that they quite unabashedly market the star and not the ideological position of those producing the show. The singers can sing whatever they normally sing, and the audience will be happy. It is an easy way of raising funds.

The question is, should there be some political responsibility here? Would it have been ideologically more appealing to some if Geldof had brought in acts from Africa to the Live-Aide concerts to actually perform and at least feel that these were not just handouts, from white northern philanthropists seeking to appease their affluent consciences by giving something back? Would as much money have been made? (African musicians did try in France, they didn't get much publicity nor did they raise as much money). Is the money more crucial than niceties of pride and dignity?

Pride and dignity are however central to the third type of show which is the kind of show that adopts a political cause as its theme and then becomes the platform for the propagation of such a theme. In this the whole problem of who speaks for who and who champions whose cause becomes apparent. So that in the Amnesty International Tour it is quite clear that those questions were asked when the artists were selected. Peter Gabriel and Sting were the forerunners of the affair. Two white Englishmen, now, since many of the countries in which infringements of Human Rights are supposedly taking place happen to be developing nations not heavily populated by

whites, it makes all the sense to have some international musician associated with the event. Youssou N'dour gets picked. Bob Marley is dead; his son Ziggy is not as mature a visionary and reggae is now too much of a popular form to make it as exotic and distinctive as N'dour's African rhythms; and, anyway, Gabriel has worked with N'dour in the past.

Then, since many of the victims of torture, etc. are women, you need a woman. It would be sexist to do otherwise. Tracy Chapman is ideal. Young and black and a woman who has been celebrated by the women's movement as an up and coming spokesperson for the cause and one who has a record on the charts that is doing so well. She is popular. She is not a star and she is being compared consistently, with Bob Dylan. So she is in.

Then you need somebody to bring people in. None of the above artists can do so in Japan or South America much less in southern Africa. Well, you could go with Michael Jackson - too many blacks - and anyway he really doesn't have that social consciousness about world affairs to suit the bill. Also, you couldn't afford him; he is not fond of sharing stages. So many to pick from, but Springsteen is fingered. Billed as one of the six best known men in the world along with Pope John Paul, Ronald Reagan and Rambo (alias Sylvester Stallone), Springsteen is your man for the job, he did sing "War" and "Born in the USA."

So there is the line-up. The mix is interesting but you wonder whether the interests of the Amnesty International cause have been served. Certainly, by

seeing stars associate themselves with some political cause, the cause becomes more popular and Amnesty thrives on world opinion, hence that is one up for him. Secondly, it is not so important that all the songs deal with freedom as long as four or five songs that challenge the conscience of people are heard and all the artists have that one tune in their repertoire which could do it. Thirdly, with such a short line-up of artists, a great responsibility rests on each of them to understand and be articulate about this ideological position. The Mandela concert was a joke in that regard. What some of the artists were doing there remains an absolute mystery to me. The interviews with many of them were pathetic. Some had no idea what this was all about. It was Wembley Stadium, that was all, and people were watching from all over the world! We forgot Mandela after a while and that was the tragedy. This is less likely to happen with smaller acts. Still, do people really listen to songs and act upon them? Does music effect change?

Bob Marley sang:
*One good thing about music,
When it hits you feel no pain;
So hit me with music
Brutalize me with music.*

What did he mean? That music is ineffectual or that music is subtle, it is sweet-learning, it is a sugar coated pill? Marley's music is so adamantly political and yet so danceable and pleasing that one can't help assuming that he was referring to the genius of his work. If in fact good music can achieve this, then the painless surgery of artists like those

involved in injecting social and political consciousness into Rock 'n' Roll has potential for some success but the world has to be careful that in the process there is not a laxness which would deny the second step after the message of music - which is action. The riot in Italy when Bob Marley sang "Get Up Stand Up": the charge of freedom of fighters in Zimbabwe to reggae's call to arms, and the marches for black rights in America to the gospel militancy of black rhythm and blues artists, are all evidence that music is a forceful entity. Balancing entertainment and political activism is the dilemma: Marley sings about.

Black schoolchildren have been handing out the declaration at the gates. Some endure insults from the homeward-bound South Africans - "We don't want that shit!" - for the sad truth is that the music and its thrills are all too disconnectable from the message for the good-livers who crossed at Beitbridge.

From "Anybody Understand Rock 'n' Roll"
(*London Times*, 15/10/85)

Brian Appleyard

Bishop of Eldoret, Kenya Bishop Alexander Muge' will be meeting students and other interested persons at UNB in Rm. 106 Carelon Hall at 7:00 pm Wed. Nov. 2. Bishop Muge' is an outspoken critic of the present Kenyan Government whose discourse is not only compelling but is very informed. Bishop Muge' is visiting Canada for this month.



Artwork, layout K. Dawes

Zimbabwe issued some 20 000 visas to South Africans to attend this concert. The white South Africans crowded the front row. Bruce could not find a black girl to dance with.