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## **Rockin' to free the world? Amnesty International's benefit concert tours, 1986-88**

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## Rockin' to Free the World?: Amnesty International's Benefit Concert Tours, 1986–88

“Half the world is under the age of 25, and a great part can't read. With music, we can communicate to all people equally well in the rich and poor nations of the East and West, and demand that governments give human rights now.”<sup>1</sup>

—John G. Healey, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

“While you're writing letters for prisoners and for your own future, don't forget that being a member of Amnesty has a component of fun. It can be fun having a dictator for your pen pal.”<sup>2</sup>

—Sting, Songwriter

“Amnesty's objective dovetailed with our corporate philosophy about the right for freedom of expression. We both believe strongly in the freedom to do what you want.”<sup>3</sup>

—Joseph LaBonte, President, Reebok International Ltd.

It was the culminating moment in what was billed as the most ambitious music event ever staged. On October 14, 1988, 30,000 exuberant spectators packed the Estadio Mundialista football stadium in Mendoza, Argentina for the penultimate event in the Human Rights Now! concert series, a globe-trotting tour with performances in fifteen countries on four continents. Organized by the human rights organization Amnesty International (AI) to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the tour showcased some of the most distinguished popular musicians of the era: Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, and Youssou N'Dour. Over a six-week period, more than a million people attended concerts, volunteers

1. Terry Trucco, “Rock's Largest Human Rights Tour,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1988, C12.

2. Amnesty International [hereafter AI], Booklet, “A Conspiracy of Hope Tour: Concerts For Amnesty International 1986” Folder 14, Box 384, National Office Records, Amnesty International USA [hereafter AI Records], Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, New York, NY [hereafter CUL].

3. Jacob Weisburg, “Amnesty International's ‘Magical’ Mystery Tour,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 1988, 26.

handed out 1.2 million copies of the Declaration, and hundreds of thousands of concert-goers signed a petition calling upon governments to ratify international human rights treaties and protect human rights advocates.

In a remarkable tour, the Mendoza concert stood out. Only nine days earlier, on October 5, Chileans had handed the 15-year dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet a shocking defeat in a historic plebiscite to determine whether to retain military rule or return to democratic government. Nestled in the famed Argentine wine country across the Andes from the Chilean capital of Santiago, the Mendoza concert attracted 15,000 Chileans who arrived in a line of buses stretching two-and-a-half miles, turning the concert, noted one observer, into “a massive ‘No’ rally” against the dictatorship.<sup>4</sup> As one young spectator told a reporter, “Before October 5 this music was a form of protest against Pinochet, but now it is also a symbol of hope, a huge demonstration of happiness.”<sup>5</sup> At the end of the day, as the raucous crowd roared its approval, the artists took to the stage together for a rendition of the late Jamaican singer Bob Marley’s reggae rights anthem “Get Up, Stand Up”—adding in the Spanish lyrics “*derechos humanos, para todos y para siempre*” (“human rights, for everyone and forever”).<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on research in the recently opened Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) Archives at Columbia University, this article contributes to scholarship on the recent history of human rights by analyzing the Human Rights Now! tour, along with its less-ambitious predecessor, the 1986 U.S.-based Conspiracy of Hope concert series. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to the history of human rights. The human rights “boom” in the 1970s has emerged as a focal point, and scholars such as Kenneth Cmiel, Samuel Moyn, Barbara Keys, and Mark Philip Bradley have explored the proliferation of human rights awareness and activism over the course of the decade.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, non-governmental organizations engaged in transnational human rights activism have figured prominently in this literature,

4. Cable, U.S. Embassy (Santiago) to Department of State, “Mendoza Human Rights Concert Sounds Sour Note for Chilean Government,” October 24, 1988, Digital National Security Archive, ID: CLO2656.

5. Alberto Arebalos, “‘Pinochet out!’ Banners Urge at Amnesty Concert,” *Reuters*, October 14, 1988.

6. Cable, Amnesty International, Press and Publications to Human Rights Now Coordinator, “Human Rights Now dispatch no 15,” October 11, 1988, Folder 20, Box 372, AI Records, CUL; quote from Cable, U.S. Embassy (Santiago) to Department of State, “Mendoza Human Rights Concert Sounds Sour Note for Chilean Government.”

7. For key contributions on the recent history of human rights, see Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2016); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015); Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (New York, 2012); Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2010); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (New York, 2010); William Michael Schmidli, *The Fate of Freedom Elsewhere: Human Rights and U.S. Cold War Policy toward Argentina* (Ithaca, NY, 2013); Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign*

particularly Amnesty International.<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, music has emerged over the past two decades as an arena of interest for U.S. foreign relations historians. Building on the pioneering work of scholars such as Penny M. Von Eschen and Jessica Gienow-Hecht, in 2012 a special forum in *Diplomatic History* illuminated the potential of studying U.S. government efforts to advance American influence and leadership through musical diplomacy.<sup>9</sup>

This essay contributes to this body of scholarship by assessing human rights developments in the 1980s using a social and artistic practice—popular music—that is underexplored in the existing studies.<sup>10</sup> By focusing on Amnesty International, the essay illuminates how non-state actors could engage in forms of cultural diplomacy in a manner similar to governments. At the same time, the concerts also reveal both the power of the state and broader structural forces in shaping the contested meaning of human rights. The essay makes three inter-related arguments: First, I argue that Amnesty International USA's benefit concert tours made a signal contribution to one of the defining developments of the late twentieth century: the expanding awareness of internationally-recognized human rights and the corresponding proliferation of human rights talk across much of the globe. The meaning of human rights, however, whether for performers or spectators, was by no means uniform or static, and the second element of my argument is that the concerts serve as a springboard to

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*Policy* (New York, 2018); Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York, 2011).

8. On Amnesty International, in addition to works cited above, see Anne Marie Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, NY, 2006); Barbara J. Keys, "Anti-Torture Politics: Amnesty International, the Greek Junta, and the Origins of the Human Rights 'Boom' in the United States," in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, eds. Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock (New York, 2012), 201–21; Jonathan Power, *Like Water on Stone: The Story of Amnesty International*, (New York, 2002); Sarah B. Snyder, "Exporting Amnesty International to the United States: Transatlantic Human Rights Activism in the 1960s," *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2012): 779–99.

9. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920* (Chicago, IL, 2009); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "The World Is Ready to Listen: Symphony Orchestras and the Global Performance of America," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 17–28; Jennifer Campbell, "Creating Something Out of Nothing: The Office of Inter-American Affairs Music Committee (1940–1941) and the Inception of a Policy for Musical Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 29–39; Emily Abrams Ansari, "Shaping the Policies of Cold War Musical Diplomacy: An Epistemic Community of American Composers," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 41–52; Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Music Pushed, Music Pulled: Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, and Imperialism," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 53–64.

10. Scholarship on music and human rights, Nomi Dave writes, "remains both idealist and somewhat woolly." Dave, "Music and the Myth of Universality: Sounding Human Rights and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 7, no. 1 (2014): 5. See also D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* (New York, 2010); Ian Peddle, ed., *Popular Music and Human Rights*, 2 vols. (Burlington, VT, 2011). On music and participatory politics, see John Street, *Music and Politics*, (Cambridge, 2012); and Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, 1998).

interrogate the elasticity of human rights rhetoric, fans' varying commitment to human rights activism, and the evolving meaning of human rights. Specifically, I contend that Amnesty International's benefit concerts were shaped by the Ronald Reagan administration's embrace of a narrow version of human rights embedded in the administration's anti-communism and emphasis on democracy promotion and free-market fundamentalism. Third, with concerts in nations facing disparate human rights challenges—ranging from post-dictatorship Argentina to communist Hungary—Amnesty International emphasized that the concerts illustrated the universal validity of human rights. Yet by featuring artists predominately from the West and with corporate sponsorship from the shoe-giant Reebok, I argue that the concerts ultimately advanced a distinct narrative rooted in individual rights and civil liberties, while also illuminating the impact of market logic on human rights advocacy in the late twentieth century.



