STRIKING A CHORD: Rock and Politics in the Eighties

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Rock music, like space, is big. Very big. It has a huge audience, is extremely culturally pervasive and is serviced by a vast leisure industry. Like that other great arena of popular culture, sport, rock has provoked controversy over the relationship between commerce and culture.

Put simply, there are two polarised positions on rock. At one end of the spectrum of opinion, rock is viewed as dissenting, liberatory and the authentic voice of contemporary youth. At the other end, it is regarded as being passive, repressive and the artificial product of scheming capitalists. In between is a chaotic swirl of intermediate positions which I will attempt to negotiate. In this article I will focus on three current issues in rock concerning Live Aid, tobacco (and other) sponsorship and Red Wedge’s political mobilisation of young people.

First, however, a brief background. Rock is a child of the sixties. It is the product of a meeting between the musical forms which had been developed in the Fifties with the sensibilities which emerged within post-war “baby boom” youth. Rock was the generation gap, the anti-war movement, the sex and drugs push into music. Alternately, it advocated direct political protest and the indirect challenge of hedonism — “turn on, tune in, drop out”. By the early seventies, things had changed. While rock ideology nominally retained its outsider status, the demise of both rock hippiedom and full employment led to a period of “me generation” introspection and a concentration on musical and technological virtuosity.

Until punk came along. Once again, rock was avowedly subversive, shocking and overtly political. Safety pins, bondage gear, swastikas, torn clothing, spiky haircuts, swearing on TV, and songs of urban deprivation all caused a new moral panic. But punk also joined the roll of faded rock styles and was replaced in public consciousness by fads and fashions variously described as “new wave”, “new romanticism” and “new pop”. Here there was an emphasis on smart
clothes and “easy listening” music. It appeared that rock had again been co-opted by the industry. However, the burst of idealism which accompanied Live Aid and some forceful expressions of leftist sentiments in rock music suggest that the pendulum is swinging back to a less apolitical, amoral and acquisitive rock. But these signs may be only mirages or smoke-screens. We can only assess them by looking beyond conventional rock hyperbole and, in the process, establish some of the ways in which rock is simultaneously a product of the wider society and an important influence on the shape of that society.

It is now almost two years since a global audience of around 1.5 billion people from over 100 countries (almost twice the 1984 L.A. Olympics audience) watched Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Madonna, David Bowie, Paul McCartney, Sting, etc. all perform on behalf of Live Aid, raising over US$40 million in the process for African famine relief. “Saint Bob” Geldof, the organiser, is now a secular Sir Bob, while various documentaries and news reports have shown relief getting to some needy areas and struggling to reach others, crops regenerating after rain, and also continued famine in war-ravaged northern Sudan. Aid for Africa has been a mixture of success and failure — as we would expect — and reactions to it have been similarly varied. Responses to it tend to have fallen into two categories. First, there is the celebration of the whole affair, in particular, its community and philanthropy. When a hard-nosed rock entrepreneur like Bill Graham describes Live Aid as the rock music industry’s “finest hour. Frayed by far” and a razor-penned critic like Julie Burchill acts as a self-confessed “unpaid publicist for Mr. Geldof”, then the forces in favour of Live Aid are considerable indeed. Most newspaper coverage was unabashedly well-disposed towards Live Aid, with an oft-expressed pleasant surprise that the egoistic rock music industry had done something altruistic for a change.

Such benevolent responses were rejected by sections of the political left and right. On the right, the Australian Financial Review argued that Live Aid “cannot be taken seriously as a response to the crisis of famine in Africa, especially in Ethiopia”, while W.F. Buckley in the US found the cause “philanthropic in design” but could not overcome his aesthetic revulsion and his concern as to whether “the capitulation of the middle-aged suggests a cultural insecurity”. On the left, Greil Marcus in the US characterised Live Aid as “an enormous orgy of self-satisfaction, self-congratulation” while Australian Shaun Kenaely argues that Live Aid was:

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Yet it would be misleading to deny that overt, youth-focused dissent has disappeared completely from the face of rock. But, again, it is much more systematic and hard-headed than in the flower-power era which is conventionally held to be the high point of rock’s social impact. It has coalesced around a recent movement in Britain called Red Wedge, although it must be acknowledged that there are some obvious local predecessors — Rock Against Racism, for example, or Midnight Oil’s involvement (along with other bands) in People for Nuclear Disarmament. Red Wedge is distinctive, however, because it is an organised attempt to help elect a political party. This is the British
Labour Party and it follows that we have to be cautious about the portability of the phenomenon to Australia which does not, as yet, have a radical right-wing government. Yet there are obvious parallels in the conditions faced by youth in both countries. High youth unemployment, lower youth wages, work-for-the-dole schemes, tertiary fees, and so on are all realities or pressing prospects.

