

August 13, 2006

Into Africa

By [ALEX WILLIAMS](#)

AS the house lights dim for the second act of each performance of Madonna's "Confessions" tour, the singer, wearing a crown of thorns, begins her 1986 anthem, "Live to Tell," while her body hangs in mock crucifixion on a cross glittering with the mirrored tiles of a disco ball.

Madonna has been riffing on crucifix imagery for two decades. What hauls the entire tableau vivant into the present are the images flickering behind her on screens: close-ups of African children, staring with mournful eyes, superimposed over crackling flames and a running ticker, which tallies at 12 million the number of children orphaned by AIDS in Africa.

That Madonna should suddenly be casting an ice-blue eye toward Africa should hardly be surprising. After all, she has always known how to spot a trend.

And much as it may strain the limits of good taste to say it, Africa — rife with disease, famine, poverty and civil war — is suddenly "hot."

Beginning early in the decade with a trickle of celebrity fact-finding missions to strife-torn sub-Saharan nations ([Bono](#) in Ghana, Bono everywhere) that became a torrent within the last couple of years (Clay Aiken in Uganda, Jessica Simpson in Kenya), Africa has now been embraced by the masses.

Those who work with or study Africa-related causes report that tourism in many African countries is way up, that students are increasingly choosing to study and volunteer there, and that money is pouring into Africa-centric charities — from grassroots efforts organized at churches and suburban dinner parties across the country, to larger aid organizations. Even among hipsters, clothing decorated with the image of Africa is beginning to replace last season's Che Guevara T-shirts.

"There is new life in the movement now," said Lisa Szarkowski, spokeswoman for [Unicef](#) USA, who noted that Africa had been suffering from donor fatigue for years before celebrities like Bono began stumping for Third World debt relief and Angelina Jolie, who recently had a child in Namibia, helped renew interest. Now, there's "more conversation, more possibility," she said. "There is a lot of momentum."

Those newly interested in the continent have been motivated by different atrocities. For some it has been the genocide in Darfur; for others, AIDS orphans. But regardless of anyone's specific interest, most people consistently describe being attracted by what they see as a clarity — both political and moral — in Africa's problems.

“I ask myself, ‘Why Africa?’ Why am I not motivated by Iran or something,” said Genevieve Parker, a 17-year-old student at the Potomac School in McLean, Va., who just returned from a summer trip to Ethiopia where she helped install pipes for an irrigation system. “It’s just because I don’t understand what’s going on: who are the good people, who are the bad?”

In Africa, Ms. Parker said: “there are a lot of problems, but you can group them in together. I can organize Africa in my head, in terms of poverty, droughts, even governments.”

And for many, at a time when the United States is divided into red and blue, for and against, cease-fire and bombs away, the seemingly unambiguous nature of Africa’s needs can be unifying.

Daniel Millenson, a Brandeis University sophomore who is a leader of the Sudan Divestment Task Force, a nationwide movement aimed at persuading universities, governments and corporations to stop doing business with Sudan until the genocide there ends, said that Africa-related issues — famine, genocide, disease — don’t polarize people the way subjects like, say, the Iraq war does.

“The issue is very popular because it can attract people from both sides, whether they support the war in Iraq or not,” Mr. Millenson said. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the movement to divest from Sudan is one of the most active movements on college campuses in at least 20 years.

Still, why all the interest now? Yes, celebrities probably deserve much of the credit, but the bridge from Hollywood to Africa was constructed long before Angelina Jolie was born. Danny Kaye was running off to Africa for Unicef as far back as the Eisenhower years, and Bob Geldof pointed legions of superstars toward Africa in 1985 with his Live Aid concerts.

Some Africa experts believe that the continent could be benefiting from an American public that is antsy to feel its goodness and influence, yet is simultaneously feeling itself shunned around much of the rest of the world.

William Easterly, a professor of economics at [New York University](#) and author of the recent book “*The White Man’s Burden: How the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*,” sees Africa as filling a sort of existential vacuum for Americans struggling in a post-Sept. 11 world.

“We had this sudden awareness that there were all these people out there who hated us, and we needed people who, as far as we know, don’t hate us, and are in great need and we can help,” Professor Easterly said. “It’s the perfect meeting of needs — an intersection where we need Africa and Africa needs us.”

Regardless of the exact reasons why Americans are responding, say educators, philanthropists, and activists, there is little doubt that the current burst of interest in Africa is markedly different from those of the past. Rarely, they say, has the popular interest in Africa spanned so many different issues and countries and inspired so many different people to take action.

“Africa issues in the 80’s were usually concentrated on one country,” said Una Osili, an associate

professor of economics and philanthropic studies at [Indiana University](#) who grew up in Nigeria. “Live Aid was concentrated around one issue — famine relief. Now, multiple issues are being addressed: HIV/AIDS, Darfur, the ongoing issue of poverty.” The focus now is regional, she said, “multi-country.”

