

Is That It? Bob Geldof. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986, 352 pages, £11.99 hard.

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With the possible exception of Mother Teresa, Bob Geldof is the most practical, as well as the most effective, humanitarian of this century. Geldof's autobiography, *Is That It?*, provides some insight into the great mystery: how one individual, invested with no political power, allied with no great organization, and connected to no government, managed to triumph over the forces of greed, cynicism, chauvinism, bureaucratic red tape, and the often petty but formidable jealousies of international politics. Geldof's life is no longer separable from his heroic efforts on behalf of famine relief in Africa, especially the Live Aid concert, billed by *Rolling Stone* as "The Day The World Rocked," and certainly the most spectacular media event to this day. This scruffy, controversial lead singer of The Boomtown Rats generally had a reputation for being anti-establishment, if not anti-social—a punk anarchist whose antics and lyrics struck recklessly in every direction: hardly a likely candidate to mastermind what was at one and the same time the biggest live television event ever and a monument to human compassion.

Geldof, however, had displayed the same perseverance and stubborn will with The Boomtown Rats that characterized his famine relief efforts. In fact, the world of Rock and Roll politics, as portrayed in *Is That It?*, is remarkably similar to the world of international politics. Attempting to bring fame and fortune to the Rats, Geldof fought the same forces—albeit on a small scale—that he struggled with to bring forth Band Aid, Live Aid, Sport Aid, Self Aid, and their offspring. Geldof is a master of publicity; he marshalled the forces of the media as few people have ever been able to do (and not so coincidentally, the epiphanical moment moving him to action was a BBC report on the Ethiopian famine). The book chronicles Geldof's accelerating ability to generate publicity; he exhibited a remarkable understanding of the media even before he decided to become a rock musician.

Strangely, though, this man who must certainly be among the greatest contemporary heroes has failed to generate the tremendous celebrity one would expect in an era when a moment in the spotlight can send a face reflecting through the media as through a hall of mirrors. *Is That It?* helps to explain this strange disparity between Geldof's massive achievement and his relatively meager fame. While his honesty often removed obstacles to famine aid, it clearly made many people wary of Geldof. It is an honest book: intriguing, literate, wide-ranging, mercilessly frank. The frankness will come as no surprise to fans of The Boomtown Rats. Geldof's genius and his honesty have been inextricable from the outset; his desire for success, for a broader audience, have repeatedly conflicted with his refusal to compromise. This is not to imply that Geldof, a proven master of mediation, can never be conciliatory. However, when it comes to his art, it is clear that he does not have it in his nature to make concessions to mediocrity.

Witness, for example, Geldof's effort to make *In the Long Grass*, the final Rats' album, a success. When a Columbia executive balked at "Dave," perhaps the best and most moving song on the LP (because Geldof was "singing emotionally to another guy" and "faggots don't sell records") Geldof managed a masterpiece of re-creation for the American release. The lyrics of "Rain" are, in their way, as haunting as those of "Dave," and the melody remains the same. The incident is representative of the odd circumstances surrounding Geldof. It is, after all, strange that Columbia did not mobilize its publicity forces in the wake of Band Aid and Live Aid, playing off international events to make The Rats one of its major acts. Instead, it was rather the reverse. The Boomtown Rats are no longer together, and Bob Geldof is no longer with Columbia Records. Why? Perhaps because Geldof is a special threat. Here, after all, is a performer who unselfishly competed with his own burgeoning hit, "Dave," on the European hit parade, doing all he could to make "Don't They Know It's Christmas" a big seller. Here, too, is the individual who pleaded, cajoled, and shamed performers, executives, even governments into forgoing profits in the interests of saving lives. Band Aid was, as Geldof was perceptive enough to realize, a "subversive phenomenon": aid without conditions. It was subversive, too, as a BBC commentator noted, in that it took power from politicians and put it in the hands of ordinary people. Record company executives doubtless came to the same conclusion the Roman Empire reached nearly 2000 years ago—saints are much more dangerous than sinners: especially to profits.

