

U2: The Stadium Psalmists & Prophets

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OK, OK. I know what some of you are thinking. U2: self-righteous, hypocritical, egotistical, smug, etc etc. And that's just the polite version. For many, if ever there was a case of celebrities transgressing forbidden boundaries into politics or religion, U2 is it. Bono seems the worst: one minute he is hobnobbing with Presidents & Prime Ministers, the next minute he is rabble-rousing stadium audiences into a frenzy. Then they have the gall to claim it is driven by Christian convictions. Just who do they think they are?

Rock & roll has traditionally been obsessed with fashion, sex and drugs and therefore *obviously* 'off-piste' for Christians. It is certainly true that U2 would appear to conform to some of the stereotypes - swearing like troopers and the world of private jets and luxury villas. Furthermore, their lyrics (usually written by Bono, and/or The Edge) can leave a lot to be desired for those looking for a pure, let alone clear, moral or spiritual tone. So it is no wonder many Christians have despaired of them and moved on (if they were ever with them in the first place).

On the other hand, the secular world simply doesn't get them. A fascinating example was the review of the new album *No Line On the Horizon* (2009) in the *New Yorker* magazine¹. The reviewer was quite lost with some of the lyrics (which I would argue are some of their most spiritually and biblically rich yet). If European politicians are not supposed to 'do God', how much less should rock stars?

So they can't win - brickbats from Christians, incomprehension, if not derision, from the world. And that's even before stopping to consider what they are trying to achieve. This article is not out to convert to their music (although some would claim that is a personal obsession!). Instead, we will try to understand what lies behind their music and activism. That they have been a successful rock band is an understatement - they can pack stadiums on every continent with new songs and new ideas, despite having been together for 30 years (remember the Beatles were only together for around 10). The issue in hand here is to consider how they have attempted to avoid both the Christian ghetto and chameleon-like compromise. Whether they have been successful or not is for others to decide.

BONO: I enjoy the test of trying to keep hold of what's sacred, and still being awake, walking around, breaking through the plate glass window. It's one thing being in that holy huddle; it's another thing taking yourself out there into the world.²

Christians have much to learn from that test.

1. A band beyond stereotypes

The band was formed in September 1976 at a Dublin comprehensive school, and after one or two small changes, it became U2 18 months later – and they've had the same lineup ever since. The first album came out in 1980 (**Boy**) and they've not really looked back. Bono, The Edge and Larry Mullen Jr (but not Adam Clayton) were involved in a charismatic Christian

¹ Sasha Frere-Jones: *THE LONGEST RUN* (*New Yorker*, April 6, 2009)

² From an interview with Ann Powers – quoted in Henry Vanderspek, *Faith Hope & U2* p7

fellowship in Dublin as teenagers (unusual in itself for 70s Catholic Ireland). Subsequently, Bono has suggested that Adam has also come to faith in recent years.³

● Stadium as “church”

Their experiences of church in those early years were not altogether positive. A ‘word of knowledge’ from a church member specifically called for the band to split - sadly this was in fact a catalyst for the church itself splitting and caused a great deal of heartache and confusion within the band⁴. It is perhaps

- ▶ Gloria (1981)
- ▶ 40 (1983)
- ▶ Yahweh (2004)
- ▶ Magnificent (2009)

little wonder then that the band has a rather jaundiced view of church life (quite apart from the near impossibility of fitting regular church participation into their hectic schedules). Any ecclesiology that is discernible is understandably impoverished, or at least is very unusual. But U2’s huge stadium gigs have almost become church substitutes (interestingly, they usually take a chaplain to accompany them on tour). It is a fact that sceptics have found themselves affected by the experience of a U2 concert. There seems to be an intangible something that goes beyond the standard stadium euphoria. The band members sometimes joke before a gig about going to ‘church’.

