

U2

*By James Henke*

PERFORMERS





**B**ack in 1985, when I was the music editor of *Rolling Stone*, I convinced Jann Wenner to put U2 on the cover. It took some doing. I had first met U2 some five years earlier, when I was one of a handful of American journalists sent to England to see the band shortly after the U.K. release of its first album, *Boy*. I rode in a van with the band members – then barely in their twenties – from London to Coventry for their gig at a university gymnasium. The show totally knocked me out, and I came back convinced that U2 was going to be, as the headline of my story put it, “the next big thing.” From that day on, I was constantly championing the band around *Rolling Stone*. When Jann finally gave in and let me put it on the cover, our headline boldly declared: **OUR CHOICE: BAND OF THE EIGHTIES.**

Though the decade was only half over, that ballsy procla-

mation proved accurate. By the end of the decade, U2 had reached heights that few bands ever attain. The group was lauded by critics, and its audience had grown from an adoring cult into a massive mainstream following. The band rebelled against the decade’s prevailing pop trends and almost single-handedly restored a sense of social conscience and meaning to rock & roll. For U2 and its fans, rock & roll was serious business. Rock & roll mattered.

U2 was nearly a decade old when that first *Rolling Stone* cover story hit the stands. The group was formed in 1976, when Larry Mullen Jr., a drummer, placed an ad on a bulletin board at Dublin’s Mount Temple High School seeking musicians to form a band. The respondents: Dave Evans, a guitarist who adopted the nickname the Edge, which has been variously interpreted to describe either the shape of his face or his sharp mind; Paul Hewson, a singer who went by the moniker Bono Vox, the name of a local hearing-aid

▲ Band of the Eighties, as declared by ‘Rolling Stone’: Adam Clayton, Larry Mullen Jr., Bono, and the Edge (from left), Cork, Ireland, March 1980





▲ Bono became concerned about the plight of the Ethiopian people early on in U2's career and has since focused much of his energy on such problems.

store; and Adam Clayton, a bassist. Inspired by the do-it-yourself ethos of punk rock, they forged ahead, creating a distinctive sound focused on the Edge's soaring, chordal guitar technique and Bono's passionate vocals.

First calling the band Feedback, the group settled on U2, suggested by Dublin musician and future U2 graphic designer Steve Averill. Today Averill jokes that the band members never particularly liked the name, but a victory at a battle of the bands in Limerick on St. Patrick's Day in 1978 sealed its fate. The win earned U2 a recording session with CBS's Irish record label, which yielded *U2:3*, a three-song EP released in September 1979. The record included the tracks "Stories for Boys," "Boy/Girl," and "Out of Control." It hit Number One on the Irish charts, and an international deal with Island Records soon followed.

In 1980, U2 released *Boy*. Produced by Steve Lillywhite, *Boy* explored themes of adolescence in an earnest, forthright manner, a unique departure from the nihilism of punk and the egotism of hard rock. This earnestness, which was to become a hallmark of U2's early work, was in part a result of the group's spiritual beliefs; three of the band members – Bono, the Edge, and Mullen – were devout Christians. The group also had enormous ambition. "I don't mean to sound arrogant," Bono told me, "but even at this stage, I do feel that we are meant to be one of the great groups. There's a certain spark, a certain chemistry, that was special about the Stones, the Who, and the Beatles, and I think it's also special about U2."

Two more Lillywhite-produced albums, *October* and *War*, followed, in 1981 and 1983, respectively. The latter album, with

**U2 almost single-handedly restored a sense of social conscience to rock & roll**

such politically oriented songs as "Sunday Bloody Sunday," about the strife in Northern Ireland, cemented U2's reputation as one of the more socially conscious bands in rock & roll. During this period, U2 toured incessantly, building a rabid following with its full-throttle, punk-inspired live performances.

With 1984's *The Unforgettable Fire*, U2 began what would become a long and fruitful relationship with the producers Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois. Where Lillywhite's productions had successfully captured U2's onstage power, Eno and Lanois encouraged the band to experiment in the studio, using different sonic textures and approaches. *The Unforgettable Fire* produced U2's first U.S. hit, "Pride (in the Name of Love)," a song about slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. The

album reached Number Twelve in the United States. Then, on July 13, 1985, U2 made a career-transforming appearance at the Live Aid concert in London. In front of 72,000 people at Wembley Stadium, and an estimated television audience of 1.5 billion in 160 countries, the group's spirited, fifteen-minute performance of "Bad," during which Bono leapt into the crowd and improvised snippets of "Ruby Tuesday," "Sympathy for the Devil," and "Walk on the Wild Side," became a highlight of one of rock & roll's most legendary concerts. Suddenly, the whole world knew about U2. The band followed the success of the Live Aid appearance with a series of concerts benefiting Amnesty International, the human rights organization. Appearing alongside Sting, Peter Gabriel, Lou Reed, and others, U2 had joined the upper echelon of rock & rollers. It was also using its newfound success to speak out on issues it deemed important – a trait that would continue



through the coming decade.