"Back home the press were starting to call me, cynically at first, then half seriously, St. Bob. At first I was pissed off, but then I found it ludicrous, rather than offensive, given the sort of person I knew I was." Geldof never backs off; he neither pretends embarrassment in matters such as his own canonization nor does he hide behind humility (the worst form of ego, according to Lenny Bruce). In fact, Geldof engages all issues. He anticipates his friends as well as his critics. He is literate, imaginative, educated, and entertaining. *Is That It?* is a remarkable book which, even if Band Aid and Live Aid had never taken place, would deserve to be read. It provides insights into the works and days of a contemporary rock musician, and it just as revealingly scrutinizes the influences that work like worms in vinegar upon Irish youth. Geldof's relationship to Catholicism, for example, is examined and re-examined. "I actively disliked the church and its institutionalized morality, which I felt bedeviled Ireland," Geldof writes. Yet he is open-minded and notes that the priests he met in Africa were "great, pragmatic men driven by a sense of responsibility towards others. I felt humbled by them." Neither his admiration for these men nor his esteem for the practical and effective Mother Teresa tempers his remarks: "Psychologically the Church seeks to own you from the day you are born . . . It is a system of control and, of course, I hated it." And "Guilt is the heritage of all Catholics." Geldof can, at one and the same time, admire the religious impulse and characterize the Catholic faith as voodoo that continues "to work its magic" even after it has been rejected.

The friction between young Bob Geldof and the Catholic Church—especially the priests who were his teachers—is emblematic of the relationship between Geldof and institutions throughout his life: from the British Empire to Columbia Records. Geldof displays a remarkable, and brave, ability to strip away the various accretions such as religious belief, political affiliation, business associations, or nationality and deal with individuals. His affectionate regard for Prince Charles and Princess Diana, for example, would seem to be at odds both with his Irish heritage and his disdain for elitist conclaves. Perhaps the most frequent attack against Geldof was his willingness to "shake hands with the devil" in order to help people. Indeed, the attacks continue—*SPIN*, in its September 1986 issue, accuses Geldof of "ignoring" the fact that the Ethiopian government is killing its own people. But it is a fact about which Geldof has obviously

thought long and hard.

Readers of *Is That It?* will be rewarded with an extended and cogent argument for shaking hands with the devil by Geldof, in which he recounts discussions with Ethiopian government officials. Geldof attempts to deal with such people on a personal level, because he believes "what makes them tick is the key to which way the country will go." He obviously has no illusions concerning the anti-humanitarian actions of these individuals; he is genuinely convinced that more suffering can be alleviated by dealing with them than by ignoring them or denouncing them. Geldof is by no stretch of the imagination politically naive. Professional politicians—such as Margaret Thatcher—have learned this lesson painfully. Geldof has been criticized for extending aid as long as resettlement continues. Again, though, Geldof insists upon aid without conditions. As he notes, the EEC has extracted a promise that resettlement will be ended in exchange for EEC aid: "If you believe that, you'll believe anything. If they stop it it's because they no longer need it and if they don't want to stop it they won't."

Is That It? is by no means a boring account of the logistics of Band Aid or Live Aid. It is a very entertaining and moving autobiography by a very entertaining and perceptive artist. The book is loaded with telling anecdotes that entertain as they enlighten. Illustrating the importance of understanding moral systems other than our own, for example, Geldof recounts the story of "Joe," whose failure to comprehend the mores of his Thailand Bar Girl lover leads to the amputation of his penis. She inserts it in a bag of ice, calls the hospital, and informs him that he has one hour to have it reattached. And while Geldof objectively recounts his constant childhood battles with his father, his father's influence is clear. His father's quixotic conduct when sailing—crossing the path of the mailboat and shouting that steam must make way for sail, knowing the mailboat would ignore this rule of navigation—mirrors Geldof's own contempt for authority which ignores its own rules when they become inconvenient.

Geldof masterfully selects incidents that serve as fascinating, open-ended metaphors. He tells for example of President Eamon De Valera's appearance at Blackrock College. De Valera was a hero of Ireland's fight for Independence against the British, and was thus a powerful symbol of Irish patriotism. "The priests emerged first, followed by De Valera, a tall, frail and almost blind man then in his nineties, helped by his ADC. The band struck up the national anthem and De Valera, unsure of his bearings and tottering slightly behind the upright priests, turned around and faced the wall, standing to attention. No one noticed that he was standing the wrong way, except the assembled boys, who were stifling their hysterics. There he stood, inches from the white wall, his back to the band, as the national anthem played on. Could be that he did it on purpose."

