

SOUNDBYTE: Go to U2 internet sites, they're *murder*. I mean, where is this sycophancy, can I ask someone? -- Bono

BOOK REVIEW: U2: THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY

[@U2](#) November 20, 2014 by Scott Calhoun

There are biographies about U2, fact books and encyclopedias about U2, memoirs about growing up with or working for U2, story books about stages of U2's career, and U2's own autobiography. If you spent years reading many of these books plus a lot of articles about U2, then interviewed some journalists and a few music industry insiders, you could fall down the rabbit hole yourself and pick up a drop of Bono's self-confessed megalomania. All that time immersed in U2 can bring a rush of blood to the head. Then, you might call your own biography of U2 "definitive," as Eamon Dunphy did in 1987 with his *Unforgettable Fire: Past, Present, And The Future—The Definitive Biography Of U2*. It happens. And it is forgivable if you are self-aware of your own bombast, crack a few jokes about it after the fact, and -- most important -- create and deliver an excellent piece of work. Bono is forgiven most of the time by most of his fans. Dunphy's book, intriguing and flawed, didn't live up to the hype of its title. And unfortunately, now in 2014, there's nary a hint of braggadocio from John Jobling in his *U2: The Definitive Biography*, nor is there any evidence of excellence.

In this new biography of U2, we learn nothing new about U2. It is not definitive in the sense of being comprehensive or complete -- it doesn't delve into certain uncharted waters of U2's past and it ends in 2013 -- nor is it definitive in the sense of being a persuasive statement of what U2 is and means. A bibliography indicates the sources Jobling has consulted, but he rarely attributes information to those sources in the course of his chapters. Fans familiar with Jobling's reading list will recognize the information as having first appeared in these other books, articles and interviews. The book claims to be "the first unauthorized biography of U2 to document and analyze their near-forty-year career objectively, going beyond the myth to present a fascinating warts-and-all portrait of the Irish rock band." The trouble was, I could never detect what myth, or myths, Jobling was hoping to go beyond. It seems Jobling means myth in the sense of a misperception or a falsehood, not as a story enacting truths that are difficult to understand. Does a myth persist of U2 being a band of skilled musicians from the get-go, who did not have to battle, or sometimes buy, its way to the top, and has, at each step forward, done better and better work? Do some fans think U2 has not made enemies, nor leveraged their status and power for their financial benefit, nor grown into an international corporation by taking advantage of international markets? Surely Jobling doesn't think he needs to convince U2's critics that the band is all-too-human?

Jobling does not claim to write historical fiction, yet he presents much of his information as if he were either an eyewitness to history or inside his characters' minds. It's misdirection by grammar compounded by unattributed borrowing from someone else's work. Whereas Bono was remembering for Neil McCormick in *U2 By U2* that Sophie Shirley, his religious studies teacher in high school, "would say things like, 'Yes, it's a fallen world but it's still beautiful. God's fingerprints are everywhere if you want to see them,'" Jobling neither reports that he talked with Shirley nor that he is repeating something Bono remembered Shirley as saying. Jobling turns Bono's paraphrase into a quote from Shirley about God: "She personally reassured Paul that He loved him and would never stop loving him, that His intentions were true and everything in the universe happens for a reason. 'God's fingerprints are everywhere,' she said. All he needed to do was look around and listen."

When Edge speaks in *U2 By U2* on his daughter Sian's diagnosis of leukemia, he says: "I don't want to go into too much detail. But my family went through some very intense times and Sian had to suffer through some awful experiences, which she continues to do with amazing fortitude for one so young." Jobling reports that Edge and Morleigh drew strength from their daughter's personality: "But Sian was a courageous young girl, blessed with her mother's soothing serenity and her father's unassuming self-confidence, and they found great comfort in this once the initial shock had passed." Maybe they did, but it's claiming too much on the part of this biographer to know that.

