

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

MARCH 2005

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3

WHEN THEY LOOK AT THE WORLD: REALITY AND REDEMPTION IN THE MUSIC OF U2

Nathan Tiemeyer

They are, in the words of *USA Today's* Edna Gunderson, "rock's lone superpower." Then again – when you qualify as a band who has (1) ushered in the new millennium with a multiple Grammy winning album (*All That You Can't Leave Behind*, 2000) that *Rolling Stone* magazine hailed as its third masterpiece; (2) delivered an emotionally powerful post-9/11 Super Bowl halftime show; (3) enjoyed the view from the vanguard of pop culture as the recent focus of Apple's iTunes ad campaign, (4) seen its latest studio album (*How To Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, 2004) debut atop the album charts and garner widespread critical acclaim; and (5) sold out shows for its upcoming world tour in a matter of minutes – that title isn't really a stretch.

Known to the world simply as "U2," it appears that these four lads from Dublin, Ireland – Bono (vocalist/lyricist), the Edge (guitar and keyboard), Larry Mullen, Jr. (drums), and Adam Clayton (bass) – are at the top of their form. So much so, in fact, that Peter Gaston of *Spin* magazine recently quipped that, despite spending the last few years as the world's greatest rock band, U2 is "making a case for a raise."

Of course, such acclaim isn't exactly new to the band. Shortly after they had released their very first album, *Boy* (1980), *Rolling Stone* hailed U2 as the "Next Big Thing." And since that time, U2 has sold a near-ridiculous number of albums, earned more awards than one can practically keep track of,

and literally landed in the *Guinness Book of Records* for concert attendance.

In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that U2 has been at or near the forefront of the ever-changing scene of rock and roll for the span of a generation. To put it another way, the band has done much more than continually release albums and embark on concert tours. They have been vitally relevant for twenty-five years – a phenomenon nearly unparalleled in the history of the genre.

But the reality of U2's consistent, widespread appeal occasions a simple question: why is this the case? Why have U2 and their music continued to resonate so profoundly to so many? Doubtless one could offer many answers that would begin to do the subject justice. Still, a strong case can be made that the relevancy of U2 can be traced, at least in part, to the presence of two major themes within their music, themes that seem to be almost constantly present when U2 – to borrow a song title from *All That You Can't Leave Behind* – looks at the

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world, and then tells us what they see.

The first of these themes can be labeled candor. Writer Bill Flanagan has remarked that U2 are by nature truth tellers, and Bono, the man who is largely responsible for the lyrical content of the music, is by nature a big mouth. This results in a bold transparency, giving the listener access to a singer and his band as they honestly grapple with the broken-

ness of the world in which they live. Things are not the way they are supposed to be, and acknowledging that fact is a task to which U2 has been consistently dedicated.

Take, for example, what may be one of the finer songs in U2's catalog, "Running to Stand Still" off the seminal *The Joshua Tree* album (1987). The song touches upon the plague of drug abuse that had infected the band's hometown of Dublin. For the inspiration of the song, Bono references hearing about a couple who was so desperately addicted to heroin that they decided to risk everything to smuggle a large quantity of the drug into the city. Alluding to the housing towers located in a particular Dublin neighborhood, Bono's lyric reads like this:

Sweet the sin/ Bitter taste in my mouth/ I see seven Towers/ But I only see one way out/ You got to cry without weeping/ Talk without speaking/ Scream without raising your voice/ You know I took the poison/ From the poison stream/ Then I floated out of here.

Remarking about the song, Bono had this to say: "For a lot of people there are no physical doors open any more. And so if you can't change the world in which you're living in, seeing it through different eyes is the only alternative. And heroin gives you heroin eyes to see with." While Bono is ultimately no pessimist (as we shall soon see), the song serves as a powerful tool. It helps the listener to gain a brief but haunting glimpse of what it feels like to be someone so hopeless, that to cope with your situation you find yourself willing to embrace a remedy that ultimately promises only destruction.

