



Illustration: John Morris

# The Mandela Moment

The Mandela movement has been *the* campaign of 1988. Like Sport Aid in 1986, it has vividly fired the popular imagination. **Mark Perryman** analyses the ingredients of Anti-Apartheid's success story

**N**elson Mandela is in prison where? (a) South America, (b) South Korea, (c) South Africa. Provide the right answer to this *Daily Mirror* competition and your prize would have been a pair of tickets to the Mandela Concert at Wembley on June 11th. With one shrewd commercial move the *Mirror* revealed both the incredible interest in the concert, and the appalling ignorance about the man whose birthday it was to celebrate.

Five weeks after our lucky prize-winners went to Wembley we were provided with an answer as to whether the interest in the concert would affect the ignorance about the man. In an opinion poll commissioned by Anti-Apartheid 92% knew who Mandela was and 70% supported his unconditional and immediate release.

What makes this turnaround all the more remarkable is that it should happen now. Two years ago, the rising

level of resistance to the apartheid regime in the townships meant South Africa was rarely out of the news. The resistance, coupled with the brutal use of force and censorship under the state of emergency, created all the conditions for a broad and massive anti-apartheid campaign in this country. It didn't happen. And yet two years later, with South Africa out of the immediate news, here we have a momentous upsurge and outpouring of support for the anti-apartheid cause.

This wasn't, at least in its immediate context, a reaction to a liberation movement on the move or an oppressive regime on the rampage. The solidarity campaigns have all been reactive in this sense, including the biggest we've seen in postwar Britain, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Twenty years ago, in 1968, hundreds of thousands marched for Vietnam, inspired and mobilised by the Tet offensive in January of that year. In 1988 an

even larger movement has been, in a sense, manufactured by turning what could have been an all-too easily forgettable birthday into an unmissable media extravaganza. The worlds of communicating and campaigning were brought, if only for a moment, spectacularly together.

**Four parts of the Mandela campaign** worked to produce such a moment. First and foremost, there was the concert itself. A brilliant coup, not just in filling Wembley to capacity but also the occupation of millions of tv screens throughout Britain and across the world. Secondly, the morning after the concert ended the Mandela Freedom March left from Glasgow Green. Traversing Scotland and down the length of England the 25 marchers, each symbolising a year of Mandela's imprisonment, set a furious pace throughout their trek. In their wake they left an immediate sign of a campaign that could have a life of its own in local communities hundreds of miles away from the world of Wembley. The march never made the headlines but that simple link was a very important part of the campaign. Thirdly, when the marathon march reached London it became a triumphant parade into the biggest rally ever mounted by Anti-Apartheid. Some 250,000 filled Hyde Park and were faced by a stage that wouldn't have looked out of place back at Wembley. From the colourful backdrops and the huge video screen to the sheer size and volume, this was the world of the stadium meeting the world of the rally. The speakers, among them Archbishop Tutu and Sir Richard Attenborough, were for once audible because the PA system wasn't designed so much for them but for the highlight of the afternoon, Simple Minds. Fourthly, throughout the campaign advertising was treated as a key way to project its ideas and ideals. The publicity focus remained relentlessly on Mandela and the avenue used was one of those by which people expect to be fed their daily messages, advertising in the national press. The form legitimised the content, that is the rationale of the advertising medium and this was a campaign that used it as widely and as professionally as resources would allow.

**But why has Anti-Apartheid so spectacularly succeeded now** when it has largely failed in the past? The answer will not just be found in the recent imagination of the mix of the old and the new, but also in the reason behind that past failure. This lies in what was the founding basis of the movement, and what for 30 years has dominated all its work, the sanctions campaign. On this question we have seen the successful international isolation of Mrs Thatcher, a situation which will be intensified should Dukakis win in November. Domestically, meanwhile, she has found herself facing a sizeable

minority supporting sanctions.

But Thatcher's position is a dynamic one and it has consistently prevented the supporters of sanctions from breaking out of that minority status. Constantly on the offensive, never ducking the argument, Thatcher puts the case for a positive and reforming dialogue of engagement with South Africa. She pictures her opponents as passive isolationists incapable of provoking peaceful change in South Africa. Her argument cannot win over those convinced of the impossibility of reforming apartheid. But it is not those that she is interested in, she wants to win the middle ground. Anti-Apartheid's hitherto overwhelming emphasis on the sanctions issue has steered it away from that middle ground, leaving far too much of it for Thatcher and her themes of engagement and dialogue. The Mandela campaign has begun to show how that ground can be won and majority support for sanctions secured.

**T**he marginalisation of the campaign from the ground it could win was further illustrated when the boycott campaign was launched into a particular popular arena, sport. In this instance, the campaign was a force from the outside, often appearing to be more anti-sport than anti-apartheid. It is a campaign that isn't informed by the political and cultural world that sports people inhabit, nor does it offer the means by which sport can positively express support for the cause in its own terms. Instead it is treated as the passive and ignorant bystander. In this way the weakness instead of the strength of the campaign is stressed and the opposition to 'interfering politics' can be galvanised by the supporters of apartheid in a world in which they are decidedly in the minority.

Sanctions are an absolutely vital part of the isolation and defeat of apartheid. They are a practical way in which the West can materially aid the liberation movement within South Africa. But they are the potential product of a much more generalised sense of moral outrage at the inhumanity and irrationality of apartheid. A plurality of forms needs to be created to express this outrage. These must provide space for the majority who, while opposing apartheid, do not as yet either support or identify with the demand for sanctions. The breadth and depth of this outrage opens up a middle ground on which to counter Thatcher's case for dialogue and engagement. It is on this middle ground that the campaign will be won or lost.

