



## Looking for the Kingdom Come

### Questioning Spirituality in U2

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Despite their status as the world's premier stadium rock band with all the obligation to worldly concerns that implies, and despite a continued scepticism with rock held by large portions of the Christian community,[1] there would appear to be widespread agreement with the opinion of Graham Cray, that "it has been perhaps U2's main achievement to introduce positive spirituality back into rock music".[2] U2 were a new wave band formed in Dublin in 1977 by Bono (Paul Hewson, vocals), The Edge (David Evans, guitar), Adam Clayton (bass) and Larry Mullen (kit). Their first song to become widely known was 'Gloria' (from *October*) in 1981, after which *War* in 1983, *The Unforgettable Fire* in 1984, *The Joshua Tree* in 1987, *Rattle and Hum* in 1988, *Achtung Baby* in 1991 and *Zooropa* in 1993 topped the charts. Their idiolect developed from a punk style base, maturing in simple harmonic patterns (without extended verse-refrain forms), a driving bass technique, busy and echoic guitar patterns in high register, and a recitative-like vocal approach; the combination of these seems to cry out the band's sincerity. The epic, ideologically sound nature of many songs from the 1980s, the band's evident devotion to its audience, and three of the members' reasoned Christian commitment confirmed their idiolect's connotations, which have led to favourable comparisons with such luminaries as Bruce Springsteen.

Cray expands his position with consideration of a number of U2's lyrics, particularly the final verse of 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'. This is a song which is frequently interpreted in terms of the inadequacy of faith, a song which, in Bernd Schwarze's words "uncover[s] the ambivalence of religious traditions and spiritual experience".[3] For Cray, however, this would appear to be an unwarranted gloss, for he finds in it precisely the same call "to leave behind the past and press on in the upward call of Jesus Christ"[4] made by Paul in Philippians 3:12-14, a passage which has itself caused difficulties for Evangelistic orthodoxy. This debate exemplifies the difficulty of trying to develop an interpretation solely from the meanings of the words themselves, rather than in their interaction with individual listeners. While neither Schwarze's analysis nor Cray's is implausible, both appear to find in

the song exactly what they were indeed looking for. The view that U2 have recently abandoned the quest (or that it has at least vanished underground), that the 'spiritual' content of their recent work is to be questioned is, however, one that has to be seriously dealt with.

But why talk about finding spirituality in rock music itself, rather than in rock lyrics? Are there elements within U2's musical structures which somehow embody spirituality? What does spirituality mean in this context? One approach might be to suggest that music can make use of certain 'spiritual signifiers'. In an essay on the music of the band Yes, I have proposed that the rather unspecific spirituality expressed in the lyrics of Jon Anderson and Steve Howe is supported by a number of such signifiers. Some of these are nearly iconic, such as passages which do without rock's normative bass frequencies and dirty timbres, both of these elements signifying rock's earth-bound status, or the use of multivocality, wherein the listener feels literally surrounded within the voice, to signify spiritual union. Others were more metaphorical, such as the use of a fully chromatic cycle of fifths to signify the discovery of a spiritual unity beneath surface diversity.[5] Edward Macan has more recently proposed a related signifier, suggesting that the long, held organ chords of much progressive rock retain the atmosphere of high Anglican worship where he suggests they originated.[6] In another context, I might want to make out a similar argument for the stepwise basses and prevalent suspensions (even within a rock rhythmic language) for the worship songs of Graham Kendrick, Paul Field or Andy Silver. Such a procedure might at least enable us to ascertain the extent to which the music is supportive or subversive with respect to the lyrics, but the absence of equivalent overt signifiers in U2's music makes it difficult to define the music's spirituality.

