2011

Music and Politics: U2 and the Country of Adolescence

Howard Schaap
Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Music Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/128

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work: Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
Music and Politics: U2 and the Country of Adolescence

Keywords
U2, Bono

Disciplines
Christianity | Music

Comments
• Copyright © Reformed Church Press 2011.
• http://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2011/06/01/music-and-politics-u2-and-the-country-of-adolescence/

This article is available at Digital Collections @ Dordt: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/128
Music and Politics: U2 and the Country of Adolescence

Howard Schaap

At the end of spring semester, I know it’s coming. It’s most often an honest question from both colleagues and non-teachers alike, though sometimes the latter’s fascination with “summers off” borders on an obsession. Still, in whatever form, the question still comes: “What do you have planned for the summer?” Even though I answer this question more assuredly as a college teacher than I did as a high school teacher, this year I find myself fishing for an answer that will satisfy. “Some grad school work; reading and writing and, of course, parenting.”

Then there’s this: I hold tickets to two concerts this summer, both of them U2 concerts, in separate cities, and a significant portion of our summer plans revolve around these events. Even though U2 has a certain amount of credence in Christian higher ed circles, thanks especially to “Christian themes” in their lyrics and Bono’s global activism on behalf of the poor, I still feel apologetic, still feel beholden to the critic in me that says things like “Rock concerts are so low brow.” “What are you, a groupie?” and “U2, what genre is that, nursing home rock?”

To be fair, U2 has aged pretty well and for that I’m, well, proud of them. While many bands fade within a decade or burn out in the night sky that is rock and roll, U2 has remade themselves a couple of times and has continued to grow to the point where they have become a significant global influence. The reason I’m proud of them, of course, is that this ultimately reflects positively on me as a fan. After all, I discerned all of this as a teenager, selecting them from the wasteland of 80’s music as a prophetic voice in the postmodern rock and roll landscape.

In reality, I latched onto them when I was, as they say, pre-theoretical, at the ripe old age of 12 when my 17-year-old sister got The Joshua Tree for her birthday. Was she the prescient one? Considering that she was split at the time between the singles “With or Without You” and Cutting Crew’s forgotten “Died in Your Arms Tonight” that also seems doubtful.

No, if I’m honest with myself, my love for U2 is probably akin to almost any adolescent fascination with rock music. But I reserve the “almost.” Throughout the years, U2 has climbed the charts with such varied songs as “With or Without You,” “One,” “Numb,” and “Vertigo.” They have fostered fledgling faith with songs like “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” and “The First Time.” They have given voice to our collective sense of tragedy—see their post 9/11 Super Bowl performance—and triumph—see “The Saints Are Coming.” They have shamelessly plugged Amnesty International and Jubilee 2000. The point here is that U2 has moved fans beyond just the effect of adrenalized rock to something more. And for that, I think, they do deserve some thanks from many of us.

While I could argue that it was in the area of fledgling faith that U2 has most impacted me personally, as I drive off toward U2 sightings this summer, I credit them most with my own, well, political awakening.

How to explain the political atmosphere in the early 80’s in the Middle America where I grew up? Jimmy Carter was a peanut farmer from the South who talked slow and thought slower; Ronald Reagan was a movie star from California whose slick hair matched his slick talk. More importantly, one of them was a
Democrat for whom we never voted, the other was a Republican for whom we always voted. But, most importantly, they were as unreal as the other superhero programs that came to us through the TV including *Dukes of Hazard*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Dallas*. This was proved when Reagan was shot, the footage playing over and over again in chaotic slow motion.

No, politicians were far away from us, if they existed at all, and the only way they really touched us was in the same way the air touched us, in a way that you don’t really stop to consider—or need to.

So, when dad started taking me to neighbors’ farm auctions where a mob assembled and took turns raising white notecards to take away that neighbor’s stuff, why blame the air? When I drove dad’s prized tractor to the local consignment auction and dad was prescribed lithium, was that the air’s fault? When mom and dad whispered in the kitchen and in the bedroom and told my sister and me that dad was going to California to work for a season and that we might join him there if he liked it well enough, the air had nothing to do with it. This was nothing historical or political, even when it got some press and its own name, “the farm crisis.” This was just the way things happened to go, the air you happened to breathe.