Jobling promises "a vivid portrait," but the life he gives to the scenes he paints is a result of embellishment and the occasional sensational untrue statement. I noticed the now-familiar scene, as first told by Bill Flanagan in *U2 At The End Of The World*, of Bono escaping his handlers one night in Tokyo and following

Fintan Fitzgerald first to a club and then to an apartment with girls and heroin. Bono declines the girls and the drugs, falls asleep, and wakes the next morning with a python crawling on him. Fitzgerald and Bono escape unharmed and Bono admits, "I know I've pushed it too far. I could have been arrested surrounded by prostitutes and heroin in some Yakuza crack den. OK, I wasn't taking part — but try telling that to the judge!" Jobling, to his credit, cites author and book in his paragraph -- "As told in Bill Flanagan's *U2 At The End of The World*" -- but feels the need to paint a more vivid portrait in which Bono "lost his minders in a blur of bustling crowds and neon lights and plunged headfirst into a world of techno-slavery and after-hours hostess joints. He later surfaced on an apartment floor, his brain like a television tuned to a dead channel, and his aching body surrounded by a group of semi-naked hookers shaking off a night's worth of smack."

I asked Flanagan if he felt it was a fair representation of his account of what happened (or what really happened) that night in Tokyo. He told me, "It's a rewriting of a story from my book, blown up with stuff that I never said and didn't happen. 'Techno-slavery'? 'Surrounded by a group of semi-naked hookers'? Those are some flights of fancy."

Jobling, in making a case for U2 being "fiercely protective of their inner world," calls Flanagan's biography "noticeably free of brand-damaging material" and suggests it was censored, but he lets an unnamed source say it for him: "The uncut version of the book was 700 pages long," says a source. "He was ostracized by them [U2] afterward. Flanagan really damaged himself with that book, by writing the truth. So that's the kind of people you're dealing with."

It was news to me that Flanagan was damaged because of his book and that U2 had cut him off. I seem to recall his name attached to many U2 projects since 1995. Was your book chopped-down by U2, Bill? Aren't you and the band still friends? "That's total nonsense. They didn't change anything and I'm still friends with U2," Flanagan told me. Flanagan confirmed what I could check myself: He wrote notes for the *Joshua Tree* deluxe album, the *Achtung Baby* deluxe album, the digital Complete U2 collection and the introduction for the sheet music book *U2 The Complete Songs*; did editing work on *U2 By U2*, contributed to *U2 Show*; and has been thanked on most of the albums since his book was released.

U2: The Definitive Biography tries to humanize the band by focusing on U2 spending a lot of cash to live well, tour well, and act spoiled. Is this new information that paints a better portrait of their humanity? We hear from Lola Cashman -- who was ordered by court-action in 2006 to return items she took from the band in the 1980s, and who wrote her own tell-all book in 2003 -- who seems to have bent Jobling's ear toward her theme of U2, particularly Bono, being too precious about too many things, and becoming increasingly hungry for power and money.

As Jobling works to present the human side of the band, he devotes four consecutive chapters to chronicling U2 in the 2000s, titling them, respectively, "Billion-Dollar Dreams," "The Goal is \$oul?," "Love and Money or Else" and "The Ecstasy of Gold." He writes, of his own opinion, on the matter of Bono supporting the Jubilee 2000 initiative: "Fame and fortune in the music business were not enough for the enormously ambitious Bono. He longed for power on a major scale and harbored political aspirations." As Jobling marches through the years of Bono's increasing activism in the 2000s and U2's transition into being a so-called "corporate rock-band," he claims, "in June 2004, Bono completed what many critics considered to be his transformation from would-be global healer to cannibal archcapitalist by becoming a cofounder and managing director of Elevation Partners...."

Many fans and critics alike know from other accounts that Larry disapproved of Bono's work with some politicians and spoke out about it in the mid-2000s. Jobling quotes a comment from Adam Clayton about "a price in terms of relationships" in the band because of Bono's activism, and he does mention it coming from *The New York Times*, but offers no support for his own statement of "objective analysis": "Bono and Larry, whose long-term animosity for each other was only outweighed by their mutual love of power and money, were also in constant disagreement over the precise nature of the singer's relationships with government officials.... Larry, who was resigned to leaving the group in the not-so-distant future, longed for the days when it was just four Dublin boys against the world."