The desire to find a 'spiritual quality' within music appears particularly to have originated with early nineteenth-century Romanticism as music became identified with that crucial aporia in the secularised worldview, and is nowhere more apparent than in evaluations of the worth of the music of Beethoven for the entire edifice of Western culture. Although clouded with reason, Sullivan's commentary is typical. He declares, for instance, that the "spiritual content of the most characteristic of Beethoven's 'second period' work may be summed up as achievement through heroism in spite of suffering",[7] an interpretation which depends on reading the musical 'motif' as an 'individual', and tracing in the course of the movement or even work, its response to its life journey. In this interpretation, of course, Beethoven's op.135 quartet is found most profound, for in its final movement the 'motif' exchanges struggle for confident, even exultant, acceptance of death and what it portends. This is by no means an old-fashioned notion, for it underpins Mellers' much more recent exploration of Beethoven's achievement. But what is it that makes such a content 'spiritual'? It comes about through reading the motif as not just any individual, but as the individual who relates the journey undertaken, i.e. as the author. It is a reading which inscribes the music as an autobiographical account from which the material, bodily inessentials have been stripped away. Thus, the 'spirit' of a work translates as its 'essence', just as the 'spirit' of the individual is also her/his 'essential' centre, that which gives her/him identity. In this (untheorised) vision, contrary to mystical Christian tradition, the 'spirit' is

viewed as inherent within the body, rather than vice versa.[8] Likewise, the contradiction between Cray's and Schwarze's accounts of 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for' grows from their equivalent assumptions of the autobiographical nature of Bono's lyrics. There are, of course, grounds for such assumptions. Bono has declared that his lyrics express his belief: "I didn't think, 'Hey, I'm going to write about my belief in God,' it just came out", but it is clear that this profession should not be overt: "An old but very wise man once said to me that you should never fight darkness with light, you should just make the light brighter." [9] He has also attempted to turn belief into action, particularly in terms of his visits to Ethiopia, Nicaragua and El Salvador, [10] journeys which affected Bono deeply and led to the outrage expressed in songs like 'Bullet the blue sky'. We can argue, then, that Bono is conforming to the command in James 2:26 to turn his words into action.

There is a second constituent feature of the attribution of 'spiritual' to a musical quality which relates also to Beethoven: the spiritual transcends everyday reality (as all 'great' music is purported to do), and thus music with a spiritual quality transcends the time and place of its reception. This becomes particularly pertinent if we view Christianity as unifying the transcendent (the Father) and the immanent (the Spirit) in the Trinity. Here is one possible way to bring together the 'spirit' and the 'Spirit', which might otherwise appear quite separated. But which of these might be located in the music of U2? In a previous essay, [11] I argued that U2's idiolect up to the late 1980s (as far as *Rattle and Hum*, in fact) affords the listener a centring experience, the provision of an existential authenticity, an experience to be trusted. This affordance results from a particular stylistic combination of musical techniques (songs' method of construction, accessibility of performance technique, textural connotations of spaciousness and pre-linguistic vocality) operating within a loosely defined socio-historico-cultural matrix. Note that this conception of authenticity is diametrically opposed to that normally identified for rock music: rather than proclaiming an idiolect's proximity to the style's origins in the blues, authenticating the utterance, this conception locates authenticity in the listener's self-construction, as a centred being. This, too, appears to be an accepted position: Dunphy locates U2's 'authenticity' in their ability to communicate the 'reality' of experience, [12] a reality which can only be validated through experience. Crucial to my previous argument was the observation that this centring was afforded not through songs' lyrical content, but through musical techniques. In other words, linguistic understanding was at a discount. This is important for two reasons. In the context of Cray's location of spirituality within U2's music, note that it is often assumed that music is an adequate medium for those 'understandings' for which verbal discourse is insufficient. [13] We know that many of Bono's own lyrics were not subject to careful 'composition', [14] and that Edge expresses a disdain for learning standard rock chordal formulae, preferring to work instinctively. [15] Additionally, scepticism towards linguistic rationality is a prominent feature of a range of Protestant thought which problematises the trustworthy, unmediated experience. [16] In these terms, this mature style of U2 erects a stage for the confrontation of doubt in the insistence of trust, a stage made explicit during the *Zoo TV* tour where the song 'One' became accompanied by a ritual igniting of cigarette lighters (the song seemingly being taken as an

anthem for everything!).