Britain, with a youth unemployment rate approaching 30 percent and an uncompromisingly reactionary government, was ripe to produce Red Wedge in late 1985. Established rock artists such as Paul Weller, Billy Bragg, Sade, the Smiths and Lloyd Cole and the Commotions have banded together with the express purpose of ousting Thatcherism and installing a Labour government in Britain. The campaign was mounted through a series of concerts rather than through conventional rallies, with literature discreetly distributed and occasional encouragement from the stage in the form of “throwaway” comments or politically informed songs, such as Billy Bragg’s “Between the Wars” or Style Council’s “Walls Come Tumbling Down”. The emphasis is on the punk era notion of “serious fun”, but with a clearer purpose — a Labour victory in the next election.

The relationship between Red Wedge and the British Labour Party is a little ambiguous. The black soul singer Junior Giscombe describes Red Wedge as being “for, but not of, the Labour Party”. Initial funds came from the Labour Party and Labour office facilities have been used, but Red Wedge hopes to become financially autonomous. They are “mutually friendly societies” but Red Wedge is anxious not to be seen as simply an arm of the Labour Party and, in particular, PR for its leader Neil Kinnock. Rather, it sees itself as a broad alliance which is favourable but not beholden to the Labour Party, seeking influence by retaining the right to be critical. The tension between disciplined party politics and free-wheeling youth pressure group politics is apparent, for example, in Red Wedge’s uneasiness about the rooting out of Trotskyite Militant members of the Labour Party.

Now that some information has been provided about Red Wedge, we may attempt to draw some conclusions about its emergence. There is, first, the question of what kind of phenomenon it is. Like Live Aid, it has critics on both left and right. Nick Robinson of the Young Conservatives sees Red Wedge as “just an attempt by Neil Kinnock to present the Labour Party Youth Section without the influence of Militant which dominates the LPYS”. This is not a surprising position, coming as it does from a representative of the party that Red Wedge has sworn to eject from office.

But there has also been criticism from the “hard” left. X. Moore of the Socialist Workers Party and the Redskins band has argued that, while Red Wedge has been effective in mobilising musicians “it’s hamstrung to uncritical support of Neil Kinnock; it can’t rock the boat, it can’t criticise”, while Julie Burchill has argued that popular music is incapable of being effective in any orthodox political way: “The Young must learn to take their politics straight, like adults, and not like fidgety children who must be cajoled into thinking by concerts and singalongs ...”. In addition to such criticisms is the suggestion that those young people who attend Red Wedge events are there to see their favourite rock stars and listen to music, and that the intended “message” goes through or past their ears. However effective Red Wedge may be in its aims, it is transparently the product of the predicament of youth in contemporary British society. Yet do the same conditions pertain to Australia and can we expect a similar movement here?

In one obvious respect circumstances differ in Australia where the memory of a (conventional rather than radical) conservative government still remains and a Labor government has won the last two elections. However, the current economic crisis and the shift to the right of the Labor government is fashioning a comparable state of affairs. And the arguments used by Red Wedge to support Labour in Britain are the same as those applied by many young people to the Australian Labor Party — they’re the best of a bad bunch. Yet it is doubtful whether such a movement would be whether such a movement here would be avowedly socialist like Red Wedge, given the exaggerated stigma attached to the term in Australia. This is not to argue that intense political debates do not arise here in association with rock music. The current dispute over tobacco sponsorship of rock gigs is testimony to rock’s political potential.

