
SOUNDBYTE: "We always encourage people interested in covering our songs, as long as they're not completely crap." — Edge

THE @U2 INTERVIEW: FLOOD

Return to Zooropa [@U2 July 26, 2013](#) by Scott Calhoun



Twenty years ago this month, the summer leg of Zoo TV took what was already a strange, bewildering tour to a new place -- the Land of Zooropa. As fans in Europe were hearing live performances of songs from U2's surprise new album, Flood was already in Los Angeles working on *The Downward Spiral*, Nine Inch Nail's third album.

He had started the year by signing up to work on a U2 EP in Dublin, and miraculously, for U2, five months later a new album was finished. Now Flood had a new "first time" for himself: producing credit for U2. He would go on to produce *Pop* and some tracks on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* for U2.

I recently asked Flood if he would think back 20 years and talk about making U2's most experimental album. Kindly enough, never mind it was his last day of work on Warpaint's new album, Flood opened his studio doors and his memories.

Scott Calhoun: Do you still listen to *Zooropa*?

Flood: Yeah, I listen to it every once in a while. And when *Achtung Baby* was being reissued we also did some re-mastering of *Zooropa*, so I was listening to it pretty intently then.

Has *Zooropa* aged well? Would you give it to someone today and say, "You gotta listen to this."

Yeah. Definitely. The rewards are so great. It's an album that needs to be listened to quite a few times, because something that you initially love you might grow to hate, and vice versa. And why be frightened of something that's not such an easy sell? If you want to try to give yourself strength, as a person, you've got to look at things that might not necessarily look so appealing to begin with.

Let's go back to before *Zooropa*. You started working with U2 as an engineer on *The Joshua Tree*, and then three albums later you are producing *Zooropa*. Why did they pick you to produce? What were they hoping you would do for them?

I don't know. I think because on *Achtung Baby* it had been, from a sonic point of view, such a creative departure for them, they wanted to really, really push the boat out. I can't remember why Dan [Lanois] wasn't doing it, and Eno was involved in a few other things, so he would come in and out and do two weeks and then leave and then come back again. So, I think they were looking for somebody who they knew, on a basic level, could record everything and be in charge of all of that. But then, all of them were pushing for creativity and maybe that was what they were looking for from me. I could bring, at that time, something more, sonically, on a creative level. I don't know.

Were they fans of your work with other bands, in the 1980s? Did they ever say something like, "That sound on that record -- can you do that for us?"

Oh, very much so. The reason I was working on *Joshua Tree* was because I had worked with the Virgin Prunes in 1983, I think, then when they were looking for a sound for *Joshua Tree* they wanted a sort of ambient, open sound. And Gavin Friday -- with my eternal thanks to him -- played Bono the second Nick Cave record that I recorded in Berlin; and the track, "Wanted Man," he said to Bono, "Listen to this. I think this is what you're after, and I've worked with this guy." So Bono phoned me up and said, "Do you want to come over for an audio interview?" Basically, I did two weeks with them in the very early days of *Joshua Tree*.

What did you have to do for your audio interview for *The Joshua Tree*?

Well, Bono said, "We're set up in this house on the outskirts of Dublin. Come over. We're just demoing, you can do whatever you like. Dan Lanois and Eno will be popping in and out, but basically it'll be us and you and you can do whatever you like." I didn't know, but they had got a couple of other people to come in, essentially to do the same thing. And, I got the job.

But then with *Achtung Baby*, I remember being in Giants Stadium watching Depeche [Mode] and Anton Corbijn came in to the press box, and he said, "I've got some friends to see you," and these two guys with hoodies walked in and it was Bono and Adam who had to come in under disguise, because if 75,000 people had seen them, they would've gone ballistic.

So, they came in and said, you know, obviously this [*The Joshua Tree*] has been really successful and with all the time you spent in Berlin working with Nick Cave and quite a few other people, we really want to get a piece of this. We want to do our new album, we want to change the way we do things, we're going to work with Lanois and Eno again ... and do you want to be involved? So I went, "Yeah. Great."

