



Handout 5 - Tom Morello on Sun City

Tom Morello Remembers Little Steven's 'Sun City,' the Song that Changed the World

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Thirty years ago this week, an odd conglomerate of hip-hop, rock and jazz artists led by Steven Van Zandt came together on the *Sun City* album, featuring a title track that, one could argue, actually had a part in changing the world.

Back then, all-star fund-raising songs and albums were something of a trend in popular music. Bob Geldof of the Boomtown Rats organized some of the U.K.'s biggest superstars on Band Aid's



“Do They Know It’s Christmas?” Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie then followed with a similar stateside effort: USA For Africa’s “We Are The World.” Bryan Adams rallied his fellow Canadians on the Northern Lights song “Tears Are Not Enough” and Ronnie James Dio even got heavy metal into the charity game via Hear N Aid’s “Stars.”

All of those songs had good intentions, and were intended to appeal to the sympathy of people who lived relatively fortunate lives. The hope was that those people would contribute money to help those who are less fortunate, and in that, they were successful, raising tens of millions of dollars.

So, in late 1985, when Little Steven Van Zandt unleashed the “Sun City” single and album upon the world, billed to Artists United Against Apartheid, it was a much different proposition. “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” asked you to “Say a prayer and pray for the other ones” who are less fortunate. That’s easy to swallow, and easy to remove yourself from: they are, after all, the “other ones.” “There won’t be snow in Africa this Christmastime,” they sang. “The greatest gift they’ll get this year is life.”



“We Are The World” implored listeners to take some action: “We can’t go on pretending day-by-day/That someone, somewhere will soon make a change/We are all part of God’s great big family/And the truth, you know, love is all we need.” A nice sentiment, and like “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” it raised lots of money for a good cause.

In both cases, Americans could remove politics from the situation. Perhaps a draught or famine was the reason for the suffering that these people are experiencing.

But “Sun City” was rallying against the evil and unjust actions of human beings. “Relocation to a phony homeland! Separation of families, I don’t understand!” the song boomed. “Twenty-three million can’t vote ’cause they’re black! We’re stabbing our brothers and our sisters in the back!” This song wasn’t just asking people to donate money.

The song’s ambition and purpose was to inform Americans that apartheid was still very much in effect in Africa, and that this was something that Americans should be very angry about. In many cases, we were learning what apartheid actually was through this song. And “Sun City” also pointed out that our government didn’t seem too bothered about it: “Our government tells us, we’re doing all we can/Constructive engagement is Ronald Reagan’s plan/Meanwhile people are dying and giving up hope/This quiet diplomacy ain’t nothing but a joke!”

“Sun City” didn’t have the commercial appeal of “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” or “We Are The World,” because it was much angrier. Feel-good songs weren’t supposed to call a sitting president to task. Also, it incorporated a new art form known as hip-hop, which didn’t go down with many rock fans. This wasn’t easy listening.

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Among the music fans that paid close attention to the song was guitar god Tom Morello, who would later combine rock and hip-hop with political lyrics in Rage Against the Machine, and later Street Sweeper Social Club.

“It’s a song that changed the world,” he tells *Radio.com*. “It’s a song that put the spotlight on the horrors of apartheid, and helped broadcast them around the planet in a way that was so geniusly done by Little Steven, by making a collaborative record, the likes of which the world had never seen before. Miles Davis, Joey Ramone, Run-D.M.C. and Bruce Springsteen: all on one track!”

Morello says that “Sun City” was very effective in its goal to raise awareness of apartheid. “One of the levers that ended apartheid was the international sanctions. And those sanctions were helped to be put in place by public opinion. And the public was moved by a number of things. One of those things was that song.”



Three years ago at a tribute to Van Zandt organized by Little Kids Rock, Morello performed “Sun City,” which he prefaced with an impassioned speech. “Sun City was a melatonin free pleasure paradise in the midst of abject poverty and repression in South Africa, which held big payday concerts for western artists,” he said from the stage. “Little Steven led Artists Against Apartheid in a world wide boycott of Sun City and bravely supported Nelson Mandela, who President Reagan routinely referred to as a ‘terrorist!’ The song itself was an irrefutable jam that featured perhaps the most revolutionary gathering of artists ever heard on a recording. It was an inspired song, an inspired video, and it inspired American youth, who were part of the global movement that actually pressured apartheid out of existence. It was literally a song that changed the world.”

And like the best folk songs, the lyrics can be adapted to new situations: Morello updated it for 2012 show singing, “The Mexican border is far away/but people on both sides are human, no matter what they say! You can’t buy me, I don’t care what you pay! Don’t ask me, Arizona, cause I’m not gonna play!”

A few years later, Morello and Van Zandt were temporary bandmates, when Bruce Springsteen invited the Rage guitarist to join the E Street Band on tour. One night on the tour, he performed that song alongside the man who wrote it, in a rather significant setting.

“We played that with Bruce in Johannesburg, South Africa, and it was very moving to rock that song there.” During that tour, Morello suggested covers of songs by AC/DC and Van Halen that the band ended up performing on stage. But he says that everyone was simpatico about putting “Sun City” into the set.

“That was a unanimous decision. All of the E Street affiliates can make suggestions, but only Bruce Springsteen decides what we’re going to play! But that was one that I think everybody was excited about doing.” In the spirit of the original song, they were joined onstage for that performance by one of hip-hop’s greatest MCs, Mos Def.

Three decades after its release, “Sun City” may not have attained the status in our culture of its more well known and easily digestible cousins “We Are The World” or “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” But its legacy may be a more important one. As Morello says, “That is a song that is on a very short list. There are songs that inspire change, but there aren’t many songs that create change, and that is one of them.”