

Drowning Man

War, 1983

37 “IT WAS THE TITLE OF A SAM Beckett-style play I’d started about a drowning man,” Bono said about this handsome, haunting piece. But in gestures the absurdist Irish writer might’ve appreciated, there’s no mention of a drowning man anywhere in the lyrics, which conflate romantic and spiritual love, and crib lines from the Bible (Isaiah: 40, to be precise). Etched with the Edge’s acoustic-guitar strokes and capped with a Middle Eastern-flavored violin flourish, the dazzling music points toward the ambitious tapestries of *The Joshua Tree*; the Edge described the final version as “perfection. It’s one of the most successful pieces of recording we’ve ever done.”

The Electric Co.

Boy, 1980

38 “THE ELECTRIC CO.” raged about a friend who’d been tortured with electroshock therapy at a Dublin psychiatric hospital. It was a high point on U2’s 1980 debut, *Boy*, with reverb-crazed guitar steeped in Public Image Ltd or Echo and the Bunnymen, as well as the “boy” refrain that gave the album its title. Onstage, Bono often threw in a snippet of Stephen Sondheim’s “Send in the Clowns,” which turned out to be an expensive habit when U2 released it on *Under a Blood Red Sky* before clearing the rights. (The snippet was cut from later editions.) Bono began replacing “Send in the Clowns” with “Amazing Grace” – a much cheaper option.

Luminous Times (Hold On to Love)

Non-album B Side, 1987

39 A TESTAMENT TO THE creative roll U2 were on during the *Joshua Tree* sessions, this excellent, darkly roiling song about love’s addictive power ended up on the cutting-room floor. (A demo version was used as the B side to “With or Without You.”) The band recorded it without the help of either Brian Eno or Daniel Lanois, arriving at something closer to the shadowy expressionist charge of arty European punk than American blues or gospel. Though “Luminous Times” was never fully completed, the Edge told Eno, “I think this is as good as anything on the album.”

Love Is Blindness

Achtung Baby, 1991

40 THIS PULSATING, CELESTIAL-effects ballad, the concluding track on *Achtung Baby*, wasn’t originally intended for U2; Bono wrote the song (on piano, which he rarely did) with R&B-soul diva Nina Simone in mind before U2 kept it for themselves. The Edge has said the song has “probably one of Bono’s finest lyrics”; the reference to “a little death,” Bono has said, “can be taken to mean a faint during orgasm but also works as an image of terrorism.... I was mixing up the personal and the political.” The personal factored into the music as well: Recording his solo, the Edge, who was separating from his wife, “played until the strings came off,” Bono said.

Volcano

Songs of Innocence, 2014

41 FOR 2014’S “SONGS OF INNOCENCE,” U2 created a concept album based on their experiences growing up in Dublin. “We wanted to make a very personal album,” Bono told ROLLING STONE. “Let’s try to figure out why we wanted to be in a band, the relationships around the band, our friendships, our lovers, our family. The whole album is first journeys – first journeys geographically, spiritually, sexually. And that’s hard. But we went there.” “Volcano,” which kicks off with a throbbing bass hook written by the Edge, taps the anger Bono felt as a teenager until he joined his band. “You were alone,” he sings. “But now you are rock & roll.”

In a Little While

All That You Can’t Leave Behind, 2000

42 WHEN BONO CAME UP WITH the understated, soul-kissed “In a Little While,” he thought he’d written a simple little tune about stumbling home after a night out drinking and facing the inevitable hangover to come (“Friday night running/To Sunday on my knees”). But the song took on a new meaning when Joey Ramone died of cancer only a year after its release; the singer was a huge U2 fan who loved *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*, and he had been listening to “In a Little While” in the hospital during his final moments. “Joey turned this song about a hangover into a gospel song,” Bono said later. “That’s the way I always hear it now, through Joey Ramone’s ears.”



Bono, circa 1980, when U2’s debut album was released

Lemon

Zooropa, 1993

43 “‘LEMON’ STARTED OUT AS a disco tune until Brian Eno got through with it,” said *Zooropa* engineer Flood about this propulsive dance track, a showcase for Bono’s falsetto. Flood credited Eno for coming up with chilly Talking Heads-esque background vocals, “making it a very bizarre folk song.” “Lemon” was originally written and recorded with a drum machine, though Flood ultimately decided to use Mullen’s live drums instead. In contrast to the upbeat art-rock feel, lyrically it was inspired by the “strange experience to receive, in the post, from a very distant relative, early Super 8 footage of my mother,” said Bono, “aged 24, younger than me, playing a game of rounders in slow motion.”

No Line on the Horizon

No Line on the Horizon, 2009

44 U2 BEGAN WORK ON WHAT would become *No Line on the Horizon* in 2006 with veteran producer Rick Rubin. But when those sessions proved unsuccessful, they soon returned to their longtime collaborators Daniel Lanois and Brian Eno, traveling to Morocco to begin recording as a six-piece band. They nailed the album’s pulsating title track – about a “girl, a hole in her heart” – in a single take. “It’s very raw and very to the point,” the Edge told ROLLING STONE. “It’s rock & roll 2009.” Said Bono, “You could have called this album ‘The Pilgrim and His Lack of Progress,’ because all the characters are struggling to stay true to their values or want to realize their potential.”

BOOKSHELF

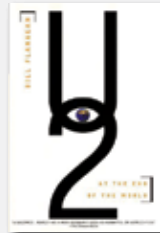
U2: 360

Essential reading for casual fans and lifelong obsessives – including a deep dive into the band’s songwriting history and an epic sit-down with Bono. By Andy Greene



U2 by U2
U2 WITH NEIL MCCORMICK
2005

This official coffee-table-size oral history – crammed full of amazing photos and anecdotes – tells the band’s entire story in their own words. No other U2 book comes close to providing this much inside detail of the band’s career, particularly its chaotic pre-fame days in Ireland.