But then not every rock band gets a stadium singing biblical Psalms on their way home! For years they ended concerts with the song **40** - a beautiful combination of Psalm 40 and the “How long” psalms like Pss 13 & 63. More recently, their parting shot on the Vertigo tour was often **Yahweh**. The song draws in an astonishing range of ideas – but most significantly contains a firm grasp on the reality and timing of Christian hope (in common with **40**). And they know what they are doing. Here is Bono in 2004:

There’s cathedrals and the alleyways in our music. I think the alleyway is usually on the way to the cathedral, where you can hear your own footsteps and you’re slightly nervous and looking over your shoulder, and wondering if there’s somebody following you. And then you get there and realize there was somebody following you: it’s God.’⁵

So what are they?!

● Christian band or band of Christians?

U2 have deliberately avoided the Christian music ghetto, much to the chagrin of many Christian leaders. Because they have not been identified with a particular church since their early days, and because their pronouncements and lifestyles are nothing if not provocative, it is hardly surprising that many assume they have gone the way of all things and departed from the faith.

- ▶ I still haven’t found what I’m looking for (1987)
- ▶ Acrobat (1991)
- ▶ The First Time (1993)
- ▶ City of Blinding Lights (2005)
- ▶ Moment of Surrender (2009)

³ Assayas 2005:64

⁴ Stokes 2005:31

⁵ Jon Pareles, New York Times, section 2, p29, column 2 (Nov 14 2004)

However one of their most iconic songs (inspiringly arranged on the film *Rattle and Hum* with a Gospel Choir) is **I still haven't found what I'm looking for**. It might appear to be a song of lost faith. But the final verse is anything but.

I believe in the kingdom come
 then all the colours will bleed into one
 Well, yes I'm still running
 You broke the bonds And you loosed the chains
 Carried the cross Of my shame
 You know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

Musically and lyrically, this song seems to be both a resounding declaration of faith *and* an articulation of basic biblical eschatology. For the Christian is a pilgrim on a journey to the heavenly promised land - we're not there yet, but we know where we're going.

So perhaps it is better to avoid categories like Christian band or Christian music altogether, and see U2 more as a band with Christian members, who regularly explore Christian themes. What is remarkable, if not unique in modern times, is that they have been able to do this on such a public and global platform.

Still this does not mean there is nothing to unsettle the Christian. In fact, sometimes they seem to go out of their way to provoke.

● Telling Stories, Playing Parts

A classic example came on the ZooTV tour in 1992 - when Bono sang a handful of songs interspersed with monologues (in a vaguely British, aristocratic accent) while dressed up as Satan. Many were perplexed, to say the least. It certainly fitted with the barrage of incongruous images and texts that characterised the tour. But there was a serious purpose behind it all.

The problem was this time, especially in the USA, Bono had to explain it. In the video for their song for *Batman Forever* (**Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me**), Bono is seen walking along the street reading C S Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. Then he explains:

One night I was doing my Elvis-devil dance on stage with a young girl in Wales, and she said, 'Are you still a believer? If so, what are you doing dressed up as the devil?' I said, 'have you read *The Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis that a lot of intense Christians are plugged into? They are letters from the devil. That's where I got the whole philosophy of mock-the-devil-and-he-will-flee-from-you.' She said, 'Yes'. And I said, 'So you know what I am doing.' Then she relaxed and said, 'I want to bless you.'⁶

The key to understanding this is to grasp what artists and poets have done for centuries: they have told stories. From Homer in antiquity, via Schubert's *lieder* cycles, right up to the best rock singer, they tell stories about life. And this is the point: those lives are not necessarily their own! Bono has taken on a number of personae and he is hardly unique in that (just think of the different guises of David Bowie or Madonna). What is interesting is how often these guises become vehicles for Bono to explore more spiritual themes. Here are just a few:

⁶ Stockman 2005:106

▶ Arrogant Pop Star:	The Fly	The Fly (1991)
▶ Satan:	MacPhisto	Daddy's gonna pay for your crashed car (1993)
▶ The Doubter:		The First Time (1993)
▶ The Betrayer:	Judas	Until the End of the World (1993)
▶ Wounded Soldier (<i>in Middle East</i>)		White as Snow (2009)
▶ Parisian Traffic Cop		No Line on the Horizon (2009)

This explains another song whose lyrics, when one stops to think about them, are spiritually very disturbing: **The First Time**. Musically, it is very simple indeed - most of the time it just rocks back and forth between two chords. After the gentle build up of the first two verses which seem to be all about the faithfulness and love of Jesus, there comes the shock of this final verse (which is even more explicit in its biblical imagery).

