

THE South African authorities may be trying hard to keep events in that country off the world's television screens, but they have failed to keep them off the turntables and airwaves. World hunger may have been the predominant musical cause during much of 85, but at the end of this year of new musical activism, the main concern is apartheid.

Just consider what was happening around the country last Monday. At Dinghalls in London Hugh Masekela was performing a whole set of new political songs that will appear on an album next year. One of the best, looking forward to the time when Nelson and Winnie Mandela will walk through Pretoria, was a reminder that Masekela used to play for his friend Mandela at African National Congress rallies in the Fifties, before the ANC was banned.

Masekela first acquired a trumpet, and learned to play, largely through the efforts of Trevor Huddleston, then working as a priest in South Africa. Thirty-one years ago, Huddleston called for a cultural boycott of South Africa, a boycott that was finally endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1980.

One of those in the audience on Monday was Bob Dylan, who appears on an album, released this week, supporting the boycott. Earlier in the day, the man who put the Sun City album together, Little Steven (otherwise known as Miami Steve Van Zandt, former guitarist with Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band) was in London to meet the now Bishop Huddleston, president of the Anti-Apartheid movement.

Meanwhile, up in Sheffield, a demonstration was planned against Elton John, because he has played at the Sun City complex in the so-called homeland of Bophuthatswana. It was called off when it was learned that Elton had put out a statement saying he wasn't going back while apartheid remains.

And if that wasn't enough, there was a bizarre development involving that rousing bunch of skinhead socialists, the Redskins. In what's surely an unprecedented move, even in the wilder fringes of pop, they actually stole the tape of their latest single from their record company and gave it to another company, because they want it released as a benefit for the ANC and South African Trade Unions, to coincide with their 12-date anti-apartheid tour that starts on Monday.

The two new anti-apartheid records, The Redskins' Kick Over The Statues and Little Steven's Sun City (which is actually credited to Artists United Against Apartheid) are not, of course, the first in the field. Jerry Dammers and the Special AKA recorded their own best-selling tribute to Mandela, and just a few weeks back Dam-

Now rock throws itself at the laager

Gander
26/11/85



Politics and rock and roll have occasionally gone together. But Little Steven, formerly Steve van Zandt of Springsteen's band, has focused the power of the music on apartheid. Robin Denselow sees the campaign pull in the stars

Little Steven, right, at Nelson Mandela's memorial in London, picture by Martin Argles; and Hugh Masekela left, picture by Alan Titmuss

mers and Wyatt collaborated on their excellent single aiding SWAPO. But in their very different ways the new records show how different sets of artists on both sides of the Atlantic are working to the same end.

The Redskins' Chris Dean, sitting in a pub in north London, explained why he had seized the tapes from London Records and given them to Abstract. "It wasn't that London were opposed to anti-apartheid, it's just that they didn't want us to bring this record out now. It didn't

fit in with their manic search for a massive hit single, and the marketing men thought that at this time of year it wouldn't do as well as our last single.

"But I'm proud of our brinkmanship. We wanted to bring it out even if it was the end of the Redskins. Because of what's happening in South Africa, it needs to be out now."

The Redskins are no newcomers to political action, for they started in Yorkshire during the Rock Against Racism days (they were then

called No Swatikas) and spent much of last year and this playing benefits for the miners. Little Seven's contribution is a lot more surprising, simply because apartheid has, until very recently, not been the issue in the States that has been here.