Observations frequently seem apothegm. "The only real sin is wasting time," Geldof declares (but he also insists that he doesn't believe in the work ethic, that neither a person's value nor dignity should have anything to do with his or her work). Or, "rock music is one of the great twentieth-century art forms, not least because of its internationalism, its ability to transcend the artificial barriers of language and frontiers and speak instinctively to the whole world in a way that other sorts of music have never quite done." Live Aid demonstrated the truth of this observation. Yet, recounting the incident which inspired "I Don't Like Mondays," schoolgirl Brenda Spencer gunning down her schoolmates in San Diego, he declares: "Pop music is so terribly unimportant." Pop music is a tool; it can generate happiness, money, international understanding or—as at Altamont—it can produce disaster. Geldof's wisdom is that he perpetually qualifies his declarations. He is never afraid to reconsider his own position.

Thus he can write: "I am not a great believer in notions of coincidence, serendipity, synchronicity and all the other rag, tag and bobtail of karmic law, but some things seemed too easy." He then proceeds to recount the coincidence, serendipity,

synchronicity and sheer good luck involved in crystallizing Band Aid. Perhaps the most admirable quality of this book, as well as Geldof's most admirable quality, is the willingness to say the unsayable. Geldof made Band Aid and Live Aid work because he was able and willing to say things politicians and professional relief workers either could not or would not say. When Geldof met Margaret Thatcher, for example, he did not merely accept her congratulations on his famine work with an "aw shucks, thank you m'am." Rather he used the opportunity to confront her in front of the television cameras concerning the spending of 10 million pounds to dispose of surplus EEC butter, butter which could save lives in Ethiopia. When Thatcher, tiring of Geldof's probing questions, finally snapped, "It's not as simple as that," Geldof answered back, "No. Prime Minister, nothing is as simple as dying."

His refusal to be cowed by the movers and shakers of the world, and his propensity for blunt speech have made him a hero in his native Ireland. During the Self Aid concert in Dublin last May, Geldof made his final appearance with the Boomtown Rats. The concert was everywhere—piped into restaurants, on the TV's of pubs which were not normally predisposed to playing rock and roll music, in the lounges of sedate bed and breakfast establishments. Self Aid united the generations for one evening, but clearly they had been united on Bob Geldof for quite some time. And their admiration was not only for Geldof's work as a humanitarian, but his role as spokesperson to the powerful. There was a widespread feeling that Geldof could tell the world leaders what they needed to be told, and that he was somehow the spokesperson of the powerless. Geldof recounts the phenomenon of being trusted, of constantly being slipped money by cab drivers, pedestrians, people in pubs—frequently returning at night with £500 in his pockets—and of being advised "You tell them, Bob, you tell them like it is. About time somebody did, I wish I could get the chance."

Ultimately, this book is impossible to categorize, just as it is impossible to convey its broad appeal. Geldof has, after all, an amazingly wide experience from which to draw. He has seen poverty in Calcutta, Bangkok, and Ethiopia. Yet he has dined with Prime Ministers and Princes. He has been used by the world of pop music, but he also has shown how this indifferent and artificial world can be used in the interests of basic human compassion. He has been a movie star, a rock star, a journalist, an entrepreneur, a rebellious student, a language teacher in Spain, the first white honored by the Congressional Black Caucus, an honorary Knight of Commander of the British Empire, one of the great organizers in human history, a talented—even superb—lyricist. He has known utter loneliness and rejection as well as world-wide admiration and a global constituency. He has cried at the image of a starving child on television and has told quibbling political leaders to "fuck off back to school." Geldof analyzes himself as carefully as he analyzes the various social strata through which he has moved. His mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage when he was six, and Geldof admits to feeling a sense of loss even today. Her death was pivotal; it contributed heavily to his rebellious nature and to the vicious father-son battles he chronicles unflinchingly. Typically, Geldof analyzes what he chronicles, and he understands and explains his father's behavior as well as he does his own. Though the empathetic reader may suffer discomfort because of Geldof's frankness, ultimately it is chief among the book's many virtues. Geldof felt that one of the achievements of Live Aid was the memory it left of "one day of decency in a tawdry world." His frankness helps make the reader's impression of *Is That It?* one of decency as well.

Among a great many other things, the reader has learned, at the end of *Is That It?*, that appearances notwithstanding, it was no accident that this scruffy rock singer manipulated rock stars, journalists, politicians, businessmen, and fans into making the world rock for humanity on one day of decency. Various readers may approach *Is That*

It? differently: as a psychological document it is remarkable, but it is no less remarkable for its sociological and political insights. It will entertain and titillate rock fans who search its pages for bits of information about their favorites. It will satisfy the literati who appreciate the artistry of narrative carefully crafted. In the tradition of Irish works, it will probably have something to aggravate most readers. It is an excellent book about a brilliant individual, and finally it is a straightforward anthem to human decency.