My father is a rich man // He wears a rich man's cloak
 Gave me the keys to his kingdom coming // Gave me a cup of gold
 He said I have many mansions // And there are many rooms to see
 But I left by the back door // And I threw away the key

What is going on there? Bono later explained that this song was not his own story.

It's about losing your faith. I haven't lost my faith. I've a great deal of faith. But that song expresses a moment a lot of people feel.⁷

Christian Scharen comments on this:

Perhaps, then, his empathy opens up space for those who have experienced this loss to see again how a lover, a brother or a father might be seeking them still.⁸

Perhaps a crucial lesson from this is the need to appreciate more fully the distinction between poets and preachers.

- ▶ Preachers seek to inspire by digging out what is already there in a biblical text. They seek to bring to light the freshness, vitality and above all, relevance of the ancient truths in as clear a way as possible; but that is not an end in itself. Nor are the illustrations or rhetorical devices used in the course of the sermon - for they should also serve the overall purpose. For the ultimate goal of good preaching is changed lives, ever more conformed to Christ's likeness.
- ▶ Artists also seek to inspire and even change people - but through a very different means. They evoke a mood, a sense, a feeling - often by expressing things that words can never fully express. Therefore their creations are often vague, elusive, hard to pin down. They seek to articulate experience, perhaps, more than doctrines. But that doesn't render their creations false, necessarily! Truth, after all, is not less than propositional; but nor can it ever be exclusively propositional.

Of course it gets confusing when poets do start to preach. And perhaps that is one of the reasons people do not quite know what to make of Bono's pronouncements. But that is no reason necessarily to lift his songs out of poetic categories.

⁷ Scharen 2006:72

⁸ Scharen 2006:72

● Facing the Postmodern

The 90s were a period when many of the original U2 fans fell away. Those reared on the rough and ready **Boy** (1980) or the landscaped guitars of **The Joshua Tree** (1987), couldn't really see what was going on. And yet anyone who is trying to understand what is going on culturally in the west will recognise that Bono & The Edge are way ahead of the game on this – during the 90s, they embraced both the challenges and opportunities of postmodernism.

The “Ironic” Albums

- ▶ Achtung Baby (1991)
- ▶ Zooropa (1993)
- ▶ Pop (1997)

Not only were they influenced by the rise in electronic dance music, they were also reading some of the the big names of postmodernism: Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, etc etc. They realised that the big questions of the day centre on the nature of truth, epistemology and the effect of living in a media-saturated culture.

The result was that they took massive financial risks with their early 90s stadium shows – no one had done anything quite like it. While many thought it pretentious or a ludicrous waste of money these shows made a profound impact. Anyone who wants to get visceral sense of what postmodernity is like should see the videos of **Zoo TV** live in Sydney and **Popmart** live in Mexico City. An illustration of this would be the song **Even Better than the Real Thing** (1991). Not one of their finest songs, perhaps, but it deliberately plays on all the obsessions of our media-age – where virtual reality is preferred to real reality.

What is striking is that they do this while managing to hold onto some basic gospel convictions.

2. A band with gospel vision

● Saturated with Scripture

Christian Scharen's book *One Step Closer* contains a fascinating series of chapters in which he outlines how various songs fit into various biblical categories. In particular, the OT genres of psalms and prophecy feature highly.

In 1991, Penguin books decided to publish different books of the bible as individual volumes (under the banner of *Pocket Canons*) for which a wide variety of intellectuals, writers and public figures were invited to write the introductions. And who did they ask to write the introduction to the Psalms? Bono. He wrote this:

The Psalter may be a font of gospel music, but for me it's in his despair that the psalmist really reveals the nature of his special relationship with God. Honesty, even to the point of anger. 'How long, Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself forever?' (Psalm 89) or 'Answer me when I call' (Psalm 5).⁹

On another occasion, he said this:

But you see, King David was the first blues singer. As well as praising, he was there shouting at God – you know: 'where are you when we need you?... 'we're surrounded'... 'your people are starving'... 'are you deaf?' That type of thing. He'd be wailing, this militant mind, this poet musician with enough faith to