There have been rumors of Larry wanting to quit the band for 10 years now, but they've only been rumors and it has been a longtime U2 strategy to hype the tenuousness of its existence. Larry being Larry means we should not rule out his surprise departure in the future, but it seems that as of 2014 he is staying put. However, Jobling writes with the confidence of an insider that in about 2005, "Larry, tired of U2's mind-numbing business chores and the lack of respect accorded to him by Bono, confided to close friends that he intended to quit the group after the release of two more albums." We don't know from Jobling who those close friends might be, but we're asked to trust him.

The last words of the book's last chapter, "The Wrong Compromise," are given to journalists Greg Kot and Jim DeRogatis, who've written critically of the band before. They cement the theme of Jobling's biography and parse what he must want his readers to remember as the definition of U2. Kot says, "Young bands view U2 with a lot of skepticism. They may admire them for their money and fame, but U2 is no longer the model of how to succeed in a vile business without selling your soul." DeRogatis adds, "They've become this giant megacorporation that needs to sustain itself. ... There are elements of the band that genuinely care for their fans, but I'm sorry, you play these enormous stadiums with a company like you're working with, Live Nation, and people get screwed. ... [Musically] had the band ended at *Pop*, they still would have been perceived as going out on top, because they were at least challenging themselves up to the end. ... It is the end of the U2 story. But we're probably doomed to ten more years of them because of Live Nation. If it didn't matter, it wouldn't be so heartbreaking. But to see bands like U2 become what they once hated and operated in opposition to, it really is heartbreaking."

By my count, Jobling has written heretofore zero profiles of U2, or album reviews, concert reviews, tour-junket profiles, or op-eds on the cultural relevancy of U2 or on any of the controversial elements of U2's nearly 40-year approach to making art and commerce. His dust-jacket credits say he has interviewed the actress Gillian Anderson, the professional wrestler Mick "Mankind" Foley, and the singer Karen O. He claims to include interviews with U2's "closest friends and business associates" and teasingly thanks in his acknowledgements all of those "who did not request anonymity." I didn't recognize among the ones who were named anyone who would be counted as U2's "closest" friends and business associates -- no producers either. Cross-referencing the thank-yous U2 has included in the liner notes of its last three or four albums doesn't lead to any matches with Jobling's list. Most of the named sources, such as Carter Alan, Chas de Whalley, Marc Marot and Meiert Avis, have been privy to certain aspects of U2's career but have also shared similar information elsewhere. Others, such as Kot, Cashman and DeRogatis, have spoken on the record before, and critically so. Whoever the anonymous sources are who did speak with Jobling, it's a pity they didn't share anything with him that has not already been reported in other story books, fact books, memoirs or in *U2 By U2*. Jobling is protecting the identity of some of U2's closest friends and business associates so they can offer warmed-over old news about U2.

Do we need another biography of U2? Yes we do; or rather, we will. Perhaps not now, though, while it is still disrupting the music industry, its fans' lives, and its own story. I found, in the end, that Jobling's portrait did not enhance U2's looks nor was it persuasively unflattering. Reading *U2: The Definitive Biography* illustrates the difficulty of making a realistic document about a band. I find at this late hour of U2's career that the more prevalent misperception about its band members and the music they create is that they are actually too flawed to be believed; that U2 is too real and too human and we should care less than we do about them. Jobling didn't want to write a biography that would go beyond this "myth," though. He thinks U2 is too good to be believed; we need a lot more facts for support than he offers.

U2 is a band of mortals who are at times extraordinarily inventive and inspiring, and at other times predictably flawed. They create targets for others to aim for and are themselves easy targets of criticism. If myth means, as it should, a story explaining what is difficult to understand, then isn't the myth of U2 what we want to read? U2 help us understand rebellion, pain, joy, longing, art, ambition, commerce, performance, friendship, animosity, youth, aging and more. Defining these things by attempting to define U2 in its entirety is a worthwhile goal for a biography of a rock band.

U2: The Definitive Biography is available from Thomas Dunne Books for \$26.99.

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