And then *Zooropa* was off the back of *Achtung Baby*, and it had gone so well, and now we were just going to do an EP and they wanted somebody they knew that would go in and do it.

Did *Zooropa* turn out to be more of a challenge than you bargained for?

It was most definitely a challenge and it was a good challenge. *Achtung Baby* had been so rewarding, then I think I had gone on and done another album with Depeche and something with Nine Inch Nails. Originally, Bono said they wanted to do an EP and it started in January. And, he said it would be really short, because *Achtung Baby* was so long. So I said, "Okay, fine."

They were set up for rehearsals for the next leg of Zoo TV, for stadiums, and they were in a place in Dublin and they had been doing some recording. So, I came over and Eno came over. It was very much an experimental record. Everything within the first months escalated because it was all based around jams or snippets from live shows. Bits were taken from everywhere and very quickly it turned into an album. Suddenly we were all sitting there going, "We thought we turned up for an EP, but now it's an album."

Was it because the jams were going so well that there was just more there than anyone had planned on?

Yeah, and it was just a very productive time. We had also set up in The Factory, which is where they were rehearsing as well. And Eno came in with a load of different ideas to get the ball rolling. And, like for "*Zooropa*," the second half is based from a jam they did in New Zealand that Joe O'Herlihy had got and processed. There were lots of different places where stuff was coming from. So what we'd do is we'd spend a week and they would do loads and loads of jams, and I would be in the studio control room recording and taking notes, and Eno would be out with the band playing, or coming in the control room, and he would take notes. And at the end of the week, we'd compare notes and say, "Right, we agree that these are the best moments from these jams." And then we'd put them ... probably on a cassette ... and then give it to the band as, like, the best of the week.

We did that for a couple of weeks and we built up a pretty in-depth load of jams. And then myself and Eno and Edge would sit there and I'd say, "Right, well, I like this one and I think I can do some work with that one"; and Eno would say, "I like this one and I can do something with that one"; and Edge might say, "This one is based on a song I've been working on; maybe we can do something with that." So we'd divvy it up like that.

And then we had the new Windmill Lane studio, and there was a room there and it was just set up and waiting for somebody to go over. It was about three weeks before anyone actually ventured to go in there, because there was just so much recording going on. But then it became us using two rooms there and one back at The Factory and we were just cycling around material and each room would be working on a different song.

Who started talking about making a whole album?

It was driven by Bono. There was a green room at the back of the control room, and the band, after they had been doing loads of recordings, would go into the green room, and during that time Bono was starting to develop the notion of the Land of *Zooropa*, and the music started to fit into that. And each time he would come out of the green room, the EP would grow and grow and grow.

How did the rest of the band feel about that?

I think Larry and Adam, particularly Adam, weren't that keen on doing a record. They were less enthusiastic about the work load that they saw in front of them when it started to turn into an album. Even an EP was a push, especially for Larry and Adam.



Would it have stayed an EP if Bono hadn't discovered the Land of Zooropa? Would Edge have been happy with just an EP too?

Yeah. Bono did the job of persuading them all. I mean, there were occasions it was quite obvious they did not want to be in the studio, but that's human nature. Who does, after coming in at midnight from a show?

And I didn't have a life. My life was in the studio. It got to the point where ... by the end of making it ... the day for me would begin about 10:00 in the morning and I would listen to what had been done the previous day, start doing some tidying up, the band would come in about 11:30 a.m., listen, make suggestions, maybe a mix would be up or somebody would do a quick overdub or some singing, then they'd give me a list of things they thought needed to be done, then they would go off in the plane to wherever they were playing in Europe. Dennis Sheehan would be standing in the back of the control room, twitching, about 2:00 in the afternoon because they had to get to Portugal or Greece or somewhere like that, so they would leave and I would then have all this work to do. They would do the gig, get on the plane, fly back, and then usually between midnight and 1:00 in the morning Bono, generally, sometimes Edge, and occasionally right at the very end when final approval of all mixes was needed, the whole band would come in, either do a load more recording or listen to what we'd done. But once Bono and Edge were in the live mode, to them it was all just part of the same process. Sometimes we'd work until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, they would go, I would do a bit more tidying up and finish about 6:00 a.m., and go to bed. And that went on for a good two to three weeks at the end.

