



By: TA | AP Insight

A rich political biography of the Glastonbury Festival



The storm raised by the London rap duo Bob Vylan calling for the death of the Israeli Defense Forces marked this year's Glastonbury. But the history of the political life of this music festival is much longer and richer.

The Glastonbury Festival is making headlines for controversy rather than music.

The likes of Olivia Rodrigo, Rod Stewart, Neil Young, Charli XCX, Busta Rhymes and Doechii played to tens of thousands onsite, and millions more on TV, during Britain's biggest and most famous music extravaganza.

But it's little-known rap-punk duo Bob Vylan attracting politicians' ire — and a police probe — after leading a chant calling for “death” to the Israeli military.

This isn't the first time politics has collided with pop at the festival. For half a century, Britain's big political and cultural divides have found their way onstage at Glastonbury.

Glastonbury grew from the counterculture

The Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, to give it its full name, was founded by Michael Eavis in 1970 on his Worthy Farm, 120 miles (some 200 kilometers) southwest of London. It's still run by the 90-year-old farmer and his daughter, Emily Eavis.

Originally a hippie happening with a 1 pound ticket price (about 20 pounds or \$27 today), Glastonbury has largely shed its counterculture cachet.

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These days, tickets for the three-day event cost close to 400 pounds. But it remains famous for its eclectic lineup, unique

atmosphere and commitment to environmentalism and other progressive causes.

This year's event drew about 200,000 people to see almost 4,000 performers on 120 stages, alongside film screenings and live debates on a variety of issues.

The festival has always had a political side

Glastonbury was founded in a spirit of hippie idealism that has never entirely faded.

In the 1980s, the festival donated some of its profits to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which protested U.S. nuclear weapons on British soil. It continues to support charities including Oxfam and Greenpeace.

By the late 1980s, attendees included New Age “travelers” involved with the U.K.'s unofficial and anarchic rave scene.

In 1990, some travelers clashed with security at the site, leading to significant damage and more than 200 arrests.

Since then, the festival's security and organization have grown increasingly professional, sparking regret from some fans who feel it has lost its alternative spirit.

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The 2016 festival coincided with the U.K.'s referendum on European Union membership, and the decision to leave the bloc — which most young people opposed — overshadowed the event.

Many performers mentioned Brexit and the dispirited mood, including headliner Adele, who urged people to “look after each other.”

Performers have often vented their opposition to politicians from the stage. In 2019, rapper Stormzy led the crowd in “F___ Boris” chants aimed at then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson. This year, Irish rappers Kneecap directed the same expletive at Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

In contrast, then-Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was warmly received at the festival in 2017 after doing better than expected against the Conservatives in a general election.

Emotions are high over the Gaza war

Israel’s **war** against Hamas in Gaza has provoked heightened emotions that spilled over onto Glastonbury’s stages.

Before the event, some politicians called for Glastonbury to cancel a performance by Irish-language hip-hop trio Kneecap, whose pro-Palestinian comments, critics say, have crossed a line into support for violence.



Some politicians called for Glastonbury to cancel a performance by Irish-language hip-hop trio Kneecap

Kneecap member Liam Óg Ó hAinídh has been charged under the Terrorism Act with supporting a proscribed organization for allegedly **waving** a Hezbollah flag at a concert in London in November.

He denies the charge, and Kneecap has accused critics of trying to silence the band because of its support for the Palestinian cause.

Kneecap’s energetic set included plenty of pro-Palestinian comments and criticism of the government. But it was the act that preceded them, Bob Vylan, that caused a furor when a member of the duo led chants of “death to the IDF,” the Israel Defense Forces.

The Avon and Somerset Police force said officers would review video evidence “to determine whether any offenses may have been committed that would require a criminal investigation.

Michael and Emily Eavis said Bob Vylan had “very much crossed a line.” They said “there is no place at Glastonbury for antisemitism, hate speech or incitement to violence.”

The BBC is facing criticism

Britain’s publicly funded national broadcaster is under fire for showing Bob Vylan’s set, one of dozens of Glastonbury performances it streamed live online.

The BBC **said** Monday that it should have cut off the broadcast after the “antisemitic” and “utterly unacceptable” comments, and has removed the performance from its website.

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But the government is demanding to know what “due diligence” it did on Bob Vylan before the broadcast.

Some media experts say the broadcaster is in a difficult position. Steven Barnett, professor of communications at the University of Westminster, said Britain’s influential right-wing press, “including newspapers such as the Daily Mail and The Sun, frequently attack the BBC, “for both commercial and ideological reasons.”

Right-leaning newspapers featured the Bob

Vylan story prominently, and Barnett said that attention “puts any political leader under enormous pressure” to express an opinion.