Chapter 8

George Harrison and the Concert for Bangladesh: When Rock Music Forever Fused with Politics on a World Stage

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ABSTRACT

The Concert for Bangladesh occurred on August 1, 1971, forever changing the dynamic between popular music, politics, and humanitarian aid. The concert was organized by former Beatle George Harrison, reflecting New Left political leanings. He was inspired to put on the concert by Bengali Ravi Shankar, who sought aid for victims of war and severe weather in East Pakistan, soon to become Bangladesh. The concert raised consciousness among the counterculture movement and mixed with world politics as the War of Liberation raged in the south Asia country on the Indian subcontinent.

My friend came to me, with sadness in his eyes
He told me that he wanted help
Before his country dies
Although I couldn’t feel the pain, I knew I had to try
Now I’m asking all of you
To help us save some lives.
--First two stanzas of “Bangla Desh,” written and sung by George Harrison

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamic between political speech and popular music changed on August 1, 1971, when former Beatles George Harrison and Ringo Starr, as well as Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Leon Russell, Ravi Shankar, Billy Preston, and other musicians and singers mounted the stage in New York City’s Madison Square Gardens for the first large concert event to benefit a humanitarian cause. The musicians donated their time and talent to the Concert for Bangladesh, which was supplemented by a live-performance record album and a feature-length film. Altogether, the two concerts, album, and film raised millions of dollars to aid the people of Bangladesh, as East Pakistan was called by residents seeking freedom from Pakistan, and amid official U.S. government indifference to the sufferings in the region brought about by warfare and severe weather. The concert, album, and film also helped to raise global awareness of the cause of the Bengali people, who sought their own country (Lichtenstein, 1971).

Additionally, the Concert for Bangladesh led, by example, to other multi-act concerts to benefit social and humanitarian causes throughout the following decades including the elaborate, simultaneously broadcast Live Aid concerts organized by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure in 1985, followed a month later by the first of a series of Farm Aid concerts to help struggling family farmers in the United States. Other examples of such events include the Secret Policeman’s Ball benefit shows beginning in 1979 for Amnesty International and the 1984 Band Aid single, “Do They Know It’s Christmas/Feed the World.” This use of popular music stardom to promote social justice continued into the 21st century with efforts such as the ONE campaign created by Bono of U2 to fight AIDS and poverty in Africa.

Live and recorded music had been used to protest social injustices well before George Harrison and Ravi Shankar organized the Concert for Bangladesh. American folk singers including Woody Guthrie and early American Blues singers including Blind Lemon Jefferson often sang of injustices and misery. But before the Concert for Bangladesh, protest music was heard as individual performances by singers and their bands.

In addition, there had been other multi-act concerts such as Monterey Jazz Festival, which began in 1957; the history-making Woodstock concert in 1969; and the New Orleans Jazz Fest, which began in 1970. But these multi-act concerts were largely commercial or cultural events, rather than benefits to aid social causes. That link was made for the first time by the Concert for Bangladesh, which came at a time in the United States and Europe when numerous social movements were challenging the prevailing culture of consumerism at home and empire-building abroad.

Indeed, the concert to aid the Bengalis emerged out of the social unrest and social change that began in the 1950s and 1960s. This social upheaval had evolved into various social movements that challenged the institutions of liberal democracy in a new “cycle of protest,” as described by Sydney Tarrow (as quoted in West, 2013). The Civil Rights Movement, the nuclear disarmament movement, the environmental protection movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and cultural changes such as the hippie movement opposing materialism, the feminist movement to promote equal rights for women, and an era of permissiveness towards sexuality all contributed to decades of challenge to the conformist consumer society. These movements brought to the forefront the failures of western democracies at mid-century, when many in society, particularly young people, no longer accepted institutionalized racism, gender inequality, sexual repression, international imperialism, and U.S. military involvement in Cold War hot spots that left tens of thousands dead for little or no political gain. The rock festivals of Woodstock in the United States, Nimbin in Australia, and Glastonbury in England connected music to these cultural