But when people questioned the air, organized into groups that pointed out the air quality, that was something evil. One story was about a group called “Groundswell,” who went around to these farm auctions and intimidated would-be buyers, real thugs in my mom’s version of the story, thugs who would threaten to rough you up if you took your neighbor’s stuff. “It was the bankers who were the real enemies here,” went the thugs’ line of argument, “so if we drive auction prices down to nothing, what would they do? They’d have to let us stay on the land—after all, we’re all in this together.” While this sounded like good logic, my parents made clear that it was really the devil’s reasoning.

Because, of course, politics in Middle America in the 1980’s was also bound up with—although separate from—God. A good God had instituted a land of the free, home of the brave, and he would see that it was governed by the people and for the people, and while the government was like God’s screw-up nephew, it was nonetheless instituted by God and therefore none of your business.

The next step from “Groundswell,” the connecting argument went, was what happened thirty miles up the road from our farm, where two bankers were lured out to a farm and shot dead by the farmer and his son. No, it was either breathe the air or commit murder. There was no middle ground.

It was in this context that I heard “Bullet the Blue Sky” for the first time, a song my sister and I couldn’t make heads or tails of until we read in Time that Bono had written it while in El Salvador about the conflict there. Conflict? It was in this context that we heard “Pride (In the Name of Love),” a tribute to Martin Luther King, a black man from the 1960’s. 1960’s? A black man?

Then, in the fall of 1989, my sister got me the movie *Rattle and Hum*, a rather unremarkable rockumentary, according to most critics, filmed during the American leg of the Joshua Tree Tour. Of course, I loved it as one loves anything that calls to one from the country of adolescence. The pinnacle of the film is a performance of “Sunday, Bloody Sunday” at McNichols Arena, in Denver, Colorado, on November 8, 1987. It’s filmed in dingy black and white, as is much of the film. Bono is bare-armed, sweaty, wearing something that looks like sweat pants and a sleeveless vest. His shoulder-length hair has, well, the perfect body to it. It’s roughly my wife’s 80’s hairdo, without the wings. Cool.

“Well here we are the Irish in America,” Bono begins. The crowd screams. However, this is not the “look at us, the greatest rock band in the world moment” that Bono is prone to. No, Bono, still true to grandiose Bono fashion, is going to lecture the crowd at a rock concert about Irish history. “The Irish have been coming to America for years,” he intones, “going back to the Great Famine, when the Irish were on the run from starvation, and a British government that couldn’t care less.” The Irish are still coming to America in 1987, Bono goes on to argue, “a lot of them are just running from high unemployment, some run from the
troubles of Northern Ireland, the hatred of the H-blocks and the torture, others from wild acts of terrorism like we had today in a town called Enniskillen, where eleven people lie dead, many more injured, on a Sunday, Blood Sunday.”

My dad was a news watcher. In those days the violence of the IRA was pretty high profile. I had seen footage of grim, beleaguered-looking people juxtaposed against bulked up military personnel with machine guns, and I had seen rubble in blind streets set against dingy skies, the aftermath of bombs.

The song proper starts with Edge’s simple guitar picking, an ascending and descending pattern that’s meant to be haunting—and succeeds. When Bono sings, “I can’t believe the news today,” it’s perfectly fit to that day in 1987. Bono’s vocals are elegiac, this is a dirge, and the sorrow in this performance lingers through multiple verses, longer than the album version of the song. When the drums and bass do kick in, they come in hard and fast and we launch almost immediately into Edge’s guitar solo, which is so sharp as to be grating, searing.

Then, while the band goes into a holding pattern, Bono goes on an impassioned rant, remarkably coherent and, to one viewer at least, almost poetic considering the circumstances. Very early on, the rant denounces the violence of Enniskillen with a convincing if startling “F— the revolution!”—which you can imagine really got one adolescent’s attention—but it gets more sorrowful and reflective from there. It ends with Bono engaging what I imagine to be a relatively clueless Coloradan audience in a call and response that begs for an end to the violence. “No more!” he screams, and they echo over and over, and at one point his voice overpowers the mic, before resolving into the song lyrics, “Wipe your tears away.”

While the rant is done, the song isn’t. There’s still hope to go in the song: Edge’s high octave picking seems like sunlight piercing the darkness surrounding the McNichols stage, and, while the driving guitar returns and the song ominously promises, “The real battle yet begun…” the phrase finishes with, “We’ll claim the victory Jesus won on…Sunday, Bloody, Sunday.” In the McNichols version, this phrase is almost downplayed, you have to know the lyrics, as if the lads don’t want the resolution to the violence that is the condition of the world to seem too cheap, too easy to pronounce, with or without Christ.