Was part of your job for four months to just always be there in the studio ready to go, even at midnight?

It was pretty insane, but I couldn't call it a job. The thing about it, though, was when you were inside it, it just was. It was a living organism. You just went with it. Rob Kirwan, one of my best friends -- it was the first time I had started working with him, on that record -- and he said that record nearly drove him insane. And at that time he hated me more than anybody living, because I just was relentless: gotta do this; gotta do this; gotta do this. In the end, I had to finish early, by a week, because I had been booked for months to go and do Nine Inch Nails, and they were sitting there waiting for me in Los Angeles.

Oh? Did the work for *Zooropa* end in April because of your schedule? Would U2 have taken longer if you could have stayed?

I think there would have been a sense that that could have happened. The last mix I did was "Lemon," and I remember sitting and mixing it all through the night -- in a lemon shirt which was bought especially for the occasion -- and then leaving in the morning feeling the mix was in a really good place. And they spent about a week going backwards and forwards and they ended up, according to my friend, saying it was pretty much where I had left it.

Maybe it would have gone on a little longer. Maybe it was good that I had to go. I mean, it was a very hard thing to do, to walk away from something, but it was a necessity.

Did you feel all the songs were in good shape when you had to leave?

The whole process was quite obvious that this was not a big U2 album; this was very experimental. And the fact that there were no singles, and everything like that, sort of took the emphasis away from it being a big release. I think people viewed it in a very different way, so, I could have walked away feeling, "Okay, I could spend another six months refining it," but maybe that was never what it was supposed to be.

I mean, the album is incredibly experimental and that's by its very nature. It never intended to be an album. So, there are some of my favorite songs that U2 have ever done on there and there are some things that really are, not mistakes, but ... not at the giddy heights.

What's a song you think didn't quite get to there?

Ohhh ... "Daddy's Gonna Pay for Your Crashed Car."

What does it still need?

Being involved in it, I always felt it was going to be a better song. Whereas, what it is, it's a great feeling. I love the whole introduction: it's total experiment. And it sort of seems to lead you into a place that for me, personally, I was never quite sure it achieved where it was going to go to. I know for some people they absolutely love that, because it's not a "song" song, per se. But for other reasons there are so many sonic things on that track that if I detailed what was doing what, you wouldn't believe what was going on. So, for me, that particular song, as a producer, I sort of wish it could have been more, but as an entity, it was brilliant.

The whole thing about the record was everything was an experiment, so going back to what I was saying about hits and misses, that's why the highs for me are so high and some of the lows are so low, but you need both of them otherwise it would be a very different album.

Is *Zooropa* better because of its hits and misses?

Most definitely. It's so brave. I think if you're looking at it as a career-spanning album, the thing that's brilliant about *Zooropa* is it is so experimental, and for a band at that point in their career to be that brave and do something like that ... I mean, there were no singles released, and it was just like, "Here we go. Take it or leave it. It's not what you're expecting." That's incredibly brave. If people can have the strength and confidence to do that, to wash a bit of your dirty laundry in public and maybe go, "Well, I'm fallible, I'm human," people will ultimately respond to that more. But if you have all these things that are incredible craft, that have no downside to them, then suddenly the humanity goes out of it. And that's one of the strengths of U2. They are a human band. There's no trickery going on.

There's no trickery? Right. I know what you mean, but at that time it looked and felt and sounded like so much trickery.

Yeah, but in those days it was really experimental. We were using everything. "*Zooropa*," for example, is the band recording a version of the song in Dublin in 1993, and then Eno managed to morph it into what is the second half of the song, which is a live sound check straight to DAT from New Zealand a year previous. It's amazing, and it is being really bold. So yes, there is trickery, but it's not trickery as in trying to cover up something, it's trying to make it as an artistic statement. That's what's so good about the record. There's no "We've got to have the killer single," or "Where's this one going to reach in the stadium?" It's like, "This is art, totally driven by art."

And wasn't the art of it all especially important to them, particularly at that time?

