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## **Benefit Concerts: Truly for the Benefit of the Cause?**

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## **Abstract**

Benefit concerts have been used as a fundraising method for urgent issues for centuries, beginning in 1749 with concerts put on by George Handel. The first modern benefit concert was the Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, which proved that these concerts could raise large amounts of money for their cause. Live Aid was put on by Bob Geldof in 1985 Live Aid in response to the famine in Ethiopia. The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness in 1992 was staged following Freddie Mercury's death and worked to raise money for awareness and a cure for HIV/AIDS. The Concert for New York City was the music industry's response to the September 11th terrorist attacks. These concerts all worked towards raising money for their respective causes but also faced skepticism and financial issues that tarred the legitimacy of their intention. Celebrities are commonly the organizers and faces of benefit concerts, making them a form of catalytic philanthropy. Despite these problems, benefit concerts are still a common method of fundraising and raising awareness for humanitarian causes.

**Keywords:** Benefit concerts, Live Aid, Farm Africa, The Freddy Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness, The Mercury Phoenix Trust, The Concert for New York City, The Robin Hood Foundation, Catalytic Philanthropy

## Introduction

A benefit concert is defined as “an event that utilizes music and the platforms of celebrities to raise awareness or money for an urgent issue (Mlaba, 2023)”. While benefit concerts may seem modern, it is a fairly aged way to raise money for charities and build awareness for causes. One of the earliest known benefit concerts was held by George Handel in 1749 to raise money to build a chapel for The Foundling Hospital, an orphanage in London. He held a second concert the next year and performed “Messiah”. The concert was such a success that Handel was made a governor of the hospital. These annual performances continued for nearly 20 years, even after Handel’s death because he left the hospital a copy of the score and performance parts for “Messiah” in his will (Howell, 2014). The first modern benefit concert is considered to be the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh, which set the stage for future benefit concerts including Live Aid in 1985, the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness in 1992, and The Concert for New York City in 2001. All set out with the goal of raising money and awareness for their intended cause, but often faced financial roadblocks and public backlash (Mlaba, 2023; Pomerantz, 2010).

Put on in 1971 by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, The Concert for Bangladesh aimed to raise money for Bengali refugees who had fled to India. It was the first large-scale music event that was intended to benefit human rights (Cohen, 2021). Performed in two shows on August 1, 1971, the concert was held at Madison Square Garden and featured performers including Bob Dylan, Ringo Starr, and Eric Clapton (This Day In Music, 2023). The concert raised nearly \$245,000 through ticket sales and donations and has since raised another \$17 million for the George Harrison Fund for UNICEF through documentary film and album sales (Cohen, 2021).

While the concert certainly drew Western attention to the needs of the refugees, it also faced some issues trying to get the money to the refugees. The money from the album sales following the concert, which totaled nearly \$12 million, was held by the IRS for over a decade because the event had not applied for the appropriate nonprofit status (Cohen, 2021; This Day in Music, 2023). Harrison was forced to dig into his own pocket to maintain the fund and its legal fees following the hold-up by the IRS (This Day in Music, 2023). Harrison's wife was even quoted as saying that she didn't "know how much money actually reached where it should have gone, early on." The concert's legacy is handled by Jonathan Boyd, who claims "The money did eventually reach Bangladesh, although perhaps not in time to help the refugees at that point." He also mentions that because of the lack of nonprofit registration, the IRS took a cut of the funds (Thomson, 2011).

## **Live Aid**

In 1984, Bob Geldof, an Irish musician, traveled to Ethiopia and witnessed the famine that had killed several hundred thousand and was likely to kill many more. He returned to London and created an ensemble of music stars called Band Aid that released their first single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" that holiday season. The song raised \$10 million and inspired a similar response from U.S. musicians. Geldof then took his idea to help the famine to a much larger scale, a charity concert called Live Aid. It was held on July 13, 1985, in both Wembley Stadium in London and JFK Stadium in Philadelphia. The 16-hour show featured over 75 music groups including Elton John, The Who, Madonna, and Queen. Phil Collins performed at the start of the concert in London then flew to Philadelphia to finish the concert. Over 150,000 people watched live between the two venues and more than a billion people watched live on television.

