
SOUNDBYTE: Larry is really the Pete Best of U2. We should have thrown him out the first month. He was much too good-looking then and still is. We never found our Ringo. -- Edge

'U2 HAD STEPPED UP IN A BIG WAY'

Anthony DeCurtis talks to @U2 about *The Joshua Tree* and the mood in camp U2, February, 1987. [@U2 November 27, 2007](#) by Scott Calhoun

Twenty years ago, *Rolling Stone* writer Anthony DeCurtis met U2 for the first time, when the release of *The Joshua Tree* was about a month away. The album was done; now there were interviews to do and a video to shoot. DeCurtis spent a week with them gathering material for what would be two pieces for the magazine in the spring of '87, one of which would be the May 7th cover story. After two decades of writing about U2 -- his most recent interview with Bono was for *Rolling Stone's* 40th anniversary issue this fall -- DeCurtis, now a contributing editor at the magazine, talks to @U2 about when you could tell, if you were lucky enough to be around them, "there was just this feeling like it was all going to happen. It was palpable."

What stands out for you, now, about the first time you heard The Joshua Tree?

I remember having to go in to the office on a Saturday and pick up a cassette that Jim Henke [then the music editor at *Rolling Stone*] had left for me. I guess he had gotten a copy and either dubbed it for me or left me his copy, and I listened to it there. It's the sort of record that makes an immediate impression. It's not something you have to work very hard to like or to be engaged by. One of the things about doing this job was sometimes you get the right band at the wrong moment, but I just felt that this is going to be a huge record. It was really good.

You knew that right away?

Oh, absolutely. I honestly did. I was pretty gripped by it.

By that point, U2 was a band I certainly cared about. But I wasn't somebody who had jumped on board right away. There were certain aspects of the early U2 that put me off a bit. I remember reading about Peter Wolf being in the studio looking at a video of U2 performing, and just saying, "That guy is walking back and forth on the stage waving a flag." I must say, I kind of shared a bit of that. I mean, I liked *Boy*, you know. I liked what the record was. And I liked *October*, too. There was something about those records that I really responded to. *War*...I got it, but I couldn't quite really grasp where the band was going.

Did you think War was a departure from their first two albums?

Yeah, I liked that stuff that was a little more internal, you know? And I guess I was confused by, you know...I mean, Bono is a master at blurring contradictions, I think. *War* was a record that with everything going on in Ireland, I just didn't think it was enough to say, "This is not a rebel song." All that stuff was just kind of like: *Well, okay, but there are sides here and it's one thing to just bemoan this.*

I struggled a lot with it and wasn't entirely convinced by all that stuff. But *The Unforgettable Fire* -- which a lot of people are pretty ambivalent about -- was a record that meant a great deal to me.

What did you like about it?

I liked the kind of out-of-focus quality. I liked the sort of dreamier aspects of it. The romantic side of U2 has interested me more than the specifically socially conscious side. I mean, Bono's work in the actual world has been extremely impressive. Complicated in its own way, but very impressive. Musically though, I'm

just much more drawn to the other aspects of what their music is.

Anyway, I was kind of poised for [*The Joshua Tree*]. I was also just very excited about the idea of writing about U2 for *Rolling Stone* as a cover story.

So the magazine sent you to Dublin...

Yeah, I had never been to Ireland, and this was really only the second cover story I had done. There were a lot of personal feelings along those lines. There was a sense of excitement. I flew to Ireland, then flew to England with them, and then they went back to Ireland and I flew home from London. It was about a week in all. This is the kind of thing that just never happens anymore: this level of access where you're going around to different countries, in three or four settings. I was interviewing Edge in cars, in his hotel room, in bars. And Bono in the car and at Larry Mullen's house. They are pretty compelling personalities, and they certainly were then. I just kind of got swept up.

I landed and I went out to dinner with Adam and Edge on the first night I got there to just get to know one another. We got along well. Adam had a very engaging and wry manner. He was someone who had more of a wry slant on things than the other guys did. He sort of enjoyed a certain kind of humor....

Did they pick you up at the airport and just take you out to dinner? No handlers, no one else?

Yeah, just us. We went to some sort of gentleman's club [*laughs*], some place where you had to be a member. It was pretty extraordinary.

The next morning, Bono picked me up and I went on one of those famous rides through Dublin with Bono. They are creatures of habit, to be sure. I've read enough versions of the exact same thing that happened to me, but still it was pretty exciting.