George Allan's discourse on these matters finds the rituals which embody spirituality, like the centring experience of listening to U2, to be constructed experiences. These experiences, however, are not solipsistic, but communally transmit "the past by sustaining the original presence of former accomplishments despite the perishing of the details that embody it... over time the power of the beginning grows instead of dwindling",[17] thus relating the opposing understandings of the 'authentic' referred to above. Allan's wider aim is to deconstruct certain principles of postmodernism, and two main thrusts of his argument are relevant here. The first is postmodernism's inherent contradictoriness. Though it may, in Lyotard's telling phrase, exhibit an 'incredulity towards metanarratives',[18] it is founded upon one such metanarrative, which Allan identifies as a secularised millenial vision.[19] The second is postmodernism's devaluing of the historicity of experience. Allan's world "is thoroughly historical, it has ... a beginning, middle, and end" although the "mythic narrative" which relates and explains it "need not be linguistic." [20] But in the wake particularly of Derrida, he complains that "dogmatism, skepticism and spontaneity are each alternatives to a living tradition, and each is growing ever stronger, ever more virulent, in the contemporary world. But each collapses temporal duration into just one of its three modalities: dogma focuses exclusively upon the past, skepticism on the future, and spontaneity on the present. Reality, however, is fully temporal and human reality is fully historical." [21] Here, then, can be found one location for postmodernism's secularity: how can a spirituality be embodied within an artistic enterprise exhibiting a postmodernist aesthetic?

After *The Joshua Tree*, U2's oeuvre appears to many to have departed from this authentic stage and to have embraced, little by little, just such a postmodernist aesthetic: a celebration of a postmodern world. Both *Zooropa* and *Pop* tend to adopt an ironic stance towards the world, a stance portrayed in the exchange of the naturalistic, windswept locations of the liner photography of earlier albums for darkly psychedelic, defocused artwork and photographs of the band in enclosed, studio spaces. In 'Zooropa' itself, abandoned exuberance seems to have given way to measured menace, a menace compounded by the recital of meaningless (because decontextualised), but all-too-potent, advertising slogans. This is no longer a music of the great outdoors, but of a signal-rich urban non-space. The texture of the whole song is denser, pressing in from all sides, preventing instruments from carving out their own virtual spaces. The world tour which separated *Achtung baby* from *Zooropa*, known as *Zoo TV* explores this postmodernism. No longer do we have the (illusion of the) authentic performer expressing his innermost feelings, but singer Bono takes on the personae of The Fly and of Mr McPhisto, each parodying the egomania of celebrity status. While there is a serious point to these creations, they still mark an acceptance of the construction of the artistic persona. Bono is, after all, a rock star. The set, itself a mammoth creation of unclothed scaffolding, light show and giant videowalls became a site for intentional information overload: unrelated, contradictory sequences of images and slogans, some subliminal, flashing lights, high volume. Videowalls in a rock gig are usually employed to bring the

band closer to the audience (particularly to those too distant to see the stage clearly), serving a similar function to the interpolated acoustic set.[22] Here, though, both conventions are subverted. The constructed intimacy connoted by the videowall, and the 'natural' intimacy of the acoustic set are *recognised as faked* and thus, as a double negative, unmasked.[23] In the midst of this, it appears that the 'serious' message overtly present in some shows, the repeated phone calls to world leaders or to beleaguered survivors in Sarajevo, calls which rarely connected, went frequently unrecognised, and not surprisingly. In the vicious irony apparent in performances of songs like 'The Fly', there is a sense that Bono is in but not of the world.[24]