The concert raised a collective \$127 million for the famine relief and the publicity encouraged Western nations to give enough surplus grain to end the crisis (History.com Editors, 2009).

Farm Africa is a foundation established in 1985, the same year as Live Aid. It aims to reduce poverty, boost harvests, sustain natural resources, and overall end the need for aid in East Africa. Farm Africa received funding from Live Aid which had both short-term and long-term impacts on the communities. Liz Dobson, the head of program funding for Farm Africa, said, “Funds raised by Live Aid addressed not only short-term emergency response efforts but were also directed towards sustainable development programs by organizations including Farm Africa that have had a long-term impact in helping build a prosperous rural Africa (East Anglian Daily Times, 2015).”

In 2010, the BBC did an investigation on Live Aid and reported that only 5% of the money raised from the concert had reached Ethiopians experiencing famine. They reported that the majority of the money was used by rebel groups in the Tigray province to buy weapons (BBC News, 2021). There was a civil war ongoing in Ethiopia that was contributing to the famine, but the war was mentioned nowhere in any of the advertising, nor was the fact that food was being used as a weapon of war (Pruce, 2019, p. 60-61). The claim was later confirmed to be incorrect, and the BBC apologized for the inaccurate report several months later (BBC News, 2021).

From the beginning, Live Aid was envisioned to be extravagant in ways that almost overshadowed the real reason for the event - famine relief in Africa. Garofalo and Ullestad (1992) said, “Live Aid was first and foremost a media event of the highest order. The aid, the music, and the musicians were quite secondary to the event itself (p. 45).” One idea for the spectacle included simultaneous rocket launches at Wembley Stadium and JFK Stadium. One

would hold Mick Jagger, the other would hold David Bowie. The idea was eventually scratched due to financial constraints but was instead replaced with flying Phil Collins across the Atlantic in a supersonic jet so that he could perform at both venues. The entire event barely focused on the needs of the famined communities and was more focused on the celebrities and the donors watching and attending (Friedman & Davis, 2013, p. 214). Perhaps the only moment in the entire concert focused on the famine was David Bowie's demand that some of his stage time be used to show a CBC report on famine relief. That moment quickly came to an end when Bowie recentered the event on the donors, calling them heroes and implying that Africa needed neo-imperialist heroes to save them (215). Put perfectly by Friedman and Davis, "Live Aid was done, not because it necessarily needed to be done, but because it could be done (214)."

### **The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness**

Freddie Mercury's death from HIV/AIDS in late 1991 shocked the music community. Only five months later a benefit concert was planned: The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness. It was set to take place at Wembley Stadium in London in April 1992 and was broadcast to "virtually every country in the world (Watrous, 1992)". Artists including Elton John, David Bowie, and Metallica performed and the proceeds were given to AIDS organizations worldwide. This concert was one of the first public acknowledgments of the AIDS crisis in the pop music industry, even though it had been commonly discussed on Broadway and in Hollywood for several years (Watrous, 1992). The manager for Queen, Jim Beard, said, "The industry really hasn't done much about it...Def Leppard, Guns 'n' Roses, Metallica represent the macho, hetero side of the industry, and it's important to welcome bands like that. It's too bad you need something emotive like Freddie's death to bring all these people together."

