

A GOOD MAN IN AFRICA

by Roger Beaumont.



"We had shown that Edmund Burke was right when he said, 'Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little,' " - Sir Bob Geldof

There are some who can talk the talk and others who can walk the walk, but there are precious few who can tell it like it really is and get things done.

Rock singer and activist Bob Geldof had a reputation for having a big mouth and a dangerous quality long before most of the world had ever heard of him.

His organisation of the Band Aid record and Live Aid concerts in 1985 certainly changed that. A total of £70 million was raised for famine relief - still the most money raised for charity by a single event.

When asked if he'd forgotten James Joyce's dictum that to succeed an Irishman needs three things: silence, cunning, and exile, he replied: "No I hadn't, but as I'm Irish I have a highly defined sense of the ridiculous."

Bob Geldof is certainly not given to linguistic economy. One of the latest press cuttings describes him as a "hectoring, self-promoting yob". But those who know him says he is friendly and impeccably mannered. The only yobbish side to him is his language, which is absolutely filthy. Most of his comments about Robert Mugabe could not be reported in any newspaper.

"My personal opinion is that Robert Mugabe is a murderous tyrant," Geldof told Sky News. "He's embarked on a campaign of state terror and famine in a bid to wipe out the opposition. I think it's up to the African leaders to come out and call the shots. Mugabe has to be called for what he is - a tyrant. You people should be demanding that Mugabe steps down. I don't care where he goes. He can join Idi Amin in Saudi Arabia, he can join the ghetto of tyrants, but get him out of there.

"Most African governments are absolutely useless, absolutely f***ing pathetic, without the asterisks. African leaders need to get a f***ing grip to win the West's confidence and to save the continent from resembling the wastelands of Mad Max."

Geldof and the U2 singer Bono have established a lobbying group called Data, which seeks to shame Western governments into writing off Third World debt - and to fight Aids.

Shortly before Geldof's visit to Ethiopia last month, they met Tony Blair at Downing Street. "Mr Blair has a great passion on Africa and we want to turn that passion into cash. We have faith he will do the right thing," said Bono, but conceded that Geldof had not been as positive about the meeting as he was. "He's a bleak, pessimistic Irish bastard and I love him."

Geldof, 51, is well aware that celebrity activism can look silly. "We're a pair of stropky Irishmen, though Bono's much smoother than me and very sharp. I'm just a half-assed pop singer," he said. "At least Bono is a full-on rock star."

Maybe, but Geldof knows how to cut through the bull.

Geldof dismissed suggestions that he had exaggerated Ethiopia's current crisis. What's more, Aids, rather than famine, is becoming Ethiopia's nightmare. An estimated one quarter of Addis Ababa's population is HIV positive, and the levels in rural areas are rising sharply. He met Meseret Tadesse, a ten-year-old Aids orphan who is one of three million people in Ethiopia infected with the virus.

"This is a disgrace. I am a father and have a ten-year-old daughter. This girl wants to be a doctor when she grows up. Instead she will die within a year."

"I have not come here crying wolf," said Geldof. "Everyone's desperate not to use the F-word - by which I mean famine."

He's enraged that Africa's poor still go hungry while the West produces food surpluses - but is also critical of Africa itself. "African leaders should be more accountable, less corrupt. Almost to a man,

they are hopeless. Would you vote for any of them? They are feckless and incompetent."

Just like our lot, really.

About 13 million people in Ethiopia are currently dependent on food aid in a drought crisis made worse by HIV/Aids. Geldof is adamant that the EU is the greater villain for delivering just a small fraction of Ethiopia's staple needs and refusing, unlike the US and Britain, to supply any supplementary foods, such as oil, which give a balanced diet.

"The EU have been pathetic and appalling, and I thought we had dealt with that 20 years ago when the electorate of our countries said never again," he said. Warning that the "horror of the 80s" could return, he added: "The last time I spoke to the EU's aid people, they didn't even know where their own ships were. The food is there, get it here."

"I'm not a bleeding heart, I'm not an optimist. I'm not even a pacifist. I'm a pragmatist, this is doable," he said. "So let's do it."

Geldof is phenomenally well informed, fluent and passionate and denounces the incompetence that continues to allow people to starve.

At the end of his five day journey, officials from the World Bank, IMF and aid agencies packed the Hilton hotel to be roasted by the Irishman: "You're supposed to help Ethiopia, that's your job. I don't think dialogue is always constructive; it can be an excuse for inaction. I'm used to the sophistication of your arguments, but f**** that. It's sophistry." Whatever you may think of the man, there is something magnificent about his anger.



Available through www.thainews.com.au