

A Prayer

In his definitive
RS Interview,
Bono looked
back on his
life's work and
opened up like
never before
By Jann S. Wenner





IN THE FIRST WEEKEND OF october, I visited Bono in Cancún, Mexico, where U2 were on a weeklong break in their Vertigo Tour. Bono and Larry Mullen Jr. were both there with their families – in fact, it was Elvis Mullen’s 10th birthday that weekend, and a barbecue was planned at the house Bono had rented on the beach, where he, his wife of 23 years, Ali, and their four children were staying. With a storm gathering outside, Bono and I retreated to the bedroom, where we sat down to begin our conversation. We started at noon and talked into the evening, then started again the next morning. In all, we talked for more than 10 hours. Anyone who has been to a U2 concert knows Bono’s dramatic ability to tell a story and his sheer love of words. One on one, he is just as impressive, full of wit and charm. And he does love to talk. Two weeks later, the day before U2’s fifth sold-out show at Madison Square Garden in New York, Bono stopped at the “Rolling Stone” office to spend an hour or two clarifying a few more points. “You’re going to need an anti-Bono-nic when this is all over,” he joked.

The story of Bono and his band is a story of commitment to one another and to the greater causes of social justice on which Bono has staked his reputation. Bono gives us a vision of how tomorrow can be better than today. He appeals to something greater than ourselves. He tells the story of his life and struggles in terms everyone can understand. He speaks about faith in a way that even a nonbeliever can embrace.

Our talks range from the early history of the band, to his admiration of hip-hop, to his troubled relationship with his father. He can be as harsh on the subject of his own albums as any rock critic. The interview here represents a mere fraction of our conversation. But for Bono, that conversation never ends – he means to involve his audience in it for as long as he can, and we are all the better for it. —J.S.W.

First off: Where do you get those sunglasses?

Bulgari. A lot of people think that, when they see a “B” on the side, that it’s just my own megalomania. Only half the time it is. I’m the Imelda Marcos of sunglasses.

Why do you wear them all the time?

Very sensitive eyes to light. If somebody takes my photograph, I will see the flash for the rest of the day. My right eye swells up. I’ve a blockage there, so that my eyes go red a lot. So it’s part vanity, it’s part privacy and part sensitivity.

I. A Musical Education

What were the first rock & roll records that you heard?

Age four. The Beatles – “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” I guess that’s 1964. I remember watching the Beatles with my broth-

er on St. Stephen’s Day, the day after Christmas. The sense of a gang that they had about them – you can tell that they connected – as well as the melodic power, the haircuts and the sexuality. Which I was just probably processing.

Then performers like Tom Jones. I’d see Tom Jones on Saturday night on a variety show – I must have been, like, eight years old – and he’s sweating, and he’s an animal, and he’s unrestrained.

And then, of course, Elvis. I’m thinking, “What is this?” Because this is changing the temperature of the room. And people stopped talking.

Who else had a big impact on you, musically, at that age?

Before I got to the Who, the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin and those kinds of things, I really remember John Lennon’s *Imagine*. I guess I’m 12; that’s one of my first albums. That really set fire to me. It was like he was whispering in your ear – his ideas of what’s possible. When I was 14 and lost my mother, I went back to *Plastic Ono Band*.

Bob Dylan at the same time. Listened to his acoustic albums. Then starting to think about playing those acoustic songs. My brother had a Beatles songbook – so trying to teach myself guitar, and him sort of helping.

And that song – which is actually such a genius song, now that I think about it, you’re embarrassed the day after you learned it – “If I Had a Hammer.” That’s a tattoo, that song.

That was the first song you learned how to play?

“If I had a hammer, I’d hammer in the morning/I’d hammer in the evening/All over this land/I’d hammer out justice/I’d hammer out freedom/Love between my brothers and my sisters/All over this land.” Fantastic. A manifesto, right there.

You’re still doing the same song.

[Laughs] Right.