The Human Rights Now! concert series marked a turning point for Amnesty International. Founded in 1961 by the British lawyer Peter Benenson, Amnesty had developed into a voluntary organization focused on obtaining the release of international prisoners of conscience and using popular pressure to encourage governments to adhere to international standards governing their treatment. The explosion of interest in human rights in the 1970s propelled Amnesty to global prominence. Membership in Amnesty International USA increased by an average of ten thousand new members per year over the first half of the 1970s and the annual operating budget jumped to nearly \$1 million; globally, by the end of the decade, Amnesty had forty national sections and a total membership of more than 150,000.<sup>11</sup> Amnesty remained focused on grassroots activism, especially its signature letter-writing campaigns on behalf of political prisoners. But the organization's groundbreaking *Report on Torture* in 1973 solidified its credibility as a global human rights watchdog, and its pathbreaking "country reports"—relying on fact-finding missions and a growing research staff to detail rights violations across the globe—became increasingly indispensable tools for human rights advocates. In turn, such reporting facilitated Amnesty's development into an influential lobby in Washington, D.C.<sup>12</sup> Underscoring its remarkable rise and the power of its reporting, in 1977 Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

As a leader among the growing number of non-governmental human rights organizations, Amnesty's credibility was based on its reputation for impartiality. Letter-writing campaigns intentionally included prisoners of conscience held by regimes from across the ideological spectrum. Similarly, by taking a narrow focus on political repression, Amnesty's reports avoided broader critiques that might leave the organization vulnerable to criticism of advancing a politically-motivated agenda. Without question, Amnesty's reputation for being politically

11. Kenneth Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1235.

12. Cmiel, 1235.

neutral contributed to its appeal in the United States and overseas, mobilizing a groundswell of newfound interest in human rights and creating a rapid response network for victims of state-sanctioned violence. Between mid-1974 and mid-1983, for example, Amnesty interceded on behalf of 3,830 individuals perceived to be in danger of torture in dozens of countries.<sup>13</sup>

But the effort to achieve impartiality had important consequences. As historian Kenneth Cmiel has written, Amnesty and many of its peer organizations eschewed “thick descriptions” of local culture and context in favour of simple and direct “thin” messages. The language of human rights, Cmiel writes, “... works through its vagueness. Certain images—a woman suffering clitoridectomy, a man being tortured, an ethnically driven bloodbath—click ‘human rights’ in people’s minds thousands of miles away.”<sup>14</sup> Thin descriptions could both make human rights violations visible and drive human rights activism. But they came at a cost, rendering less visible unique local conditions and structures that contributed to rights abuses.<sup>15</sup>

Such considerations would shadow the Amnesty concert tours in the second half of the 1980s. Four years after Amnesty was awarded the Nobel prize, John G. “Jack” Healey was hired as the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA. Ordained as a Franciscan friar in 1964, Healey had been active in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and had chafed against regular Church duties. Assigned to teach a catechism class, “I told the kids that North Vietnamese children were as good as South Vietnamese children,” Healey later recalled. “The kids went home and told their parents—and I never taught again.”<sup>16</sup> Healey left the priesthood in 1968, and over the next eight years he channelled his energy into community activism, serving as Executive Director of the American Freedom from Hunger Foundation and Campaign Coordinator for the Center for Community Change. In the process, he developed a knack for raising public awareness and funds through creative, media-friendly events such as “walkathons”—in 1976 he netted \$10 million by organizing the Dick Gregory World Hunger Run.<sup>17</sup> Tapped to serve as the Peace Corps Country Director for Lesotho in 1977, Healey returned to the United States four years later as the newly-hired Amnesty International USA Executive Director.

Healey was the driving force behind Amnesty’s concert tours. The initiative began as an unusual attempt to raise awareness, membership, and funds. By the mid-1980s, despite the rising visibility of the human rights movement over the previous decade, the problem of violations had hardly dissipated; in 1984, Amnesty estimated that 98 countries engaged in torture.<sup>18</sup> Correspondingly, in

13. Amnesty International, *Torture in the Eighties* (London, 1984), 3.

14. Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” 1249.

15. Bradley, *The World Reimagined*, 220.

16. James Henke, *Human Rights Now!: The Official Book of the Concerts for Human Rights Foundation World Tour* (Topsfield, MA, 1988), 15.

17. Henke, *Human Rights Now!*, 15.

18. Amnesty International, *Torture in the Eighties*, 2.

addition to the perennial problem of fundraising, Healey perceived the United States to be a growth-market for human rights activism. “Amnesty is a well-kept secret,” he told a journalist in April 1986. “We want to make it a household name.”<sup>19</sup>

The result was Conspiracy of Hope, a June 1986 concert tour of six U.S. cities funded by AIUSA and corresponding with Amnesty International's 25-year anniversary. To an extent, the project drew inspiration from a series of Amnesty benefit events in London that began in the previous decade. In 1976, British comedian John Cleese organized *A Poke in the Eye (with a Sharp Stick)*, a benefit show featuring the absurdist comedy group Monty Python's Flying Circus. With a television special and a spin-off album, the event brought in \$40,000—a pattern that was repeated the following year with equal success. Building momentum, in 1979 Cleese collaborated with musician Pete Townshend of the band the Who to produce *The Secret Policeman's Ball*, releasing comedy and music records and a film that netted Amnesty \$250,000. The project's success attracted attention, and a sequel two years later boasted high-profile musicians including Sting, Phil Collins, and Eric Clapton.<sup>20</sup>

If Conspiracy of Hope expanded on Amnesty's budding success in linking human rights activism to popular culture, the tour also piggybacked on the emerging phenomenon in the mid-1980s of massive benefit concerts in the United States and Great Britain.<sup>21</sup> In July 1985, some 162,000 fans attended 16-hour Live Aid concerts in Philadelphia and London, raising millions of dollars for famine relief in Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> Two months later, 70,000 spectators descended on placid Champaign, Illinois for Farm Aid, a day-long benefit for indebted American farmers with acts ranging from folk to punk. The brainchild of country music icon Willie Nelson, the event, a pair of *Los Angeles Times* journalists enthused, was “one the most daring pop-cultural exercises since Woodstock.”<sup>23</sup> More to the point, Live Aid and Farm Aid demonstrated that politically-engaged artists such as the Irish rock band U2 could successfully harness their commercial success for social causes. As U2 front man Bono Hewson told a reporter, “Our goal is to have these events not considered big deals anymore, but a routine part of the rock ‘n’ roll life.”<sup>24</sup>

19. Charlotte Curtis, “A Rock Effort to Support Man's Rights,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1986.

20. Henke, *Human Rights Now!*, 12.

21. On the rise of benefit concerts, see Sam O'Connell, “Which Music for Which Catastrophe? The Functions of Popular Music Twenty-First Century Benefit Concerts,” in *Popular Music and Human Rights*, vol. 1 (Burlington, VT, 2001), 101–13.

22. Samuel G. Freedman, “Live Aid and the Woodstock Nation,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1985, C19.

23. Kevin Klose, “Farm Aid to Play Among Plenty,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 1985, A3; quote from Robert Hilburn and Dennis McDougal, “Farm Aid: Music, Political Harvest,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 1985, E1.

24. Robert Hilburn, “Calendar: Pop Music '86,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1986, U56.

Jack Healey agreed. He successfully drafted U2 to headline Conspiracy of Hope, along with an impressive array of top-flight musicians, including Bryan Adams, Sting, Miles Davis, Peter Gabriel, Jackson Browne, and Ruben Blades. The organizer of Live Aid, Bill Graham, signed on as producer. The 10-day concert tour included shows in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Atlanta, and Chicago, and culminated in an 11-hour extravaganza at Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey that was broadcast in its entirety on MTV and a nationwide radio network. At each stop, an artist-led press conference reiterated the importance of Amnesty's work, concert-goers received print material on the organization, and, during the East Rutherford show, TV and radio listeners were exposed to dozens of Amnesty public service announcements.<sup>25</sup>

Conspiracy of Hope, an internal Amnesty International USA memo subsequently asserted, was an "extraordinary success." 115,000 people paid \$36 per ticket to attend one of the concerts, and Amnesty estimated that 7 million watched on television and 30 million listened on the radio. The concerts raised \$2.2 million and 35,000 new members joined as a direct result of the tour. Membership continued to rise in the concerts' aftermath: over the following twelve months, Amnesty added between 15,000 and 20,000 new members every two months. Such gains were in no small part due to rapt media attention: Amnesty estimated that the tour generated 7,000 press clippings and air time on every major television network. "As a result of this burst of publicity," the memo concluded, "Amnesty has become a household word in the United States."<sup>26</sup> Healey was delighted. "This is the best thing that has ever happened to us," he told the press. "We are getting reports from (chapters) all over the country—cities where the tour didn't even go—about new members. We have had so many designers volunteering to do posters and attorneys volunteering their services that we don't even have enough brochures to send them."<sup>27</sup>

Buoyed by the success of Conspiracy of Hope, Healey envisioned an even more ambitious follow-up tour in 1988 to correspond with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He turned his attention to planning a concert tour that would include shows in the West, Eastern Europe, and the Third World. As Healey enthused to a journalist, "the only way to show that the declaration is everybody in the world's document was *play* the world and not just do the West."<sup>28</sup> By late March 1987, a draft policy statement identified the project's goals: "Present a multi-cultural, multi-racial musical and

25. Booklet, "A Conspiracy of Hope Tour: Concerts for Amnesty International 1986."

26. AI memo, Pat Bronstein to all New York and Regional Staff, "Statistics" September 24, 1987, Folder 17, Box 384, AI Records, CUL.