Yeah, most definitely. Where they were at, they were doing Zoo TV -- where every rule had been broken, with the idea of the B-stage, the long walkway, the cut ups, the way the visuals were -- everything about it was mind blowing. And, to be on that set, on the live front, they were at the height of their powers, so that they could do something like *Zooropa* and it was completely part of their creative process.

What did you contribute to the creative process? Did you push them to experiment in any way?

The way that it was, it was just a giant team effort. It was like a series of art studios, where each different person was chopping and changing, and somebody would come up with an idea. "Lemon" was a track that had been recorded for ages, and then one day Eno went, "Just give it to me." And he does a couple of things and then, it's like, Bono comes in says, "Ah, brilliant, I know how to do that," and then he's singing the vocal at 4:00 in the morning with me. There was nothing suspicious about it. I would, maybe, just present the band with a different set of tools to work with.

Which songs were you really happy with when they were done?

I thought a great realization of all those ideals was "The Wanderer." For me, that's a great song and it translates emotionally brilliantly, yet there's a load of sonic experiments going on there. There's the idea of this person sort of wandering through this desolate landscape, but there's an air of nonchalance. Everything about the lyric, the delivery, the sound of his voice, the music -- it just seems fantastic. It delivers on all levels.

It is a great song. What did you do for it?

Bono and Edge, if I remember rightly, sort of had the song. Then Eno did some treatments on some drums, I think, and then there were some weird noises in the background I managed to pick out. Edge did a couple of bits and then somebody went, "Oh! Let's get Johnny Cash in to sing it."

Now, to my dying day this is one of my few regrets ... I actually wasn't there on the day he recorded the vocals. So, what happened was he sang it through loads and loads of times and they tried to put together a vocal that felt in keeping with the music, but it never quite seemed to connect. Bono said to me, when I came back, "Do you want to have a go at trying to put the vocal together?" So I decided to try and do the opposite of what everyone had done, which was to make a completely cold, dispassionate-sounding Johnny Cash. Almost like he's Johnny Cash the robot. It took quite a lot of time to eliminate all feeling from it, but in a way that helped marry it to the music. So there's this somebody who's completely dispassionate and because I wasn't there during the recording, I had no emotional attachment to any of the performances. I had no idea what had gone into making them, so I could be completely removed from the whole process. And then Bono heard it and went "Perfect!" He did backing vocals and we moved a couple of things around, but what he heard was what he wanted for the song.

So you made Johnny Cash sound like a robot?

Yeah, I took out any form of passion. But it was a great song, and everybody responded to that. There was a gravitas to *Achtung Baby*, which is a good thing, and I think that's why *Zooropa* feels liberating. It's almost ecstatic, and Bono used to always say, "We're in the Land of *Zooropa*. This is what it feels like to be in *Zooropa*." And you start to go, "Right, yeah, I totally get it." And "The Wanderer," you know, it feels like a desolate place, but it's not too bad, you know? It's okay.

Hope still remains in the Land of *Zooropa*.

Yeah, exactly. So, what seems like a fairly straightforward song is managing to convey so many different levels that are all very subtle. If that song is just trying to give hope, it could be, just, preachy or something like that. So, for me, on *Zooropa* there are a lot of songs that cover a lot of different emotions and do it very subtly. "Stay" is another one that starts off very humble, yearning, melancholy, quite dark in places...

Which songs, then, ended up keeping a lot of your ideas? Which are the most "Flood" tracks?

I think the most obvious one is "Crashed Car." The least obvious one would be "The Wanderer," but that's also very Eno, very much so. "Numb." And the one that I feel the most proud about is "Stay," because that was ... I wouldn't say "living hell," but it was really difficult to get it to where it got to.

Why? What did it take to make "Stay"?

Well, Edge had demoed the song before we even started the process, and for a while there was his sort of demo-version that the band and everybody tried to flesh out. And then we re-cut a whole version of it, and I think there may have even been a third version running. We tried to get all the versions to marry, and it was literally on the last couple of days of mixing of that song, when the track was up and experimentation was going on, that I felt I finally worked out what it was the song needed.

