

# TIBETAN FREEDOM CONCERT

## Building Movements Through Cultural Organizing Case study: The Tibetan Freedom Concerts

The Tibetan Freedom Concerts were a series of concerts in the 1990s designed by artists + activists to be a new kind of benefit event that organizers called a message concert (intended to raise awareness rather than money). The concerts combined the ability of musicians to convene, inspire and engage new audiences—particularly young people—with the strategy of activists who knew the historic power of young people to make change, and how to create engagement sequences that could build and mobilize a movement to exert pressure on international agents. In this way, the concerts were a true partnership in building a movement around the music.



### Tibetan Freedom Concerts Facts

- Brought together over 325,000 people from 1996 to 1999, with a worldwide audience of over 6 million.
- Grew audience engagement in the concert's call-to-action from 30% in the first year, to over 80% by 1998.
- Raised over \$5 million dollars for the Milarepa Fund's education, outreach, and grant-making programs.
- Created some of the world's first online broadcasts, attracting over 5 million people to view the events from their computers.
- Involved over 120 performers; many are still engaged in the Tibet movement throughout the world.

- Brought unprecedented, international media coverage and attention to Tibet's plights and its nonviolent struggle for freedom.
- Organized by the Milarepa Fund, a nonprofit founded by Erin Potts & the Beastie Boys.

But the successes of the Tibetan Freedom Concerts aren't just to be seen in balance sheets and Pollstar statistics. The Concert organizers developed innovative on-site engagement and education techniques with the criteria that all attendees would leave the concerts knowing something about Tibet and with opportunities for ongoing involvement.

The response to these efforts was measured in high-rates of participation in on-site petition signing (i.e.: 80% of 122,000 concert-goers in 1998), astonishing growth in grassroots and chapter membership and evidence of concert-goers becoming dedicated activists who committed to extensive leadership and organizing training. For the organizers, these are some of the important results that they are proudest of:

- ⇒ Students For A Free Tibet (SFT), a student chapter organization and the activist partner of the Milarepa Fund during all of the concerts, grew from approximately 30 U.S. based chapters before the first concert to 300 in the three months following (and that was during summer break!).

Today, SFT has over 650 active chapters in over 35 countries. Many of SFT's current leadership first heard of Tibet through the Tibetan Freedom Concerts. Because Milarepa and SFT early on initiated a training program where many of these concerned concertgoers were able to learn nonviolent civil disobedience and other activist tools, a high percentage of these new supporters have become what we call high-risk activists— personally sacrificing more than other student and youth activists in their support of Tibet.

- ⇒ In 2000, the Milarepa Fund and Students for a Free Tibet, in partnership with other Tibet support groups and environmental organizations, prevented the World Bank from using taxpayers' money to fund a resettlement project that would have legitimized China's population transfer policy in Tibet. This campaign mobilized and organized thousands of concertgoers, politicians, musicians and the general public. It was the first time in World Bank history that the World Bank had ever cancelled a project due to public pressure.
- ⇒ Through the concerts, Milarepa and SFT also campaigned against British Petroleum's involvement in a Tibet pipeline project in partnership with PetroChina, the main operating subsidiary of China's state-owned oil industry. The high-profile nature of this campaign attracted the support of over \$6.75 Billion dollars in investments for a shareholders' resolution.

The campaign also cost PetroChina – and therefore the Chinese Government - over \$7 billion in investments during its IPO.

⇒ The Concerts also brought critical awareness to the campaigns for the release of numerous Tibetan political prisoners. A dozen of the political prisoners that were highlighted at the Tibetan Freedom Concerts have been released, including the Fullbright awarded ethnomusicologist, Ngwang Choepel.

