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Elena Canido Muiño

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“Flowers of Fire”: Sociopolitical Issues in U2’s *War* and *The Joshua Tree*

Abstract: U2 have always managed to hold a narrow line between social awareness and partisan political allegiance, belonging to a broad category of music that Rachel E. Seiler calls “contemporary conscious popular music”, which includes “music of any genre that focuses on social issues and perceived problems in society and may or may not include music that carries an overtly political message”. Consequently, much of the analysis of their songs claim that these are only a mere description of the terrible situation countries such as Ireland and the US were facing at that time. In this paper, however, I will examine the sociopolitical significance of U2’s songs as an appreciator of their cultural contribution and show that the events which formed the backdrop to some of U2’s most explicitly political songs in the 1980s – especially those included in *War* and *The Joshua Tree* – are etched indelibly into the text of both Ireland’s and America’s troubled colonial and political history. Ultimately, the lyrics analysed will also provide a good way of exploring how rock music, identity and sociopolitical ideas combine.

Keywords: Irish rock, songwriting, U2, *War*, *The Joshua Tree*, comparative literature, popular music studies.

Résumé: U2 a toujours réussi à maintenir une ligne étroite entre la conscience sociale et l’allégeance politique partisane, appartenant à une large catégorie de musique que Rachel E. Seiler appelle « musique populaire contemporaine consciente », qui comprend « la musique de tout genre qui se concentre sur les problèmes sociaux et les problèmes perçus dans la société et peut inclure ou non de la musique qui porte un message ouvertement politique ». Par conséquent, une grande partie de l’analyse de leurs chansons prétend qu’il ne s’agit que d’une simple description de la situation terrible que des pays comme l’Irlande et les États-Unis connaissaient à l’époque. Dans cet article, cependant, j’examinerai la signification sociopolitique des chansons de U2 en tant qu’appréciant leur contribution culturelle, et montrerai que les événements qui ont formé la toile de fond de certaines des chansons les plus explicitement politiques de U2 dans les années 1980 – en particulier celles incluses dans *War* et *The Joshua Tree* – sont gravés de manière indélébile dans le texte de l’histoire coloniale et politique troublée de l’Irlande et de l’Amérique. En fin de compte, les paroles analysées fourniront également un bon moyen d’explorer comment la musique rock, l’identité et les idées sociopolitiques se combinent.

Mots clés: rock irlandais, écriture de chansons, U2, *War*, *The Joshua Tree*, littérature comparée, études de musique populaire.

Introduction

In the 1960s and the 1970s, it was widely believed that rock songs could change the world. Thus, rock was supposed to have the power of creating the possibility of an ideal world, and for some time, it actually seemed to help the struggle towards that ideal world. As years went by, however, people realised that it could not, because as John Street notes,

A song, however powerful its performance, cannot win an argument. The song is a mixture of sounds, references and images; its meaning cannot be stated in the same way that a political view can be articulated¹.

In fact, probably the biggest, most real challenge of rock music – or of any art with a certain social and / or political dimension – was not to “change the world” *per se*, but to change people’s opinions and perspectives on a particular topic or situation, because as transformative learning theory suggests, once a personal transformation has taken place, people seldom return to their old perspectives. It was also to say something about the times in which the artist lived, and more importantly, to find that what they have said speaks to another moment in history.

Nonetheless, a song does not always and exclusively mean what it says, as there might be no definitive interpretation because of the ambiguity in the words or the way the sounds are interpreted. Similarly, Rachel E. Seiler claims that:

The meaning and impact of music are contingent on listener constructions. Songs have no absolute meaning or value and can’t be assessed according to what the lyrics say or what the performer believes; rather, a song’s influence on a listener is a matter of what the music represents and expresses and how it is received. Only then does the music take on meaning, and only then might its social and political aspects become evident².

The point is, thus, to recognise the way a song encourages divergent interpretations depending on how ideas, lyrics and sounds are communicated or delivered by the artist. Consequently, the links between rock music and politics clearly vary according to the political context and the nature of the cause. However, as Gerry Smyth notes,

[...] there’s no way to resolve the issue of “political music”, as the two words belong to different orders of discourse; judgments in relation to the one will not necessarily hold in relation to the other. Music is in fact always already “political”. [...] What the music “means”, above and beyond that, depends upon your own political persuasions³.