**The Mandela campaign worked because** the previous focus on sanctions, boycott, and isolation was totally transformed into a new emphasis on personality and celebration. And the new focus demanded a combination of a creative use of traditional forms of campaigning, marches and rallies, with new forms drawn from the worlds of

popular entertainment and communications.

The personality was Mandela himself, the figure who more than anyone else dramatises the issue of apartheid. It was in this dramatic form that Mandela was constantly being projected. Three factors made up that extremely powerful projection and instilled it with popular appeal. First, the nature of his supposed crime. He is imprisoned for his ideas. He has not used arms or committed acts of violence. He is in no active sense a 'terrorist'. He was a lawyer and politician who believed that it was morally and tactically correct to use violence to overthrow apartheid. Strong sentiments, but quite distinct from employing those violent means oneself. Mandela, in this way, is both a symbol of struggle and at the same time remains untouched by the inevitable violent and tragic implications of such a struggle when it is armed.

**Second, there is the extremely close** support Mandela enjoys from his wife and daughters. The commitment, loyalty and affection of Mandela's family provides us with a very basic and familiar form for millions to identify with. Third, there is the age of Mandela, the incredible duration of the sentence for a 'philosophical crime', and the moral stature that Mandela now enjoys by what has to be frankly described as the nobility of his suffering. We think of Mandela in terms of the contribution he will make to the construction of a new South Africa: that is the scale of his moral stature.

**B**ut these factors in themselves would not have been enough. The brilliant connection, self-consciously made by Anti-Apartheid, was the one with Mandela's birthday. Everyone has one day of the year that is theirs, their birthday. It gives us the chance to celebrate and not to feel self-conscious about it in the face of the inhumanity that Mandela has been forced to suffer. We can celebrate with his family, feel part of a wider family and most of all we can 'party'. It makes us feel important too, because you can't have a successful birthday party without guests.

This combination of personality and celebration provided the way into a concert that conspicuously exuded those values: a worldwide media event, reaching in one day an unbelievable 10 billion people. This was a spectacle that immediately became immersed in the life and soul of the nation. It was a spectacle from the world of stadium rock. The stadium represents a passion that is expressed through the music and the theatrically overblown gestures of the performers. It represents a sense of occasion, that's why people willingly, even happily, queue for days on end, and pay £25 for a ticket. Most of all, it is a world of celebration, right down to the 'Hello Mum' banners and the rhythmically clapping hands held

**'The stadium represents a passion that is expressed through the music and theatrically overblown gestures of the performers'**



high above tens of thousands of heads. That's why every time the call was made from the stage the stadium rang out with the response – loud and confident. That's why every time the cameras swung towards the audience there was a wild clamour to appear on screen. This was an audience with a keen sense of its own belonging.

**H**owever, it wasn't Wembley alone which made the spectacle. It was the 10-hour, live transmission which transformed it into a popular event, reaching into the consciousness of millions. At the outset the idea of global tv coverage was not uppermost in Anti-Apartheid's collective mind. But as the organisation unfolded it found itself in a new cultural universe of agencies, production companies, promoters, managements and the like. This intervention had to be informed and transformed by the worlds and values of the arena being addressed. The sheer organisational and practical pressures of mounting an event on this scale forced this transformation. It came about through the deep strategic involvement of figures from the world of music in the unfamiliar world of campaign politics. Past interventions around such figures as Zola Budd or products like Paul Simon's *Graceland* album had never been forced to change in this way. While they were aimed at the world outside politics, they were conducted in the language and form of

a campaign untouched by the worlds they were seeking to change.

As a consequence, the event evolved into the biggest and best concert of the year, and as a result the tv companies literally could not afford not to televise it. Consequently, the attacks on the live transmission of the event by the BBC, and the extraordinarily high profile which it gave to the event, were themselves marginalised. These attacks were led not by the government but by the lonely far-right supporters of apartheid on the back benches. The battle was fought out in the abstract; was it or was it not a political or a musical event? On this ground Anti-Apartheid could not lose. The cause did not obscure the culture, they embraced one another. The essence of Mandela and his imprisonment, through the celebration of his birthday, had itself become an entertainment event. Cause and celebration were indistinguishable. The opponents, meanwhile, distinguished themselves as antiquated killjoys lost in the mists of parliamentary politicking, while everyone else was simply intent on having a party.

The Mandela campaign worked because of the mix of the old with the new, the traditional forms of political campaigning with the worlds of entertainment and communications. Its success was rooted in a heritage of popular music with a political conscience. The soul music of the civil rights movement of 60s America; the peace, love and

understanding of the late 60s; the punk agitation of Rock Against Racism; Amnesty International's *Conspiracy Of Hope* tours. For decades no campaign has been complete without its musical wing and since Live Aid that music has found a form through which to place the issues it seeks to represent on a world stage.

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**What was new about the Mandela concert** was the rare sensitivity it displayed for the cause at hand. The music and the message had a genuine relationship shown by the showcasing of the best in black music – both the stars and the styles – presenting rap, reggae, soul and jazz alongside the rich diversity of African music and dance. At the same time it showed us that the world of committed entertainment doesn't have to stop short at music. It was also a day of unabashed humour and the incongruous but impassioned seal of approval bestowed by the parade of celebrity compères. In this way it learnt from and built upon Live Aid. But this was a moment for a movement. Live Aid did not need a campaign in that way for it was already part of a wider charity movement. Mandela's freedom demands an ongoing campaign and it will have to be one in which this present spectacular moment can lay a basis for many more fusions of the political and the cultural until the life of the Anti-Apartheid Movement itself is transformed into something new. ●

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