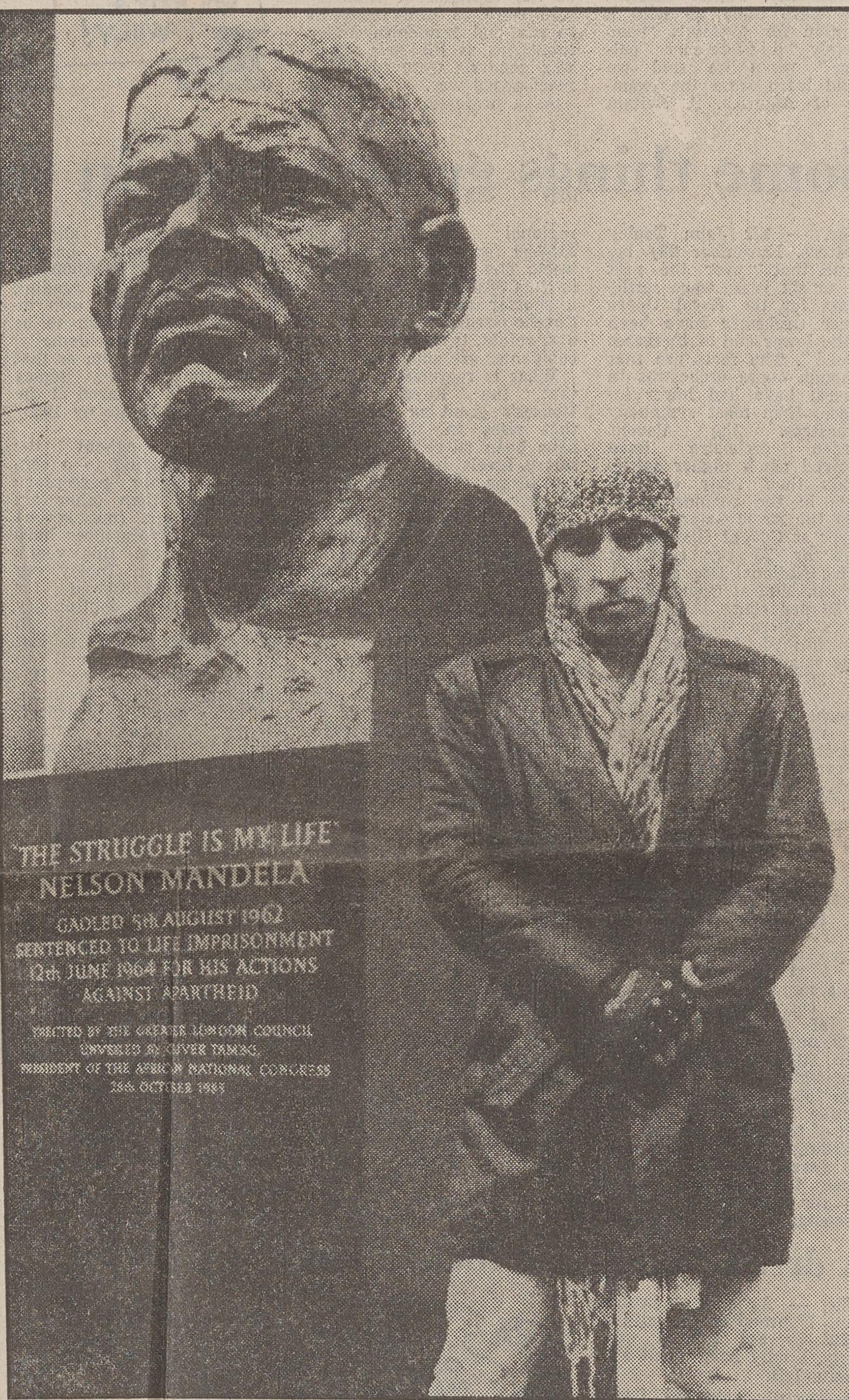
He has managed to produce not just a best-selling single, an album and a video, but to involve a quite remarkable set of British and American musicians, from right across the musical spectrum. There are rappers

like Afrika Bambaataa and Kurtis Blow, established white rockers like Bono, Townshend, Dylan, and Springsteen, reggae stars like Jimmy Cliff (although he has played in South Africa), soul stars like Bobby Womack, and jazz heroes like Miles Davis, combined on what has become the most controversial American record of the year.

"People are totally manipulated by propaganda," complained Steven. "It's been Communist this and Communist that. But then there's

never been a record quite like this, that's been openly critical of the Reagan administration in the lyrics. We've had some real problems in the South, with radio stations playing the record being threatened by white supremacists and being told to take it off. And they took it off. It's rough."

Particularly rough, considering that the considerable proceeds from Sun City will not be going to the ANC but (on the advice of the UN) to the Africa Fund, a charity that helps political prisoners



and their families, and provides education for exiles.

It's a sign of the power of pop that Steven first became concerned with South Africa after hearing the Peter Gabriel song Biko. "I had no idea what it was about, but I was absolutely moved by it on an emotional level." Deciding he wanted to write about South Africa, he first did his homework — remarkably well "because when I write I take research to the extreme."

Last summer he visited first Zimbabwe and then South Africa itself. Steven wasn't playing, but talking. "I met different black groups, and said 'Shall I come down and do a show as a symbol of solidarity?', and they said 'no'. The last person they invited was Jimmy Cliff, and now they want to implement the boycott completely. They want the boycott — there's no question about that — and it is up to us to honour that."

The idea for the Sun City song came after a visit to the entertainment complex that has attracted so many pop stars in the past. "It's like Las Vegas stuck in a wasteland that is a prison to those people. There's an hotel complex, a pool, a casino and an arena, and a mile down the road is the ghetto. The thought that a job would be worth more to those people than their freedom is just a joke."

Back in the States, he wrote a song that would also, he hoped, make people think about racism at home. By bringing together black, white and latin styles that would normally only be heard on different radio stations, he hoped to "break down our own apartheid." The cast on the album is extraordinary, but was apparently quite easy to assemble. "I just started making phone calls, and people started saying 'yes.' I can't talk anyone into anything."

Coming after Live Aid, Farm Aid and the rest, how did he judge pop's current social and political concern? "Live Aid led to everything. It turned people around, and Geldof even turned around the business a little bit — 'hey, reality can sell!' Pop music is the most powerful communication in the world. It transcends culture and it transcends language. It's a world-wide language, and it's about time we started using it."

The campaign seems to be working. The 7,000-seat Sun City arena has attracted no foreign artists since Elkie Brooks and Shakin' Stevens in June. They, and others like Queen, noted in the UN Register of those who have broken the boycott, will presumably face demonstrations unless, like Elton John, they promise not to go back. And despite the attempted news blackout, millions of Americans are still being made aware of the violence in South Africa every day, as MTV screens the Sun City video.