

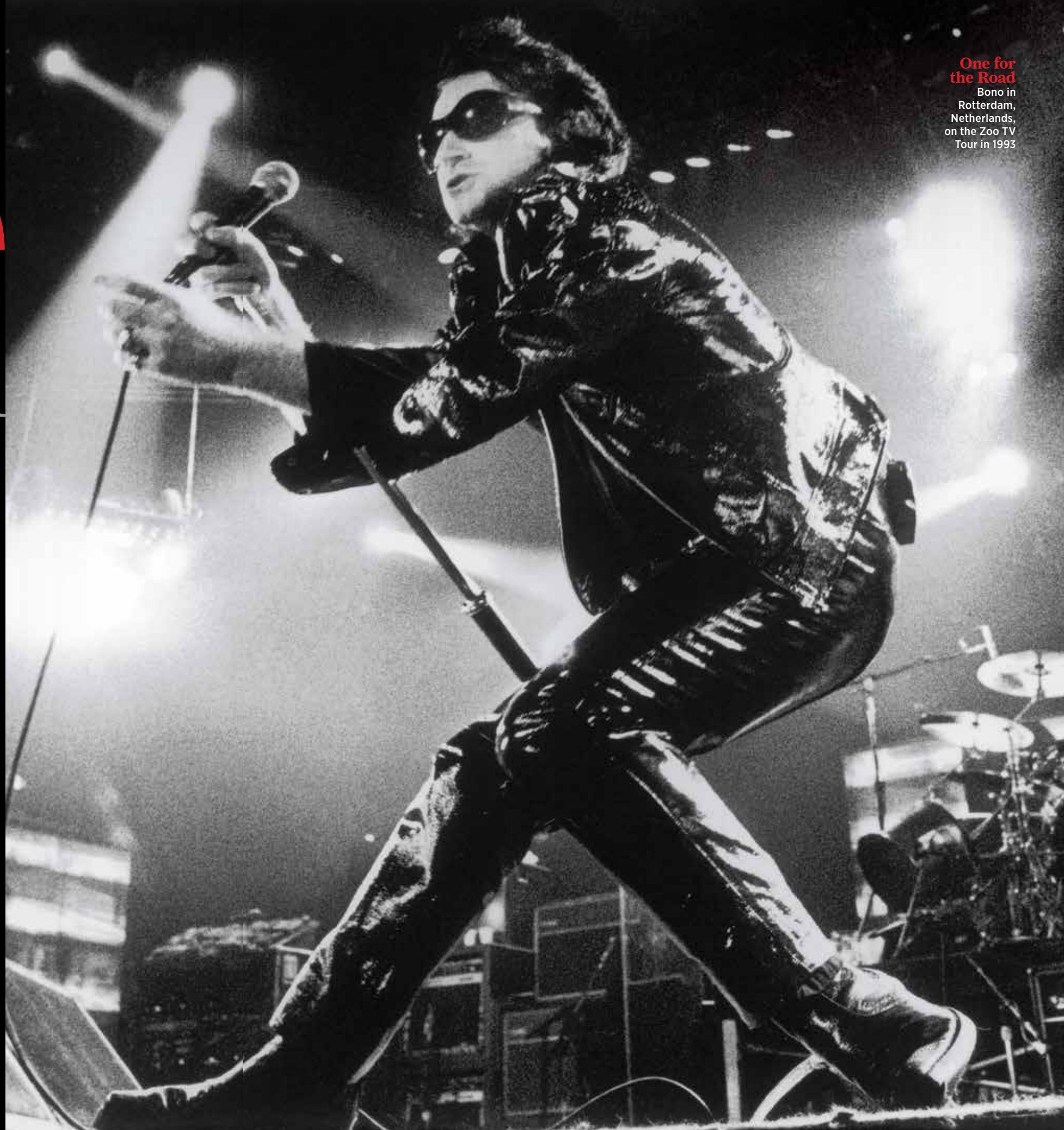
No. 1

One

Achtung Baby, 1991

IN A CATALOG DEVOTED TO EXPLORING ROMANTIC LOVE, spiritual faith and social justice, no single U2 song unites all these themes as potently as this supreme soul ballad. “It’s [about] coming together, but not the old hippie idea of ‘Let’s all live together,’” Bono said. “It is, in fact, the opposite. It’s saying, ‘We are one, but we’re not the same’ . . . [and] we have to get along together in this world if it is to survive.”

The lyrics, informed by tensions within U2 at the time, “fell out of the sky, a gift,” recalled Bono. “‘One,’ of course, is about the band.” The music, born of paired Edge guitar riffs, was painstakingly sculpted by producers Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois, who added tension to the gentle beauty. The result is an immaculate balance of the intimate and anthemic. The understated rhythm section and Edge’s rainbow hues map Bono’s journey from the near-whispered opening (“Is it getting better?”), to the bridge where he declaims “love” in a cracked holler, to the falsetto outro, all pain and fierce hope. “One” reflects many geopolitical rifts – it was recorded in Germany, as the Cold War was coming to an end, and mixed in Ireland. Bono later recalled “going around Europe when stuff was going on in Bosnia, sometimes 300 miles from where we were playing.” Released as a single to benefit AIDS research, it spoke to families riven by the disease and to all embattled lovers. Singers from Johnny Cash to Mary J. Blige have covered it, Michael Stipe memorably sang it at an MTV event celebrating Bill Clinton’s inauguration, and Axl Rose called it “one of the greatest songs that’s ever been written,” adding that, when he first heard it, “I just broke down crying.”



One for the Road
Bono in Rotterdam, Netherlands, on the Zoo TV Tour in 1993