In the middle of 1985, the tobacco industry (in the shape of Philip Morris’ “Peter Jackson” brand) made a major move into Australian rock. The Sydney-based Peter Jackson Rock Circuit functioned as an exercise in market testing, with the ultimate aim of having a national rock gig network bearing the logo “The Peter Jackson Rock Circuit Presents ...”. Currently, names such as Electric Pandas, the Allnites, the Party Boys, the Saints, Machinations and Boom Crash Opera have followed that of Peter Jackson. The tobacco company undertakes to
few years now, while Marlboro (another Philip Morris brand) has sponsored acts overseas. With arch-corporate competitor Amatil (Benson and Hedges) vying for the familiar sport and high art outlets, the rock music audience is an appealing target group. All that disposable income and pleasure-seeking should amount to a good return on the $100,000 or so invested to buy goodwill through association. This kind of underwrite the cost of publicity, promotion and advertising of selected rock gigs in return for a brand-name check on posters which prominently feature open cigarette packets inviting (wordlessly) the consumer to taste and try.

Perhaps the only surprising thing about this development is that it took the tobacco companies in Australia so long to stumble onto the idea. After all, Pepsi Cola have been doing it for a rationalisation of the entertainment industry is commonplace, and it is not really a major jump from the multinational corporate record companies such as RCA, CBS, and EMI (who have signed up most of the prominent Australian rock bands) to the other conglomerates who are looking for a piece of the youth market action. The tobacco companies, with their restricted advertising opportunities, are particularly keen to spread brand awareness through new channels.

These manoeuvres have not, however, gone unchallenged. It is symptomatic of rock in the 'eighties that for every move by big business to colonise it there is resistance to such intrusion. Tobacco sponsorship of gigs was criticised in full-page advertisements by bands such as Hoodoo Gurus, Hunters and Collectors, and Midnight Oil who cried “Hands off!” while organisations such as the Australian College of Physicians, and individuals like Gordon Chater, Dick Smith and Lisa Forrest exclaimed “Hands up!” A rival circuit was set up by Quit for Life, promoting “The Big Gigs” by bands such as Spy v Spy who, in turn, thank Quit for Life for giving us freedom of choice of where and how we want to play.

However, the financial insecurity common to many rock bands blurs the apparently stark choice between circuits. For example, Verity Truman of Redgum, a signatory to the “Hands off!” letter opposing tobacco sponsorship, has written of the “agency/live venue scam” which “puts bands in the invidious position of choosing not where to work, but whether or not to work at all”. Also, Vince Lovegrove, the manager of another signatory, The Divinyls, further highlights the complexity of the issue by pointing out that they “do not support, in any way whatsoever, the Right to Life Organisation [sic] nor any lobby movement to remove the Peter Jackson Company from any form of sponsorship of the rock industry”. This latter response, with
its confusing encouragement of corporate sponsorship and simultaneous tirade against "attempted corporate monopolistic sponsorship which dictates who will perform where", is representative of the predicament of mid-eighties rock. The need to take care of business leads to tensions between idealism and pragmatism, autonomy and dependence, obscurity and ambition. There is no space outside of a narrow range of market choices in which to shelter. In the Darwinian world of contemporary rock, there are many more bands than smokers who Quit for Life.

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Corporate sponsorship also made considerable inroads into rock culture with the Australian Made tour over the recent New Year period. The multinational Mobil Oil Australia Limited, Ansett and the ANZ banking group sponsored the Australia-wide tour by acts like INXS and Jimmy Barnes. The essentially commercial nature of their involvement was carefully camouflaged through the shrewd utilisation of a community program and the exploitation of Australian nationalism. Thus, Mobil's "Streetbeat" road safety campaign which was heavily promoted during the tour gave to their involvement a "charitable" quality which recalled the altruism of Live Aid. This was rock for the common good — which also coincided, happily, with the raising of the half million dollar loss and dependence, obscurity and ambition. There is no space outside of a narrow range of market choices in which to shelter. In the Darwinian world of contemporary rock, there are many more bands than smokers who Quit for Life.

... has prevented the almost total capitulation evidenced by, for example, modern sport.

Rock, then, is constrained by the same forces which operate pervasively in culture and society, and is itself part of a wider leisure complex. Yet it cannot be simply reduced to its money-making activities. Rock is always likely to throw up a punk culture or a Red Wedge which challenges rationalised entertainment. For, while many rock movements either begin or end in an orgy of cynical commercialism, their uses and meanings can never be easily confined or predicted.

REFERENCES

1. For an authoritative account of rock's development, see Simon Frith, Sound Effects, 1981, New York: Parthenon.


5. One Australian working for Red Wedge says in The National Times article: "In Australia if you had the word 'socialist' attached to a group like this, it would go down the tube."

