

When I first tried

to write something on the music industry's various African records/videos, I immediately encountered what seemed to be a moral dilemma: despite the myriad reservations I had about the packaging of the products, I had to accept the fact that they had at least managed to raise a large amount of money for what was indisputably a good cause—to be critical in any way almost seemed like an act of bad faith. I was silenced, then, by the *care* that the records and their contributors exuded.

Perhaps another example of this feeling of stasis can be found in our uneasy relationship with the disarmament movement: the apocalyptic consequences of nuclear war are used to silence all opposition to the terms upon which that debate is held. We are told to forget, or at least to hold in abeyance, reservations we might have concerning this dissolution of difference(s), because we are all agreed that the safety of the world comes first. We are, before anything else, the world.

However, to meet these extraordinary manifestations of corporate concern within the music industry with no critical work because we *too care* for the plight of those third world peoples suffering from the results of economic and political repression would be to acquiesce in a rather scandalous atmosphere of self-satisfaction. Crucially, to say nothing would be, I believe, to bear silent witness to the depoliticization of both starvation and the whole notion of 'care' itself.

I was confirmed in my 'bad faith' while watching The American Academy Video Awards on tv last week. Unbelievably—though only just, this was after all the music industry in Hollywood, on tv!—the academy announced the introduction of 'a very new and special award'. I groaned, as thousands of others must have, in cynical expectation. The very first recipient of 'The Humanitarian Award' was, of course, the USA For Africa team with their song and video *We are the World*. For, in the words of the record's producer, managing the awesome task of bringing together in one room 45 of America's greatest living artists.

Their's was not the first nor the last awesome gathering. Since Christmas we have also had Bob Geldof's Bandid with 'Do They Know It's Christmas?', and more recently Bryan Adams and friends with 'Tears Are Not Enough'. All three records have gone to the top of their respective charts and the British and American have managed reciprocal transatlantic success. They have all been aided by massive exposure on both the radio and tv with the American record being the most stunningly marketed: 'We are the World' was simultaneously released and played on over 2,000 radio stations world-wide—a feat only equalled perhaps when the Americans first stepped on the moon! First and foremost, though, these have been tv events.

Who has not been moved in some way by the spectacle of so many of our favourite stars of different epochs assembled together to sing for the plight of others? There is something quite touching about the likes of Ray Charles, Tina Turner, Stevie Wonder and Bob Dylan singing together simply because they care for a better world. But we should pause to think a little about this notion of caring that is so central to the success of both this record/video and the British and Canadian ones. A preliminary question that we might pose then could be: what would constitute a politics of caring; how do we



untangle and make sense of the meanings and preconceptions imbricated with these ideas of care and charity? To pose such a question means ultimately to consider questions of Western and, crucially, US imperialism.

Interestingly, many members of this latter-day American salvation army played at President Reagan's inaugural bene-

fit. Even more interesting is that a number of the black stars did that when 90 percent of black Americans, recognizing where their best interests definitely did not lie, voted against Reagan. Another awkward fact that we might consider is that some of the singers have performed in South Africa (Tina Turner, Ray Charles, Kenny Rogers) despite the international embargo. It would appear then that it is easier to care when your object of interest is thought to escape any political concerns, is one that seems not to be predicated on any notion of struggle and is therefore found to be worthy of your humanitarian gaze.

We Are The World — You Are The Third World

by
Mark Lewis

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Certainly the sense of being 'touched' by the singers' performances soon shifted into one of wariness when I considered the lyrics of the USA For Africa song; they began to reveal for me precisely the unwritten texts that inform the sentiment of the project. What is necessarily disavowed but also revealed in the very words 'we are the world' is the role of colonial history and present day western imperialism in precipitating the current African crisis. For the 'world' that is elided is the world of the world bank, the International Monetary Fund, western defence programs and the world markets that dictate the price and availability of crops and commodities, now and in the future. This is the world that is massively culpable for the terrorism of starvation and it is a world *we wish we were not*. For, and uncomfortable though it is for us to