⁹ Introduction to the Psalms, 1991, vii

believe he had a deal with God... believed it enough to get angry when it looked like He wasn't coming through.¹⁰

In this, U2 are not afraid to express some of the things that the Bible does and yet which many modern Christian artists shy away from. Take a song like **Wake Up Dead Man** (1997). It is clearly a passionate prayer to Jesus in a suffering world – during the course of which uses the 'f' word! That puts a lot of Christians off. But while it is not language I would personally use in my prayer life, it is not, to my mind, gratuitous – for it is a song about deep-seated emotions, like the Psalms. This is what Bono has said about that song:

It's the end of the century, and it's a century where God is supposed to be dead. Seeing the world in two dimensions doesn't have the appeal that it had for a lot of people. People want to believe, but they're angry, and I picked up on that anger. If God is not dead, there are some questions we want to ask him. I'm a believer, but that doesn't mean I don't get angry about these things.¹¹

As with David, then, so, it seems, with Bono. It is precisely his faith in the goodness of God that fuels and permits his confused and desperate prayer.

But what of the foundation of such faith?

● The Gospel premise

The Christian gospel of forgiveness and divine reconciliation, implicitly and sometimes even explicitly, clearly lies behind many U2 songs. There are many that could be chosen to illustrate this point. **Grace** is an obvious one of course. It contains the wonderful lines:

Grace, she takes the blame // She covers the shame

Removes the stain // It could be her name...

...What once was hurt // What once was friction

What left a mark // No longer stings...

Because Grace makes beauty out of ugly things

Then take **All Because of You**. This begins *I was born a child of grace* and then plays on the very name of God: for Yahweh means "I am". Hence, the chorus goes *All because of You, I am I am*. The repetition at the chorus end, while subtle, is deliberate.

Bono has talked in various interviews about how the latest album (**No Line on the Horizon**) should be seen as containing three distinct parts. So it seems legitimate especially to take the 2nd (**Magnificent**), 3rd (**Moment of Surrender**) and 4th (**Unknown Caller**) songs together with the 1st song, the album's title track. The result is an extraordinary sequence that seem to articulate the experience of living in the now and not yet, of coming to the end of oneself and crying out to God in conversion - as the result of passing the stations of the cross (**Moment of Surrender**). **Magnificent** is nothing less than a modern psalm while **Unknown Caller** seems to riff on the idea of God silencing his people in order for him to be heard (cf. Psalms 37:7 & 46:10).

- ▶ The Playboy Mansion (1997)
- ▶ Grace (2000)
- ▶ All because of you (2004)
- ▶ Moment of Surrender (2009)
- ▶ Unknown Caller (2009)

¹⁰ Stockman 2005:129

¹¹ Stockman 2005:134

Is this fanciful interpretation or wishful thinking? Take this extended quotation from Bono in series of interviews with Michka Assayas.

I really believe we've moved out of the realm of Karma into one of Grace. You see, at the centre of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics – in physical laws – every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the Universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that 'As you reap, so you will sow' stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.

I'd be interested to hear that.

That's between me and God. But I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep s**t. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.

The son of God who takes away the sins of the world. I wish I could believe in that.

But I love the idea of the Sacrificial Lamb. I love the idea that God says, 'Look, you cretins, there are certain results to the way we are, to selfishness, and there's mortality as part of your very sinful nature, and let's face it, you're not living a very good life, are you? There are consequences to actions.' The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven.

That's a great idea, no denying it. Such great hope is wonderful, even though it's close to lunacy in my view. Christ has his rank among the world's great thinkers. But Son of God, isn't that farfetched?

No, it's not farfetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Mohammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook. Christ says: No I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying: 'I'm the Messiah'. I'm saying 'I am God incarnate.' And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet, we can take. You're a bit eccentric. We've had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don't mention the 'M' word! Because, you know, we're gonna have to crucify you. And he goes: No, No. I know you're expecting me to come back with an army, and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah.

