

One World: Together At Home—A noble gesture married to official cynicism

By Paul Bond
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The *One World: Together At Home* special streamed April 18 was a highly contradictory affair.

The enormous global viewing figures and, for the most part, the sincerity of the musicians themselves point to overwhelming support for keyworkers at the frontline of the coronavirus pandemic, and an increasing recognition of their role. However, the programme channeled this support into the dead end of appeals for corporate charity and was aimed at promoting the lie that “we are all in this together.”

The international broadcasts incorporated local variations of the initial two-hour American show, curated by Lady Gaga. An array of big-name artists, including long-established figures such as Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Jennifer Lopez, and the Rolling Stones, together with the more recently famous, from The Killers to Billie Eilish, performed songs at their locked-down homes.

The pandemic has triggered a social media backlash against the promotion of celebrities over frontline keyworkers. This shows a healthy instinct, but it does not preclude genuine sentiments on the part of the artists. It is difficult to gauge how far performers may have felt pressure to be seen as doing the right thing, but the impulse to support the event should not be underestimated.

The performances and their introductions were intended to entertain—no small thing under such conditions—but many artists also made explicit their recognition that this is a global medical crisis requiring an international response. That impulse could only go so far under the limitations of the shows.

Lady Gaga brought the performers together under the auspices of international advocacy charity Global Citizen. Its perspective is “targeting world leaders to end extreme poverty by 2030.”

The broadcast sought no public donations, but Global Citizen used it as a lever to encourage global support for response efforts to COVID-19 by soliciting corporate donations to the World Health Organisation (WHO)’s COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund. This added to the show’s contradictions. The explicit statement of celebration and support for keyworkers was made contingent on financial support from big business, with the American broadcast making repeated acknowledgement of its deeply cynical corporate supporters.

The BBC’s British production mentioned in passing the \$128 million raised from corporate donors but stressed that it was not a charity broadcast but a celebration. It was opened by George the Poet, whose introductory verse spoke of the need to self-isolate in these terms:

“There’s everything to live for, ‘Cos the world is yours.”

The American show pulled in nearly 21 million viewers, 45 percent of all live television viewers. Internationally, including local variants, the programme has so far been seen by more than 270 million people. That total does not yet include audiences in Africa and the Middle East, and the programme will air in China shortly. These numbers point to an overwhelming sympathy with those at the frontline. The focus was on health workers, but it was not confined to them. The British show mentioned transport workers, postal workers, delivery and refuse workers.

Introducing the US show, Lady Gaga spoke of her pride at being able to encourage a contribution to the Solidarity Response Fund, as well as her gratitude and concern for health workers and for those trying to live through the pandemic and wondering what would follow. She saw her contribution as the uplifting relief offered by performance, borne out in her choice of Charlie Chaplin’s *Smile* as the curtain-raiser.

There were many cover versions of classic songs, like Lizzo’s performance of Sam Cooke’s *A Change Is Gonna Come*, Billie Eilish and Finneas’s take on Bobby Hebb’s *Sunny* and Keith Urban’s performance of Steve Winwood’s *Higher Love*. Others had material in their own back catalogue that fitted the bill. Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder turned in a fine performance of *River Cross*, with its demand, “Let it be a lie that all futures die.” Some performances were more directly personal responses to medical suffering, as in Taylor Swift’s performance of *Soon You’ll Get Better*, a song written following her mother’s diagnosis of cancer. This allowed some perhaps unintended resonances of something bigger, with its line, “This won’t go back to normal, if it ever was.”

In some cases, one saw artists who, in their comments and recollections, were not so far from their working class childhood experiences after all. Tom Jones referred to his two years’ home confinement with tuberculosis under the National Health Service (NHS) as a child.

The most powerful moments came when performers addressed the bigger picture with direct reference to their own experiences. Paul McCartney, whose mother was a nurse, prefaced *Lady Madonna* with a statement that there was a need to come together and tell world leaders to strengthen healthcare systems internationally to prevent such an outbreak in future.