Reading *Zoo TV* as a parody of parodistic techniques, as an alternative approach to authenticating meaning, suggests that it is U2's musical idiolect which has continued to be transformed, rather than the band's expressive motivation. Such a reading appears to be close to the band's intentions. According to the normally reticent Mullen: "The essence of rock and roll - it's about confusion on every level... after the Sarajevo linkups we did, carrying on the show was incredibly difficult. People took it as "How can you have irony and then be serious?" But that is the point ... That *is* TV... it's not meant to be easy".[25] The insistence on difficulty (rather than simply celebration of difference) is anathema to the postmodernist aesthetic. Brian Eno (producer of the albums from *The Unforgettable Fire* to *Zooropa*) points to clear continuities of studio approach and working method through these.[26] 'Zooropa' retains the avoidance of a stable verse and refrain form (which had been a permanent feature prior to *Rattle and Hum*),[27] the suggestions of vocal ideas (rather than sustained narrative), the long held organ chords reminiscent of *The Joshua Tree* and *Unforgettable Fire*, and the digital delay treatment of the guitar. 'Until the End of the World' consists of reflections on the part of Judas Iscariot, set doggedly to a dorian (minor) sequence on e, which mysteriously turns major at the end of each verse, as Judas recalls the certainty of Jesus waiting "until the end of the world" and presumably the promise of forgiveness. And yet, doubt overwhelms at this point on the album, as the extended playout transmutes E back into e.[28] As a portrayal of the impossibility of discipleship apart from grace, this is powerful indeed. There is the inclusion of the unnecessary image of "looking for Jesus and His mother" in the midst of the inarticulate timbres which illuminate the bad days of 'Some days are better than others'. 'Unnecessary' to the narrative, but pointing up the fact that such a search is an ordinary, unremarkable, thing to undertake. The refrain's gawky guitar timbre recalls the visual awkwardness of David Byrne's fronting of Talking Heads, while the image is delivered with overpowering vocals. The refrain to 'The First Time' asserts that "for the first time, I feel loved". The last of three verses focuses on a 'Father', owner of many mansions, but Bono 'left by the back door' and 'threw away the key'. Having repeatedly rid himself of this idolatrous object, however, the song intimately closes with the refrain. The whole is set within a gently rocking alternation of I-IV, while the ejection of the key is marked by a momentary (minor) VI. On the tortured 'Dirty Day', the proclamation of universal guilt ('throw a rock in the air - you'll hit someone guilty') is immediately countered with what sounds almost like absolution, marked as it is by held organ chords (as referred to earlier). These songs suggest that an interpretation of *Zooropa*

as a celebration of secular postmodernity is far too simplistic. And then there's the remarkable interpolation in the live version of 'Bullet the blue sky'. This song (which needs to be seen against the background of U2's continual love-hate relationship with the USA and American culture generally) consists of two verses and then two spoken passages, separated by a guitar solo. On the live version, the second spoken passage contains as an interpolation a diatribe against television culture and the emptiness of television evangelists. The song is ultimately, a tirade against the US arms trade involvement in Central America, and Bono proclaims "The God I believe in isn't short of cash, Mister". This live version is preceded on the recording by The Edge's rendition of Jimi Hendrix's hate-filled distorted guitar solo 'Spar-spangled banner'. 'Bullet the blue sky' was performed as part of the Zoo TV tour and, although the interpolated diatribe is absent, it is more than compensated for by the flaming crosses on the videowalls. This total performance, then, was both a display and a critique of the postmodern, albeit playfully enacted. By the time of the more recent *Pop*, the core style is not only rock, but also contemporary dance music. Gone are the wide open spaces, replaced as on *Zooropa* not only by dense textures filled with washes and surface drum patterns (particularly on the opening three tracks), but also by bare, acoustic guitars with heavily treated vocals. Beneath all this, however, pacing remains the same and is a clear continuity from the epic style. Yet three songs at least overtly tackle related topics. The claustrophobic 'Mofo', again, treats a search for personal salvation as simply part of life, unmarked by special musical treatment. 'If God will send his angels' gently continues the dispute with TV evangelists over an unassuming, comfortable textural setting (complete with mellow guitar and vocal hook) and the inevitable derogatory reference to "country songs". 'Wake up dead man' continues the uncertainty of 'With or without you' in its overt questioning of Jesus' presence over a largely uninvolved backing and a great deal of nearly subliminal interference. There is no taking of the wide road[29] here.