At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says: 'Oh, my God, he's gonna keep saying this'. So what you're left with is: either Christ was who He said He was – the Messiah – or a complete nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson. This man was like some of the people we've been talking about earlier. This man was strapping himself to a bomb, and had 'King of

the Jews' on his head, and, as they were putting him up on the Cross, was going: Ok, martyrdom, here we go. Bring on the pain! I can take it! I'm not joking here. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that's farfetched.¹²

It is not every day that you find rock stars articulating substitutionary atonement or the old C.S. Lewis argument of 'mad, bad or God'¹³! Even a song with the rather unpromising title of **The Playboy Mansion** is about grace: it deliberately contrasts the world of the superficially beautiful to which few have access (i.e. Hugh Hefner's Playboy Mansion) with the heavenly mansions to which any can enter through Jesus.

● Relationships human and divine

Now this is where some get very suspicious. For U2 seems deliberately to cross the line between our human relationships and our relationship with God. It seems blurred at best, completely confused at worst. This was hinted at in the song quoted above, **Grace** - in which Bono plays on the fact that as well as being a wonderful concept, Grace is a girl's name.

- ▶ Gloria (1981)
- ▶ She moves in mysterious ways (1991)
- ▶ The First Time (1993)
- ▶ Grace (2000)
- ▶ Moment of Surrender (2009)

Yet there is, of course, biblical precedent for such blurring. After all, debates rage over the significance of the Song of Songs precisely because it is not clear whether it articulates the wonders of sexual intimacy and/or a more spiritual intimacy with our Lord.

The blurring comes most explicitly in Ephesians 5. As we read Paul's exploration of Christian marriage, it is only natural to assume that the relationship between husband and wife is primarily in view. But then he suddenly slides into the relationship between Christ & The Church (Ephesians 5:32) as if the connection was always that obvious!

Perhaps this is one explanation for U2 sustaining their mainstream popularity while still being able to explore more spiritual themes. Rock music is *meant* to be about love and sex. To sing songs explicitly about devotion to Jesus is not very "rock-and-roll". But blurring the two? That's quite a different matter. But if we step back, part of the wonder and thrill of poetry has always been that it can work on more than one level. Bono can always maintain that he's just singing love songs - but those songs will always mean more to those who have the ears to hear.

One can get a grasp of this blurring in the song **Mysterious Ways**. The 'she' of the chorus sounds like a girl who is fickle and hard to understand. Nothing new there: that has been the subject of troubadours' songs for centuries (although I have it on good authority girls have always found boys equally confusing)! But of course the song's resonance is Christian. It surely evokes the English hymn written by the wonderful eighteenth century poet, William Cowper, which begins **God Moves in Mysterious Ways**.

At first sight the hymn and song have little in common apart from the obvious common phrase in their titles. But consider the songs' common purpose. Both seek to reassure in the face of confusion and doubt. Cowper himself battled depression and mental illness throughout his life so he knew better than most what life's storms could bring. The song's character Johnny has

¹² Assayas 2005:203-205

¹³ C S Lewis Mere Christianity (Fount, 1990), p52

clearly hit rock bottom (see v1). His only hope is to kneel (end v2) and turn to the one who can talk about the inexplicable, turn the tide and lighten up days and nights.

GOD MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS	SHE MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS
<i>William Cowper (1731-1800)</i>	<i>U2 (1991)</i>
God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform; He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.	Johnny, take a walk with your sister the moon Let her pale light in, to fill up your room. You've been living underground, eating from a can You've been running away from what you don't understand.
Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill, He treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.	She's slippy, you're sliding down. She'll be there when you hit the ground. <i>It's alright, it's alright, it's alright.</i> <i>She moves in mysterious ways.</i>
You fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so much dread Are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.	Johnny, take a dive with your sister in the rain Let her talk about the things you can't explain. To touch is to heal, to hurt is to steal. If you want to kiss the sky, better learn how to kneel On your knees, boy!
His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.	She's the wave, she turns the tide She sees the man inside the child. <i>It's alright, it's alright, it's alright.</i> <i>She moves in mysterious ways.</i>
Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain: God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.	Lift my days, light up my nights, oh. One day you'll look back, and you'll see Where you were held now by this love. While you could stand there, You could move on this moment // Follow this feeling. <i>It's alright, it's alright, it's alright.</i> <i>She moves in mysterious ways.</i>
	Move you, spirits move you; Move, spirits, move you, oh yeah. Does it move you? She moves with it. Lift my days, and light up my nights, oh.