27. Robert Hilburn, "Amnesty Concerts—The Returns Keep Coming," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1986, 31.

28. Italics original. Richard Harrington, "Rock and Rights: the Concert Crusaders," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1988, G1.

artistic bill, and remain multi-cultural in its public profile; Include countries of all continents, and at least one country with a socialist government; [and] Include translations of the Universal Declaration and AI materials in indigenous languages everywhere the tour visits, and in as many other countries (e.g. broadcast countries) as possible.”<sup>29</sup>

From the outset, however, Healey confronted stiff opposition from within the ranks of Amnesty International. Unlike Conspiracy of Hope, which was funded and managed entirely by AIUSA, a globe-trotting concert would require support from the International Executive Committee (IEC), the centralized decision-making body in an otherwise highly-decentralized organization; the Amnesty International Secretariat, responsible for the organization's research and campaign work; and the national sections where concerts would be held. Healey found an ally in Franca Sciuto, the IEC Chairperson, when he presented the idea to the Committee in January 1987, and the British, Norwegian, and U.S. sections were quickly drafted into a coordinating committee to examine whether the project was feasible.<sup>30</sup> AI national sections were also generally enthusiastic about the proposal. As the Iceland section noted “rock has become very definitely the medium for sociocultural and political expression for our younger generation.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Chilean section's Sergio Zamorano dismissed concerns that rock 'n' roll had limited appeal, presenting the genre as an “undeniable . . . cultural manifestation of [the] times.” The concerts were an investment, Zamorano concluded, since “Youth are the future of the world, and to raise awareness in them now will create a better tomorrow for all.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite reservations from the International Secretariat, under Sciuto's leadership the IEC gave the concert tour a green light in July 1987. To protect Amnesty from potential liability arising from the tour, a separate entity from AI—the Concerts Foundation—was created to organize the project, directed by Healey and a close-knit staff drawn from AIUSA.<sup>33</sup> As the project gained momentum, Healey quickly convinced Conspiracy of Hope veterans Sting, Peter Gabriel, and Youssou N'Dour to join the tour, as well as producer Bill Graham. The immensely popular rock musician Bruce Springsteen and breakout star Tracy Chapman subsequently agreed to volunteer their time as well. Additionally, at each concert, local bands would supplement the regular roster.

29. AI memo, draft for working group meeting, “Policy Statement on Universality of the Tour,” March 30, 1987, Folder: World Tour, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

30. AI memo, Franca Sciuto to AI national sections, “Proposal for a Campaign and Concert Tour to Mark The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” undated [probably January or February 1987], Folder 23, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

31. AI correspondence, Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir (AI Iceland Section) to Franca Sciuto (AI International Secretariat), March 31, 1987, Folder 23, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

32. AI correspondence, Sergio Zamorano (Chile Section) to Øyvind Johnsen (AI Norwegian Section), April 21, 1987, Folder 23, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

33. AI Memo, Draft, Concerts for Human Rights Foundation to all sections/IEC/International Secretariat, “The Human Rights Now! World Tour: a study in International Decision-Making” undated, Folder 16, Box 374, AI Records, CUL.

In late 1987 Sciuto officially announced the project as Human Rights Now!, “the biggest campaign . . . [Amnesty] has ever mounted to mobilize world opinion in the race against time for human rights.”<sup>34</sup>

With financial backing from the shoe-giant Reebok, the Human Rights Now! concerts kicked-off on September 2, 1988. The final preparations had been exhausting; as tour coordinator Mary Daly told a reporter, “We sat down the other night and figured out that there were 1,520 visas issued, 1,572 injections given and 2,240 malaria pills taken.”<sup>35</sup> At each concert an animated film was shown on a giant screen illustrating the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and each attendee received a “passport” containing the Declaration and a tear-off slip to sign his or her name to indicate support.<sup>36</sup> After playing for 77,000 fans in London’s Wembley Stadium, where the stage was framed by map of the world alongside a massive banner marking the fortieth anniversary of the Declaration, the entourage of more than 150 musicians, organizers and technical crew members hopped the English Channel in two chartered DC-10 planes for a show in Paris. With major coverage of the event in the French press, even socialist president François Mitterrand got in on the act. “I salute those who responded in number to the Amnesty International appeal and the artists from every country who mobilized for the human rights cause,” Mitterrand declared in a message that was read aloud during the concert.<sup>37</sup>

From Paris the tour headed across the Iron Curtain to Budapest. After a press conference attended by more than 200 journalists from media outlets across the Eastern Bloc, tens of thousands of spectators attended the concert, including Hungarian Prime Minister Károly Grósz.<sup>38</sup> During the event, the Concerts Foundation press officer noted that a group of Hungarian high school students collected 36,000 signatures in support of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent concerts in Torino and Barcelona drew similar crowds, media attention, and petition signatures. In anticipation of the Barcelona concert, the Spanish section of Amnesty mailed one million brochures asking for signatures in support of the Declaration; by mid-September they were receiving 1,000 replies a day. One radio station called the concert “The most important political event in Spain since the death of Franco.”<sup>40</sup>

34. AI Memo, “Human Rights Awareness Project: Circular no. 2,” November 13, 1987, Folder 21, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

35. Terry Trucco, “77,000 in London Hear Rock Stars Make Music for Human Rights,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1988, 9.

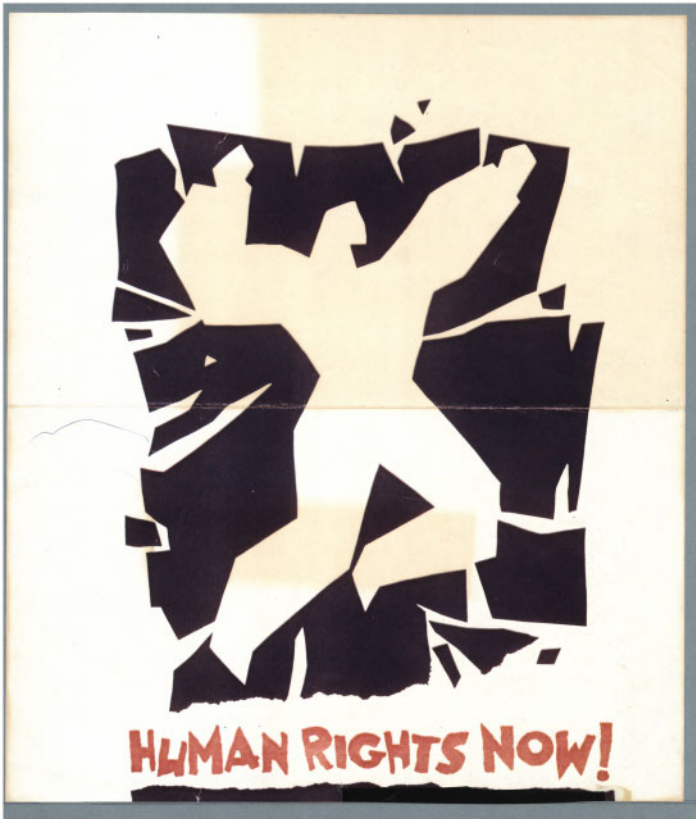
36. AI Cable, press and publications to Human Rights Now. Coordinator, “Human Rights Now. Dispatch No. 11,” September 12, 1988, Folder 17, Box 374, AI records, CUL.

37. “Morning Report,” *USA Today*, September 6, 1988; AI Cable, press and publications to Human Rights Now. Coordinator, “Human Rights Now. Dispatch No. 11.”

38. “Amnesty Rock Tour Performs in Budapest,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1988, C21.

39. “Human Rights Now. Dispatch No. 11.”

40. “Human Rights Now. Dispatch No. 11.”



**Figure 1:** Poster from the “Human Rights Now!” concert series, 1988, Amnesty International Poster Collection - COLLO0146.57, IISH (Amsterdam), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, © Amnesty International.

Crossing the Atlantic, the tour stopped in San José, Costa Rica, then flew north for a pair of shows in Canada at Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens and Montreal’s Olympic Stadium. After three shows in the U.S.—Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Oakland—the tour traveled across the Pacific for gigs in Tokyo, Japan and at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Delhi, India. Returning to Europe for a concert in Athens, Greece, Human Rights Now! headed to Harare, Zimbabwe and Abidjan, Ivory Coast. By the time the tour concluded in mid-October with three concerts in South America—São Paulo, Brazil; Mendoza, Argentina; and at the River Plate Stadium in Buenos Aires, Argentina—the artists had logged more than 100 hours of air transit and flown 35,000 miles.

