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COMMENT: From BandAid to Dapper Laughs - charity songs are all about hitting the right tone

[Dr Lee Barron](#), Principal Lecturer, Media & Communications Design, discusses the charity record and its place in our culture

The charity song is an odd thing. Generally composed with the simple intent of raising money for a cause, the musical quality of the thing somehow falls by the wayside. In the charts, it's an anomaly, and they certainly prompt strong opinions.

November has been the month of the charity song. Bob Geldof and Midge Ure have announced Band Aid 30, the third recording of the ultimate charity song Do They Know It's Christmas?, this time to raise money for those countries afflicted with Ebola.

And then there's Danny O'Reilly's version of the charity single. This is the man more commonly known as Dapper Laughs, who kicked up a media storm for making a series of deeply offensive comments about women and the homeless. ITV have just dropped his "laddish" comedy show [Dapper Laughs: On the Pull](#). He had attempted to salvage some sense of propriety after his comments about the homeless by offering royalty donations to the charity Shelter for a song called A Walk To The Pub... With A Tramp. For some reason, [Shelter didn't want his money](#).

These are poles apart in terms of tone but both have proved contentious.

Band Aid set the tone

The original Do They Know It's Christmas? was produced in 1984. The inspiration for the Boomtown Rats and Ultravox vocalists to write it was provided by stark televised images of starving people in drought-torn Africa. The idea was to raise money to provide food for the starving: to use music to save lives.

The original Band Aid. [retrolandusa](#), [CC BY-NC](#)

Band Aid brought together stellar pop artists, such as Paul McCartney, David Bowie, Bono, George Michael, Boy George and Sting. The song reached #1 for Christmas 1984 and ultimately sold more than three million copies. Royalties all went towards famine relief. [Whatever you think about the song itself](#), it demonstrated the potential to which pop music could focus public attention and galvanise charitable giving on an enormous scale. It was a potent example of what celebrity power could achieve and was the defining moment in which rock stars definitively entered into the political arena.

And so they wheeled it out again in 2004 to raise money for food aid for Darfur, recruiting a new generation of stars such as Dido, Chris Martin, Robbie Williams, Busted, and Dizzee Rascal. And now we're at the third new release. Bono's still around, and the new pantheon of chart-friendly and critically-acclaimed stars with considerable fan bases consists of One Direction, Bastille, Elbow, Sam Smith, Ellie Goulding, Paloma Faith, and Adele.

Pop politics

Pop stars entering the realm of politics is not something that has been universally endorsed. There are the issues of self-publicity to the power relation of affluent millionaire Western celebrities helping the “powerless” Southern world, to the undeniably mawkish quality of the song’s lyrics.



Ure and Geldof with their 1984 Ivor Novello Awards for the Band Aid single.
PA/PA Archive

Nevertheless, the fusion of pop talent with a cause that seeks to directly alleviate human suffering has, over the course of 30 years, chimed with the public and dramatically displayed the social benefits that can result from music recorded for charitable purposes (with the added impetus of the Christmas giving spirit being emotively invoked).

While the 2014 iteration of Do They Know It’s Christmas? will unquestionably be successful. It has top stars and a worthy cause. But the banner of charity is not a guarantor of success, nor is it a means by which controversy can be sidestepped, as Dapper Laughs discovered. Shelter rejected O’Reilly’s royalties due to the album’s trivialisation of homelessness. The song is offensive, and so inappropriate as a source of charitable income.

Tone deaf

O’Reilly is not alone in attempting to buffer censure through charitable giving. DJ Mike Read discovered this with his [UKIP Calypso song](#). The song contained anti-EU and immigration references and was sung in a Caribbean accent. It was supposed to share profits with the British Red Cross and its


Ebola campaign. The charity stated that it could not accept money from the song due to its political allegiance to a particular party and its references to asylum seekers.



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

Band Aid is not safe from similar complaints. Writing in the Guardian, [Bim Adewunmi railed against it](#), calling it “clumsy, patronising and wrong in so many ways”. And she has a point. Charitable giving cannot override negative perceptions, as Dapper Laughs has learned.

But Band Aid 30, whatever the complaints, offers the chance to re-ignite the spirit of 1984 for a new generation of pop fans with a new generation of pop star. It will connect with a humanitarian cause, tap into the fervent fandom that surrounds acts such as One Direction and Sam Smith and cancel out any residual cynicism. But perhaps it’s time for a new song? If it was pitch-perfect, who knows what new success we could see.



Lee Barron does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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