Using the funds raised from the concert, Brian May, Roger Taylor, and Jim Beach founded The Mercury Phoenix Trust (MPT) in Mercury's memory. The organization focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment at the grassroots level in nearly 55 countries worldwide. Since its founding, it has provided over £ 18 million to over 2000 projects working with individuals with HIV/AIDS and providing medical care and other necessities (Mercury Phoenix Trust, n.d.). It was originally reported that the concert raised \$35 million for AIDS charities, but many say that number was likely "grossly inflated". One source speculated that the concert may have only raised \$8 million and cost over \$12 million to produce, putting the show in the negatives for profit. The organizers later denied the show lost money and countered this by saying that the concert was not intended to be an actual benefit concert, it was solely a tribute to Mercury and his impact on the music industry (DiMartino, 1992).

### **The Concert for New York City**

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 left the United States hurting and uncertain as to how they could heal from this tragedy. Paul McCartney, notably a British musician, saw this pain and grief and decided a benefit concert would help raise money and bring healing to the country. The Concert for New York City was held at Madison Square Garden just 39 days later and featured comedians, actors, politicians, and musicians. The crowd was filled with survivors of the attacks and the loved ones of those lost, many of whom held photos of their lost family member. It was a beautiful tribute filled with raw emotions and the power of community (Plotnicki, 2020). Audience members captured in the concert film sang praises like, "No one...could doubt the healing power of music" and "The concert was a break from the horror...a little piece of heaven on earth after being in hell for six weeks" (Horvitz, 2001). The concert



raised \$35 million during the five-hour show that was broadcast on VH1. The concert was later released on DVD and CD by Columbia Records and SONY Music and profits also went to the Robin Hood Foundation (Plotnicki, 2020).

The Robin Hood Foundation was the recipient of the funds raised from the concert. The organization provides financial assistance to people struggling in New York City through its relief fund. They immediately put the funds to use and gave the family of each victim of the attacks \$5000 during the holiday season of 2001. Since the concert, they have provided nearly \$33 million worth of mental and physical health services to people impacted by 9/11. The Attorney General of New York has referred to the Robin Hood Relief Fund as “the most effective and transparent of all the 9/11 assistance funds” (Robin Hood, 2016).

The Robin Hood Foundation was questioned in 2007 by Congress for their use of ‘rainy day funds’ for investments in hedge funds. It was found in their 2005 tax returns that nearly \$145 million was invested into 19 hedge funds, 7 of which were managed by a board member or a member of the leadership council, all of whom are major donors of the organization. The Better Business Bureau of New York reviewed the organization and found that the Robin Hood Foundation met the standards for charity accountability. Other leaders within the Better Business Bureau have expressed their doubts though, wondering if the hedge funds were to fail, would the board be able to fire the hedge fund manager, among other concerns (Fitzgerald, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

As established throughout this paper, benefit concerts throughout history have been able to help their causes, but also have found themselves in trouble, particularly financial problems. The concerts mentioned all had the same outcomes: they raised money and awareness for their

respective causes, but what happened to the money was questionable. You may wonder about the psychology behind benefit concerts and why celebrities wearing thousands of dollars of clothing and jewelry are begging average people to dig into their pockets and donate a few dollars. After all, these celebrities could singlehandedly give a large donation from their own pocket and save themselves some trouble. This type of fundraising is called catalytic philanthropy; celebrities feel like they are making a difference using their platform, ordinary people are able to help the cause and be entertained, and the cause benefits from potentially more donations than they would have received from a handful of celebrities (Pomerantz, 2010). Benefit concerts “...effectively challenged the Western cultural imaginary that positions people of the Global South as silent victims in need of Western aid, and...illustrated that...benefit concerts really do serve a necessary cause...(Friedman & Davis, 2013, p. 223).” Concerts such as Live Aid portray the donors as white saviors and should be reevaluated to consider how these causes can be helped without seeming savior-ish of the West. So while these concerts certainly have some questionable outcomes, they are not only helping the cause, but helping to unite everyone watching and donating. Benefit concerts, such as Live Aid, act as “...the reawakening of a section of the rock audience to its own social potential and a quantum leap in public awareness of the horrifying problems of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and racism (Garofalo & Ullestad, 1992, p. 46).”

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