This spiritual connection became clearer during Bono's improvisations on the recent Vertigo tour when he was heard to change the last verse:

*She moves in mysterious ways
Oh Love, // Mmm, Love // I feel your comfort, love, I need your comfort
Move me Spirit, hold me // Move me Spirit, feed me
Move me Spirit, take me // Move me Spirit, teach me
to move with it, to move with it lift my days, light up my nights, love.¹⁴*

Are there perhaps shades of another hymn there too? Frances Havergal's 1874 hymn **Take My Life and Let It Be** anyone? No - perhaps I'm just getting carried away now.

The stumbling block for some is that the one in the song who can do all this for Johnny is female. We are perhaps wary of thinking of God as feminine, in part because in the ancient world, pagan deities were often female fertility goddesses. So for the biblical writers that

¹⁴ Scharen 2006:52

language was risky. Yet even here, there is biblical precedent (see box). This list must give us pause at the very least, and would appear to legitimise what many of these songs are seeking to do.

Some have even suggested that every time Bono sings to ‘you’, he’s actually singing to God. In the latest single, **Magnificent**, that is clearly what he is doing, but such a blanket statement is surely going too far. Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is something more going on in many of the songs than the merely human level. For our human relationships, at their best, can only ever be a pale reflection of our devotion to God.

- ▶ **Metaphor of God as Mother:** Numbers 11:12 (*Moses didn’t do this, implying that God did*); Isaiah 49:15; Isaiah 66:12-13; cf Ps 131:2, I Peter 2:2-3
- ▶ **Metaphor of God as Midwife:** Psalm 22:9-11, Psalm 71:6, Isaiah 66:9
- ▶ **Divine Wisdom as feminine:** Proverbs 1:20-33, 3:15-20, 8:1-11
- ▶ **Parables** using male and female analogies for God: Luke 13:18-21, Luke 15:3-10
- ▶ **Natural World Images:** Psalm 57:1; Deuteronomy 32:11-12; Matthew 23:37/Luke 13:34; Hosea 13:8

● **The Gospel Hope**

We have already detected a clear eschatology in their gospel hope in **I still haven’t found what I’m looking for**. There are many others. The classic Joshua Tree single, **Where the streets have no name**, was provoked by Bono’s short term work with his wife Ali in famine-ravaged Ethiopia. It is a song of longing for escape from the agonies of the present (a world of famine and dust, acid rain and conflict). But there is hope for a place where there are no divisions or bitternesses, “**a place high on a desert plain where the streets have no name**”. The Ethiopian context is clear. Yet there still seems to be more to it.

- ▶ Where the streets have no name (1987)
- ▶ City of Blinding Lights (2004)
- ▶ Walk On (2000)
- ▶ Always (2000)

I remember my first visit to Northern Ireland about 12 years ago. It was shocking to find that in various towns, the kerbs of different streets would be painted either Green (for Catholic) or Orange (for Protestant). It was all part of the deliberate reinforcement of social and cultural separation. Someone’s address would instantly reveal their religious affiliation. Could it be that the longing for the abolition of street names is in part a yearning for the abolition of social divisions and conflict? Who wouldn’t want that?

Another song under this heading is a personal favourite. **Always** did not make it onto an album but ended up as a filler for the EP of their big 2000 hit **Beautiful Day** (the song shares a similar chord structure). In this song, each line or idea ends with the word ‘always’. Near the start it contains these suggestive statements:

What we have we’re gonna keep, always
 What we’ve lost we don’t need, always
 What is it that won’t let you sleep, always
 ... Don’t look in the obvious place
 The soul needs beauty for a soulmate
 Get down off your holy cloud, always
 God will not deal with the proud, always
 Well if you dream then dream out loud, always
 Eternally yours, always

There are not many other global bands with such eternal convictions. Yet this seems to be what lies at the heart of their unique contribution to contemporary music: JOY. Joy is hard to find out there and when it is, it often gets dismissed as rather out of keeping. This is what the New Yorker review mentioned earlier is getting at with this derisive comments:

While most rock bands flirt with the allure of destruction and the charms of sin,
U2 has kept its eye on that corniest of feelings: uplift.¹⁵

Yet I'm convinced that it is precisely U2's genuine, unfettered joy that keeps countless fans glued to their iPods.

