Celebrities Must Encourage Actions to End Apartheid

By RON WILKINS

The Unity in Action Network and the Patrice Lumumba Coalition have made the United Nations cultural boycott of South Africa the primary focus of their work against the oppressive apartheid state.

Elombe Brath, chairman of the coalition and founder of the network, wrote in 1982 that we have a duty to "make our artists accept responsibility along with their popularity."

A year later, Unity in Action's Los Angeles chapter expanded on that point in a position paper, saying "for better or for worse, the media has turned our leaders into celebrities and celebrities into leaders.

"What is said and done by selected Black artists and athletes is always prime-time news. But leadership is not just another 'starring role' or 'starting position.'

"Rather, it is an awesome responsibility. On camera and on stage, celebrities who are sincerely dedicated to the just struggle in South Africa must encourage decisive and continuous action by fans and colleagues in the campaign to eliminate apartheid."

Although those comments were directed toward black artists and athletes, sensitivity to oppression and a sense of social responsibility are human values to which personalities of all races should aspire.

As for the network's role and responsibility, we would like to quote Barbara Masekela, secretary of the African National Congress' Department of Arts and Culture:

"No consideration of the cultural boycott that looks away from the daily occurrences in the streets of South Africa, the daily struggle and sacrifice, of any consequence.

"The cultural boycott is no rigid theoretical discourse. It is a practical political exercise that must be designed to aid and abet the initiatives of our patriots against the scourge of racist economic exploitation.

"It is a question of choosing to betray or support our struggle for national liberation."

Unity in Action has discovered picketing to be a potent and effective tool in implementing the cultural boycott. Demonstrations are undertaken only when behind the scenes attempts to gain an artist's compliance have failed.

"Adverse pre-performance publicity associating an artist with the horror of apartheid has, at times, been sufficient to draw a pledge to honor the boycott. In one case, such publicity resulted in the cancellation of a concert.

"Artists the network has picketed include Frank Sinatra, Millie Jackson, Danniebelle Hall, Linda Ronstadt, Ray Charles, Tina Turner, Shirley Bassey, Julio Iglesias, Dolly Parton and Nikki Giovanni. Of this group, only Charles, Ronstadt and Giovanni have not signed pledges to support the boycott."

Unity in Action in Los Angeles has received pledges to support the cultural boycott from the Temptations, Barry Manilow, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, Shelley Berman, Tina Turner, Pia Zadora, the Osmonds, Buddy DeFranco, Terry Gibbs, Tom Jones and Richard Roundtree.

The network has obtained pledges in the New York area from such past offenders as James Moody, Brook Benton, Stephanie Mills, Lou Donaldson, Andre Crouch and the Main Ingredient.

"Success has not come easily or without the cooperation of other organizations committed to the cultural isolation of South Africa. Many artists have eventually come to terms only after sustained region-by-region picketing."

Along with implementing the cultural boycott in the Los Angeles area, the network has exposed South African propaganda films such as The Gods Must Be Crazy and the 10-hour television miniseries Shaka Zulu.

Many artists have demonstrated their abhorrence of apartheid through their work. Actor-producer Robert Hooks has struggled with errant colleagues privately and publicly in an effort to gain their compliance.

In Los Angeles, octogenarian actress Frances Williams, Watts Towers Arts Center director John Outterbridge and C. Bernard Jackson, director of the Inner-City Cultural Center, have been unstinting in their support of the boycott.

Unity in Action in Los Angeles recently spearheaded efforts resulting in an agreement with the Cannon Group, Inc. that the film company and its subsidiaries "will cease doing any business whatsoever in or with apartheid South Africa until apartheid is dismantled and a free, democratic government is established."

A June article in Hollywood's Daily Variety indicated that Cannon, more than any other film company, has been responsible for either "shooting" or "picking up" the nearly 20 films shot in South Africa and Namibia in the last two years.

"A resistance culture was born long ago in South Africa when the forebears of the martyred Solomon Mahlangu were driven from the land that was their birthright and denied the fruit of their labor."

"In the often limited arsenal of the oppressed, culture can prove to be a powerful weapon. The combined force of the culture of resistance and the cultural boycott are pushing apartheid perilously closer to its ultimate destruction.

NOTE!!
Unity In Action & the Patrice Lumumba Coalition would like to express our appreciation to ACCENT/LA for reprinting this paper. Correction: the 2 org.s., UTA & PLC, "have made the U.N. Cultural Boycott..."a" rather than "the" primary focus of their work."