“Imagine” is the first really powerful thing to you?

Imagine and Bob Dylan. “Blowin’ in the Wind” – all that stuff – and the folksy thing. Which is, I suppose, what set me up for John Lennon.

Dylan set you up for John Lennon?

Because it’s folk. If you’re interested in folk, in words and whisperings, that quiet thing. I was in my room listening on headphones on a tape recorder. It’s very intimate. It’s like talking to John Lennon on the phone. I’m not exaggerating to say that. I remember John singing “Oh My Love.” It’s like a little hymn. It’s certainly a prayer of some kind – even if he was an atheist. “Oh, my love/For the first time in my life/My eyes can see/I see the wind/Oh, I see the trees/Everything is clear in our world.” For me, it was like he was talking about the veil lifting off, the scales falling from the eyes. Seeing out the window with a new clarity that love brings you. I remember that feeling.

Yoko came up to me when I was in my twenties, and she put her hand on me and she said, “You are John’s son.” What an amazing compliment!

II. A Spiritual Life

Did you feel religious in your childhood?

Even then I prayed more outside of the church than inside. It gets back to the songs I was listening to; to me, they were prayers. “How many roads must a man walk down?” That wasn’t a rhetorical question to me. It was addressed to God. It’s a question I wanted to know the answer to, and I’m wondering, “Who do I ask that to?” I’m not gonna ask a schoolteacher. When John Lennon sings, “Oh, my love/For the first time in my life/My eyes are wide open” – these songs have an intimacy for me that’s not just between people, I realize now, not sexual intimacy. A spiritual intimacy.

Who was God to you at that point in your life?

I don’t know. I would rarely be asking these questions inside the church. Occasionally, when I’m singing a hymn like... oh, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or “Be Thou My Vision,” something would stir inside of me. But, basically, religion left me cold.

Your early songs are about being confused, about trying to find spirituality at an age when most anybody else would be writing about girls and trouble.

Yeah. We sorta did it the other way around.

You skipped “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and you went right...

...into the mystic. Van Morrison would be the inverse, in terms of the journey. It’s this turbulent period at 15, 16, and the electrical storms that come at that age. There was also my friend Guggi. His parents were not just Protestant, they were some obscure cult of Protestant. In America, it would be Pentecostal. His father was like a creature from the Old Testament. He spoke constantly of the Scriptures and had the sense that the end was nigh – and to prepare for it.

You were living with his family?

Yes, I’d go to church with them too. Though myself and Guggi are laughing at the absurdity of some of this, the rhetoric is getting through to us. We don’t realize it, but we’re being immersed in the Holy Scriptures. That’s what we took away from this: this rich language, these ancient tracts of wisdom.

So is that why you were writing such serious songs when you’re 19?

Here’s the strange bit: Most of the people that you grew up with in black music had a similar baptism of the spirit, right? The difference is that most of these performers felt they could not express their sexuality before God. They had to turn away. But I never believed that. I never saw it as an either/or thing.

You never saw rock & roll as incompatible with religion?

Look at the people who have formed my imagination. Bob Dylan, 1976 – he’s going through similar stuff. You buy Patti Smith’s *Horses* – “Jesus died for somebody’s sins/But not mine...” And she turns Van Morrison’s “Gloria” into liturgy. She’s wrestling with these demons – Catholicism in her case. The music that really turns me on is either running toward God or away from God. Both recognize the pivot, that God is at the center of the jaunt.

Soon after starting the band, you joined a Bible-study group – you and Larry and Edge – called the Shalom. What brought that on?

We were doing street theater in Dublin, and we met some people who were madder than us. They were a kind of inner-city group living life like it was the first century A.D. They were expectant of signs and wonders. It was a commune. People who had cash shared it. They were passionate, and they were funny, and they seemed to have no material desires.

