



Wide Awake

Adam Clayton, the  
Edge, Bono and  
Larry Mullen Jr., in  
Ireland, 1984

Pop ruled in the mid-Eighties.  
But U2 built a fanatical  
following by playing rock  
& roll with a new kind of  
energy and spiritual purpose

**By Christopher Connelly**

# Keeping the Faith

**T**HE RAMADA INN OF DÜSSELDORF, West Germany, stands on the outskirts of town amid a host of low-slung corporate buildings: a tall, sleek, bloodless base for junior industrialists away from home. It's hard to imagine a place farther removed from the gritty, red-brick bustle of U2's hometown, Dublin. Consider, then, the surprise of drummer Larry Mullen Jr. as he snacked on some biscuits and tea in the hotel's bar one morning. There in front of him was Ronnie Drew, the craggy-faced singer for one of Ireland's most popular groups, the Dubliners. The fiftyish Drew, rather an *éminence grise* of traditional Irish folk music, could hardly be mistaken for a rock & roll buff – yet as he pulled up a chair next to Mullen, he was quick to express his regard for the work of U2.

"Oh, you're a great band," Drew told Mullen. "My kids just think you're the greatest, have all your records, listen to them all the time. Yeah, the kids love ya." They chatted briefly before Ronnie got up to leave. "You know," he said gravely, "it would be a great honor if I could tell them that you bought me a drink."

In America, their names are not household words, and their faces are unfamiliar to even some of their fans. They have yet to notch a Top 10 album or single. Only now are they beginning to tour arena-size venues. But for a growing number of rock & roll fans, U2 – vocalist Paul "Bono" Hewson, 24; guitarist Dave "the Edge" Evans, 22; bassist Adam Clayton, 24; and Mullen, 22 – have become the band that matters most, maybe even the only band that matters. It's no coincidence that U2 sell more T-shirts and merchandise than groups that sell twice as many records, or that four of U2's five albums are currently on *Billboard's* Top 200. The group has become one of the handful of artists in rock & roll history (the Who, the Grateful Dead, Bruce Springsteen) that people are eager to identify themselves with. And they've done it not just with their music but with a larger message as well – by singing "Pride (In the Name of Love)" while most other groups sing about pride in the act of love.

On record, U2's thunderous sound (developed with help from producer Steve Lillywhite) turned heads from the beginning. Instead of copping the straight-ahead squall of the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, U2 cast the brash, heroic spirit of punk in a new image. Their sound was echoey and atmospheric, while their lyrics were more attuned to the grayer areas of human existence. In 1981, the band's first LP, *Boy*, established a U.S. beachhead thanks to "I Will Follow," a keening single that found a home on college radio. *Boy's* successor, *October*, was written and recorded in a mad dash after Bono's book of lyrics was stolen; it sold poorly.

U2's American breakthrough came with 1983's *War*, which marshaled the sounds of militarism – *rat-a-tat-tat* drums, savage guitar work, defiant vocals – in the service of pacifism, albeit a pacifism ready to wage a moral battle with its enemies. Such songs as "New Year's Day" (about the Soviet domination of Poland) and "Sunday Bloody Sunday" (about a massacre of

civilians by the British in Northern Ireland) became radio staples, and the LP sold over a million copies. U2's live shows had always drawn fervent audiences, but now Bono solidified the success of *War* by crystallizing its messages onstage in bold physical images. His most memorable gesture was brandishing a white flag – what he termed "a flag drained of all color" – during "Sunday Bloody Sunday," as if to say that in war, surrender was the bravest course. It was no wonder that *War's* 1983 follow-up, a live mini-LP titled *Under a Blood Red Sky*, also earned the group a gold album.

The band's appeal doesn't seem to be sexual: No member of U2 appears to have seen the inside of a health club or a New Wave haberdashery, and only Mullen could pass for a Cute Guy. U2's strength, it seems, goes deeper. Like most rock & roll bands, U2 articulate, at top volume, the alienation that young people can feel from their country, their hometown, their family, their sexuality. Like some of the best rock & roll bands, U2 show how that alienation might be overcome. But unlike anyone else in rock & roll, U2 also address the most ignored – and most volatile – area of inquiry: alienation from religion.