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What was the significance of the Human Rights Now! concert series? Given the enormous attention that the series generated, it seems clear that the concerts made an important contribution to the growing awareness of human rights

across the globe in the late twentieth century. Without question the event raised Amnesty International's global profile. More than one million people attended concerts, and Amnesty estimated that one billion people worldwide would eventually watch a televised documentary of tour highlights.<sup>41</sup> Amnesty national sections where concerts were held experienced membership growth, including Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, and Spain. Overall, by 1989, Amnesty had grown to more than 700,000 members in over 150 countries and territories, with more than 3,895 local groups in more than 60 countries.<sup>42</sup>

Human Rights Now! was also a signal moment in raising awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More than a million copies of the Declaration were distributed at the concerts and in December 1988 Franca Sciuto and Ian Martin presented the Human Rights Now! petition to United Nations Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar with more than 3 million signatures from more than 130 countries.<sup>43</sup> The sheer number of concert spectators and petition signatories underscores the significant role of the Human Rights Now! campaign in the globalization of human rights talk, and the emergence of human rights, in the words of historian Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, "as the *doxa* of our time, belonging among those convictions of our society that are tacitly presumed to be self-evident truths and that define the space of the conceivable and utterable."<sup>44</sup>

If Human Rights Now! was a transformational moment for both Amnesty International and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the concerts' success also reflected the evolution of human rights in the United States over the course of the 1980s. A decade earlier, in the waning of the détente era, a surge of human rights activism had confronted fierce resistance from the Nixon and Ford administrations. Liberal internationalists castigated the White House for its support of repressive right-wing allies in the developing world while cold warriors denounced détente as thinly-veiled appeasement of Soviet totalitarianism. But for Secretary of State Henry M. Kissinger—whose tenure ran through both administrations—the benefits of anticommunist allies in the Third World outweighed the cost to American credibility of associating with unsavory regimes, and détente had the potential to decrease tension between the two superpowers. Jimmy Carter's victory in the 1976 presidential election underscored the extent to which Americans had shifted against the realist approach of the Nixon-Ford era, yet Carter's emphasis on non-interventionism, multilateralism, and human rights in U.S. foreign policy ultimately failed to forge a new

41. Robert Hilburn, "A Rousing Start For 'Human Rights' Tour," *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 1988, E1.

42. AI, *Amnesty International Report 1989* (London, 1989), 16.

43. AI, *Amnesty International Report 1989*, 15–16.

44. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, "Genealogies of Human Rights," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (New York, 2011), 1.

and durable foreign policy consensus, and, combined with a weak U.S. economy, set the stage for Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 election.<sup>45</sup>

At the outset of the 1980s, the Reagan campaign had lambasted Carter's human rights policy as defeatist and self-abasing. In the months following Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, the new administration quickly took steps to curtail Carter-era pressure on right-wing regimes with poor human rights records. By mid-decade, however, human rights had assumed a defining role in the Reagan administration's foreign policy approach. The Reagan team articulated human rights, however, in accordance with right-wing political and economic goals, casting human rights as anticommunism, free market economic policies, and democracy promotion. Social and economic rights, which had been championed throughout the Cold War by the communist world, and, in the 1960s and 1970s by many Third World nationalists, were intentionally excluded from the Reagan administration's human rights framework.<sup>46</sup>

As part of a broader "Morning Again in America" emphasis on national revival, the Reagan administration used human rights to make significant steps toward recreating the bipartisan Cold War consensus between the Executive and legislative branches that had foundered in the late 1960s amid domestic dissent over Vietnam. As such, Reagan's articulation of U.S. political rights and civil liberties as human rights was a far cry from many liberals' understanding of human rights in the 1970s as a way to "reclaim American virtue" after the American defeat in Vietnam.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the Reagan administration fashioned a distinct human rights vernacular that articulated Reagan's optimism and patriotism and was embedded in the administration's anti-communism and free-market fundamentalism.<sup>48</sup> As Reagan declared in his farewell address, in the 1980s, "we stood, again, for freedom. I know we always have, but in the past few years the world again—and in a way, we ourselves—rediscovered it."<sup>49</sup>

Amnesty International's benefit concerts were shaped by the Reagan administration's embrace of human rights. A sharp critic of the administration on issues such as the U.S. intervention in Central America, by the mid-1980s AIUSA was nonetheless operating on a political landscape in which the president was effectively using the bully pulpit to push a narrow human rights narrative into the mainstream. Like Reagan's articulation of rights, Amnesty International's concerts eschewed liberal guilt. Instead, the booming,

45. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*; Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow*; Umberto Tulli, "Whose Rights Are Human Rights?: The Ambiguous Emergence of Human Rights and the Demise of Kissingerism," *Cold War History* 12, no. 4 (2012): 573–93.

46. See William Michael Schmidli, "Recreating the Cold War Consensus: Democracy Promotion and the Crisis of American Hegemony," in *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion*, eds. Robert Pee and William Michael Schmidli (Cham, 2019), 75–92.

47. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*, 183.

48. On the concept of human rights vernaculars, see Bradley, *The World Reimagined*, 156–97.

49. Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation," January 11, 1989, *Reagan Foundation*, last accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/128652/farewell.pdf>.

adrenaline-infused stadium concert format fit perfectly with the glitzy consumerism of the Reagan era.<sup>50</sup> In a decade defined by the Reagan administration's melding of human rights into a rosy vision of American freedom, Amnesty's rock-tour format raised difficult questions regarding the "thinness" of human rights talk. During the Conspiracy of Hope tour, an undercurrent of criticism had questioned the depth of spectators' support for human rights activism. There was no doubt that the musicians added star-appeal to Amnesty's work. As one 16-year-old told journalist Robert Hilburn, "If U2 believes it is a good cause, then I believe it is a good cause, too. They talk about issues in their songs, but not in a preachy way."<sup>51</sup> But it was difficult to gauge the depth of such support—even the thinnest human rights message requires *some* knowledge of the issues. "The crowd tried to muster enthusiasm when various musicians alluded to helping eliminate human suffering and releasing political prisoners. But many in the audience seemed puzzled," Hilburn reported. "They didn't know if the artists were talking about releasing all prisoners—including bank robbers—or just some prisoners." Similarly, the *Washington Post* noted that although artists drew attention to human rights abuses in trouble spots like South Africa and Central America, "the audience—mostly white male teenagers and young adults—has traditionally been out of touch with those particular tunes."<sup>52</sup> At the Los Angeles concert, when Hilburn asked a group of teenagers to describe Amnesty International's work, one blithely responded, "Doesn't it help people who have lost their memory?"<sup>53</sup> Such responses called into question spectators' commitment to human rights activism. As Martin Lewis put it, "will the MTV generation's support be skin-deep?" A London record company publicist whose work with Amnesty started with *A Poke in the Eye*, Lewis wondered whether Conspiracy of Hope "can it be translated into something more substantial that demands continued commitment rather than donations?"<sup>54</sup>

Such doubts were brushed aside by the tour's supporters. "Contrary to cultural myths, rock and roll has always had a good deal more to do with self-determination and self-realization than with any form of rebellion," wrote Timothy White in an article titled "Freedom to Rock" and published in a slick booklet produced by Amnesty for the tour. Apparently unaware that self-determination had been excluded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, White, a former senior editor at *Rolling Stone*, cast rock music and

50. On American consumerism in the 1980s, see Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (New York, 2006); Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 204-24.

51. Robert Hilburn, "Amnesty Finds Friends Among Fans," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1986, I1

52. Richard Harrington, "Pop, Politics, and a Day in the Sun: Raising Voices for Amnesty International," *Washington Post*, June 16, 1986, C1.

53. Robert Hilburn, "Amnesty Tour: Keeping The Doors Open," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1986, R68.

54. Richard Harrington, "Rock for Rights: the Megaconcert for Amnesty International," *Washington Post*, June 15, 1986, B1

human rights as rooted in individual liberty.<sup>55</sup> “It’s a deeply felt musical expression of a curiosity about life and one’s place in it, a boundless seeking born and fuelled by the freedom to do so.”<sup>56</sup> More concretely, Healey emphasized that 1,000 high school groups working with Amnesty had formed as a result of the tour, and the number of university groups had doubled to 500.<sup>57</sup> He and other organizers emphasized that Amnesty—and human rights activism more broadly—would benefit in the long-term by connecting with young people. As participating musician Steve Van Zandt asserted, “Once your social consciousness is raised, there’s no going back. Once you are educated, you don’t become uneducated again.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet similar concerns dogged the Human Rights Now! concert series. When Healey proposed the initiative, Regional Liaison Officers (RLOs)—whose research and on-the-ground reporting was distilled into AI’s country reports and provided the evidentiary foundation for lobbying and campaigns—were adamant in their opposition. Eastern Europe specialists warned against a concert in Moscow given the Soviets’ hostility toward Amnesty, and emphasized that shows in Eastern Europe could be portrayed by the local authorities as “an example of ‘Western cultural Imperialism’ backed by the CIA etc.”<sup>59</sup> An Asia RLO dismissed the project as “directed to music lovers not HR [human rights] activists.”<sup>60</sup> The Latin Americas RLO team worried that in order to make the necessary preparations for a concert series, “other work would be seriously neglected” and argued that a concert series could backfire, since “AI could be interpreted as ‘foreign-based’, already a widespread assumption in the region.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the tour’s proposed venues also posed a problem. “Lastly, I do hope we won’t call it a World Rock Tour, when it isn’t going round the world,” one staffer wrote AI Secretary General Ian Martin. “I can’t imagine anything that shows up our parochial western bias more.”<sup>62</sup>

The harshest response came from the Africa Department. In an April 1987 meeting, there was a general agreement that a concert series “did not rank high

55. Bradley R. Simpson, “Self-Determination, Human Rights, and the End of Empire in the 1970s,” *Humanity* 4, no. 2 (2013): 239–60.