Is it as frightening as everyone says, when Bono's driving the car?

It is. It's scary. But look, if you're going to have a tour guide through Dublin...We did our drive through Dublin and out to Larry's house.

Why did he take you to Larry's house?

You know, I've interviewed these guys a number of times over the years and it just seems often that Bono will kind of bring Larry along. Bono will sort of coax him to talk and show him that it's okay. And particularly at this point I think that's why Bono drove me out to Larry's house and we did the interview out there. And then he kind of dropped me off and had Larry drive me back into the city.

How was Larry when Bono wasn't around?

Larry was friendly. He's not somebody who I think particularly takes to the interview process. I think the other guys do it and they do it fine, but Adam and Larry were both feet-on-the-ground kind of guys. Particularly at that point.

Though the next time I really talked to them, for the next U2 cover I did for *Rolling Stone*, Adam was dating Naomi Campbell and he certainly took on a kind of public aspect at that point. But at that time, it became pretty clear to me that Bono was the one who was going to carry the story and the other guys were perfectly willing to let him do that.

The next day we all flew off to London together for a video shoot. One of the things that stands out in my mind is when we went to London, everybody was psyched. I mean, everybody was really psyched. I remember we were leaving their office and everybody's saying, "Bono, here's your passport!" and Bono was all over the place. There was this element of just very high spirits. There was a sense that this was a big moment.

We got there late in the afternoon and we all went to a bar. The thing I remember about that was Bono actually talking to me about *me*. I must tell you, it's something that rarely happens among musicians on that scale. Their level of curiosity about the journalists who have come out to cover them is not there.

Was he sort of interviewing you, asking you the questions?

Yeah, exactly. "I understand you have a Ph.D. ... What was it like?" I remember him saying, "I kind of got caught up in rock 'n' roll and girls and there was just kind of no turning back. But there was a lot that I really wish that I had been able to study." That sort of thing.

We talked a lot about poetry. It was like, you know, talking with a kind of literate Irish guy in a bar. It was a kind of literary conversation you just don't typically have when you're out doing these stories. And it was a literary conversation in which somebody is not just interested in holding forth on what they happen to know but, you know, a genuine conversation. And I just felt like: *Ah, this is actually a real person*. I was really affected by it.

I'm sure Bono has changed in some way since you first met him. What have you noticed?

Since then, I probably have done about a half-dozen pretty long pieces and then talked to him for other stories, and look: This guy is palling around with Bill Gates and Bill Clinton. There's a kind of world that he moves in now that if it didn't change you, I don't know who you'd be.

I think...I'm trying to articulate it. Alright, I'll tell you a few anecdotes and you can glean from them what you will.

Bono recently hosted a screening of *Control*, [Anton Corbijn's] movie about Joy Division. There were maybe about 20 people there. I was surprised that so few people came. Part of the idea was, I think, to get some buzz going for this film his friend made. Bono got up to speak at the beginning of the movie, to introduce it, but I don't think the projectionist knew, so the movie started while Bono was talking. It was hilarious. Bono just sort of scurried off and went and sat down. He was very much the kind of scamp that he had been in the past.

Whereas, when I went to his apartment to talk to him for the 40th anniversary issue of *Rolling Stone*, it was like talking to somebody who was used to playing on the world stage. It wasn't like somebody who was doing a screening for 20 people that his friend the photographer made. It was like somebody who was used to talking to important people and making big decisions and doing things that had massive impact.

It was very different from when I wrote what I think was the first big story about Bono's debt work in *Rolling Stone*. We were knocking around in Washington, D.C., in bad conference rooms, and he still jokes about that. We walked into a hotel and he turned to Shelia Roche and said, "If the next tour isn't successful (they were making *All That You Can't Leave Behind*), we'll always be staying in hotels like this."

Even between then, almost 10 years ago, and now, there is a significant change. I don't think it's a pretense, but I think that enough of going to G8 meetings and enough of meeting heads of state has put him on a level of somebody who is used to operating on that scale rather than somebody who is the lead singer in a band you like. The band has gotten big enough, but there's also this other level of bigness in his life.

Going back to London, twenty years ago...you watched them make the video for "Red Hill Mining Town."