"Sodomasochism is not taboo in rock & roll," notes Bono. "Spirituality is." Indeed, when religion in America seems sadly synonymous with political conservatism and with the electronic evangelism of Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell, U2 dare to proclaim their belief in Christianity – at top volume – while grappling with the ramifications of its faith. Each member is careful to avoid discussing the specifics of his beliefs (the perfectly amiable Mullen, in fact, customarily declines to give interviews), and the band's musical message is hardly a proselytizing one. But even to raise the issue, to suggest that a person who loves rock & roll can unashamedly find peace with God as well, is a powerful statement. This is a band that onstage and offstage seems guided by a philosophy not included in such yuppie maxims as "feeling good" and "go for it": not how might we live our lives (what we can get away with), but how ought we to live our lives.

**L**OFTY GOALS – BUT WHILE THE PROMISE of U2's records has always been great, it is a promise that remains largely unfulfilled. In the past year and a half, U2 have found themselves faced with several critical decisions: artistic, financial, personal, even patriotic. Each choice represented a test of whether the band could continue to articulate its message and fulfill its promise without drowning in contradictions. And while the outcome isn't settled yet, U2 seem to have come through their crises in good shape – due in large part, perhaps, to the band members' willingness to acknowledge their own weaknesses.

"It interests me that I'm portrayed as some sort of strongman," says Bono with genuine perplexity. "I don't see myself in that way. I know my weaknesses. When I see the albums, I don't see them as anthemic. I think that's what's uplifting, that's what connects with people. I think people relate to U2 because they've seen us fall on our face so many times."

Clad from head to foot in his usual color – black – Bono sat in the downstairs bar at a London hotel last November, merrily bouncing Edge's five-month-old daughter, Holly, on his lap. In a few hours, U2 would head to Düsseldorf, where the band had been booked to perform at Rock Pop, a concert festival in nearby Dortmund that would be filmed and shown to much of Western Europe. The one-show tour would allow the band to rest up while giving it one more shot at breaking in West Germany – a land

#### Peace Patrol

U2 on the *War* tour in 1983. "It interests me that I'm portrayed as some kind of strongman," says Bono.



where Bono had once told a less-than-delirious audience, “In my country, it’s customary to clap.”

As Holly gurgled approvingly, Bono read aloud from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” U2 being the sort of band that takes *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* along on tour. His road-ravaged voice was clear and suitably melodramatic, but by the third stanza, Holly was grabbing for something round and shiny on the table in front of them. “Money,” explained Bono to the tot. “That’s what all the trouble’s about.”

He knew. At the beginning of 1984, the band not only had to hire a producer for the album that became *The Unforgettable Fire*, but it also began negotiating a new record contract. It was the latter choice that provoked more dread: “The greatest threat to the career of this band, or any other band,” Edge had declared, “is financial success.”

But choosing a producer to replace Steve Lillywhite came first. U2 had enjoyed working with Jimmy Iovine, who had offered to produce *Under a Blood Red Sky* for next to nothing just for the chance to work with them. Paul McGuinness, the group’s savvy manager, liked Iovine’s commercially proven skills, but the band members chose the duo of Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois.

“We decided that the music should decide,” explained Bono. “And we made some music, and we could see that it was a more abstract – dare I say it, ambient – record that we were going to

pocket or in my bank account. I don’t want to say that money is not important to me, because it is disgusting for me to say that at a time when a lot of people don’t have money. So I’m thankful that I don’t have to worry about my next meal. It is a threat to the band, because I don’t want anything to take away from our focus. But I just don’t want to see it.”

**I**T WAS ONE IN THE MORNING IN DÜSSELDORF when Bono – his busby of black hair tucked under a hat – rested his boot-clad feet on a chair in his hotel room, opened a beer and talked about how he’d gotten here.