56. Timothy White, “Let Freedom Rock,” in the booklet, “A Conspiracy of Hope Tour: Concerts for Amnesty International 1986.”

57. Richard Harrington, “Rock for Rights.”

58. Robert Hilburn, “Amnesty’s Red-letter Final Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1986, H1.

59. AI correspondence, Hugh Poulton (Research Department EUR) to Øyvind Johnsen (AI Norwegian Section), “1988 Human Rights Concert Tour and East Europe (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia),” April 27, 1987, Folder 32, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

60. AI correspondence, Screeclata [?] (Asia RLO) to Øyvind Johnsen (AI Norwegian Section), May 5, 1987, “1988 HR Concert Tour,” Folder 32, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

61. AI correspondence, Sylvia Beales (Americas RLO Team) to Øyvind Johnsen (AI Norwegian Section), May 7, 1987, Folder 32, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

62. AI correspondence, Margorie [?] to Ian, “World Rock Tour: Moscow,” April 10, 1987, Folder 32, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

among the region's priorities," and specialists complained that "there appeared to be no clear rationale behind the project except for the fact that some musicians had offered their services." Others expressed concerns about "how universal a language rock music was in Africa, especially in those parts of the continent with a strong Muslim influence. There were a number of countries where it would be positively harmful to AI's work to promote itself in such a way." While open to the concept of using music to advance Amnesty's goals, the group concluded that such events "would work best on a purely African level, involving mainly African bands."<sup>63</sup>

Such concerns had merit. Although it is difficult to gauge, the evidence suggests that many, if not most spectators went for the bands, not because of a serious engagement with human rights. "You want the truth? I came for the music, though I believe in the cause," one spectator at Wembley Stadium admitted. "It's a good cause, but with those performers, I'd have come anyway," another fan asserted. "It's the concert of the year."<sup>64</sup> Such responses underscore historian Stephen Hopgood's emphasis on the importance of marketing, rather than a "transcendent commitment to 'humanity,'" in both the dramatic expansion of Amnesty's membership rolls and the emergence of human rights talk as a defining feature of the late twentieth century.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, given the limited commitment of many concert-goers, it seems plausible to suggest that Human Rights Now! was a milestone in the emergence of human rights "slacktivism": low-effort activism that would not take place if it required more effort.<sup>66</sup> The success of this brand of human rights diplomacy, in other words, was contingent upon concert-goers' understanding of human rights advocacy as embedded, in some way, in the act of having fun.

Even in Mendoza, where 15,000 Chileans celebrated the victory of the "No" vote against the brutal Pinochet dictatorship in the recent plebiscite, the crowd's commitment to human rights was debatable. "While the youthful crowd was definitely anti-Pinochet and pro-rock, it cannot be said that they were particularly committed to human rights," noted a U.S. Foreign Service Officer dispatched by the Embassy in Santiago to observe the concert. "Chilean writer and poet Ariel Dorfman took the stage prior to the penultimate act and gave a short speech on the atrocities which have occurred in Chile and attempted to read a poem on the subject. He could not be heard over the hoots of the youths who only wanted to see and hear the star attractions."<sup>67</sup>

63. AI memo, "Human Rights Concert Tour 1988," May 1988, Folder 32, Box 386, Folder AI Records, CUL; AI correspondence, Richard Carver (AI Africa Section) to Ian Martin (AI Secretary General), "Rock tour—Discussion in the Africa Region," April 14, 1987, Folder 32, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

64. Trucco, "77,000 in London Hear Rock Stars Make Music for Human Rights."

65. Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), 104.

66. Hopgood, 106; Dave, "Music and the Myth of Universality," 9.

67. Cable, U.S. Embassy (Santiago) to Department of State, "Mendoza Human Rights Concert Sounds Sour Note for Chilean Government."

The Harare concert offered a more disconcerting example of the limits of promoting human rights through popular music. In preparation for the show, the Zimbabwean government issued 20,000 visas to predominately-white South African concert-goers. Although the performers repeatedly emphasized an anti-Apartheid message, one journalist reported that at the end of the show, black students handing out the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “endure[d] insults from the homeward-bound South Africans ‘We don’t want that shit!’” The “sad truth” the journalist concluded, “is that the music and its thrills are all too disconnectable from the message.”<sup>68</sup>

Complicating matters was the malleable nature of human rights and the range of meanings attached to it during the tour. The headliner, Bruce Springsteen, was no stranger to social issues. Springsteen’s 1984 hit “Born in the U.S.A.,” as historians Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm have convincingly written, was “a critical examination and lament of the coming of age of post-New Deal working-class politics.”<sup>69</sup> Yet at the press conference prior to the London concert, Springsteen drew a tenuous connection between an album by the British rock band The Rolling Stones that he had purchased as a teenager and his later interest in human rights activism. “It was a little piece of plastic. But I found on that record a transcendent moment of freedom,” Springsteen told the assembled body of some 250 reporters. “I think that rock at its best . . . makes freedom. That’s what Amnesty International does. I’m here to help Amnesty do its job.”<sup>70</sup> Almost simultaneously with the Human Rights Now! press conference, Los Angeles Lakers coach Pat Riley was packing up after a basketball clinic at Wembley for British players and coaches. When reporters queried *him* on human rights, Riley echoed Springsteen—but with a basketball twist: “If there’s one thing that basketball expresses, it’s freedom and the freedom to play, which a lot of us take for granted.”<sup>71</sup> The rock star and the coach had a point: music and sports are certainly relatable to human rights; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, in addition to protecting the right to “participate in the cultural life of the community,” enshrined the “right to rest and leisure.”<sup>72</sup> But by defining human rights in relation to a nebulous notion of “freedom”—and linking freedom to having fun—Springsteen

68. Bryan Appleyard, “Anybody Understand Rock ‘n’ Roll?” *The Times* [London], October 15, 1988.

69. Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town: ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ Social History, and Working-Class Identity,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 353.

70. Edna Gundersen, “88 Amnesty Tour Hits the Road Today,” *USA Today*, September 3, 1988.

71. Trucco, “77,000 In London Hear Rock Stars Make Music for Human Rights.”

72. UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 10, 1948, 217 A (III), *United Nations*, last accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

and Riley's characterization of human rights seemed uncritical and overly simplistic, conflating human rights with a loosely-defined freedom of expression.<sup>73</sup>

The elasticity of human rights talk was stretched to absurdity by Peter Mensch, manager of the rock band Def Leppard. Jack Healey had invited Def Leppard to join the Human Rights Now! tour, but dropped the band from the roster after Springsteen agreed to come on board. Livid at Def Leppard's poor treatment, Mensch not only accused Healey of having "the spine of an eel" but complained that the band's *rights* were violated. Def Leppard, Mensch declared, had been "jerked around and treated like second-class—no make that *third-class* citizens—and handled as if we belonged in the back of the bus."<sup>74</sup>

The band members' hurt feelings aside, the episode—along with Springsteen and Riley's comments—illuminated the possibility that amid the hype surrounding the concert series, human rights risked trivialization. In the 1970s, Amnesty International had pioneered the use of direct testimonials by victims of human rights abuses in its human rights reporting. "Individual consciousness, lived experience, moral witness, and a testimonial turn," writes Mark Philip Bradley, "became the keywords for activists of this era and began to reshape the contours of global politics and morality."<sup>75</sup> The performers who donated their time to the Conspiracy of Hope and Human Rights Now! tours were positioned in a similar manner; their on-stage testimonials underscored the importance of Amnesty's work and the urgency of advancing the human rights cause. Yet unlike the victims whose voices peppered AI's human rights reports in the previous decade, the performers could claim the mantle of moral witness almost exclusively on the popularity of their music; their appeals on behalf of human rights, in other words, were inextricably linked to their status as rock-stars.