U2's crowning achievement of the eighties came with 1987's *The Joshua Tree*. Recorded with Eno and Lanois, the album topped the charts for much of the year. Two singles, "With or Without You" and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," also reached Number One. *The Joshua Tree* won Grammys for Album of the Year and Best Rock Performance. After a triumphant world tour, U2 released the film *Rattle and Hum* in 1988. The accompanying album featured a guest appearance by B.B. King on "When Love Comes to Town." *Rattle and Hum* entered the charts at Number One, and the single "Desire" reached Number Three.

U2 had it all. But then, on December 27, 1989, during a show at the Point Depot, a former railway hall in Dublin, Bono introduced the song "Love Rescue Me" by saying, "Well, I suppose this is a kind of going-away party, because I think that's what we gotta do. We've had a great ten years . . . We gotta do something else the next while, just gotta go away for a little bit . . ."

When U2 released *Achtung Baby* nearly two years later, it was clear that the break had brought about some changes. Primarily recorded in Berlin, *Achtung Baby* was funkier and more metallic than U2's previous albums. It incorporated industrial textures and dance rhythms, and its lyrics showed a hint of world-weariness that was unusual for the band. Nonetheless, *Achtung Baby*, produced by Lanois and Eno, was a smash. It became U2's third consecutive Number One album and yielded two more Top Ten singles, "Mysterious Ways" and "One."

On February 29, 1992, U2 kicked off the Zoo TV tour in Lakeland, Florida. It was an even more radical departure for the group. Where U2's previous tours had been straightforward, minimalist affairs, Zoo TV was flamboyant and ironic. Six East German Trabant cars hung from lighting fixtures, and some thirty-six TV monitors ran across the stage, displaying messages like EVERYTHING YOU KNOW IS WRONG, DEATH IS A CAREER MOVE, and WATCH MORE TV. During the show, Bono adopted various guises, including the Fly, the Mirror Ball Man, and MacPhisto. During a break in the tour, U2 entered the studio and quickly recorded *Zooropa*. Produced by Eno, Flood, and the Edge, the album was released in July 1993 and reached Number One. When the tour ended, with two shows at Tokyo's Egg Dome in December 1993, the members of U2 took another break.

On February 12, 1997, U2 held a press conference at a New York City Kmart to announce its next album and tour. PopMart, the tour, would be even more of a spectacle than Zoo TV. It would kick off in Las Vegas and include some seventy stadium dates worldwide. The stage would boast the world's largest video screen, a hundred-foot golden arch, a giant stuffed olive, and a nearly forty-foot-high lemon. In an effort to explain this new direction, the Edge said, "We believe in trash, we believe in kitsch, and that's what we're up to at the moment." *Pop*, the album, was heavily influenced by electronica and marked yet another musical change for the group. It entered the charts at Number One in twenty-eight countries and gave U2 an additional Top Ten single, "Discotheque."

In 1999, Bono shifted his focus from music to social politics. He became the chief spokesman for Jubilee 2000, a campaign to persuade the wealthier nations of the world to forgive third world debt. In that role, he became a fixture in newspapers as he made his way around the globe and met with the likes of U.S. president Bill Clinton, British prime minister Tony Blair, and Pope John Paul II (whom Bono convinced to