We were on the set of the video shoot which was, like, 9,000 hours long. I don't remember much of the set -- it was pretty dark. It seemed like a performance piece. There weren't trees melting or horses walking around on the stage! It was interesting to just kind of see Bono on a set. It's a very different kind of thing from performing as a rock star on a stage to performing in a studio for a video, where you are essentially lip-syncing and all that business.

It was just the band on a sound stage pretending to play. It was interesting to see Bono hanging out for about two hours or so and then it would be, "*Okay Bono, get up and do your thing!*" And you'd see this total commitment. That complete ability to perform. That's something that's always interested me: the performance and what that means and what is involved in that. And watching him do it -- a lot of people just really need to work it up to make some sort of transition between chatting with you in the hallway outside the studio and then walking up and really having to put out. But I remember people applauding on the set. It was pretty strong stuff.

We haven't talked about Edge yet. What impression did he make on you?

[Laughs] I talked to Edge in London, in his hotel room. I remember my room being bigger than his.

Did you mention that to him?

No!

Edge was pretty quiet. I remember being struck by how thoughtful he seemed. You know, Bono is off to the races...you're kind of steering his conversation because he's just kind of propelled by whatever it is that's on his mind and you just kind of jump along for the ride because there's a kind of energy and momentum to him. Whereas, Edge is just much quieter. He's the kind of person who, if you ask him a question, will actually sit there and think about it. He's not the kind of person who shows up with talking points. There's a genuine sense of wanting to respond to what you're interested in.

I remember there's a point he made. One of the things they were talking about was their period of spiritual, maybe, obsession, that they got in around the time they were making *October*. He was saying that subsequently his feeling was that there was a kind of range to morality. It wasn't just this is good and that's bad; this is black and that's white. But that it existed within a spectrum. That if it moved too far in one direction then obviously that was bad. If it moved too far in another direction then that was really good. But in the middle it was difficult to know. That sounds like an obvious point, but he made it in a kind of powerful way.

I've found myself just going back to that conversation and at times just thinking about it in various situations that I've been in where it seemed like what the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do was not necessarily clear, and there might be a variety of ways to interpret it.

Did he seem to have some special insight? I wonder why his take on this topic stuck with you?

I felt like he had really grappled with the question. It wasn't just somebody saying things are not just black or white; it was somebody who had worked his way to that understanding. The particular way that he said it and the level of seriousness just made it really come across.

I once did an interview with David Byrne, and we were talking about *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. He said Brian [Eno] and I got really obsessed with certain aspects of rhythm. He said that one could say we could have hired a good funk drummer and made the same record without reading fifty books about African music. Byrne said that's true, but it's like the kid across the street with his car. You could go to the lot and buy a car and drive your car...and you've got a car. But that kid who takes his car apart and puts it back together every weekend exists in a different relationship to that car than you do to yours.

That's what I felt about Edge in that conversation about morality. I kind of got the sense that that knowledge was something he had earned somehow. It was one of those moments where you can hear something a lot of times but it will require a specific context or a specific speaker to really make its meaning hit. In that case, that's what happened for me when he was talking about it.

Could you sense that U2 had grown since The Unforgettable Fire and were prepared for what was coming?

Oh, without a doubt, man. They had stepped up in a big way. There was the Conspiracy of Hope tour; there was Live Aid; and "Bad" had become a big performance song for them. All of that stuff combined...the table was set. There was just this feeling like it was all going to happen. It was palpable. I'm not sure I've ever really...maybe with R.E.M. around the same time. But U2 wanted it more. There was that sense that here it is.

U2 wanted it more than R.E.M.?

Oh, without question more than R.E.M. Not a lot of people had really paid a lot of attention to R.E.M. to that point. In fact, I remember talking to Edge about R.E.M. at yet another dinner. We were all smoking cigars. Bono was off at the movies with Larry, I think, and he came back for dessert. I remember saying to Edge, you know, "What have you been listening to?" I said I really liked R.E.M. and I asked him what he thought about them. I remember Edge expressing some ambivalence, particularly about Michael [Stipe].

At that point the difference between Bono and Michael could not have been starker: Michael was still very withdrawn and extremely skittish on stage. I think there was, with Edge, a sense that there was reluctance to step up. That was sort of the difference between U2 and R.E.M., I think.

U2 was just always going for it. I don't think there was any question about it. You know, Bono is going to climb the rafters and that kind of stuff. Michael has become a lot more outgoing but that's still not going to happen. I think that's what some of that was about. I think Edge was a little mystified about it.