No, I didn’t think about all this then. I was an eighth grader. Watching this scene unfold, I simply got goose bumps. This was something that meant something. This was how words could take a stand on something—could affect something? Maybe. But they could move people, I knew, because they moved me. However, I would certainly hide this from mom and dad because, no matter what the circumstances, they wouldn't understand the F-word.

Of course, there were other things that endeared the performance to me beside the politics. The F-word made it contraband. The fact that most of my friends listened to Motley Crue, Poison, and Warrant drove me to the imagined high road that was U2. The simple adrenaline of the song even meant that the performance found its way to becoming a pre-game ritual before JV basketball games. Weird.

Still, world news was never quite the same again for me. Revolution, protests, violence, elections—these things mattered, I came to understand.

Years later, as a senior in college, on a study abroad semester and as a passenger on a bus, I would pass through a border with machine-gun toting guards armored to the hilt, protecting a fenced and barb-wired compound that marked the beginning of Northern Ireland, and I would pass, quite unexpectedly, through the town of Enniskillen, would want to stop and get off and look at the place, the monuments and placards remembering the dead. Instead, with that emotion from the country of adolescence washing over me, I would recount the song and Bono’s impassioned speech, word for word. Years after graduating from college, with the critical thinking skills that I paid handsomely for, I also learned about the wave of factors that drove my family out of farming in the 80’s—factors that ranged from ideas like “manifest destiny,” to
politics like the Cold War, to policy that valued efficiency and technology at the expense of people, to poor personal choices–and I would come to understand the profound importance of a movement like “Groundswell.”

So that’s my justification for my summer plans. As I ride off toward major metropolitan areas to see the lads from Dublin in mammoth stadiums full of wealthy middle-class thirty- and forty-somethings–sometimes with their children in tow, as I saw during the last tour–who’ve paid handsomely for their tickets–one blogger says the mean ticket goes for $159.72, even though my tickets are the cheapest and in front of the stage, a place reserved for members of U2.com (yes, it’s that bad)–I do so because they still call to me from that magic country of adolescence, but also because they called me out of that country and taught me that words matter, that a stance on something and willingness to speak out about it matters.

Recently, in a concert in Mexico City, Bono addressed that country and its partner in drugs and violence, the United States. “Why is it that all we hear on the news is how drugs are smuggled through Mexico to the United States?” Bono reportedly asked. “And we don’t hear about all the automatic weapons that are being smuggled into Mexico from the United States. Nine thousand registered arms dealers on the other side of the border. Nine thousand.”

Of course, there’s room for significant critique of Bono’s ego, his politics, and his concert diatribes crafted specifically for the local audience. But words and politics do matter. They should matter to us, and we should teach them to our children. As U2 ages–I half expect Bono to come on stage with a walker this summer, but no, that’s much too undignified for him–I wonder about the future, about who will arise to arouse a generation to the condition of world events. Coldplay, of course, is the heir apparent, a wildly popular band with a slightly younger demographic. However, at least among college students, the music scene is increasingly fractured: a band’s shelf-life is shorter than Wonder Bread; genres and subgenres explore market niches that seem to attack the monolith that used to be pop music; “albums” themselves are almost a thing of the past, replaced by singles you consume off the iTunes dollar menu. Then again, Lady Gaga comes out with a worldwide promotional package for her new album that has her posing on the cover of every magazine, visiting every talk show and sitcom she can, and pairing with every popular form from FarmVille to Starbucks in an attempt to seemingly take over the world itself. In this landscape, the idea that we could take a band–a media construct–seriously, that it could, as I have claimed, “call us out of the land of adolescence,” seems laughable. Global popular culture in any form seems increasingly distant from political realities. In fact, politics seems increasingly distant from political realities.

Maybe, then, my U2 fetish is a sign of my own age. In a world of uncertainty, I cling to what I know, to the good old days. Granted. Maybe we’re at the point where U2 can’t do what they used to anymore. Maybe they’re permanently part of that scrap heap known as classic rock.

Still, I stick by what I said earlier. Recently, my wife had a Facebook friend write to her, “Tell your husband thanks. Twenty-one years ago, he introduced me to a little Irish band called U2.” The point here is not my proselytizing on behalf of U2–although I do think it merits some back stage passes–but that for generations of fans, U2 has moved us beyond just the effect of adrenalized rock to something more aware, something perhaps more active, something definitely more fully human. And for that, I think, they do deserve some thanks. One could do worse, it seems to me, than be a lover of U2.

Howard Schaap teaches English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.