I realize now, looking back, that it was just insatiable intellectual curiosity. But it got a little too intense, as it always does; it became a bit of a holy huddle. And these people, they pretended that our dress, the way we looked, didn’t bother them. But very soon it appeared that was not the case. They started

asking questions about the music we were listening to. Why are you wearing earrings? Why do you have a mohawk?

How did you end up leaving that?

I think we just went on tour. If you were going to study the teaching, it demanded a rejection of the world. Even then, we understood that you can’t escape the world, wherever you go. Least of all in very intense religious meetings.

What is your religious belief today? What is your concept of God?

If I could put it simply, I would say that I believe there’s a force of love and logic in the world, a force of love and logic behind the universe. And I believe in the poetic genius of a creator who would choose to express such unfathomable power as a child born in “straw poverty”; i.e., the story of Christ makes sense to me.

How does it make sense?

As an artist, I see the poetry of it. It’s so brilliant. That this



scale of creation, and the unfathomable universe, should describe itself in such vulnerability, as a child. That is mind-blowing to me. I guess that would make me a Christian. Although I don’t use the label, because it is so very hard to live up to. I feel like I’m the worst example of it, so I just kinda keep my mouth shut.

Do you pray?

I try to take time out of every day, in prayer and meditation. I feel as at home in a Catholic cathedral as in a revival tent. I also have enormous respect for my friends who are atheists, most of whom are, and the courage it takes not to believe.

How big an influence is the Bible on your songwriting? How much do you draw on its imagery, its ideas?

It sustains me.

As a belief, or as a literary thing?

As a belief. These are hard subjects to talk about because you can sound like such a dickhead. I’m the sort of character who’s got to have an anchor. I want to be around immovable

Man of the People

Bono in Times Square, 2005. “I will not let that thing called fame change my mood anymore,” he said.



objects. I want to build my house on a rock, because even if the waters are not high around the house, I'm going to bring back a storm. I have that in me. So it's sort of underpinning for me. I don't read it as a historical book. I don't read it as, "Well, that's good advice." I let it speak to me in other ways.

III. A Political Awakening

After Live Aid, you and your wife, Ali, went to Ethiopia. This was September 1985. How did that experience affect you?

That's a big question. Your route here is interesting – whether conscious or unconscious. What you've got me to talk about is how I justify being in a rock & roll band. Going way back, I, for some reason, associate music with emancipation and freedom for myself. If rock & roll means anything to me, it's liberation. Not just for yourself – your sexuality, your spirituality – but also for others.

But sometimes the necessary narcissism of being a writer and performer conflicted me. You could be bought off by your success and forget your ideals. End up on the cover of *ROLLING STONE* in a pair of expensive shades and forget who you are. And develop a knowing smirk; develop irony; develop layers of protection necessary to be a rock & roll star in the age of celebrity.

To the point of nearly breaking up the band a few times...

Yes, we thought at times there might be better tools to change the world than electric guitars.

What did you want to change?

First, ourselves, I suppose. To become better people. And second, the wickedness of the world. For a lot of people, the world is a desperate place. A third of the people who live in it cannot achieve sustenance. And there is no real reason for that, other than a certain selfishness and greed.

So, Ethiopia?

That thought process brings Ali and I to Ethiopia, to study this up close. We worked in an orphanage. We lived in a little tent. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire. Woke up in the mornings as the mist lifted, and watched thousands of Africans, who had walked all night with the little belongings they had, coming toward us to beg for food and their life. We saw the everydayness of despair. People would leave their children in rags, some would be alive, some wouldn't. For a couple of kids from the suburbs, it was a very overwhelming experience.

But it begged bigger questions. Live Aid had raised \$250 million – which felt like an enormous sum of money – and we were jumping up and down like we'd cracked it. Only to find out, years later, that that's what Africa spends every couple of weeks repaying the richest countries in the world for old loans taken out by dodgy dictators who were propped up in the Cold War to fight the Commies. Suddenly, the penny drops: There's a structural aspect to this poverty. This was about justice, not poverty.

How changed were your attitudes when you came back from that trip?