A similarly unpleasant facet of reality, the pain that goes hand in hand with human relationships, is captured on the band's latest album. In its third track, the beautiful "Sometimes You Can't Make it on Your Own," Bono explores the difficult relationship he had with his own father, something many listeners can no doubt relate to. In the space of a few words, Bono conveys the frustration he felt in trying to communicate with his dad while acknowledging his debt to the same man – himself an amateur opera singer – for his own vocal gifts: *I know that we don't talk/ I'm sick of it all/ Can you hear me when I sing/ You're the reason I sing/ You're the reason the opera is in me.*

Fueled by thoughts like that and a musical treatment to match, the song is an achingly beautiful piece of music, one that forces the listener to feel the ambiguity that results when love and gratitude is mingled with frustration and regret. It is the sad imperfection that characterizes every human relationship of consequence.

Nor is Bono shy about directing attention even to his own faults and problems, giving us such memorable lines as *I must be an acrobat to talk like this and act like that* ("Acrobat") or *I like the sound of my own voice/ I didn't give anyone else a choice and I'm not broke, but you can see the cracks* ("All Because of You").

While those lines may strike us as clever, U2 is best described at other times as incendiary, seemingly giving vent to the raw emotion they have been made to feel as a result of the events occurring around them. Witness "Sunday Bloody Sunday," U2's best-known response to the consistent cycle of violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. The song doesn't choose sides, but its emotion commands attention. It begins with a declaration:

I can't believe the news today... I can't close my eyes and make it go away. The fruit of the violence is described in graphic terms, and the nearly desperate question is raised: *How long, how long must we sing this song?* The question is pressing, given the assessment Bono makes elsewhere: *It's no secret that our world is in darkness tonight* ("The Fly").

It's fair to say that, in a medium that so often can degenerate into fantasy and fluff, U2 doggedly insists in dealing in the

currency of reality, even if that reality is not always so comforting. It is this effort that places Bono firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament psalmist, which makes sense, given his widely known interest in the biblical Psalms and what they communicate. After all, the Hebrew psalmists were poets who called it like they saw it. They lamented oppression and injustice of wicked men, as well as the darkness they found in their own hearts. It is in the Psalms that some of the most gripping passages of Scripture can be found, where the poets cry out to God for relief from what they see and experience. Sometimes, the cry is even to ask God why he doesn't seem to be listening.

It's not so surprising, then, that the candor of U2 extends even to asking those very same questions. In "Peace on Earth," a song inspired by yet another tragic bombing in Northern Ireland, Bono's raw

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questioning is captured in the lyric:

Jesus can you take the time/ To throw a drowning man a line/ Peace on Earth/ Jesus in this song you wrote/ The words are sticking in my throat/ Peace on Earth/ Hear it every Christmas time/ But hope and history won't rhyme/ So what's it worth/ This peace on earth?

Like the ancient Hebrew poets, Bono's professed belief doesn't prohibit him from asking the most troubling questions of God. And like these poets of old, the conversation is not held behind closed doors. Thoreau stated that most men live lives of quiet desperation. If that is true, then Bono is clearly the exception. His desperation isn't quiet - it's amplified.

But in a significant way, this desire to be relentlessly honest is, to many who listen to the bands music, refreshing. By that I mean it provides the same benefit of a person mentioning to a friend during dinner that she has food stuck in her teeth, or a Good Samaritan telling a fellow commuter that his rear tire is wobbling. That fact remains that living in ignorance of reality can be embarrassing at best, dangerous and tragic at worst. By forcing its listeners to focus on what is real, regardless of how uncomfortable it becomes, U2 provides them with a service of tremendous value.

It's worth noting, however, that while U2 may be exceptional in their ability to candidly speak of the raw stuff of reality, they certainly aren't unique in this regard. Drawing attention to the stuff we would rather ignore has been, at times, one of the better legacies of rock and roll. But U2's candor, their willingness to walk through the mess of life, is only half the story. Standing alone, it would most likely lack the resources to drive the tremendous resonance the band has enjoyed. Yet the same candor, when mixed with what may be described as an indefatigable hope, makes for a heady brew. This second theme, then, is also a crucial ingredient in the arresting quality that has captured the attention and admiration of so many listeners.