But that appeal flies in the face of a daily reality apparent to millions the world over of the official indifference and political

and social criminality demonstrated by politicians and governments as they take forward their campaign for a return to work and profit-making for the major corporations.

This truth found little or no expression. On the British broadcast, BBC medical correspondent Fergus Walsh made the most coy reference possible to “criticism of the WHO”—the only indication of the Trump administration’s decision to defund what is currently the most important global institution in the fight against COVID-19.

The British show made a point of celebrating keyworkers well beyond health. Workers know full well the role they are playing. As George the Poet—whose mother works for the NHS—put it, “People are doing what needs to be done.” But this only indicates how aware the BBC is of an increasingly angry reaction by workers to the policies and inaction of the ruling class and the need to provide this with the most saccharine and safe expression or redirection possible.

The broadcast included a poignant memorialisation of lost keyworkers, but not one centred on those guilty of failing to protect or support them. There is insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for health workers. The transport and communication workers rightly celebrated here have been forced to continue working in unsafe conditions without PPE provision, often having been denied it outright. Insufficient testing levels are dangerously behind events.

There was praise for a teacher for producing PPE face shields in his school engineering workshop without asking why this was necessary, and for the founder of a foodbank for distributing 70 meals in the previous week—again without asking why the foodbank was needed in the first place.

The crisis will only worsen, as the ruling class internationally look to sacrifice workers to profit in their drive to reopen business. Fergus Walsh made this agenda explicit, declaring, “We all have a role to play” in order to “get the economy moving again.”

As for the show’s charitable appeal to “corporate sponsors,” this was a concert featuring a line-up of stars that would require tens of millions of pounds to assemble under normal circumstances—if this would ever be possible. Yet various sponsors, duly name-checked for their “generosity,” collectively pledged a pathetic \$128 million for the WHO fund. That amounts to around 50 cents per million viewers—not a bad rate for any advertising executive.

More money might have been raised by having a whip-round among the major record labels, whose artists responded so generously. But these sums were pledged by corporations, which have just been handed over hundreds of billions in public funds by governments the world over.

The \$2.2 trillion US CARES Act alone put \$500 billion directly into bailing out major corporations. Small businesses have mostly seen nothing of the \$377 billion ostensibly directed their way, as \$10 billion went straight to the banks in fees and the rest was snapped up by bigger companies. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos increased his personal fortune by \$25 billion between January 1 and April 15 this year—a sum around 200 times the collective largesse shown by corporate donors to the WHO’s charity.

In Britain, the very same multi-billionaires who have profited from privatisation and the dismantling of social provision are

eagerly circling the government funds made available to business. Sir Richard Branson is working on a bid for £500 million to bail out airline Virgin Atlantic. Tax exile Branson, who has a personal fortune of £4 billion, also founded private health company, Virgin Care.

In 2016, Virgin Care threatened to sue the NHS after losing out on an £82 million contract to run children’s health services in Surrey. The NHS ending up having to pay an undisclosed out of court settlement to Branson.

There is no charitable solution to this crisis, or any of humanity’s problems. Even comparing this broadcast with previous charity events highlights the dead end that has now been reached. The 1985 Live Aid concerts raised some \$245 million specifically for Ethiopian famine relief. The coronavirus pandemic, as performers here recognised, is a global crisis that requires a coordinated global solution and raised far less from an oligarchy that is in no mood to have its heartstrings tugged by well-meaning celebrities.

And there is no way forward through appeals to governments that act in the interests of a financial oligarchy, whose response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been to carry out the biggest smash and grab raid on social wealth the world has ever seen.

The essential principle that must guide the response to the coronavirus crisis is that the needs of working people must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth. As these broadcasts demonstrated yet again, recognition is growing that the pandemic requires a rational, coordinated global response based on health requirements and the need to safeguard the livelihoods of the world’s working people. What stands in the way of this is the capitalist system and its demand for profit and no appeal to the altruism of big business and claims to a common purpose can obscure this fundamental political reality.

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