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## Can we save the world with songs?

NS Special Issue

Billy Bragg

Monday 4th July 2005

G8: Live 8 - Glastonbury holds a lesson for Bob Geldof about pop and politics, writes **Billy Bragg**. The truth is, it's the fans in the audience who will set the agenda, not the men on stage

The mood at Glastonbury Festival on the morning of Flash Flood Friday was subdued, but backstage at the Leftfield we received news that warmed our hearts and lifted our spirits. The British National Party had lost its only seat in London, decisively defeated by Labour at a by-election in Goresbrook, a ward in the borough of Barking and Dagenham.

I got the news via text from the official who is co-ordinating the trade unions' efforts to defeat the BNP across the country and I immediately passed it on to the senior organiser of the Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Union Council, who is also head honcho of the Leftfield stage.

What we have in common, apart from our opposition to the BNP, is that we are all fans of the Clash, and as such can trace the first stirrings of our political activism back to the late 1970s and Rock Against Racism.

The three of us were united two days later on stage at Glastonbury for an impromptu performance of our heroes' punk anthem "Garageland", backed by members of the Specials and assorted Leftfield luminaries. It was a fitting climax to a weekend during which huge audiences had gathered before our stage to mix pop with politics.

The Leftfield is the Labour movement's own corner of Glastonbury. Funding from the Co-op, CWU, PCS, Amicus, Unison and the RMT has provided us with the second-largest marquee at the festival, a 4,000-capacity double big top with its own floor to keep out the elements. Large numbers turned up this year to take part in debates on issues such as US policy towards Cuba and the threat of the BNP, listening and arguing with speakers including Tony Benn, Mark Steele and Jerry Dammers. But let's not kid ourselves about what is going on here - and why it is relevant to the somewhat bigger music events about to happen over the weekend of 2 and 3 July.

The Leftfield relies on musicians to draw a crowd, and not just polemical artists like myself and the anti-Bush activist Steve Earle. The Saturday-night headline act on the Leftfield stage was the hotter-than-hot Babyshambles, led by the tabloid bad boy Pete Doherty, who turned up with his supermodel girlfriend Kate Moss in tow - the antithesis of that caring Coldplay couple, Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow.

We use music to attract an audience that we hope to engage in a political dialogue, which will in turn inspire these fans to activism themselves. Those of us who were politicised by punk, following the Clash to Rock Against Racism gigs and beyond, are proof that it can be done.

Musicians, like all other artists, have an important part to play in politics, sometimes by setting an example, as in the multiracial Two Tone movement, or in a journalistic role, challenging prejudices and offering perspective. Yet the stage offers only a reflection of reality - the political power that musicians seem to have comes ultimately from their audience.

The truth is that, even though they may sometimes wish it were otherwise, the responsibility for changing the world rests solely with those people out in the audience. A song may help to sum up

the feelings of a generation, but Lyndon B Johnson didn't sign the Voting Rights Act in 1965 because he'd heard Bob Dylan sing "The Times They Are a-Changin'"; he did it because thousands of Americans had been involved in a long struggle for civil rights. Dylan was inspired by that, and wrote a song which became a rallying cry to a new generation of activists.

When thousands held hands for Bob Geldof at Glastonbury on Saturday, they were showing a willingness to address the problems that he has raised in advance of the G8 summit. When millions tune in on 2 July to hear the musicians he has assembled for Live 8, Geldof will draw on their power in an attempt to set the agenda for the world's most powerful men, who will be meeting at Gleneagles.

Having brought these crowds into our big tent, the challenge, for both Live 8 and the Leftfield, remains: how do we translate the audience's willingness to create a better world into a movement capable of achieving that goal?

*This article first appeared in the New Statesman. For the latest in current and cultural affairs [subscribe](#) to the New Statesman print edition.*

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