Around the time of *Achtung Baby's* (1991) release, Bono told Bill Flanagan, "We're looking for diamonds in the dirt, and the music is more in the mud now...As dark as it gets, though, we are looking for shiny moments." What is so unusual about U2 is the fact that, though they so consistently draw

attention to what is wrong, they ultimately refuse to give themselves over to resignation and despair. They refuse to give into the thought that this is the way things will always be. Rather, throughout their catalog, evidenced both lyrically and musically, there is a steadfast hope that exists right alongside their honest appraisals of the way things are.

I have already alluded to the fact that the band's candor reflects a biblical flavor, but it is in this thread of hope, woven throughout their music, that this influence is even more immediate and discernable. Though it does question, it is a hope that ultimately remains grounded firmly in the divine. The song that closed both U2's *War* album, as well as many of its live shows in the decade of the 80's, is entitled "40." Based on King David's psalm of the same number, the song also borrows a line from Psalm 6 to echo the question that had been posed earlier in the album in "Sunday Bloody Sunday": *How long to sing this song?*

Here however, the question is almost prayerful, and accompanied by gentle musical treatment, it is juxtaposed with lines taken from King David himself:

I waited patiently for the Lord/ He inclined and heard my cry/ He brought me up out of the pit/ Out of the miry clay.../ He set my feet upon a rock/ And made my footsteps firm/ Many will see/ Many will see and fear/ I will sing, sing a new song.

Similar thoughts are expressed elsewhere. Closing the *All You Can't Leave Behind* album is a song called "Grace." Its second stanza notes simply: *Grace/ It's a name for a girl/ It's also a thought that changed the world.* The song goes on:

Grace finds beauty/ In everything...She carries a pearl, in perfect condition/ What once was hurt/ What once was friction/ What left a mark/ No longer stings/ Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

Here is Bono's answer, even his comfort, for dealing with all the ugliness of the world. He sings of his belief that, with grace, somehow the wounds can be healed and the ugliness can be transformed to beauty. It is this belief that forms the plea of "Yahweh" the last track on their latest release. The song functions as a kind of prayer to its namesake,

‘Like the ancient
Hebrew poets, Bono’s
professed belief doesn’t
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allowing Bono to sing,

*Take this shirt/ Polyester white trash made in nowhere/
Take this shirt/ And make it clean/ Take this soul/
Stranded in some skin and bones/ Take this soul/ And
make it sing.*

If Bono seems at times to express his doubts, he's also quite capable of issuing calls to persevere amidst difficulty. "Walk On," another song off *All That You Can't Leave Behind* is dedicated to Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who has suffered at the hands of her country's oppressive government regime. And though it certainly speaks powerfully to that situation, one wonders if the song doesn't operate on multiple levels, especially in light of the following encouragement: *And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off/ And if your glass heart should crack/ And for a second you turn back/ Oh no, be strong/ Walk on.*

Just as U2 continually forces us to grapple with the hard business of reality, they also drag us up off the ground to keep going, buoyed by the belief that hope is still legitimate. It is juxtaposition of these themes that I think ultimately fuels the appeal of U2. Merely detailing the difficulties of life without a remedy will eventually foster only despair. But once one has been dragged through the muck, the need for a legitimate hope is brought into much sharper focus, and any glimpse that one can get becomes much more precious.

Thus, for instance, when one considers the myriad instances of suffering and pain that we can see on the nightly news, the apostle John's concluding vision in the Book of Revelation becomes very appealing. In that scene, the apostle describes a new heaven and a new earth, a place where glorious perfection will finally be experienced, where God will wipe every tear from the eyes of his people, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...and the lure of this kind of world becomes much more powerful; it becomes desperately attractive. In its own way, I believe that the music of U2 echoes this effect. We are taken with the band into the scrum of reality. Our nose gets bloodied and our heart grows heavy. We are made to feel the pain, but in the end, it is to force us to look for, appreciate, and embrace the promise of relief. We are dragged through hell to kindle our hope for heaven.

One of the clearest, most powerful expressions of the band engaging in this process can be seen on the *Elevation Tour* concert DVD (2001). Near the end of that tour's main set, the band slated "Bad," a song that serves as another attempt to treat the subject of drug addiction. The performance crescendos into a

fountain of emotion, carried along by Bono's exclamations of desperation and dislocation, temptation and isolation. The ache of the song is almost palpable.

