
SOUNDBYTE: You can't be incognito with Bono. -- Adam

20 YEARS OF ACHTUNG BABY: BILL FLANAGAN ON HIS FAVORITE U2 ALBUM

@U2 November 26, 2011 by Scott Calhoun

Bill Flanagan is an MTV Networks executive, author of the novel *Evening's Empire* and *U2 At The End Of The World*. He is ... heck, need I say more? Introducing Bill Flanagan to U2 fans is a bit like asking them, "Have you heard the album U2 made right after *The Joshua Tree*? You know, the one called *Achtung Baby*?" As we continue to mark the 20th anniversary of that album, here he is talking about its timeless charms.

@U2: For your money, is *Achtung Baby* U2's best album?

Yes. It's my favorite.

What are your favorite songs on the album, and why?

I love "The Fly" -- it pulls off something that looks easy and is actually really hard; it is a great, danceable, noisy rock 'n' roll song that doesn't sound like any other rock song you can think of. "Until The End of The World" has one of U2's best lyrics -- Judas as a spurned lover. "Acrobat" and "Love Is Blindness" are profound and beautiful. "Zoo Station" is a fantastic declaration of intent.

What's the strongest song on the album? Is it really "One"?

"One" is the anthem and maybe U2's most important song. Arguably, it's the biggest song of the 1990s (the only other contender I can think of is "Smells Like Teen Spirit"). And of course "One" was very significant to the band in resolving the problems they were having in Berlin, in encouraging them to push forward. It was sung by Michael Stipe and Mike Mills with Larry and Adam at President Clinton's inaugural ball; it was performed in concert by Guns N' Roses. It's certainly the song from *Achtung Baby* with the longest shadow.

The funny thing is, it's the most conventional song on the album -- unlike "Zoo Station" or "The Fly" or most of the others, "One" would have fit right in on *The Joshua Tree*.

Which song on *Achtung Baby* dealt the final blow that felled *The Joshua Tree*?

"Zoo Station" blew up *The Joshua Tree* as soon as the needle hit the groove. Or jumped out of the groove.

Do you hear any irony on *Achtung Baby*?

I don't think the album is ironic; I think it's pretty heartfelt. Some of the presentation was ironic -- Bono in his black leather and sunglasses. On the other hand, he looked pretty good that way. I guess "Even Better Than The Real Thing" is ironic, or at least it's about irony. Maybe that's the same thing.

You know what album and tour came before *Achtung Baby* that was similar? *Trans* by Neil Young. It had the electronic effects on the vocals, it had the sunglasses and the headset microphone and the big TV screens, and the songs were as sincere as could be -- they were based on Neil's attempts to reach his severely handicapped child through computers. But nobody knew that at the time and it was seen as this self-indulgent science fiction project. On the other hand, *Achtung Baby* had some of U2's best songs and *Trans* did not have Neil's best songs, so people didn't give it as much of a chance.

When you listen to *Achtung Baby* now, do you still hear an album from 1991?

One of the best things about the album is that it isn't dated the way a lot of music from that period is. There's no cheesy synth sounds, no gated "In The Air Tonight" drums. It really created its own sonic universe. In that way it's much more like a Beatles record than like records from the same era by Prince or Peter

Gabriel -- great, great artists who sometimes went in for sounds that turned out to be faddish.

What's a teenager today going to like about *Achtung Baby*?

What teenage girl doesn't like a slow dance under the mirror ball? What teenage boy doesn't like belly dancers?

What do you think U2 learned while making *Achtung Baby* album that they carried with them into the 2000s?

Well, the success of *Achtung Baby* certainly made them confident about experimenting and not getting stuck in a corner. Then again, *The Unforgettable Fire* was a real left turn after *War* -- a lot of people thought they were nuts to not try to make a big Who/Springsteen album after *War*. "Brian Eno? Are you crazy?" There was a lot of that around.

In the new *Achtung Baby* book released for the anniversary sets, you wrote about the narrative quality of the album -- about a man lured away from home only to have to resume domestic life after his wild time away. I'm wondering if you think U2 told a better story here than on some of their other albums?

I don't know that U2 ever set out with an album to tell a story. I guess *No Line On The Horizon* started out that way, but the album as it was released had let go of that. Albums like *Boy*, *The Joshua Tree* and *Achtung Baby* do reflect certain ideas the band is playing with at the time, concerns that are in their minds. Certainly *Achtung Baby* has a lot to do with faithfulness and fidelity vs. freedom and exploration. There was a lot going on in their personal lives and also in the dynamics between the musicians that brought those themes forward. I think as Bono is finalizing the lyrics toward the end of the recording process he recognizes themes that can recur, like the Sun/Moon metaphor for freedom vs. commitment.

But I don't think they would stick to a storyline at the expense of making every track as good as it could be. They don't work from a rigid outline. I think they try to make each album distinct and make it a complete experience but I don't think they go into each album with a story. It's not *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Or *Tarkus*.

Did U2 give you any directions for what they wanted from you in your essay for the new book?

No, they know what I'm going to say. Larry probably said, "Pull his string and let him do his rap again."

We know it was a struggle and *Achtung Baby* wasn't a given for U2, so if it hadn't happened, what would have? Would there simply have been no reinvention? And then what?

Well, if you imagine that they did not reinvent their sound and made another *Joshua Tree*-type record -- certainly "Who's Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses" could have fit on there, a less eccentric arrangement of "Down All The Days," and "One" would have been a big hit anyway -- it would have done well and they would have stayed an arena band for a while and then inevitably their popularity would have slipped over the next decade. They still would have had a big following, but it would not have grown. That's what happens with most bands. John Mellencamp said a great thing once -- he said, "People don't buy my new albums for the same reason I don't buy the Rolling Stones new records. I already got the good ones! How many do you need?" U2 have been smart enough to make different albums all the time. Even if you have *Boy*, you don't have *The Joshua Tree*, and if you have *The Joshua Tree*, you don't have *Achtung Baby*, and even if you have *Achtung Baby*, you don't have *No Line On The Horizon*.

Would you like to write another book on U2?

No, I think one is enough. Somebody else should write the next one. That book finished me as a journalist; ever since then I've just written fiction.

What did you make of Bono's comments in the past months about U2 not being sure if they can stay relevant, or if they should continue on?

I think Bono says stuff like that to get everybody worked up, to raise the stakes for himself and the band, to ratchet up the pressure. It's not unlike prize fighting. "I'm going to decimate the dope! I'm going to send him home in pieces! I'm like Jackson Pollack -- I'm going to splatter him all over the canvas!" It's self-hypnosis.

What's next for U2? I like your point about each album being different enough from the others that if you have one, you don't have the other. So what could they do to keep it fresh for themselves as artists and for us as fans?

Well, it could be anything. Bono said after *Achtung Baby* and *Zooropa* that he'd be interested in making a quieter album that dealt with personal matters, what goes on in a marriage. Instead they went completely the other way with *Pop*. So that option is still out there.

They recorded a lot of beautiful, moody music for the proposed *Songs Of Ascent* record, which was planned to explore spiritual themes. Something like "Cedars Of Lebanon" might hint at that direction -- but who knows if that will ever come out or how it might be changed by the time it does? They did a group of sessions with Danger Mouse -- they could make a record incorporating hip-hop techniques. On the other hand, some of the *Spider-Man* songs, like "Boy Falls From The Sky," are big, broad-shouldered *Joshua Tree*-type writing.

They have all these different ovens going, so the real question is not, "What are they going to write and record?" but "What are they going to release?" Whatever it is, it won't be what we expect.

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