Band Aid 30: clumsy, patronising and wrong in so many ways

Bob Geldof is right: Ebola must be stopped. But is the revival of Do They Know It’s Christmas?, with those lyrics that haunt me year after year, really the best way to help?

 Bob Geldof and Midge Ure launch Band Aid 30 to help fight Ebola in west Africa. Photograph: John Stillwell/PA

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The city of Jos in Nigeria has a bit of a reputation: it has one of the coolest climates in the country. When I was growing up, I was told it was one of the few places where we could grow apples, and I even once read a newspaper report that it snowed there. It was an anomaly, sure, but I bring this up because it is a story that does not often get told.

That newspaper report came back to me this week when Sir [Bob Geldof](http://www.theguardian.com/world/bob-geldof) announced that he is reviving Band Aid’s Do They Know It’s Christmas? to raise money for countries afflicted with the Ebola virus. The song’s a classic, and not just because the video features a big-haired George Michael emoting into a microphone. But there were a few parts of the song that always stuck in my craw. For example, the lyric that begins: “And there won’t be snow in Africa ...”

“It does snow in Africa!” I say under my breath every December when shopping malls roll the track out. There is a humourless danger in taking song lyrics too literally, but I can’t help it: yes, they do know it’s Christmas time in [Africa](http://www.theguardian.com/world/africa) because huge swaths of that vast continent are Christian; the greatest gift anyone can have is life; and actually, it is more likely to be water, not just “bitter tears”, flowing across Africa’s 54 nations.

Ebola is a menace and the three west African countries (Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia) where the disease is wreaking havoc need financial help – the type that multiple sales of a £4 charity CD can bring. “It has nothing to do with whether you like the record or not or whether you approve of the artists,” Geldof [told BBC News](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-29986916), which is a novel way of selling a charity record. “It’s simply a way of saying, this Christmas, yeah, let’s stop this here.” At the launch event, [he said](http://www.nme.com/news/various-artists/80985): “[Band Aid 30] is focused on a small part of Africa that potentially holds a vast danger to the world.” Everything Geldof is saying is completely true: the spread of Ebola is terrifying, it must be stopped as quickly as humanly possible, and we need to raise funds to combat it. So why does Band Aid 30 feel so patronising and uncomfortable?

There exists a paternalistic way of thinking about Africa, likely exacerbated by the original (and the second, and the third) Band Aid singles, in which it must be “saved”, and usually from itself. We say “Africa” in a way that we would never say “Europe”, or “Asia”. It’s easy to forget, for example, that the virus made its way to Nigeria – Africa’s most populous country and, for many, a potential Ebola tinderbox – and was stamped out only by the efforts of [a brave team of local healthcare workers](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2014/oct/20/dr-stella-ameyo-adadevoh-ebola-doctor-nigeria-hero). The popular narrative always places those of us in the west in the position of benevolent elders, helping out poor Africans, mouths always needy and yawning, on their constantly blighted continent, and leaves out harder to pin down villains: local corruption, yes, but also global economic policies that do little to pull some countries out of the depths of entrenched poverty.

It is interesting that Geldof says [he received a call from the UN](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/band-aid-30-bob-geldof-rewrites-classic-lyrics-for-ebolafighting-30th-anniversary-release-9852301.html) to say that Ebola was “getting out of control”. Why does the red emergency telephone go for charity, over joined-up inter-govermental action? Thirty years after the original, and lineups that include the great and the good as well as a turning carousel of opportunists, how is it still incumbent on pop stars to rise up to sing a song that manages to also gently dehumanise the people it is helping? Even the logo – an outline of Africa (no Madagascar) with BAND AID written across it, along with a hashtag “#E30LA” – feels cheap and insulting.

Pop music, however well-intentioned (and no song was ever more well-intentioned than this one), can be so incredibly clumsy. I save my greatest ire for one line in particular, the egregious lyric that haunts me every Christmas, [delivered on two separate versions by the same man](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4012573.stm), U2’s Bono: “Well, tonight thank God it’s them instead of you”. Bono says he hated singing it, and had to be persuaded to do so (twice); imagine how I feel.

To Geldof’s credit, he has said some of the lyrics [will be tweaked slightly](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/band-aid-30-bob-geldof-rewrites-classic-lyrics-for-ebolafighting-30th-anniversary-release-9852301.html) for this new version. Gone are the references to Africa’s “burning sun” as well as the assertion that it is a place where “no rain nor rivers flow”. Less easy to excise is the lingering view of Africa that has been cultivated over the last several decades.