In terms of financial giving to the continent, no agency keeps track of every dollar directed there, though “it would be very safe to say it is going up,” said Carol Adelman, director of the Center on Global Prosperity, at the Hudson Institute in Washington.

The fact that dollar-wielding Bills — Clinton and Gates — are on the loose, traveling to support their foundations, doesn’t hurt.

Individually, many smaller charities say they are experiencing unprecedented generosity. “The response to our outreach has been dramatically improving — it’s risen fivefold” in the past few years, said Paul Newell, a director in the New York office of the Ubuntu Education Fund, which helps South Africans.

A recent celebrity-dotted fund-raiser at the Puck Building in Manhattan featuring Kevin Bacon as the master of ceremonies — [Donna Karan](#) and Iman attended — blew past its initial fund-raising target by 50 percent, to raise \$600,000, Mr. Newell said.

And people are being inspired to start small charities of their own. In June, for example, 125 people, who in another time might have been content to mail Halloween pennies to Unicef, banded together at a Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., restaurant and held a silent auction to raise money (\$30,000) for a hospital in Tanzania.

“To build a hospital, the tangible evidence of where your money is going is very satisfying,” said Susan Konig, an organizer of the event. She added, “It was not some amorphous thing, but a tangible cinderblock building where in Tanzania people can get their eyes checked, receive AIDS medication, they can get pregnancy care.”

The new Africa benefactors also want to experience Africa first-hand, educators and tourist officials say. Over the last few years, tourism among Americans is up in Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia and South Africa, according to national tourist boards and embassies for those countries. From 2003 to 2005, travel to Kenya doubled to 73,000, and is up nearly 16 percent so far this year. American visitors to South Africa leaped to 233,000 in 2005, from 170,000 in 2001.

As for students, James Ellis, the director of international relations for the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, also noted a marked increase in Americans coming to study at the university in recent years, and sees a shift in their motives. In the 90’s they came out of curiosity to catch a glimpse of post-apartheid South Africa. Now, he said, they come and tutor children and build housing. “They want,” Dr. Ellis said, to “have a sense of ‘we’ve left something, we’ve done something.’ ”

Similarly, parishioners at Christ Presbyterian Church in Madison, Wis., not only raised \$200,000

for Rwanda in five months, but last fall sent seven missionaries there to assist the poor — one of them Ellen Murdoch, 58, who said she was moved to action after renting the 2004 movie “Hotel Rwanda” on DVD.

But where does all the good will leave Africa? When it comes to celebrity interest, it’s not hard to find cynics, especially since rarely does a day go by that some Page Six personalities are not draping themselves in some African cause — [Jay-Z](#) on clean water, Gwyneth Paltrow on aid to children, and Lucy Liu on AIDS.

Michael Musto, the Village Voice celebrity columnist, dismisses the current interest in Africa as merely the cause-of-the-moment among A-listers and charities.

“Celebrities,” Mr. Musto said, “have added a glamorous patina to it.” And to themselves, he said, especially if they need a little good press, like Lindsay Lohan, who has suffered through a year of rough tabloid treatment for her party-girl ways and has vowed to visit Kenya in support of the One Campaign.

And Paul Theroux, a writer who served in the [Peace Corps](#) in Africa in the ’60’s, cautioned against ennobling oneself through grandiose gestures there in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times last December.

“Because Africa seems unfinished and so different from the rest of the world, a landscape on which a person can sketch a new personality, it attracts mythomaniacs,” he wrote, arguing that Africa needs to cultivate its own saviors.

But, said Morgan Binswanger, a former liaison between performers and philanthropies for Creative Artists Agency in Los Angeles: “There’s self-interest and there’s enlightened self-interest, and the fringe between the two is gray. I think those that step forward and really carry out enlightened self-interest move an agenda.”

Alyssa Milano certainly hopes that is true. The actress, who toured civil-war-torn Angola in 2003 (and strayed into an active minefield, without incident), said Africa is one way celebrities can transform an unprecedented level of scrutiny into their lives into something productive.

Don Cheadle, the star of “Hotel Rwanda,” declined to pass judgment on whether Africa had indeed become a self-serving celebrity fad, now that even the youngest stars like Ms. Lohan are getting serious about it.

But, Mr. Cheadle said he feels that celebrities can have an impact: “People in Rwanda told me personally that the movie had a huge impact. They said people always used to come to see the gorillas and now they’re coming just out of interest in Rwanda itself.”

The larger question is whether soccer moms and flyover people will continue to care about Africa once the celebrities move on. As Mr. Musto said, “Just like a trendy restaurant lasts 18 month, so will interest in Africa.”

Paula Schwartz contributed reporting for this article.

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