As the band nears the end of the song with Bono alone on the extended stage, almost as if he has no other place to turn in the face of the alienation and pain about which he has been singing, he offers the searching question of "40." Over and over he sings: *How long? How long? How long?* The crowd begins to join in, creating what seems like a giant congregation pouring out a plaintive cry to God for relief.

Then, with the audience still singing that refrain in unison, the beginnings of perhaps U2's most signature concert anthem are heard. And the room begins to change. From its humble beginnings, the music of "Where the Streets Have No Name" gradually gains momentum, this - a song that points to a place of ultimate relief.

And as the band exultingly breaks into the main body of the song, the arena, which had been mostly dark only moments before, explodes in brilliant light, and any melancholy tone rapidly disappears, replaced by what I can best describe only as profound sense of joy. In the midst of running around the heart shaped stage, Bono changes the original lyrics of the song and sings *I'll show you a place with no sorrow and no shame/ Where the streets have no name.*

When I attended that concert myself, I remember looking around and thinking, "This is one of the most amazing experiences of my life." While it may sound strange to those who weren't there, for just a few moments, I thought I saw a glimpse of that place with no sorrow and no shame. And from that night forward - having watched that scene on the concert DVD many times since - I have continually longed for more of what U2 was offering.

I'm confident I'm neither the first nor the last to feel that way, and I have a hunch such a feeling goes a long way in explaining the continuing resonance of U2. When we see the world as U2 candidly describes it, and when we are given the offer of a restored world, we realize that they are singing about a world that we must actually live in and yet a world beyond which we must find hope.

*As Reconsiderations went to press,
we learned that U2 was inducted into the
Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on March 14.*

Nathan Tiemeyer has a Masters of Divinity from Covenant Theological Seminary. He originally presented a version of this essay for the Francis Schaeffer Institute in St. Louis, Missouri, and most recently at the Cherry St. Artisan in Columbia, Missouri.

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PASTE MAGAZINE:
FINDING FERTILE SOIL IN
COMMON GROUND

James Walden

Paste Magazine is a relatively new music magazine that can be found at most local bookstores, including Goehrings and Borders. It has been called “a thinking person’s *Rolling Stone*.” With 78% of their readership holding a college degree, and 35% with graduate degrees, this appellation seems apt. In fact, *Paste* has been labeled the first music magazine for adults, prompting their (literal) trademark, “Rock’n’roll: It’s not just for kids anymore.” But don’t think it ‘out of touch’ for that reason. This is not your daddy’s rock ‘n’ roll. Not unlike *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, or *Mojo Magazine*, *Paste* deals critically and enthusiastically with the newest expressions of contemporary popular music and culture (particularly film and literature). However, unlike other publications targeting a broader (if younger) audience of pop culture consumers, *Paste*’s featured artists are chosen more for their musicianship than their location on the billboard charts.

This commitment to quality of artistry as opposed to quantity of hype lends *Paste* a distinctiveness that can be described as a certain narrowness of focus. Such narrowness, however, is hard to define, in part because it is exceedingly broad. *Paste*’s coverage includes an enormous array of genres, from Americana, Alt-Country and Folk, to Adult Alternative and Indie Rock, to Intelligent Hip Hop and Electronica, and beyond, to music that simply defies any standard classification.

In the midst of this diversity, it is the unity of focus that gives *Paste* its coherence and distinctiveness. That focus is succinctly expressed by the magazine’s tagline: “Signs of Life in Music and Culture.” These signs of life not only evince that there is life in popular culture, but in turn, they awaken “something deeper within us,” through their beautiful and provocative forms (in all their diversity), and through the substance of their poetry, stories, truths, and questions (which is their common thread). As *Paste* editor Josh Jackson explains in the magazine’s inaugural editorial, “we humbly offer this magazine, searching for signs of life in what looks at first glance to be a musical wasteland. But underneath the surface, the soil is alive with creativity, honest emotion, and orig-

inal thought. The artists we cover have something to say and a gift to say it well. We value songcraft over style and depth over trendiness.”