## **Tibetan Freedom Concerts at a Glance**

### **San Francisco**

Polo Fields, Golden Gate Park  
June 13th & 14th 1996  
\$800 000 raised  
100,000 Attendees

The Smashing Pumpkins, Foo Fighters, Chaksam-pa, Beastie Boys, A Tribe Called Quest, Pavement, Cibo Matto, Biz Markie, Richie Havens, John Lee Hooker, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rage Against the Machine, Sonic Youth, Beck, Bjork, De La Soul, Fugees, Buddy Guy, The Skatalites, Yoko Ono/Ima

Speakers: Chimi Thonden - Tibetan Activist, Palden Gyatso - Former Political Prisoner, Shen Tong - Chinese Democracy Activist, Robert A.F. Thurman, Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies, Columbia University

### **New York City**

Downing Stadium, Randall's Island  
June 7th & 8th 1997  
\$250 000 raised  
Over 50,000 Attendees

Foo Fighters, U2, Sonic Youth, Biz Markie, Alanis Morissette, Patti Smith, The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Radiohead, Yungchen Lhamo, Ben Harper & The Innocent Criminals, A Tribe Called Quest, Beastie Boys, Rancid, Bjork, Pavement, Blur, Michael Stipe & Mike Mills, Taj Mahal and Phantom Blues Band, De La Soul, Dadon, Chaksam-pa, Nawang Khechog, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Eddie Vedder & Mike McCready, KRS-ONE, Noel Gallagher, Sonic Youth, Porno for Pyros, and Lee Perry featuring Mad Professor & the Robotiks Band

Speakers: Palden Gyatso - Former Political Prisoner, Dechen Wangdu - Tibetan Activist, Chuck D - Public Enemy, Xiao Qiang - Human Rights in China, Nane Alehandrez - Barrios Unidos

### **Washington D.C.**

RFK Stadium  
June 13th & 14th 1998  
\$1.2 Million raised  
Over 120,000 Attendees

Beastie Boys, Radiohead, Sean Lennon, Mutabaruka, Money Mark, A Tribe Called Quest, Dave Matthews Band, Sonic Youth, Nawang Khechog, Wyclef Jean, Herbie Hancock and the Headhunters, Buffalo Daughter, R.E.M., KRS-ONE, The Wallflowers, Blues Traveler, Live, Pearl Jam, Luscious Jackson, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Chaksam-pa, Pulp

Speakers: Xiao Qiang - Human Rights in China, Lhadon Tethong - Students for a Free Tibet, Palden Gyatso - Former Political Prisoner, Wei Jingsheng - Chinese Democracy Activist and Former Political Prisoner

### **Amsterdam, Chicago, Sydney, Tokyo**

June 13th 1999  
\$50, 000 raised

Over 55,000 Attendees

Alpine Valley Music Theatre, Chicago

Run DMC, The Cult, Beastie Boys, Blondie, Tracy Chapman, The Roots, Live, Eddie Vedder, Otis Rush, Cibo Matto, Handsome Boy Modeling School, Rage Against the Machine, Chaksampa

Speakers: Xiao Qiang of Human Rights in China, Lhadon Tethong of Students for a Free Tibet, Nawang Pema- Tibetan Nun

Rai Parkhal, Amsterdam

Garbage, Blur, Urban Dance Squad, Alanis Morissette, Ben Harper & The Innocent Criminals, Luscious Jackson, NRA, Gangchenpa, Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, Joe Strummer & The Mescaleros, Thom Yorke

Speakers: Erin Potts - The Milarepa Fund, Ama Adhe - Former Political Prisoner.

Tokyo Bay NK Hall, Tokyo

Hi-Standard, Buffalo Daughter, Brahman, Audio Active, Kan Takagi, Scha Dara Parr, Kiyoshirou Imawano, Nawang Khechog

Speakers: Alma David - Students for a Free Tibet, Gurme Wangda - Liason Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Sydney Show Grounds, Sydney

Regurgitator, Spiderbait, The Mavis's, The Avalanches, Neil Finn, The Living End, Celibate Rifles, Not From There, Gerling, Jebediah, You Am I, Garpa, Blackalicious, Eskimo Joe, Trans Am

Speakers: Lobsang Lungtok - Former Political Prisoner, Jo Shaw - Students for a Free Tibet, Australia, Dorji Dolma - Australia Tibet Council

**For more information about the Tibetan Freedom Concerts, please contact its founder Erin Potts ([erin@atctower.net](mailto:erin@atctower.net)).**