

**Monday, Dec. 06, 2004**

**Do They Know It's Simplistic?**

**By Simon Robinson**

Has any other song ever had so much impact? Do They Know It's Christmas?, the sing-along single recorded by British supergroup Band Aid in 1984 to raise money for starving Ethiopians, was the beginning of a fund-raising phenomenon. The song, which brought together everyone from U2 to Wham! (an achievement in itself), went straight to No. 1 in Britain and raised some $18 million. We Are the World, an even schmaltzier American effort, and the accompanying Live Aid rock concert, which was screened to 1.5 billion people around the globe, raised millions more. Band Aid, the brainchild of scruffy Boomtown Rats singer Bob Geldof and electropop pioneer Midge Ure, eventually pulled in more than $144 million, most of which bought emergency food for Ethiopia. "I once said that we would be more powerful in memory than in reality," Geldof remarked in 1992 when the original Band Aid Trust was laid to rest. "Now we are that memory."

This Christmas we can hear it all again. The season marks the 20th anniversary of the original release of Do They Know It's Christmas?, and Geldof's resurrection of the song — featuring contemporary stars like Robbie Williams and Chris Martin from Coldplay — came out in Europe last week and is a hit again (it's available in the U.S. as an import at music chain stores and as a download from [bandaid20.com](http://bandaid20.com/)). Proceeds will again help starving Africans, especially those in Sudan's Darfur region, where fighting between rebels and government-backed militias has left 70,000 dead and more than 2 million homeless in what Washington calls genocide. The new version of the song is mellower than the original, but the lyrics are the same: In Africa this Christmas, "the only water flowing/ Is the bitter sting of tears." Still.

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At the risk of appearing churlish and mean-spirited in this festive season, I have to say I'm not sure rerecording the song is a big help. Band Aid has been criticized before for its cheesy tune, and Do They Know It's Christmas? may not be the right question asked of Muslims in Sudan. But my gripe is about the way the song reinforces the popular impression that all Africans are starving as they wait for heroic Westerners to come and save them. In 1984 Do They Know It's Christmas? did a lot of good for the people of Ethiopia, and for that it should be praised. But it also left another, perhaps more powerful legacy: the image of Ethiopia as a land "where nothing ever grows/ No rain nor rivers flow."

Mention Ethiopia today, and most people still think of starving, helpless stick figures scrambling in the dust for food. So strong is the picture of famine and hunger that Ethiopian Airlines' offices around the world still field inquiries from travelers wondering whether they should bring their own meals for the flight. Upon hearing that the song had been rerecorded, an Ethiopian friend of mine, Edna Berhane, who works in public health in Africa, was worried that it sent the same old negative message: "Here we go again. It's been 20 years, but Africa is still mired in its misery, famine, wars, genocide. Let's help them see the light ... again."

In reality, Africa is a huge continent where most people are not starving, where over the past decade democracy has begun to take hold and Africans have started to grapple with their own problems and where more than 90% of respondents to a recent BBC poll said they were proud to be African. Sure, Africa has plenty of troubles: war, droughts, poverty and HIV/AIDS, but Do They Know It's Christmas? doesn't address any of the causes of these problems. There's no mention that most of the continent's famines are caused by strongmen who use food as a weapon against their enemies. And there's no reference to the reasons behind the poverty: lack of infrastructure and investment, kleptocratic leaders and barriers to growth like European and American farm subsidies that price African produce out of the market. The truth is, 20 years after Geldof & Co. set out to feed Africa, Africa still needs feeding. But more aid — and a simplistic song that perpetuates stereotypes — is probably not the answer.

Geldof and other Africa activists, like U2 front man Bono, are wonderful advocates for the push to cancel the continent's debt and open up Western markets to Africa's farmers. But I suggest they change their tune and come up with a hit demanding that the West drop its agricultural subsidies, cancel more debt and urge Africa's worst leaders to go. How about something like:

It's Christmas time
There's no need to block trade
At Christmastime
We can buy African and banish farm aid
And in our world of Western plenty
We can spread our wealth around
Throw out Africa's despots
At Christmastime.

Get 1.5 billion people singing along to that, and you could really make a difference in Africa.

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