3. A band on a mission

In the 200+ songs that U2 have released (plus the countless ones that never made it), the band has touched on a vast range of subjects. Quite apart from their constant musical reinvention, it seems to be U2's endless curiosity about the realities and uncertainties of life which keeps people listening, moved emotionally, and more unusually, thinking. Here is just a taste of how they have done this.

● Articulating Human Experience

▶ The Electric Co. (1980)	electric shock treatment for mental illness
▶ Bad (1984)	drug addiction
▶ Mothers of the Disappeared (1987)	grieving Argentine mothers of political victims
▶ One (1991)	relationship tensions
▶ Numb (1993)	despair in modern life
▶ Kite (2000)	father-son relationship tensions
▶ Stuck in moment (2000)	the suicide of INXS' Michael Hutchence
▶ Miracle Drug (2004)	Christopher Nolan, the paralysed Irish poet
▶ Original of the Species (2004)	female adolescence & body image insecurities

These songs express reality, with all its perplexities and furies. There is no papering over the cracks or pretence. As such, there is something pastorally very helpful here – and I have actually found myself playing U2 songs to people who are struggling with specific issues.

● Activism beyond the celebrity call of duty

But you can't talk about U2, and Bono in particular, without mentioning the fact that they go far beyond the obligatory rock star causes and campaigns. This is controversial of course. Yet it is no mere an ego trip that drives Bono to deal with world leaders and campaigners to work for justice and African issues. He is quite explicit that this is derived from his discipleship of Jesus. He is explicit about the absurdities of celebrity and fame – but sees these as currency in order to gain a hearing for those who don't get heard. This comes across at a comical moment in Assayas' book when Bono is asked to describe himself.

So you don't see yourself as a celebrity, then.
No, I'm not a celebrity.
Who the hell are you, then?

¹⁵ Sasha Frere-Jones: [The Longest Run](#) (New Yorker, April 6, 2009, p81)

I'm a scribbling, cigar-smoking, wine-drinking, Bible-reading band man. A show-off [laughs]... who loves to paint pictures of what I can't see. A husband, father, friend of the poor and sometimes the rich. An activist travelling salesman of ideas. Chess player, part-time rock star, opera singer, in the loudest folk group in the world. How's that?¹⁶

One strand in particular of their activism is pacifism. There are many songs about this – from the anthemic **Sunday Bloody Sunday** to the poignant **Miss Sarajevo**. The latter was written as a duet with Pavarotti in aid of victims of the 90s Balkans War and which Bono has recently said is his favourite U2 song.

- ▶ Sunday Bloody Sunday (1983)
- ▶ Pride (in the Name of Love) (1984)
- ▶ Bullet the Blue Sky (1987)
- ▶ Wave of Sorrow (1987)
- ▶ Miss Sarajevo (1995)
- ▶ Walk On (2000)

Whatever one's views about pacifism and just wars, it is hard not to resonate with their concerns about how wars have been conducted. **Bullet the Blue Sky** is a tirade against America's undercover wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 80s. It also takes aim at the religious hypocrisy in America of the prosperity gospel preachers & TV evangelists stealing money from gullible people while supporting a government that was acting illegally in secret.

This pacifism is of course strongly influenced by Martin Luther King – especially on The Unforgettable Fire album. **Pride (in the Name of Love)** is a classic and deliberately plays on the Christ-like sacrifice King made for the cause of racial equality and civil rights. There was something extraordinarily incongruous and yet somehow fitting for a band of white Irish middle aged rockers to sing this song at the very spot where Luther King had a dream as part of the celebrations for President Obama's inauguration. A more contemporary resonance with Luther King's legacy has been U2's identification with the campaign to support Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma/Myanmar - the song **Walk On** is inspired by her courageous decision in 1988 to leave the comforts of Oxford University to fight the cause of democracy in justice at home.