Moreover, in the months following the success of the Conspiracy of Hope tour the proliferation of benefit concerts in the 1980s had continued apace. Such events included sequels to the original Farm Aid concert, benefits for victims of a British ferry disaster and the unemployed in Ireland, concerts organized by the environmental activism organization Greenpeace, AIDS benefit events, Artists Against Apartheid, and a concert honouring Nelson Mandela's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>76</sup> As with other benefit concerts, Human Rights Now! raised the question of whether the performers were primarily seeking self-gratification and popular praise rather than acting out of truly altruistic motives. It was a point that Mike Mitchell, an organizer of the Live Aid Concerts, had made in 1985. "None of this has anything to do with Africa. It was our souls that were at risk, not theirs," Mitchell told a reporter. "They will go on doing what they do, and they will ultimately save themselves or not. But if we don't reach out, we've lost

73. On human rights as freedom of expression, see Dave, "Music and the Myth of Universality," 5.

74. Italics original. Patrick Goldstein, "Amnesty Concert Turns Def Ear toward Leppard," *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1988, K78.

75. Bradley, *The World Reimagined*, 137.

76. Harrington, "Rock and Rights."

our humanism. We've lost caring."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, although Live Aid raised some \$70 million for famine relief in Ethiopia, the concerts subsequently faced stiff criticism for failing to account for the political factors that led to the crisis in the first place: Ethiopian socialist leader Mengistu Haile Mariam's rapid nationalization of land and collectivization of agriculture, which created, as historian Odd Arne Westad writes, "a famine that never needed to have happened."<sup>78</sup>

Yet it would be overly reductive to chalk up the participation of the performers in Human Rights Now! to the sort of benefit event that the British musician John Lennon had derided at the outset of the 1980s as "an absolute ripoff, but ... makes the artist look good."<sup>79</sup> To his credit, Springsteen appears to have increasingly recognized over the course of the tour the importance of a more nuanced human rights knowledge. On the Human Rights Now! tour, he recalled in a recent memoir: "We had to do a full press conference in *every* country and we needed to know in detail the human rights issues in each. Trying not to look like the dilettante that I was, I studied like I hadn't since Sister Theresa Mary stood over me, ruler in hand, at St. Rose grammar school."<sup>80</sup> A few weeks after the London episode, reporters in Brazil asked Springsteen how the tour had affected his thinking on U.S. foreign policy. His response was a far cry from his earlier fast-and-loose association between rights and rock. "I have been thinking about the role of the CIA in the world, about its role in the support of the Somozas and the Pinochets of the world," Springsteen said. Deriding U.S. foreign policy as "very provincial," he concluded expansively, "I would like to see more [U.S. government] support for national liberation movements around the world."<sup>81</sup>

Yet Springsteen's most important contribution to Human Rights Now! may well have been less cerebral. "I've been an active member of Amnesty International USA and a volunteer leader for more than half my life and it all started at the Human Rights Now! Tour in Philly in 1988," Paul Paz y Miño recalled in a recent essay. For Paz y Miño, Springsteen's rendition of Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom," in Philadelphia's John F. Kennedy Stadium was transformative. "It was a powerful moment—as we all raised our voices to join

77. Dick Polman, "Rock's Latest Role: Let's Get Political," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 19, 1988, 1.

78. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005), 277. On the initial criticism of Live Aid, see "Live Aid: the Terrible Truth," *Spin*, July 1986, last accessed April 4, 2021, reprinted at <https://www.spin.com/featured/live-aid-the-terrible-truth-ethiopia-bob-geldof-feature>; and Steve Coll, "Live Aid and the Swirl of Criticism," *Washington Post*, November 22, 1985.

79. David Sheff, *All We Are Saying: The Last Major Interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono* (New York, 2001), 80.

80. Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York, 2016), 353–354.

81. "'The Boss' Laments U.S. Involvement in 1973 Chile Coup," *United Press International*, October 11, 1988. For a broader assessment of Springsteen and human rights, see David Thurmaier, "'The Country We Carry in Our Hearts is Waiting': Bruce Springsteen, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the Search for Human Rights in America," in *Popular Music and Human Rights*, vol. 1, 143–55.

them, we all knew we were also making the commitment to raise our voices against injustice.”<sup>82</sup> Paz y Miño’s experience underscored the power of popular music to convey a thin-yet-powerful human rights message. As music scholar John Street writes, “music has the capacity to make us do and feel things we would not otherwise” and with an “immediacy and directness.”<sup>83</sup>

Similarly, at the Budapest concert Springsteen’s rock anthems received an ecstatic affirmation from a capacity crowd of 81,000. Widely covered in the Hungarian media, the New Jersey native’s booming performance—and the concert in general—revealed the yearning among many young Eastern Europeans for the perceived freedoms of western consumer culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, living standards had declined in the Eastern Bloc while access to Western media and contacts increased. Eastern Europeans’ “sense of deprivation was exacerbated in large part because the provision of a Western-inspired individualist consumerism had been promoted as the future—and as a plank of regimes’ legitimacy—since the early 1960s,” write historians James Mark et al. “This policy in effect served to further glorify the seemingly abundant Western capitalist consumer world in the 1980s, whilst making it ever clearer that Eastern European states could not compete on this terrain.”<sup>84</sup> Popular music was a flashpoint on the broader political landscape and in the late 1980s Western rock had enormous appeal among young Eastern Europeans.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, although the Budapest concert also included influential Hungarian performers whose politically-inflected music had been banned under the communist government, including László Földes of the Hobo Blues Band, and János Bródy, formerly of the band Illés, Springsteen received top billing. Spectators from across Eastern Europe attended the concert, “virtually indistinguishable in their T-shirts and jeans,” noted one observer, “from rock fans in England and America.”<sup>86</sup> Showcasing the appeal of Western consumer culture, the concert illuminated a bipolar order that was crumbling, and, as tens of thousands of concert-goers enthusiastically sang along as Springsteen belted out “Born in the U.S.A.,” made a small yet not insignificant contribution to its demise.<sup>87</sup>

If Springsteen’s understanding of human rights evolved during the tour, Peter Gabriel and Sting had deeper ties to Amnesty, and at each concert, the

82. Paul Paz y Miño, “An Activist Remembers the Concert that Moved a Generation,” *AI, Human Rights Now Blog*, January 24, 2014, *Amnesty USA*, last accessed August 16 2018, <https://blog.amnestyusa.org/music-and-the-arts/an-activist-remembers-the-concert-that-moved-a-generation/>.

83. Street, *Music and Politics*, 173

84. James Mark et al., 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe* (New York, 2019), 49.

85. On the significance of Western rock music in the Soviet Bloc, see Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York, 1990), 3; Jolanta Pekacz, “Did Rock Smash the Wall? The Role of Rock in Political Transition” *Popular Music* 13, no. 1 (1994): 41-49; Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York, 1994).

86. Henke, *Human Rights Now!*, 54-56.

87. “Amnesty Rock Tour Performs in Budapest,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1988, C21.

artists used the spotlight to make human rights claims. Having visited war-torn Nicaragua the previous year, Peter Gabriel regularly dedicated his song “Games Without Frontiers” to “the 40,000 needless casualties” of the Contra War “who failed to have their human rights protected.”<sup>88</sup> In India, Gabriel told the crowd of mostly middle- and upper-class fans, “No more caste system. No more untouchables.”<sup>89</sup> And at the press conference in Brazil, Sting provocatively challenged the authorities to arrest him for bringing attention to the destruction of the Amazon and then invited Raoni Metuktire, a Brazilian environmentalist and leader of the indigenous Kayapó, onto the stage during the performance.<sup>90</sup> Such advocacy was ephemeral to be sure, but not insignificant given the sheer number of spectators and rapt media attention. It could also lead to a deeper engagement with human rights: in 1989, for example, Sting would co-found (with Franca Sciuto) the Rainforest Fund, a non-profit organization aimed at protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.<sup>91</sup>

More substantively, the Zimbabwe concert was, in effect, a massive protest against South Africa's apartheid system. Onlookers surmised that many of the 20,000 South Africans who attended the concert had never been in such close proximity to non-whites. As one Zimbabwean pointedly told a journalist, “the big thing about apartheid is that it works.”<sup>92</sup> With such a unique audience, Tafataona P. Mahoso, director of the national arts council of Zimbabwe offered a powerful welcoming address. “We are . . . using this moment to demonstrate unity of two histories—the history of struggle against European fascism which led to the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the history of the struggle that is going on in Southern Africa today,” Mahoso told the crowd.<sup>93</sup> Predictably, the concert's high point was Gabriel's performance of “Biko,” a eulogy to the black South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko who died in police custody in 1977. Banned in South Africa, Gabriel's rendition for Human Rights Now! was illegally broadcast on the radio across the nation.<sup>94</sup>

The power of the Human Rights Now! concert in Zimbabwe was the tailoring of the message—Mahoso's address combined with Gabriel's tribute—in a concert only a short drive from the South Africa border. Similarly, in Mendoza,

88. Spencer Bright, *Peter Gabriel: An Authorized Biography* (London, 1999), 184–187; Lloyd Grove, “Hollywood Invades Nicaragua,” *Washington Post*, August 20, 1987; quote from James Henke, “Chimes of Freedom,” *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1988.