The postmodern alternative to an existential authenticity is a decentred subjectivity although, as Kramer reminds us "a subject decentred is a subject still".[30] Despite the slowly fracturing idiolect, there is no exhibition of decentred subjectivity in these later albums; if anything, the notion is subverted. Bono may still be looking for the Kingdom Come, but the search is even more honestly portrayed. In 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for', U2 proclaim a spirituality which questions its beliefs, which accepts and embraces doubt; in short, which acknowledges the reality of the difficulty of belief. On later albums, that spirituality is not overturned, is not found wanting. It remains present, but is presented even more elliptically, as if to acknowledge that the only way to encounter the subversions of secular postmodernity is to subvert those.

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U2: 'Bullet the blue sky' (live), 'Star-spangled banner' (live), *Rattle and Hum* ; Island, 1988.

U2: *The Unforgettable Fire* ; Island, 1984.

U2: 'Dirty day', 'The first time', 'Some days are better than others', 'Zooropa'; *Zooropa* ; Island, 1993.

## Videography

U2: *Zoo TV: Sydney*

## Notes

[1] Howard and Streck, pp.38 and 49.

[2] Cray, p.27.

[3] Schwarze, p.89.

[4] Cray, p.28. This interpretation is supported by Martin Wroe: "this honesty... doesn't deny faith, it simply asserts our fallibility", p.22.

[5] Moore 1996. The 'spirituality' signified there seems to be a rather unspecific ecological pantheism with touches of universal siblinghood.

[6] Macan, pp.149-50.

[7] Sullivan, p.153.

[8] Sheldrake and Fox have recently called for a re-examination of the tradition, prominent in the writings of Meister Eckhart, of Thomas Aquinas and of Hildegard of Bingen, that the body

exists within the soul. See especially pp.65-89.

[9] Alan, p.37; Eggar, p.25.

[10] Bowler and Dray, pp.195 and 205-6.

[11] Moore 1998.

[12] As argued by Bradby, p.112.

[13] See, for example, Maconie p.86.

[14] See e.g. Dunphy, pp.182-3.

[15] Nolan, p.28.

[16] Among a range of possible examples, see Barth p.199 and Carter p.91.

[17] Allan, p.237.

[18] Lyotard, p.xxiv.

[19] "[A] deconstruction of the deconstructionist project ... reveal[s] that it too presupposes certain enduring truths about the order of things... A new age shall come.. in which... societal privilege and privileged knowledge will be eliminated, in which the tyrannies of universal truth and centralized administration will be dethroned... It is the Kingdom of heaven without a king, the Messianic Age with everyone his own messiah.", p.214.

[20] Allan, p.135.

[21] Allan, p.224. There are more thoroughgoing deconstructions of postmodernism's secular project, especially Ingraffia's analysis of Derrida's profound misrepresentation of "the logos of biblical theology", with which a fuller analysis should deal. See Ingraffia, esp. pp.178-85.

[22] A phenomenon widely exploited through the 'unplugged' concept owing to MTV.

[23] The seriousness of the message implied here has been contradicted by the band, but is supported particularly in the dialectic Susan Fast observes between certainty and uncertainty in 'Zoo Station'. See Fast, pp.43-4.

[24] As per Romans 12: 2.

[25] DeCurtis, pp.299-300.

[26] Cunningham, p.310.

[27] The song is, in effect, two separate songs preceded by a long introduction.

[28] The symbolisation of major chords for what are construed as positive intellectual or emotional states, and minor chords for what are construed as negative states is, of course, a fundamental feature of Western musical realism, and least from the Enlightenment on.

[29] As per Matthew 7: 13,14.

[30] Kramer, p.10.

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