“We grew up on a street where people got a job, got married, had children...and died. And went to the pub. We’d meet a guy, he’d say, ‘Drinking? Oh, yeah, drinking Thursday night, drinking Friday night, drinking Saturday night, drinking Sunday morning after Mass, drinking Sunday night. Back to the jar on Tuesday night.’ We would see this. And we just said, ‘We will not become a part of this.’”

He was christened Paul Hewson, the second son of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father. His nickname – originally Bono Vox, though he spurns the second name nowadays – was hung on him by Guggi, a guy in his gang (Guggi’s younger brother appeared on the *War* cover). To this day, Bono isn’t sure what “Bono Vox” referred to, though his gift for gab may have had something to do with it. The nickname was just a way to fit in, really, alongside Clive Whistling Fellow and Man-of-Strength Arran and Guck Pants Delaney and Little Biddy One-Way Street and all the rest of the restless Irish kids who hung out on the streets of Ballymun, a district within Dublin. “We were this gang of nut cases,” Bono recalled. “We’d get electric drills, a saw, a hose, a sweeping brush, and just go into the heart of the city, in the street, and put on a performance. Just make it up on the spot. We kind of had our own way. We were very extreme in our alternatives.” Bono’s early days were trouble-free. “I never suffered under Roman Catholicism,” he said. “I never suffered under Protestantism. I never

suffered under anything. I just grew up.” His family even sent him to a nondenominational public school. His placid domestic life changed in his teens, though, when his mother died. “It was no longer a home; it was just a house,” he recalled. “There were these three men: my father, my older brother and myself. And I was such a bastard. I used to fight a lot with my brother. In fact, I think there’s still blood on the kitchen wall. I threw a knife at him once, actually. I missed.

“But my father had some incredible strength – and when his wife died, he didn’t give in. He fought against it, he kept the house, he wouldn’t let it go down. You can imagine three guys living in a house. It could go over. He wasn’t letting it go. But I was.”

The rage spilled over in school. But instead of making Bono cynical, the death of his mother fostered religious faith in him. He started seeing the finest cutups of his generation piddling away their wit and abilities, just as they had vowed not to. “Some really talented people started getting into drugs and dying. When you see somebody who has so much end up with so little, that can really upset you.” The performance art of his early adolescence had hardened into an elitism. “I felt we were laughing at the same jokes as the years went by, and I backed off.”

# ‘There is a battle between good and evil. You’ve gotta find your place.’

make. And who better?” Who indeed? But Eno and Lanois kept U2 from harnessing their talents into compact, concise rock & roll songs and instead encouraged the group to preserve its more inchoate creations just as they were. Some of *The Unforgettable Fire* has an unfinished, slapdash quality, while other tracks – “A Sort of Homecoming,” for example – seem fussy and unfocused.

Few listeners, though, had anything bad to say about the LP’s stirring paean to Martin Luther King, “Pride (In the Name of Love),” despite a historical inaccuracy (he was assassinated in the evening, not the morning). Reaching the Top 20, it became U2’s most successful single ever and helped to boost *The Unforgettable Fire* – named for a series of harrowing paintings drawn by survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – into the Top 15. The LP was not the commercial smasher that some had hoped for, but that is quite all right with everyone in the U2 camp. They followed their muse, and they have no regrets.

Also in ’84, McGuinness negotiated an extraordinarily lucrative extension of the group’s pact with Island Records. Almost overnight, four lads from Dublin became wildly rich – certainly millionaires.

Bono chafed when he talked about it. “I don’t know. I don’t have a million dollars in my

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He remembered his promise to find a life outside what he saw around him, and he discovered rock & roll. He left some of his friends behind. “They still live on those extremes,” Bono said. “Still go into pubs in order to get thrown out. But that’s the kind of background of the group. That’s where we come from.”

**‘W**E COULDN’T REALLY SAY WE were an indigenous part of Bono’s upbringing,” declared Adam Clayton, as he and Edge sipped brandies in their hotel room one night later, the night before their concert. “We were accepted, but we weren’t the innovators.”