▲ The Edge, Bono, and Larry Mullen Jr., at the Baggot Pub, Dublin, 1979



▲ Bono testifying to a Dutch audience, 'Joshua Tree' tour, 1987

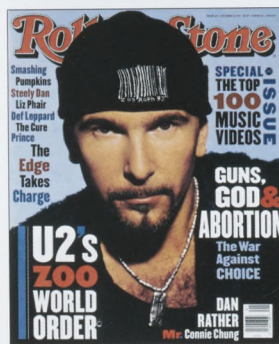
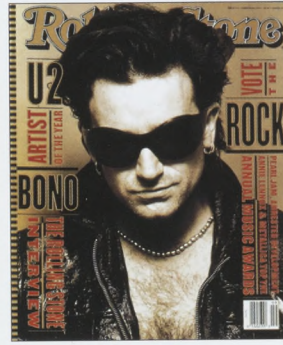
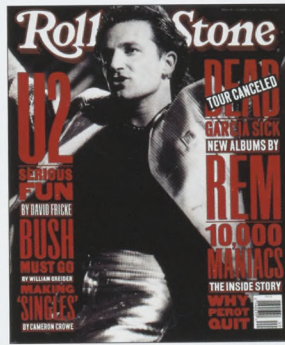
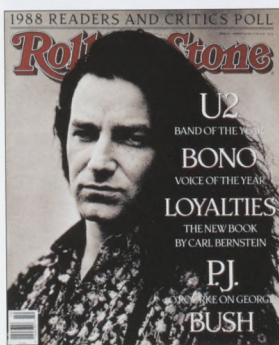
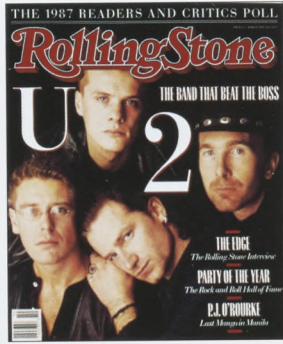
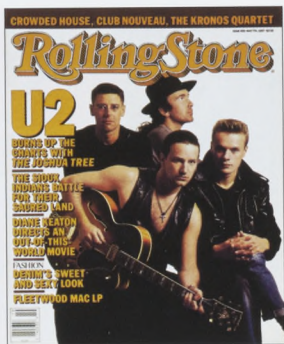


▲ Bono serenades the Edge during the Zoo TV tour, 1992.



▲ U2 surprised Brooklyn, New York, with a "truck tour," November 2004.





▲ Since 1985, U2 has been featured on the cover of 'Rolling Stone' a dozen times, most recently the December 30, 2004-January 13, 2005 issue.

don his ever present shades). He also cowrote a song, "New Day," with hip-hop multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Wyclef Jean. The proceeds from the song went to benefit relief efforts in Kosovo. And in 2001, Bono organized an all-star recording of the Marvin Gaye classic "What's Going On." It featured everyone from Britney Spears to R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe, and the profits went to the United Way's September 11th Fund and the Artists Against AIDS Worldwide campaign. By the end of 2002, the escalating AIDS crisis in Africa had become Bono's major focus, and he was becoming as well known for his sociopolitical efforts as for his music. In fact, in March 2002, *Time* magazine put him on the cover, with a headline asking: CAN BONO SAVE THE WORLD?

Meanwhile, in October 2000, U2 released *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. Produced by Eno and Lanois, the album was a return to the classic U2 sound. The subsequent Elevation tour was also something of a return to basics for the band, as the lavish sets and costumes were dropped in favor of a more stripped-down format. The back-to-basics approach paid off, as the material from *All That You Can't Leave Behind* swept the Grammy Awards in both 2001 and 2002. In a rare feat, the group captured two consecutive awards for Record of the Year, with "Beautiful Day" winning in 2001, and "Walk On" winning in 2002. "Elevation" and "Stuck in a

Moment You Can't Get Out Of" also won awards for Best Rock Performance and Best Pop Performance, and the album won the award for Best Rock Album in 2002.

During the past two years, Bono has continued to maintain a high profile as one of the world's most unrelenting social activists. As he worked the media and politicians on behalf of the Third World, the other members of U2 convened in their Dublin studio to begin work on yet another album. After a series of sessions with legendary producer Chris Thomas, U2 went back to its roots and enlisted Steve Lillywhite as producer. The resulting album, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, was released in November 2004 and was the group's hardest-rocking studio work in years. Many critics proclaimed it the band's best album ever, and the public seemed to agree. It entered the charts at Number One and hung in the Top Ten for weeks.

As this induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame takes place, U2 is once again preparing for a massive world tour. It is also, by any measurement, the most influential rock group in the world. The idea of slowing down is the furthest thing from its members' minds. And so is, quite frankly, the idea of being inducted into the Hall of Fame. "To be perfectly honest, I hate the idea of being in any hall of fame," Bono was recently quoted as saying. "We don't want to be in any hall of fame until we're retired or dead." And that seems a long way off. ●