You promise that you'll never forget... but you do. You get back to your life, to being in the band. But something in the back of my mind told me there's something here I don't fully understand – but that I will, at some point in my life, be able to help those people.

The Beat Goes On

Bono in the U.K. on the Vertigo Tour, 2005. "We might be annoying. But we're not dull," he said.

A father hands you his son and says, "Take him, because if he stays with me, he will surely die." I remember the look in that man's eye, what it took for a grown man to make that request. He's handing me his son – and you're saying no. That's a very hard thing to walk away

from. But there's part of me that didn't say no. And when I get a call 10 years later from Jamie Drummond at Jubilee 2000, I'm back there, immediately.

IV. Fame and the Stage

But after that trip to Africa, the band peaked.

In the Nineties, I was having the time of my life. I've never felt I was particularly good at being a rock star. I always thought, "It went to the wrong guy. Give it to the skinny, effete guy, not the guy who looks like a boxer or a bricklayer." I wasn't that good at this stuff. But I got quite good at it.

It started around *Pop*, which was gonna be this album to celebrate the surface of things. We had a great life; we're listening to a lot of dance music, staying up all night. We're young, our friends around. It was just a wonderful time, and we tried to capture this in songs like "Discothèque" and "If You Wear That Velvet Dress." All those beautiful, sensual songs.

But instead of sounding like the party, it ended up sounding like the morning after the party, like the hangover. I had wanted to describe my hedonism in religious terms – as the concept of carnival, a Christian concept, a celebration of the flesh, before the denial, which is Lent. But the carnival may have gone on a little too long.

So you'd started the ascent or descent into rock stardom with "The Joshua Tree"?

A little, but not really. We were very earnest. Which explains those very iconic, stony-faced photographs. We always have had a laugh, but in our public persona we're a little self-conscious, and we need to throw off a bit of moral baggage – which we got to do on Zoo TV. And then, it's fair to say, the sensory overload may have started to take over. And I needed to get back to where I was.

So you got into, like, the usual rock & roll problems of money and drugs and success.

Well, I'm not gonna explain them in detail. I just – I had a taste of the pizza.

But how did stardom affect you overall?

After *The Joshua Tree*, I didn't realize that being famous isn't that important. I'm thinking, "Oh, gosh, if I go out there, I don't want to let people down." Bob Dylan taught me this: "You should let people down. You do not have to live up to people's expectations. And if they have them, well, let them down." In the eye of that storm, I remember him saying, "You're in a band, that's lucky. I went through this on my own."

You know, the fame thing is funny. You need to find it funny. In the Nineties, I started a journey out of self-consciousness toward where I am now, where I wake up and forget that I am in a band. I will not let that thing called fame change my mood anymore. I don't travel with security.

You told a "Rolling Stone" reporter in 2000 you'd had a huge health scare. You wouldn't discuss it. What was that about?

At one point, I thought I might have throat cancer, which would've closed down the album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. I didn't even tell the band. My voice had been on low par for about five years. It started after the Zoo TV tour. You can really hear it. It seemed to just come down in power. The singing on *Pop* isn't very good. The tour I found difficult to do. I didn't know if it was my voice or whatever. I don't want to get too melodramatic about it, but actually it is pretty melodramatic if you think you mightn't be around to see your kids. But luckily I'm out of those woods.

Do you ever get scared when you go onstage and preach?

I'm sick of Bono. And I am Bono. It's like, "Oh, man, shut up." But there it is. You just don't want to be dull. We might be annoying. But we're not dull.

But you get up there like some kind of preacher. It's like watching Martin Luther King. You're not scared doing that?

I'm scared of embarrassing my bandmates and our audience, but I am convinced that this is a generation that wants to be remembered for something other than the war against terror or the Internet. Your generation had a job to do in pursuing equality and civil rights, and you took to the streets and you accomplished a lot. Our generation wants the same thing, and we recognize that the enemies are subtler.

