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BY SCOTT REDDING | 9.3.03

## *Landmine Rock*

Music festivals are an essential part of an English summer. People arrive, set up their campsites, lay down their blankets, and quickly visit a nearby tent for beer or tayberry ice cream. It's ritualized and relaxed, but also an apolitical contrast to 1.2 million people on a February anti-war march through the streets of London. A few musicians may critique the Bush-Blair war on terror and sing about anti-fascism, Mao, and the IRA, but their set finishes after a few songs, and it's back to boy-meets-girl lyrics.

To try to change and channel this unfocused atmosphere, anti-war groups such as the International Solidarity Movement and Oxfam (the U.K.'s largest development charity), are traveling from festival to festival. At Leicester's Summer Sundae in August, the Oxfam table featured a life-sized poster of a bloodstained figure holding an AK-47. A cut-out hole was where the person's head should be. Local Oxfam workers took photos of passers-by to build support for an international treaty (similar to the Ottawa treaty on landmines) on the "end-use" of the world's 500,000 small weapons.

Since a 1997 visit to Cambodia and Vietnam, singer Emmylou Harris has promoted the global campaign against landmines. Landmines maim or kill every 22 minutes, and their victims are 90 percent civilian. The freedom to walk without fear "is a basic right that we take for granted," Harris says. With fellow musician Steve Earle, she has played a series of benefits for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World. Their current tour came to Summer Sundae as the final Sunday evening act on August 10.

Harris is onstage at 7:30 p.m. sharp to begin the concert. She introduces Earle, naming him as her "captain," and their three fellow performers: Joan Baez, Billy Bragg, and Chrissie Hynde. Returning a mock salute, Earle earns his stripes later by ripping through "Devil's Right Hand" and "Ashes to Ashes." Baez covers Earle's "Christmas in Washington," and Bragg reworks his "Waiting for the Great Leap Forward" to include new lyrics on Donald Rumsfeld, the NHS (Britain's health service), and smart bombs.

Harris reveals that a person on a solidarity visit to Palestine has been listening to the concert by mobile phone. Earle, in the four-song encore, dedicates "Jerusalem" to "everybody, and I mean everybody, in Palestine tonight."

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The key moment in bridging the gap between a garden-variety summer festival and an energizing political event occurs at the halfway point of the concert. Bobby Muller, clad in black, rolls himself in his wheelchair to a microphone at stage-left. Muller is the head of Vietnam War Veterans of America. His group was part of the international campaign against landmines that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. The crowd falls silent as Muller explains the inherent, indiscriminately violent nature of landmines. "You set the charge, you hide it, and whomever steps on it becomes the victim," whether it is 30 hours or 30 years later.

Landmines affect the ability of women to gather firewood to sell in marketplaces and prevent children from playing in fields. Landmines prevent the agricultural use of the land in Angola, where 17 tons of food are flown in each day. In 1997, there were over 100 million mines buried in over 60 countries. Muller emphasizes to the crowd that "nothing has allowed the landmines campaign to go forward like these concerts. These musicians in front of you are ambassadors of justice."

Richard Lloyd, director of the British charity Landmine Action, says that 135 countries, including Britain, have signed and ratified the 1997 Ottawa treaty banning landmines. The United States has not signed. "There is a need in America for the public to keep the pressure up on the present administration," Lloyd says. "More could also be done by the British to persuade, for example, the U.S. to join the treaty."

The outward face of Britain may be *Bend It Like Beckham*, royalty, and standing ovations for Tony Blair in Congress. On the ground, however, public trust in Blair is at an all-time low. Stickers on the London Underground are promoting protests at a weapons export fair in September. Summer Sundae was broadcast by the BBC—would an anti-landmine concert be given a national broadcast in the United States? As Buffalo Springfield once said, something's happening here. The British public could force Blair to increase the landmines pressure on key allies—and prove that he has foreign policies of his own. ■

**Scott Redding** has also written for the British magazine *Red Pepper*.