Within the context of U2, the pair seem polar opposites. The English-born Clayton has blond, curly hair and a body that tends toward the mildly rotund, and is given to easy laughter, bons mots and even – gasp! – the occasional rock & roll indulgence. Edge has the wise, slightly sad face of an Irish shopkeeper, keeps his shirts buttoned to the neck, is soft-spoken but musically daring and seems possessed of an infinite store of dignity – a most unusual trait in a rock performer. The two have been close friends since their earliest days.

“We would spend weekends watching telly and not mixing with people,” recalled Clayton, “because we weren’t interested in girls and we weren’t interested in getting drunk. So when somebody said, ‘Let’s form a band,’ we thought of it as something to do with people we wanted to be with.”

“I think it was an actual passion for playing music,” said Edge. What galvanized the band musically was, of course,

punk: Television, the Stranglers, Patti Smith. From the start, though, the band saw themselves as tied neither to American rock & roll nor to a cooler, European sound. They saw their rootlessness as both a strength and a weakness. But what truly made the band special – what would attract the attention of their manager-to-be, Paul McGuinness – was the lead singer.

“I think he did something which not many others did,” recalled Edge, “and that was confront a crowd. Around that era, most bands were basically as good as their material. Bono was different. He went out there and he assumed this importance and this character and eyed the audience and was totally impressive – even though nothing behind him backed him up.”

The group cut its teeth by playing opening gigs for a host of Irish bands whose names are largely lost to history. After winning a rock-band contest, U2 were signed to an Ireland-only deal by CBS, which issued the group’s first record, a three-song EP called *U23*. CBS, though, declined to ink the band to a worldwide deal, and so the ever-energetic Bono took to passing out tapes of U2’s performances to sympathetic journalists. The resultant buzz made its way to Island Records, which signed the group in 1980.

The years since have brought many changes for Clayton and Edge – personal as well as professional. “We started working at the age of 16, roughly, up until now, when I’m 24,” said Clayton, “and in that period we’ve seen an awful lot of the world, relatively little of our families, and have had absolutely no private life. I think there is a point where you sort of react against that.

**Another Time, Another Place**  
U2 in London, 1979. The band was formed out of “people we wanted to be with,” said Clayton.

Now we're getting to a stage where we're defining our own personalities much more strongly. Edge is married, he has a child. Bono is married. You know, it's a different situation than what we were like eight years ago, just starting out. You have to face facts, but not see it as a threat to the band."

Clayton's private life – he is the one member of the band who is not avowedly religious – did cause some controversy. "In fact, I wasn't being really bad, I was being normal. But in the context of the story, the rock star with these clean-living people..."

"I would say there was an effort on your part to establish your own identity," Edge responded. "You're not a man who takes things to excess." Whatever Clayton's past reputation, times have changed. "In fact, if the truth be known," said Edge, with a gleam in his eye, "Adam is such a boring old fart at this stage, it's myself and Bono that are hauled out of the nightclubs at two in the morning while Adam is home sleeping with his feet on a hot-water bottle. He's prematurely aged."

Edge was kidding about himself, though. "Drugs and the whole idea of smoking dope and getting absolutely drunk seemed to me like an unjustifiable activity. The whole drug culture is a criminal thing; the same guys who deal the marijuana are the guys who deal heroin, who break people's legs, who get 13-year-olds hooked. I felt no attraction to that side of it." He paused. "Now, Adam, having no particularly strong moral standpoint..."

You could barely hear Edge talking over Clayton's laughter. "I mean, that story about Adam and the corpse in that Holiday Inn..."

**D**ESPITE THE BAND'S DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE, Bono has remained the group's primary lightning rod, the focal point for much of the criticism leveled at the band. And as he was pointing out over breakfast the next morning, he can get into some pretty hot water at times – like when he appeared onstage near Dublin with Bob Dylan. "He took me to the side of the stage and said, 'You know the words to 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat?'" And I said yes. I was lying.

"So I came onstage and just sang. And I think a lot of people were very unimpressed by my performance." Bono howled with laughter for a moment. "'Am I done?' And then Dylan's son came over and said, 'Listen, Bob would like you to close the show. He'd like you to sing 'Blowin' in the Wind.'" He obviously figured I knew the words to 'Blowin' in the Wind.'