The way it starts -- with just the tiny little drum kit and guitar -- that had been masked in all the versions, so all the versions had been much bigger sounding. It was only when I went, "Let's take out all this stuff," then suddenly it was like "Ah! Here's this humble thing that you can relate to." So when it came to the pre-chorus -- where there's that big wave of the guitars -- that's a huge amount of guitars that we stacked all over it that I just had on one fader -- and I was pushing it up and Bono was reacting, like, "This is what I want to do!" and then he gets inside the lyric and there's that whole twist in the lyric in there.

It's a fantastic song, and to have such a struggle to actually achieve it -- and I'm talking completely personally now -- it's something that I think, for me ... I love that song. It touches a part of me. I think that "Stay" is, if not my favorite, it's pretty close to being my favorite U2 track of all of them.

There's a reward in that song for you, beyond all the work you did on it?

Yeah, exactly. For me, the work is irrelevant. I can sit and listen to that song and just go, "This is a fantastic piece of music." And, it's very hard when you're making records to actually be able to listen to them again without remembering everything that went down. Sometimes it can take me three or four years before I can listen to a record as everybody else can hear it.

"Stay" is really the only song of the album the band's held on to for live performances. Any thoughts as to why?

I think because if you're talking about a body of work, "song" song-wise, "Stay" is the standout "song" song on there. It would sound very weird to have the others within the context of the way they do their live shows now. Around that time, they were definitely in the change mode where it was good to go from the classic songs to something that would really be left of center.



Is *Zooropa*, then, the best example of what U2 sounds like when they experiment?

I think it's probably their freest album. In some respects it's a very good version of the way U2 works on a lot of songs, in the past and present -- it's a glimpse into the way that they work. Because, a lot of the times, even though they might have a loose idea of a song to begin with, it's all about the performance in the studio. You're constantly after these sort of magic moments. And if you're doing a normal album, it's about refining and refining and refining, and then when you've got something that's an amazing song through the refining, then you're hoping that the performance will be this magic entity.

Whereas, on *Zooropa*, it was more creating events that could turn into songs from magic moments. Literally, me and Eno would be sitting there going, "I love that bit. That makes me feel as though if I chop this around and re-present a couple of things ... then we'll throw it back at the band and see where they go," rather than the other way around of working. And also, there was no hard-and-fast discipline of "This. Is. A. Song. We have to do a song that will reach this." It was more like, "Here is a moment, let's take it to its fullest context, and wherever it goes is wherever it ends up."

Were most of the songs on *Zooropa* based on those magic moments?

I think most of the songs were based around something that was really inspiring. And it shows that not necessarily every amount of inspiration will give you something that is amazing. Maybe it's a good insight into the artistic process of making music in the way U2 does, which is quite unlike anybody else.

You've worked with many great artists and talented musicians. Is U2 really that different from the others? What's so special about them?

They're incredibly demanding, in the most inspirational, fantastic way. They're greedy. They want everything. And it makes you want to be a part of it. Would I sit around working sixteen-, seventeen-hour days and not for one second consider it a job? It's just all a part of the process. It's such a fantastic feeling when you have that sort of energy.

What did you learn about yourself, as a producer, from working on *Zooropa*?

It was the start for me of accepting that there should be no rules and also, possibly, to be wary, that if you're working on a song and the song's not working, don't try and necessarily cover it with a load of sonic excellence. Maybe that's what I was talking about with "Crashed Car," that for me, as the person involved in making it, I think I had a greater expectation of it as a song. Whereas I think for pretty much everybody else, they listened to it and they're not thinking of it as "song" song. It's an emotion -- it's whatever it is.

So, I think that was very good for me, to realize that if something's not working from a song point of view, don't try and cover it up with things. Go back to the core of what the song is about. And also, again, not just on *Zooropa*, but from working with U2, it's got to move you emotionally. I think that was part of a learning journey for me that started around *Joshua Tree*. And *Zooropa* reiterated that, because it is a massive emotional roller coaster ride.

