

Live 8: Who organised the PR campaign for Blair and Bush?

By Ann Talbot
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In what was dubbed “the final push,” the last Live 8 concert took place in Edinburgh on July 6 as heads of state assembled at Gleneagles for the G8 conference. A rain-soaked crowd of 50,000 heard Nelson Mandela say via video link, “In this new century millions of people in the world’s poorest countries remain imprisoned and enslaved in chains. They are in the prison of poverty. It’s time to set them free.”

The Edinburgh concert marked the end of a truly massive media event. Five million people are said to have logged on to AOL’s live video stream of the Saturday, July 2, concerts. Upward of a million people are said to have attended the Live 8 events. Hundreds of millions are reported to have watched the concerts on TV. A quarter of a million people marched through the streets of Edinburgh.

The scale of the Live 8 event was spectacular. But its essential aim was of a far more politically sinister character than its altruistic pose would suggest. It was organised and backed by individuals and organisations with close ties to the Labour government of Tony Blair, and had the official backing of the government itself. By boosting the pitiful debt relief package agreed on by the G8 and hailing the proposals of Blair’s own Commission for Africa for aid and relief tied to free-market initiatives, it set out to provide a much-needed mask of humanitarian concern to both Blair and US President George W. Bush.

The organisers of the event and its leading spokesmen—Bob Geldof and Bono—both harked back to the legacy of Live Aid, Live 8’s 1985 predecessor. But whereas Live Aid raised millions of pounds to combat famine in Ethiopia, they stressed that this time they did not want “your money.” Echoing Lord Kitchener’s 1914 call for army recruits, they wanted “You!”

However, this is not to say that no money changed hands. The 10 concerts cost £25 million to stage. £1.6 million was paid to the Prince’s Trust to persuade that organisation to cancel its Party in the Park. Performers were not paid, though those at the Philadelphia concert reportedly got gifts worth £1,700. Perhaps the greatest payoff will be in the

boost the concerts give to record sales. Sir Paul McCartney’s performance of “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” was on sale within hours. London record shops reported a 1,000 percent increase in sales for Pink Floyd CDs the next day. David Gilmour, Floyd’s lead guitarist, immediately announced that his share would go to charity, and some other artists followed suit. But the royalties paid to artists are just a small proportion of the profits made from sales by the record companies. And there have been no magnanimous gestures from this quarter.

Moreover, in a digital world, CD sales represent a declining section of the market compared to sponsorship, broadcast rights and merchandising. Most of the costs of the event will be recouped in this way, and it is here that much of the profit and relatively cheap and phenomenally lucrative publicity will be sought. Naked commercialism was evident in even the most ostensibly charitable aspects of the operation. White “Make Poverty History” wristbands have been one of the most visible emblems of the campaign. From the start, they have been surrounded by controversy. It has been reported that some of these wristbands were made in Chinese sweatshops.

Journalist Stuart Hodgkinson revealed in *Red Pepper* magazine that some of the wristbands were being sold with the logos of companies that are accused of violating workers’ rights. This included fashion company Tommy Hilfiger, accused by Stephen Coats, Executive Director of the US/Labor Education in the Americas Project of being “at the bottom of the list in demonstrating refusal to accept responsibility for the way workers are treated.” The offending wristbands were being sold at shops owned by Scottish millionaire Tom Hunter, who has pledged £1 million to the Make Poverty History campaign.

However, Hunter is a relatively small player compared to some of the corporate enterprises that have been signed up. The backing that Live 8 has won from media mogul Rupert Murdoch is just one indication that a massive business machine has been set in motion. Murdoch’s British tabloid the *Sun* gave the event enthusiastic support, although it is

not a paper noted for its interest in Africa or liberal causes. It is, however, a key supporter of Blair.

The Murdoch and Live 8 connections are close. Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch's daughter, is married to Matthew Freud, one of the organisers. Freud runs a leading public relations company that is, according to the *Financial Times*, one of the most influential in the UK. It has the largest media and entertainment client list in the country, with clients including famous actors and major companies such as AOL—of which more later. He and his wife also have connections to the Blair government. They sit on various government committees, and his company, Freud Communications, has organised events for both the government and the Labour Party.

Freud's sister, Emma, is married to Richard Curtis, the writer/director/producer responsible for *Love Actually*, the *Bridget Jones* movies, *Notting Hill*, *Mr Bean* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. His latest film, *The Girl in the Café*, is a love story set at a fictional G8 conference, and is supposed to show how ordinary people of conscience can persuade the political establishment to do good. He is among those who founded the charity Comic Relief in the wake of Live Aid. Curtis has been one of the main organisers of Live 8. He is said to be particularly close to Chancellor Gordon Brown, who featured sympathetically as a barely disguised character in his latest movie.

Geldof's production company, Ten Alps, which provided the two big screens in Hyde Park, is also closely associated with the government. It owns 70 percent of Teachers TV, which makes programmes for the Department for Education and Skills. Last year, it enjoyed a 400 percent increase in profits. Ten Alps is positioning itself to become one of the key independent television companies in Britain. The high profile that Live 8 has given it can only enhance the company's international exposure.

Live 8 offered an unprecedented marketing opportunity. Nokia and Volvo were among the major corporate sponsors. Volvo spokesman Soren Johansson said the event "fits with the DNA of the company" and "appeals to people's emotions."

AOL ran live video streaming, billing Live 8 as "the day music changed the world." The general opinion was that video streaming had proved its commercial value. Live 8 may indeed have changed the world or at least that part of it that comes under the heading of advertising.

ABC in the US was disappointed that its coverage netted only 2.9 million viewers because the lineup had been aimed at "boomers," who would likely be at home on a Saturday night. But as one media expert said, the advertising was already paid for.

Although some of the charities affiliated to Make Poverty

History had expressed their alarm over the scandal surrounding the wristbands, the commercial orientation of the campaign was no secret. The Live 8 web site still offers a link to AOL's music download service.

Despite its appearance, Live 8 was not a protest. It was a pro-government rally. Both Blair and his Chancellor Gordon Brown closely associated themselves with Live 8. Brown spoke on a charity platform in Edinburgh the evening before the Make Poverty History rally that was supposed to be putting pressure on him! As part of the buildup to the concerts, Blair gave an hour-long interview on MTV sitting alongside Geldof and fielding questions from Destiny's Child.

The Notting Hill glitterati "did good" for Blair if no one else. As an effusive *Observer* journalist said, "By first light today, a world majority will have offered Tony Blair a significant mandate for change."

We are now being asked to believe that attending a concert, or merely watching it on television, confers a democratic mandate. The Blair government was elected by only 20 percent of UK voters. It has the lowest mandate of any British government in history. The slogan of the campaign might as well have been "Make Elections History."

Even the arrangements for the concerts, with their separate enclosures for celebrities, spoke of the essentially elitist conception of Live 8. This was an elitism based not on the traditional values of the British ruling class, but on the new global super-rich who are close to the Labour government, and who have made their base in London with its sympathetic tax laws. Black African musicians of considerable talent were relegated to a side event in Cornwall, because they do not have the same commercial weight as the acts booked for the Hyde Park event.

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