Finally, the focal point of Bono's activism and by extension U2's, has been Africa. The most poignant example of this is the song Bono wrote during the Ethiopian famine, **Wave of Sorry** (though it was not released until 2007). An elderly man came up to Bono and asked him to take away his young son in the hope of giving him a better life. This was of course not possible - but the experience left a profound mark. This song is a reflection on Ethiopia's proud history (not least its biblical resonances with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) in contrast to the abject poverty and pain it suffered during the famine. The song concludes with a brilliant but provocative improvisation on Jesus' Beatitudes at the start of the Sermon on the Mount.

4. But in the end, they're just a Rock Band!

Lest anyone suspects this is getting out of hand and transgressing into the idolatrous, it must be said that U2 is just a rock band (albeit a hugely successful one). They are not perfect: as musicians, moral examples or articulators of reality. In their better moments, they would no doubt be the first to admit that. They are not ideal models of Christian living - and they are quick to point that out. That is what most of the time stands as their defence against charges of hypocrisy.

¹⁶ Assayas 2005:42-43

There are big questions about some of the things they do and say. There are the financial decisions that U2 Inc. have made, there are other concerns of lifestyle and rock star egos, there are concerns about their theology and ethics. For example Christians some have cited their Coexist campaign (which calls on all the 'Sons of Abraham - Jews, Christians and Muslims - to live together in peace) as evidence of universalism. Well, it may well be! Yet it is hard to deny the moral goodness of the objective. If one needs labels (and how one wishes one didn't), perhaps we should see U2 as 'post-evangelical' (in the sense of what Dave Tomlinson was getting at in his 1995 book of that name) more than anything else. That will leave many things to be desired for the regular evangelical, of course. But it is interesting how often themes of historic Christian orthodoxy permeate and inform their creativity.

It is of course easy for Christian observers to judge and condemn them - yet who of us can honestly claim to understand the choices, dilemmas and conflicts that arise from having such wealth and influence? Nevertheless, they offer a profound challenge to Christians with their passionate and committed engagement with the world around us at the social, political and personal levels. U2 is one model of Christian artistic engagement at the highest and most exposed level. You might not agree with everything they do; you may totally detest their music! But it is foolish to ignore their attempts – for in recent times, no other performers have brought a Christian worldview and set of values into the public square more wholeheartedly and globally than U2.

5. BACKGROUND

● THE ALBUMS



● READING

Achtung Baby (33 1/3 album guide)	Catanzarite, Stephen	Continuum	New York	2007
Bono on Bono: Conversations	Assayas, Michka	Hodder	London	2005
Get Up Off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog	Whiteley & Maynard (eds)	Cowley	Cambridge	2003
Into The Heart: The Stories Behind Every U2 Song	Stokes, Niall	Carlton	London	2005
One Step Closer – Why U2 matters to those seeking God	Scharen, Christian	Brazos	Gr. Rapids	2006
Religious Nuts, Political Fanatics: U2 in Theological Perspective	Vagacs, Robert	Cascade	Eugene, OR	2005
The U2 Reader: a Quarter Century of Commentary	Bordowitz, Hank (ed)	Hal Leonard	New York	2003
U2 by U2	McCormick, Neil (ed)	HarperCollins	London	2006
U2: An Irish Phenomenon	Cogan, Visnja	Collins Press	London	2006
U2: Into the Heart (the stories behind every song)	Stokes, Niall	Thunder's Mouth	London	2005
U2: The Complete Guide to their Music	Graham / Oosten de Boer	Omnibus	London	2004
Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2	Stockman, Steve	Relevant	Orlando, FL	2005

● ONLINE

- U2.com www.U2.com The band's official website
 - @U2 <http://www.atu2.com/> The most popular fan site
 - 3 Chords & The Truth www.threechordsandthetruth.net/ Another good fan site
 - U2 sermons <http://u2sermons.blogspot.com/> Interesting links to all kind of different takes on U2
 - DATA www.data.org Bono's Africa advocacy charity
- I also tend to blog about U2 from time to time (!): markmeynell.wordpress.com/u2stuff/