Through a series of events I went through -- engineering, producing, engineering and producing -- I learnt so much. *Achtung Baby* was a really big turning point because I'd just come from producing *Violator* and I thought, "Well, why don't I just engineer, because I will be working with two people [Eno and Lanois] who I respect so much as producers. Why don't I watch what they do and try to compare their decisions to similar situations that I had had on *Violator*?" And then, obviously, as the album goes along the lines become blurred, and then it goes to *Zooropa* and I start taking all that confidence I've learned to develop my skill set.

Were you developing anything like a signature at that point?

No. Well ... who knows what my signature sounds are?

But you were growing in confidence.

Definitely. I mean, that period of time was *Violator*, *Achtung Baby*, *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, *Zooropa*, *Downward Spiral*, *To Bring You My Love*, and then it finished up with *Mellon Collie*, so it was a pretty good six or seven years. And each one fed into each one. If you think about all those albums, there's a certain theme to them.

Oh? What's the theme?

"I love great pop music!" To me they're all pop albums, but in the literal sense they're popular -- there's something that grabs people's attention.

Do you think U2's next album has as good a chance at being popular as their albums from back then?

Yeah, absolutely.

Have you heard anything from it?

No. Not a sausage. To my knowledge, they've only worked with Danger Mouse. I don't think any of the four usual suspects have been involved.

Do you think U2 can still make a new album that can connect with us as well as their older ones?

Yeah. I mean, my hope, knowing Danger Mouse's work, is that he will be making sure the songs stand up and that there's some sort of connection, which he does very well. I think he's really good at doing that, it doesn't matter if it's Gnarls Barkley or The Black Keys, you know, the songs touch a nerve. I, personally, have always questioned, since Bono's got into politics, whether that ability to reach inside himself and really put himself out there has been there as much as back then. But that's what I would hope would come out.

What do you think Bono means by his recent talk of being relevant, and that bit about can U2 still play the small rooms?

I think there's a lot of things at play. I think age is one thing. I think the older you get, it's quite difficult to talk about things that are going to relate to everybody in the same way. To talk about love to a 20-year-old as to what's affecting you as a 50-year-old is almost impossible. But, maybe, it's that things interest him in a different way and maybe the person he's moved into is quite a different person to the person he was then. And, in some respect U2 are very much a voice of that generation and now there's a new generation.

If you talk about it on a human level, what is there left to achieve? One tiny part of any one of those four people's lives most people never even get a chance to glimpse at, let alone have the whole package. So, to be able to sort of come back down to a place where you can appreciate and see things in the way everybody else does, I suspect that's what he means by relevancy.

So, to play a small club where people want to come and see you and be a part of that energy, and people want to come because this is one of the greatest rock 'n' roll bands on a live stage that there has ever been ... but would people think that U2 could still be that same band in their 50s, or would they be perceived as, like, the Rolling Stones? I know that Bono always struggles with that, because he never wants to lose sight of that person who grew up and he was part of that small band where it's driven totally by emotion. There's no intellect. There's no money. There's nothing else. And I think for him, that's what he would still be holding onto, but obviously it becomes incredibly difficult.

But it's not impossible for U2 to do it at their age and level of success, right?

No, it's not impossible. If they get a song that connects, then yeah. Why not? That's one thing that's brilliant about this time: Anybody can connect. It doesn't matter where it comes from if there's something that connects. That's the brilliance about music. I can say that one of my favorite artists at the moment is Katy Perry, and most people would just go, "You're insane."

Ummm, you feel a connection with her songs?

Yeah, totally. Totally. I love them. And I don't try to quantify it. And I think that's one of U2's all-time strengths: You don't quantify it. It just moves you. And the moment the intellect starts to override, and having to justify liking something, that loses all relevance for me. That's what U2, at the height of their powers, can do time and time and time again.

Think of Johnny Cash doing "Hurt." That touched everybody. And that was a song from a record I worked on 20 years beforehand. So, you can do it. But obviously if we knew how to do it we wouldn't be sitting here, because it would've been done and we'd all be reaping the success and just churning it out.

But it seems like U2 isn't content with making songs that are just popular...

No. That's why it's taking so long.

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