But let me ask again: Don't you feel you're making yourself a target? Doesn't it scare you to go out and preach like that?

No, but maybe there have been times when certainly I should have been. In 1998, we were playing in Chile, in a stadium full of people and on national television. We invited the mothers and relatives of those who had "disappeared" and demanded that President Pinochet answer these people: Where are the bones of these mothers' sons? At least tell them that. All the police leave the stadium. There's no security and half the crowd is booing. I kind of respect that our audience who disagreed with us made itself clear.

V. September 11th, 2001

By September 2001, New York had become your second home. Where were you on September 11th?

I was in Venice. I'd gotten lost on the back streets with my

It sounds like September 11th raised the stakes for you.

It completely changed everything. The mood at the shows was very different. People were holding on much tighter to our band – as I do myself when things are going on in my life. I put on music.

VI. Looking for Grace

Your manager, Paul McGuinness, said to you once that the duty of an artist is to illustrate the problems of the world, to bring them before his audience, but not to solve them.

Artists won't be able to solve it, but this generation will be able to eradicate extreme poverty. Not poverty, but extreme poverty. I call it stupid poverty: kids dying of starvation. This should not happen, and does not have to continue to happen. The people have to give the politicians their permission to spend what is, after all, their money.

You think your duty now is to help make that happen?

I wish it wasn't, because I'd much rather be in a studio writing a song. When that song forms something that didn't exist 10 minutes ago, and now it looks like it's heading to be played on the radio in Tokyo, that is a thrill. I enjoy my work campaigning as an activist, but my gift is I'm a singer, a songwriter and a performer. And I just happened to have learned other skills to protect that gift, and those skills seem to suit an activist.

You've been on this never-ending peace and nonviolence

'I don't hope I die before I get old. My heroes tend to be alive, not dead.'

son Eli and a friend, and I was trying to find directions. It was just after the first plane had hit. Some people said to me, "Well, that's the end of your work on Africa and AIDS, because now America will just focus in on itself and build some very high walls." I disagreed with that, and I was proved right. The vulnerability that was exposed in these events has helped Americans understand how others live with these vulnerabilities on a daily basis. That time of America behaving like an island is over.

I saw you play Madison Square Garden one month later.

That was one of the most extraordinary moments of our lives. When "Where the Streets Have No Name" went off, and the lights went up, I think half the house was in tears. New York had let us into a very private moment. We did not feel in any way like visitors or tourists. We were the same people.

A lot of people told you that you shouldn't play New York. It's too soon, it's too dangerous.

Yes, they told us not to play, and our own people begged me not to put up the names of all the...

Of the dead.

But I felt it was so important to do that because these people weren't statistics. They were real people. I was looking around from the stage and seeing the names of brothers and sisters and fathers, and it brings it home.

crusade since you've been 17 years old. Do you feel anointed or chosen to do this? Do you have a messianic complex, like Bruce Springsteen teasingly said?

That's fair enough. As regards anointing, I put my hand up for this job. I've probably just worn the good Lord out. "OK, you can have the anointing, then." I'm sure it wasn't in the cards.

Once you see not only the problem, but also the solution, there's no escape. You see it, you can't look away from it. I want it to feel like an adventure, not a burden. I don't mean just for me, I mean for the movement. This is an extraordinary thing, an uplifting thing. This is about us too. It's about, who are we? What are our values? Do we have any? It's exciting.

How do the guys in the band feel about the way that your crusades are shaping the perception of the band?

They were very, very worried for the first few years. It's very unhip work. They thought our audience would tire of it, but our audience has ended up feeling more powerful themselves as a result of me raising my voice for them.

What do you think the mission of U2 is today?

Not be crap. There's a deal: You don't worry about the cost of your kids' education and their medical bills and you can have a house in the South of France, but don't embarrass us by making second-rate music. Going to a very dark place inside yourself – it's expensive. A lot of bands understandably get to a level

of comfort and don't want to go there. U2's still ready to go there, and we feel there's a lot to prove. What can myself, Edge, Larry and Adam do? As long as we don't develop fat arses, I think there's another 10 years in us. Crap album, fat arse – out.