As the tagline suggests, the interest extends beyond good music. Not only do they regularly offer reviews of the newly released albums, films, and books, but also *Paste* has begun to offer a free DVD in every bimonthly issue for subscribers (in addition to the free CD music sampler that has always been one of the perks of purchasing *Paste*). The DVD contains music videos, film trailers, and even a handful of short films.

Paste began in 1998 as a website to support artists whose music Josh Jackson and his two buddies, Nick Purdy and Jordan Feibus, felt had substance and depth, though usually not breadth of recognition. The hope was to introduce music that is “beautiful, meaningful, intelligent, and creative” to new fans. The tagline then was “connecting music to the soul.” It began as a “side gig,” if an increasingly consuming one. By the end of 2001, frustrated by what they couldn’t find on the magazine racks, Purdy and Jackson decided to take *Paste* to the next level. Jackson quit his job with the Luke Society, a medical missions organization, and moved back to Atlanta to start *Paste Magazine*.

Jackson’s departure from a mission organization to edit a music magazine that has no “hidden Christian editorial agenda” and is self-consciously separate from Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has raised a few questions. In an interview with the Presbyterian online periodical *byFaith*, Jackson responds: “I know God has called some artists to be ministers to the church, but some days I wish we could just knock the walls of CCM down and that Christians would engage their culture, add their perspective in the marketplace of art and ideas, and be a little more salt and light in the world.”

Jackson affirms the Reformed tradition’s notion of calling, which challenges the sacred/secular divide and insists that all aspects of a person’s life are part and parcel of one’s relationship to God. As such, one’s faith shapes and informs all that is done, whether in so-called professional ministry or in editing an independent music magazine. As Jackson adds, “We do feel like we’re able to pick up on music with a spiritual depth that people with other perspectives might miss – music from folks like Over the Rhine, Bruce Cockburn, Pierce Pettis,

Sarah Masen, and Bill Mallonee. We hope our faith informs everything we do, but our mission is to run our company ethically, love the people we come in contact with, and put out a carefully-crafted magazine that people are going to want to read regardless of their own beliefs."

In so doing, they serve the popular culture well, but they do so in a distinctive way. The focus to unearth and showcase what is thoughtful and eloquent in popular music and culture, and the goal to become "the standard bearers for music with depth" renders *Paste* truly unique among the myriad music magazines that typically populate the newsstands. Former *Rolling Stone* editor Ben Fong-Torres, who has been writing about music for thirty years, recently wrote in a letter to Jackson: "*Paste* has already turned me onto a couple of stellar voices...In a time when record label consolidation has shut out a lot of the best music being made, we need other media, other avenues, other ways of getting the word - and the sounds - out to each other. We need you, and I hope *Paste* stays in the mix for a long, long time."

One of the thematic concerns of the Christian Study Center is to create space for thoughtful dialogue in our culture, to prompt conversations around significant questions

and topics. We see in *Paste Magazine* a model for approaching pop culture in a way that both takes it seriously as a means of thoughtful and artistic expression, and that seeks to enrich it by bringing the wealth and wisdom of the Christian tradition to bear on the conversation.

Note: The editors of *Paste Magazine* are extending a special subscription rate to readers of *Reconsiderations*: 6 bi-monthly issues including 6 CD samplers and 6 DVDs, for \$20.21 - that's 25% off the normal rate of \$26.95. To take advantage of this, visit *Paste's* website where they have set up a special link <https://www.pastemagazine.com/offer/reconsiderations>.

James Walden has a Masters of Divinity from Reformed Theological Seminary. He is assistant pastor at Creekside Community Church in Gainesville, Florida and teaches in a variety of capacities at the Christian Study Center.

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "When They Look at the World: Reality and Redemption in the Music of U2" by Nathan Tiemeyer, p. 1-4.

"Just as U2 continually forces us to grapple with the hard business of reality, they also drag us up off the ground to keep going, buoyed by the belief that hope is still legitimate. It is juxtaposition of these themes that I think ultimately fuels the appeal of U2."

Review: "Paste Magazine: Finding Fertile Soil in Common Ground" by James Walden, p. 6-7.

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Reconsiderations is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, whose purpose is to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life.

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