89. “Stars Take Rock Tour to India,” *UPI*, October 1, 1988.

90. “Rock Star Sting Challenges Brazil over Amazon Destruction,” *Reuters*, October 11, 1988; Henke, *Human Rights Now!*, 136; “Brazil's Amazon Chief Raoni Tapped for 2020 Nobel Peace Prize Nomination,” *Reuters*, September 14, 2019.

91. Rainforest Fund, “Who We Are,” *Rainforest Fund*, last accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.rainforestfund.org/who-we-are/>.

92. Appleyard, “Anybody Understand Rock 'n' Roll?”

93. AI cable, Press and Publications to Human Rights Now. Coordinator, “Human Rights Now. Dispatch No. 13,” September 27, 1988, Folder 20, Box 372, AI Records, CUL.

94. Appleyard, “Anybody Understand Rock 'n' Roll?”

Sting's powerful protest song "They Dance Alone (Guenca Solo)" reflected the artist's awareness of human rights abuses in neighboring Chile. Commemorating women activists who protested the murder of loved ones by the military government, the song took direct aim at the Chilean dictatorship: "Hey Mr. Pinochet/ You've sown a bitter crop/ It's foreign money that supports you/ One day the money's going to stop/ No wages for your torturers/ No budget for your guns/ Can you think of your own mother/ Dancin' with her invisible son."<sup>95</sup> Banned under Pinochet, Sting's rendition of "They Dance Alone" at Mendoza had special significance for the 15,000 Chileans in attendance. Adding to the effect, Sting invited a group of the women activists to join him onstage, wearing their trademark white scarves with photos of the missing. Combining authentic moral witnesses and Sting's star-appeal, it was a solemn and powerful moment in an otherwise boisterous concert; as one observer noted, "The audience was almost perfectly silent during this song (a great contrast to the norm) and improvised torches were burned."<sup>96</sup>



Moments such as Sting and the Chilean activists dancing onstage at Mendoza illuminated the potential of the Human Rights Now! concert series to fuse local human rights concerns with the broader claims of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet not all rights were treated equally. The nature of the tour, and particularly Amnesty's association with Reebok, reinforced an emphasis on individual and political rights; social and economic rights, on the other hand, were subtly sidelined.

The decision to solicit financial backing from Reebok was purely pragmatic. Except for \$250,000 in seed money from AIUSA, Healey and the IEC had agreed that no funding would come from Amnesty International. Early estimates placed the total expenses at nearly \$18 million, and although the artists would be donating their time and the foundation could expect significant returns from ticket revenue, merchandizing, and television distribution rights, Healey's staff estimated that they would still confront a \$10 million deficit. Put simply, the concerts in the developing world were the problem, since ticket prices, as an AI memo noted, "particularly in third world locations should be fixed so as to make the concert widely accessible."<sup>97</sup> Concert-goers paying roughly \$36 per ticket in North America and Western Europe would subsidize tickets selling for as little as a dollar in venues such as Delhi, making it impossible for Human Rights Now! to break even.<sup>98</sup> As one Foundation member later

95. Sting, "They Dance Alone (Guenca Solo)" *Sting*, last accessed August 21, 2018, <https://www.sting.com/discography/lyrics/lyric/ltr/all/song/253>.

96. Cable, U.S. Embassy (Santiago) to Department of State, "Mendoza Human Rights Concert Sounds Sour Note for Chilean Government."

97. AI memo, "Human rights Awareness Project: Circular No. 1," July 29, 1987, Folder 21, Box 386, AI Records, CUL.

98. John Swenson, "Human rights now! Tour Comes to U.S.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 1, 1988, p. 2.

recalled, “it became clear that the only way to finance the tour would involve some form of corporate support.”<sup>99</sup>

It was a difficult decision in light of Amnesty’s traditional antipathy toward corporate funding. Healey himself was deeply conflicted. “It was very hard for me to come to terms with that,” he later asserted. “I’ve never worked for a corporation. I’ve never wanted to. I’m deeply suspicious of them.”<sup>100</sup> But the bottom-line figures compelled the Concerts Foundation to reach out to potential sponsors. The options were slim: other than the soft drink giant Pepsi, the only serious interest came from the athletic footwear company Reebok International Ltd. And whereas Pepsi offered \$750,000, Reebok proposed underwriting the entire concert series with a \$2 million advance and a guarantee of up to \$10 million. It was an offer that Healey and his associates felt they could not refuse. “On balance, with the artists and the momentum we already had, it seemed clear that we were better off doing the tour with Reebok than not doing the tour at all,” a Concerts Foundation follow-up memo noted, “and that was the choice we were faced with.”<sup>101</sup>

Reebok’s sponsorship, however, precipitated serious difficulties between the various stakeholders in Amnesty International. After initially authorizing the Concerts Foundation to negotiate the terms of the Reebok’s sponsorship, the IEC-run Policy Committee clumsily entered into the deliberations, confusing Reebok over who was actually in charge of planning Human Rights Now! and delaying the process. Such actions placed considerable strain on Healey and his staff. As the Concerts Foundation follow-up memo gently put it, “There was tremendous ambivalence in AI over the world tour project that was almost fatal at times.”<sup>102</sup>

Yet concerns over the implications of the Reebok deal were warranted. Reebok had grown tremendously over the previous half-decade, a period, noted one journalist, “where seemingly everything, planned and unplanned, had the Midas touch.”<sup>103</sup> Net sales leaped from \$299 million in 1985 to \$846 million in 1986, and, with nearly 12,000 U.S. retailers, Reebok claimed to be the market leader for athletic footwear in the United States.<sup>104</sup> Reebok’s interest in underwriting the Human Rights Now! tour stemmed from a perception that the company’s ethos—captured by its new advertising slogan “Reeboks let U B U”—dovetailed with the individual and political rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “The common theme,” between Reebok and

99. AI Memo, “The Human Rights Now! World Tour: A Study in International Decision-Making.”

100. Henke, *Human Rights Now!*, 16.

101. AI Memo, “The Human Rights Now! World Tour: A Study in International Decision-Making.”

102. AI Memo, “The Human Rights Now! World Tour: A Study in International Decision-Making.”

103. Kristen Simon, “Reebok: at the Crossroads,” *Sportstyle*, February 22, 1988.

104. Fax message, Angel Martinez (Reebok International, Ltd.) to Jamie Radner (Concerts Foundation) January 6, 1988, Folder 2, Box 391, AI Records, CUL; Reebok Annual Report, 1986, Folder 28, Box 387, AI Records, CUL.

human rights, C. Joseph LaBonte, Reebok president and chief operating officer told the press, is “freedom of expression, and of lifestyle.”<sup>105</sup> The former president of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, LaBonte portrayed Reebok’s support for Human Rights Now!, along with the establishment of an annual Reebok Human Rights Award, as a courageous decision demonstrating that the company’s ethics trumped its bottom line.<sup>106</sup> “Some say it’s risky for a multi-national company like ours to get involved with human rights issues,” he declared. “But we owe a lot to young people and we are responding to Amnesty’s conviction that individuals can work together to make the Universal Declaration more than just a piece of paper.”<sup>107</sup> This was not just public relations boilerplate; the corporation’s “overall goals” according to an internal memo, included establishing Reebok “as a leading example of a company with a conscience.”<sup>108</sup>

In addition to the ethical concerns underpinning Reebok’s support for Human Rights Now! the company anticipated that sponsoring the tour would be good for business. Amnesty’s efforts to be politically neutral—aimed at avoiding bias in its reporting of human rights violations—appealed to the Reebok’s commercial sensibilities. As LaBonte told the press, Reebok was attracted to Amnesty since it “had never done anything aligned to any constituency.”<sup>109</sup> More importantly, Reebok gambled that sponsoring the concert tour would enhance its products’ appeal to potential consumers in a way that traditional advertising could not; as Reebok Vice President of Marketing Angel Martinez wrote to Jack Healey, “Our hope is that we can create and develop a feeling of mutual dedication to this cause and that *our products* will be incorporated into the very life of this fantastic undertaking.”<sup>110</sup> Indeed, Reebok initially envisioned sponsoring Human Rights Now! as its entire 1988 advertising program.<sup>111</sup>

Sponsorship, however, came with strings attached. In early 1988, Martinez sent Healey a blizzard of requests: inquiring if the performers would attend press conferences to identify Reebok’s sponsorship of the tour; asking for the right to create “public service announcements” showcasing the artists and underscoring Reebok’s financial support; requesting performers’ attendance at Reebok hospitality parties; and asking for a group photo of the artists for mailers, print media advertisements, tee shirts, and a poster that would be sent to all 12,000 Reebok retailers. Thinking

105. John Schwartz, “Wing-tip Rock and Roll,” *Newsweek*, September 29, 1988.

106. Nancy Rivera Brooks, “LeBonte Resigns as President of Reebok,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1989; “Human Rights Now! World Concert Tour: Reebok Media Plan” July 15, 1988, Folder 14, Box 391, AI Records, CUL; Pamphlet, Reebok Human Rights Award 1988, Folder 29, Box 387, AI Records, CUL.