acknowledge, starvation is the logical consequence of a western terrorism that lends money to countries at rates of interest the latter will only be able to meet by instituting horrific 'austerity' programs; that floods third world countries with Western food and encourages the purchase and raising of cattle thus precipitating the abandonment of traditional

crop programs; that backs despotic regimes which divert most of their GNP onto defence and the purchase of western manufactured arms. To be blunt and ignoring charitable niceties, to speak of American generosity in raising some \$40,000,000 when third world countries are going bankrupt trying to repay the tens of billions of dollars that they owe to the US, is really to engage in a beggars' economy.

The first time I saw the 'Canadian' video 'Tears Are Not Enough' was on a CITY-TV music program where it was played back to back with 'We Are the World'. The two videos were broken (tied together) by Lionel Ritchie's other big hit these days, the reworking of one of his songs to the words of 'The Pepsi Generation'. What are we to make of these juxtapositions? On the one hand, efforts to convey to us the tragedy of starvation, and on the other, Lionel Ritchie informing us that we've made our choice and it's Pepsi—conspicuous consumption, as the marxists used to remind us, revealed to us without any sense of irony!

There are many things that could be said about the exercise of bringing together widely disparate groups of musicians under the aegis of a 'national' contribution, particularly as it pertains to the 'Canadian' product, which has the appearance of seeming to strain after the effect. However, this is not the place to adequately explore this rather compli-

cated issue. Suffice it to add that this would be a problem with particular relevance for a (official) culture that continually attempts to create national difference and so often ends up looking rather opportunist.

It is interesting to recall that all three records/videos have been aimed, naturally enough, at the teen-age market, and it is therefore to this constituency—presumably without substantial income or savings—that an appeal for donations is made. The pop stars give up an afternoon or morning of their time while these young people hand over money and at the same time must give up their sense of what they normally consider to be interesting and accomplished. Another question then: why is it that in order to demonstrate that they too care, people must first purchase records which are musically some of the most uninteresting songs ever to be released? Or more pointedly, why is it necessary to use this area of overt conspicuous consumption—how much were Ritchie and Jackson paid for their Pepsi songs?—which will only further fuel careers already well buoyed with heroic status, in order to assuage the pain (and perhaps we should say 'the guilt') of starvation?

In England, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure assembled some thirty-odd British singers and musicians and put together the very first 'aid' record—'Do They Know It's Christmas?'. Bob Geldof went on to acquire national fame and exposure as he became the official spokesperson for the Bandid project. This was to reach rather absurd proportions when in a single month he was to be found co-hosting a photo session in Africa with Mother Theresa and also was a guest on London's 'This is Your Life'. In the latter show, dozens of people were brought onto the set to testify to the importance of Geldof's earlier formative years in generating his more recent philanthropic persona.

In an interview with the music press Geldof and Ure were asked why they did not use their undeniably skilled marketing techniques to raise money for Britain's beleaguered striking miners, who towards the end of the strike were suffering greatly. Ure replied that the miners had chosen to strike and that if they were hungry they could always go back to work, therefore he did not feel them worthy of support. It seemed almost unbelievable that a so-called spokesperson for a charitable concern could engage in what for all intents and purposes is the rhetoric of the feudal landlord; or is it? Just before I left England to return to Canada, Geldof was again featured on television, this time in a program all about how to be seen at the trendiest places and parties in London. Geldof was to be overheard saying that sipping all this champagne and eating smoked salmon made him feel guilty when he thought about the starving Africans in Ethiopia.

But why is this rather quotidian juxtaposition experienced by Geldof with such anxiety-ridden guilt? Precisely because Geldof as philanthropist cannot possibly have any understanding of contradiction per se. Philanthropy and care are predicated on a refusal of both politics and ideology and are only activated by this sense of guilt: a 19th century posture that we are now witnessing with a renewed vigour today. But we should not be at all surprised by this, for, to recall the portentous words of Lionel Ritchie, they have made their choice and they are now members of a new generation.

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