U2: At the End of the World
BILL FLANAGAN
1995

Future VH1 executive Flanagan spent four years traveling the world with U2 around the Zoo TV Tour. His amazing fly-on-the-wall account offers an image of the band at its peak, recording *Zooropa*, befriending Bill Clinton and becoming global leaders.



U2 Into the Heart: The Stories Behind Every U2 Song
NIALL STOKES
1996

Stokes, an Irish journalist, details the creation of every U2 song. The most recent edition goes from *Boy* to 2009’s *No Line on the Horizon*, with a bonus chapter that delves into B sides and rarities like “Alex Descends Into Hell for a Bottle of Milk.”



U2 Live: A Concert Documentary
PIMM JAL DE LA PARRA
2003 ed.

The best available guide to U2’s live performance history. Want to learn about the time that Larry Mullen Jr. took the mic in Anaheim, California, and sang “Dirty Old Town,” or what they played when they opened up for Thin Lizzy in 1981? This is the place to find out.



Bono: In Conversation
MICHKA ASSAYAS
2005

In late 2002, Bono began a series of interviews with French journalist Assayas that ultimately ran for three years. They talked about everything from Bono’s troubled childhood in Dublin to his love of Neil Diamond. At 350 pages, it’s like spending hours with an icon.

Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me

Batman Forever: Original Music
From the Motion Picture, 1995

45 CO-PRODUCED BY BRITISH TRIP-HOP artist Nellee Hooper, “Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me” dates back to the *Zooropa* sessions – on the album’s cover, it’s referred to in distorted purple letters spelling “ISSMEKILLM.” It emerged in 1995 as the lead single from the *Batman Forever* soundtrack – a rare move into blockbuster work for Bono and the Edge, who had previously done music for artier films by directors like Wim Wenders and Robert Altman. Though Bono originally balked at the idea, the Edge said, “I figured it’d be good for us to be involved in something that’s basically throwaway and lighthearted.” The gamble paid off, and it ended up a bigger hit than anything off *Zooropa*, thanks to a track that gave their Nineties dance flavors a woozily anthemic feel. Bono sings, “They’ll want their money back/If you’re alive at 33.” On the PopMart tour, the band made stark reference to the dark side of fame by projecting Warhol-esque images of celebrities, many of whom had died young, including Jim Morrison, Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain and Tupac Shakur.

Sweetest Thing

Non-album B side, 1987

46 “SWEETEST THING” BEGAN as Bono’s apology to his wife, Ali, for spending her birthday in the studio, but it became so much more. After releasing it as a B side to “Where the Streets Have No Name,” the band gave it a face-lift with rejiggered vocals and new guitar textures for a 1998 best-of compilation. U2 also made a video for the song that featured Bono wooing Ali. After albums like *Pop* and *Zooropa*, it signaled a songful return to form, paving the way for *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*. “It’s pop as it should be – not produced out of existence, but pop produced with a real intimacy and purity,” the Edge said.

North and South of the River

Non-album B side, 1997

47 WHEN BONO WROTE “SUNDAY Bloody Sunday,” he was an angry 22-year-old. But 15 years later, when he penned this somber reflection on the conflict in Northern Ireland, he was more interested in pleading than shouting. “There was a badness that had its way,” he sang. “But love wasn’t lost, love will have its day.” Originally buried as a B side to 1997’s “Staring at the Sun,” this sad ode to peace got its definitive version on Irish TV in 1998, when U2 played a tribute show to the victims of a recent terrorist bombing.

Acrobat

Achtung Baby, 1991

48 “IT’S AN UNUSUAL TIME signature for us,” said the Edge of *Achtung Baby*’s penultimate track. “It’s like a 6/8 almost, which is a very Irish time signature. It’s used in a lot of traditional Irish music, but in rock & roll you don’t really hear it that much.” Though the Edge spent the run-up to the dance-centric *Achtung Baby* absorbing the industrial sounds of bands like KMFDM and Einstürzende Neubauten, this song’s rhythm is actually driven by an atypically busy performance from Mullen, who’d been listening to the classic rock of Cream and Jimi Hendrix. The result is a quintessential U2 mix of tradition and innovation.

Numb

Zooropa, 1993

49 THIS UNIQUE U2 SINGLE began as a discarded track from *Achtung Baby* called “Down All the Days.” “It’s this quite unhinged electronic backing track with a very traditional melody and lyrics,” said the Edge when “Down” reappeared on *Achtung Baby*’s 20th-anniversary re-issue. “It almost worked.” What made it work as “Numb” was replacing Bono’s melody with the Edge’s deadpan rapping and lots of errant noises and samples. “What we’re trying to do is re-create that feeling of sensory overload,” said Bono. “So you hear a football crowd, a line of ‘don’t’s, kitsch soul singing and Larry singing [background vocals] for the first time in that context.”

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War, 1983

50 BONO TOOK THIS LYRIC from one of his key influences: King David, who wrote the Psalms. “I was always interested in the character of David in the Bible because he was such a screw-up. It’s a great amusement to me that the people God chose to use in the Scriptures were all liars, cheaters, adulterers, murderers. I don’t know which of those activities I was involved in at the time, but I certainly related to David. I was writing my psalm.” U2’s version of Psalm 40 (“I waited patiently for the Lord”) gave *War* its big finale and became one of their trusty concert-closing singalongs.

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Into the
Heart
Bono in New
York, 1992