"I went out there, and Dylan sang all the verses I knew, so it was either go back and begin the song again or go forward – and I decided to forget it, and I just wrote this other verse. In the middle of this, Dylan turned 'round and said to his bass player, 'What key are we in?' 'Cause I'd changed the tune as well as the words.

"Well, the papers hung me from a tree the next day. And while I was driving through Dublin, I was stopped at the lights, and these two guys came up to me. And I rolled down the window, and one of them stuck his head in the car and started looking around, as Irishmen are given to do. He says, 'How are you, Bono?' And I say, 'How are you?' He says, 'I saw you up on the park with Dylan.' And I say, 'Oh, yeah?' He says, 'What were you playin' up there? Jay-sus, you were way off the mark.'"

That remark notwithstanding, U2 are generally respected for being one of the first Irish groups to remain in the Emerald Isle after hitting it big – and have come to be associated with Ireland by many. The band has taken great pains to avoid getting politically pigeonholed, especially with regard to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. But last year, Bono was forced to "put my body where my mouth was" when Irish Prime Minister Gar-

ret FitzGerald, with whom Bono had had a running correspondence, asked the singer to serve on a government committee on unemployment.

Bono accepted, but the experience was ultimately disillusioning – and revealing. "There were good people there, you know," he said, "but there was another language I had to come up with, which is committee-speak.

"I realized that..." – he exhaled deeply – "there is a battle, as I see it, between good and evil, and I think you've got to find your place in that. It may be on a factory floor, or it may be writing songs."

The band's increasing fame has altered U2's unusually close personal relationship with the public, Bono said. "Now, when I go out, people aren't relating to me, they're relating to me as some sort of pop star. And so I go back to this place, and a hotel room can be a real prison cell at times. I can understand how a lot of people get into drugs. But I'm lucky because I have a lot more in my life than just that to hold me up."

What keeps him going? His family, his faith – and his belief in the importance of his art. "We have this light in the distance. I don't know what it is, a musical goal or what. But we're certain that we're going toward it. We're always arguing with each other and pushing people out of the way so we can get there. But it's for the music, it's not for the other things."

**O**N A WIND-WHIPPED DUBLIN EVENING, Bono sat sipping beers at the Docker, a riverfront pub just a block away from Windmill Lane, where U2's business office is located. Around him was an assortment of Eire's finest: the country's top television-commercial director, a couple of chatty colleens and about four barkeeps (all named Joe), plus a visitor from America.

He drove his visitor past the boarded-up docks along the river Liffey, docks once used by the Guinness brewery until the company moved its operation eastward 15 years ago. Times have been lean since, he said. They pulled up at the Grand Canal and the G was missing from its large sign: WELCOME TO THE RAND CANAL.


It was dusk, and the wind was blowing with such authority that it was hard to hear Bono talking after they climbed out of his car. As the occasional young boy or stray dog trotted past, Bono started pointing out some of the sights, silhouetted against the darkening November sky. Look, he said, there's the bakery where the 1916 Easter Rebellion began; there's the factory that won an architectural prize in the 1940s but lies dormant today. He said he'd just finished writing a song called "I Don't Live in Irishtown." "It's about a man who isn't Protestant or Catholic, English or Irish..."

He kept talking as the pair crossed another bridge. "During 'Pride,' I came out here with Chris," he said, referring to Christine Kerr (nee Hynde), who sang backup vocals on the song. "We looked down into the water, and we saw this fish, and we saw this great big eel [going after it]. We wondered: Should we interfere with the course of nature?"

And?

"We threw a rock at the eel, and it swam away."

The American asked him about a brightly lit bridge in the distance. "It's brand-new," he said. "They call it the East Link. It's never been there before."

He walked around and thought for a moment. "People are interested in bridges," he sighed. "I guess I've always been more interested in what goes on underneath bridges." 

### Tearing Down the Walls

At Ireland's Moydrum Castle, which appears on the *Unforgettable Fire* cover, 1984