107. “Human Rights Now!,” Folder 14, Box 372, AI Records, CUL.

108. “Human Rights Now! World Concert Tour: Reebok Media Plan,” Folder 14, Box 391, AI Records, CUL.

109. Schwartz, “Wing-tip Rock and Roll.”

110. Italics added. Official correspondence, Angel Martinez to Jack Healey and Jamie Radner, January 6, 1988, Folder 16, Box 391, AI Records, CUL.

111. Official correspondence, Angel Martinez to Jack Healey and Jamie Radner, January 6, 1988.

big, Martinez envisioned Reebok piggybacking on human rights to reach a huge captive audience by sending pamphlets on human rights—with the Reebok logo—to U.S. grade schools, high schools, and colleges. Correspondingly, he hoped to capitalize on popular stars like Springsteen, Gabriel, and Sting wearing Reebok gear. Dividing the performers into “A” and “B” lists, Martinez wrote “we would be very happy if 25% of the time the A list were wearing our apparel. This would not be just onstage, but perhaps at all engagements, press conferences, embarcations [sic] in connection with the tour and of course, anything filmed in relation to the tour. . . . In general, we would like participants to wear Reebok apparel 75% of the time at non-concert engagements.” Apparel produced by Reebok’s competitors, Martinez hastened to add, should not “appear in anything related to this tour—but this seems obvious.”<sup>112</sup>

Subsequent negotiations with Healey and the Concerts Foundation resulted in a lower-profile for Reebok than Martinez had envisioned. Yet at every concert, the stage was festooned with a sign reading “Made Possible by the Reebok Foundation” and Reebok sponsorship was printed on tour promotional items like T-shirts.<sup>113</sup> Critics were unimpressed. At Montreal’s Olympic Stadium, journalist Don MacPherson noted two giant inflatable shoes with Reebok’s trademark striping on either side of the stage. The tour, he concluded, was a vehicle for “blatant shilling.”<sup>114</sup>

Reebok’s sponsorship of the tour *was* aimed at both expanding its market share in the U.S. and aggressively expanding into new markets overseas. Indeed, as the company’s 1986 annual report pointed out, late twentieth century processes of globalization offered new possibilities for growth. “Worldwide, Reebok today seeks to capitalize on an increasing trend toward a global retailing market,” the report read. With brand appeal rapidly expanding beyond national borders “the beginnings of global advertising and marketing strategies are now evident. A company such as Reebok, with a growing reputation and a record of innovation in advertising and promotion, is well positioned to benefit from globalization.”<sup>115</sup>

If globalization had the potential for untold opportunities, there were potential pitfalls as well. As Reebok’s annual report made clear, “with many cultures and different athletic pursuits around the world, the [marketing] Division faces a complex marketing challenge.”<sup>116</sup> The universality of human rights offered a Reebok a unique framework for navigating global diversity and snapping up market shares overseas. By sponsoring Human Rights Now!, Reebok hoped that, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the company’s footwear

112. Fax message, Angel Martinez to Jamie Radner, January 6, 1988, Folder 2, Box 391, AI Records, CUL.

113. Bruce Horowitz, “Reebok Walks Marketing Tightrope with Human Rights Concert,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1988.

114. Don MacPherson, “Commercial Ring Lent a False note to Rights Concert,” *The Gazette* [Montreal], September 20, 1988, B3.

115. Reebok Annual Report, 1986.

116. Reebok Annual Report, 1986.

would be increasingly perceived across the globe as transcending cultural differences through universal appeal and applicability.

Reebok's sponsorship of Human Rights Now!, combined with the rock concert-format and the performers' articulations of human rights, contributed to a tour that advanced a decidedly narrow vision of human rights. Although the concerts were ostensibly aimed at raising awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in reality, individual and political rights took center stage; social and economic rights were left outside of the spotlight. Reebok's financial backing—along with frequent associations between freedom and Western rock music—infused the concerts' human rights message with a market logic. In this sense, Human Rights Now! contributed to what historian Emily Rosenberg has described as the proliferation of “mass consumer imaginaries” in the late Cold War era—while making a small but not insignificant contribution to conditioning possible alternatives.<sup>117</sup>

Reebok's bid to increase its global market share by sponsoring Human Rights Now! was largely a failure. Facing stiff competition led by Nike, the company's earnings had fallen by one-fifth by the end of 1988. By Human Rights Now!'s first anniversary, both LaBonte and top marketing executive Mark R. Goldston had resigned.<sup>118</sup> But the significance of the company's effort to harness corporate social responsibility to ethical consumer choice outlasted the concert series; indeed, Reebok's Human Rights Now! campaign can be understood as a precursor to the more recent development of “philanthrocapitalism.” As historian Andrew Jones writes, “as philanthrocapitalism inherently works to legitimise capitalism by presenting it as a progressive and constructive force, it also appears to represent another stage in an ongoing depoliticisation of global welfare issues.”<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, the possibility that Human Rights Now! might advance a message that was less-than-universal was not lost on the tour's organizers; indeed, among other places, the tour intentionally avoided the Middle East, since, as Franca Sciuto candidly told a journalist, “They have a different culture, and rock music might not be the best way to mobilize people there.”<sup>120</sup>

Amnesty International's human rights concerts thus left a significant, yet ambiguous, legacy. The emphasis on individual rights and civil liberties and the

117. Emily S. Rosenberg, “Consumer Capitalism and the End of the Cold War,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. III, eds. Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn Leffler (New York, 2010), 503.

118. Douglas C. McGill, “Nike is Bounding Past Reebok,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1989; Barbara Carton and Mary Sit, “Reebok Shuffles to Stay in the Race,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 1989; Company Profile: Reebok International Ltd., *Reference for Business*, last accessed August 28, 2018 <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/history2/87/Reebok-International-Ltd.html>.

119. Andrew Jones, “Band Aid Revisited: Humanitarianism, Consumption and Philanthropy in the 1980s,” *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (2017): 203.

120. Quote in Terry Trucco, “Rockers to Tour for Rights,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1988.

market logic that underpinned the initiative revealed the shaping power of the Reagan administration's articulation of human rights as rooted in anti-communism, democracy promotion, and free-market fundamentalism. And as the Cold War drew to a sudden—and largely peaceful—end less than a year after the final Human Rights Now! concert, U.S.-led political and economic liberalization seemed unstoppable. “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere,” Bill Clinton declared in his 1994 State of the Union address. Sounding distinctly Reagan-esque, the president continued, “Democracies don't attack each other, they make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy.”<sup>121</sup>

Yet it would be unfair to entirely dismiss the Human Rights Now! tour as simply a capitalist wolf in human rights activist's clothing. Having touched the lives of millions across the globe, the concerts unquestionably served as a springboard for raising human rights awareness. Thin human rights messages are often consequential. Human Rights Now! offered many such messages, whose significance can only be partially reconstructed: moments such as Peter Gabriel's “Biko” in Harare, Sting's “They Dance Alone” in Mendoza, and Springsteen emphatically fusing rights and rock in Budapest. And if the tour was underpinned by Reebok's market logic, it could also subvert it, as Tracy Chapman's renditions of “Talkin' 'bout a Revolution” made clear: “They're talkin' 'bout a revolution / ... Poor people gonna rise up / And take what's theirs.”<sup>122</sup> Finally, if Human Rights Now! contributed to the emergence of human rights slacktivism, it could also foster human rights activism. Springsteen's “Chimes of Freedom” at John F. Kennedy Stadium was life-changing for Paul Paz y Miño, who went on to become AIUSA's Colombia Country Specialist. “The promise I made that night,” he concluded, “is one that stays with me to this day and one I still strive to live up to.”<sup>123</sup>

121. Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 25, 1994, *Miller Center*, last accessed April 4, 2021, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-25-1994-state-union-address>.

122. Tracy Chapman, “Talkin'bout a Revolution,” *Electra*, 1988, *Genius*, last accessed April 4, 2021, <https://genius.com/Tracy-chapman-talking-bout-a-revolution-lyrics>.

123. Paul Paz y Miño, “An Activist Remembers the Concert that Moved a Generation,” *AI, Human Rights Now Blog*, January 24, 2014, last accessed August 16, 2018, <https://blog.amnestyusa.org/music-and-the-arts/an-activist-remembers-the-concert-that-moved-a-generation/>.