What would U2 be like without Bono?

I think Edge is singing very well these days. Beautiful falsetto. He sounds like a bunch of beautiful black women. Edge would lead the group to some extraordinary places without me, and they would have less pressure, but less fun. We have a lot of laughs. And I'm sure I give them some. They laugh with me as well as at me.

Do you need them for your own balance and sanity?

The truth is I need them more than they need me.

Why?

Just the way I'm wired. They raise my game. I'm terrified of being in a room on my own, or with just people who are in my employment. That is my definition of hell on Earth. You're as good as the arguments you get. I'm a better person for being around these men. They're very dignified people.

How do you feel about getting older and playing to older audiences? You know there's a golden circle over there.

There's a golden circle because rich people have feelings too [laughs]. We have a vital audience from the colleges, but we also have an audience that has been with us for a long time, and that brings with it a real weight.

And there's a resonance to that?

The Us against Them situation in the Sixties isn't the case anymore. I know 70-year-old men who are much more radical than their 17-year-old grandchildren.

There is a power that comes from age. You see the face of Johnny Cash before he left this world and you hear that voice. Or you see Mick Jagger these days, who looks like Nureyev. Their faces are more interesting. They're much more dangerous men as they get older. They know their way around the world, and they have more to say. If you were a novelist or a photographer or a painter, you'd just be getting going at 45. Why is it that that's generally not been true in music? People, particularly groups, blow it very badly.

Where do you see yourself in 20 years?

I'd like to return to fiction and poetry. I'd like to just be a writer, and a singer, and a performer. At 60, I'm going to be much better-looking than I am now. I'm sure of that. I don't hope I die before I get old. A lot of my heroes tend to be people who are alive, not dead, and living long.

In other words, you want to be doing the same thing but in a more pure form?

Words are becoming more and more important to me. I was never a guy who listened to the words. I just wrote them. And I'm really enjoying writing, whether it's speeches or letters, or prose poems, scripts or lyrics. Maybe it's because I stop talking when I start writing.

If you hadn't been in U2, what would've happened to you?

I would've been a journalist.

Why do you say that?

Curiosity. I like writing. I'm attracted to things I'm afraid of. Disaster groupie, journalist, scriptwriter. The media plays a really valuable role in a free society. The United States has

the best-quality journalism in the world, though your television really sucks.

Can rock & roll contain everything that you want to do?

It's so exciting – music. It really is. I believe the old adage that all art aspires to the condition of music.

What does that mean?

It's such an extraordinary thing, music. It is how we speak to God finally – or how we don't. Even if we're ignoring God. It's the language of the spirit. If you believe that we contain within our skin and bones a spirit that might last longer than your time breathing in and out – if there is a spirit, music is the thing that wakes it up. And it certainly woke mine up.

The thing that drives me on is a sort of curiosity about the world and people. Occasionally I lift the stones and find a few creepy-crawlies under there.

When we were in the middle of punk rock, I wanted to



hang out with Johnny Cash. I wanted to know what was going on under his hat. And I got to. And Frank Sinatra – I got to know what was going on under his hat and in his heart, and he shared things with me. That blessing that I was talking about – I've been chasing that blessing all my life from all different sources and places. From Bob Dylan to Willie Nelson to Billy Graham.

Have you found what you're looking for?

I used to think that one day I'd be able to resolve the different drives I have in different directions, the tension between the different people I am. Now I realize that is who I am, and I'm more content to be discontent. I do feel I'm getting closer to the song I hear in my head, getting closer to not compromising that melody with some crap words. I mean that on every level. I wasn't looking for grace, but luckily grace was looking for me.

The Diplomat

Bono with Nelson Mandela in Cape Town, 2003. "Rock & roll means liberation," the singer said.