Do you think U2 felt like they had come this far, that this is now the right thing for us to be doing? Like, this is ours to take?

Yeah, it's ours to take. There weren't daunted by the scale of things. They had issues with rock stardom and they had questions about what it means to be this big and what that can do to us. Those questions are real, but there was never any sense....There was that time with *October* that they got really ambivalent about it, but you couldn't really make that out in terms of their live shows. I think U2 always wanted to be big. I think they were an ambitious band in that way. In a way that R.E.M. was not.

Did you get the sense that being big for them was a sort of tool they could use for their more socially active things?

That sounds a little self-conscious to me. I think that came later, or sort of existed along the way. They were doing Amnesty International stuff when it wasn't necessarily a huge thing, but I think that became their way of giving some meaning to what they wanted in the first place. *[Laughs]* That's how I would see it. I don't think that they would have been content to be a small band. I don't think anybody in U2 had the slightest interest in that.

Well, they certainly got it.

Oh yeah, absolutely. And I think it's still meaningful to them. I think they want to have big records. I don't think that has lost its allure for them. You know, look, the argument is: it's popular music -- people are supposed to like it. They still like to try stuff and do different things. I think they definitely want to reach an audience. That other kind of niche thing...I personally have never got the impression that that's something that washed with them.

At that time, in 1987, was there any sense that a chapter was closing for them and they would need to try something different after The Joshua Tree?

I think they were looking at what was right in front of them. I think there was a sense that this is it, let's go, man. Let's jump on the horse and ride. I'm sure in some moments there must have been, "Gee, I wonder what's on the other side of that," but what I sensed was a great deal of exhilaration.

What came together so well for them for The Joshua Tree, as an album?

I think it was a clearer record. Edge talked about bringing the songs into focus and there was a concentration on songwriting, as opposed to a sound. What the record went for was a clarity, so that you were going to have big hits.

The other thing is it came out at a time where there was this sense of blockbuster LPs, that '80s gigantism of *Thriller*, *Like a Virgin* and *Born in the U.S.A.* All of that stuff was happening and this was going to be their shot. So if you made a good record, it was a possibility that it could be a huge record. And I think that's what happened there.

I was interviewing Brian Eno at the time and one of the things he was talking about was Steve Lillywhite's mix on "With or Without You." I asked him what he thought of it and he said it was really interesting, because they had lived with that song for a long time in a certain form and then they turned it over to Steve and he did something with it that had never really occurred to him: he turned it into a pop song.

But in their own case I think that they really kept a lot of the romance of their music and also were able, I think, to more effectively channel the power of it. So what you got was, in a certain sense, a higher level of craft, but without sacrificing passion or vision. And it came at a time when there was a sense of a restored sense of social conscience in music. And these songs get at that without clubbing you over the head with it.

Has The Joshua Tree aged well? Is it still just as powerful?

There's a kind of cumulative force it has that is more than the sum of its parts. Because it was such a big record for such a long time, and it looms so large, I think it's easy to reduce it to the songs that were really, really out there. But those songs in context mean a lot more and the record hits with a surprising power for that reason.

I put it on earlier today, and just hearing "Where the Streets Have No Name," it just comes roaring out. It comes across with a lot of force. And it's a real statement of purpose. Even as there is a kind of romance to it, it hits with a lot of directness. It's one of those songs you hear and you just kind of know, *this is going to be a big song*.

In a way, this album is similar to *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, in that concentration on songwriting and that clarity of focus. And that album isn't too long ago. But I don't think you listen to *The Joshua Tree* like you listen to other '80s records that sounded great back then but just, production-wise, don't come across now.

You know, it was a fun record to write about. It was a good record to write about. There was a lot going on in it. It also was going to be a popular record that people were going to enjoy who maybe didn't even care about a lot of the things that were in there. Even "With or Without You" -- you don't have to necessarily know a lot about what it is about and you can still really feel what it is -- or, "Where the Streets Have No Name": those songs are just undeniable as songs, whatever they might mean beyond that. I think the issues of the record are still relevant. It's been quite a 20-year journey, and not just for the band. A song like "Bullet the Blue Sky" is possibly much more relevant now than it was even then.

Those are, I think, a lot of the reasons for why people get worked up about it. You know, *it's good*.

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