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1. John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music*, Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1986, p. 60.
 2. Rachel E. Seiler, “Potent Crossroad: Where U2 and Progressive Awareness Meet”, in *Exploring U2: Is this Rock’ n’ Roll? Essays on the Music, Work, and Influence of U2*, Scott Calhoun (ed.), Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2012, p. 40.
 3. Gerry Smyth, “Ireland Unplugged: The Roots of Irish Folk/Trad. (Con)Fusion”, *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2004, p. 95.

In other words, the understanding of a song as "political" will usually emerge, first and foremost, from one's circumstances, such as our own sense of political disillusionment. In this way, Elvis Costello once explained what is that he wanted from his songs: "What you really want is not songs that tell you what to think but songs that teach you to think for yourself"⁴. Still, at the same time, Dave Harker claims:

Whether we like it or not, songs do have ideological tendencies [...]. Those tendencies might not manifest themselves openly in the lyrics; but the politics will be built in. It is the job of the cultural critic (as well of the historian) to tease them out; because to try to ignore them is itself a highly political act⁵.

The answer lies in the way the personal feelings tapped by the song are linked to the world experienced by the listener. Thus, in rock music, an artist's talent is usually measured by their ability to "take the community beyond itself": to show what is possible as well as reflecting what already existed. In this sense, Ron Sakolsky, coeditor of *Sounding Off! Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution*, explains that what he calls "rebel music" has "nurtured [his] critical consciousness, sparked fresh intellectual insights, uplifted [his] spirits, reinforced [his] anger at injustice, and fueled utopian dreams for a better word"⁶. Moreover, John Street argues that:

Good rock is the music of a community: it is the sound of a movement. The idea of a movement applies to both art and politics. It does not just refer to shared tastes and styles, but also to a common cause and a collective political identity⁷.

Still, as music-making is judged both aesthetically and politically, musicians in rock are also judged by their creativity and their commitment. Thus, ideas of authenticity, integrity and honesty have both an artistic and a political meaning in rock, captured in the decision not to "sell out". The idea of authenticity is thus not far when we discuss the particular point of art versus commerce: for example, independent artists too often consider artistic integrity as being incompatible with the sale of millions of records and commercial success. However, since a form of entertainment like rock is a means of communication too, it is suitable to delivering an artistic as well as a political message, because millions of people can have access to it. In fact, as Richard Kearney puts forward, creativity can be out to the service of others through an "ethical-poetical imagination"⁸ capable of seeing

4. Elvis Costello, quoted in Barney Hoskyns, "Master Blaster: Barney Hoskyns Interviews Elvis Costello", *New Musical Express*, 8 October 1983, on line: www.elviscostello.info/wiki/index.php/New_Musical_Express_October_8_1983.

5. Dave Harker, *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, p. 15.

6. Ron Sakolsky, "Hangin' Out on the Corner of Music and Resistance", in *Rebel Musics: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making*, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble (eds.), Montreal – London, Black Rose Books, 2003, p. 67.

7. John Street, *Rebel Rock...*, p. 86.

8. Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 387.

and understanding the other, an ethical imagination which is a “call of the other to be heard, and to be respected in his/her otherness”⁹, and a poetical imagination which is “inventive making and creating [...]”. The imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play”¹⁰. Rock music has applied this ethical-poetical imagination through the creative process in raising awareness of social and political causes. Consequently, it easily steps through the songs into the real world, allowing the vision the artist has of it to come through. On the other hand, John Street notes that “[r]ock is only political when it speaks with an ‘authentic’ voice, when it expresses the anger of an oppressed group”¹¹, but in order to achieve this, a community has to have an identity first: only then can its members know who they are and what they belong to. It is precisely in such a community where rock can also play the role of a social link and, through music, help people (especially, young people) create a real “community way of life” that allows them “to create a new and diverse social link which encompasses notions such as ethics, affects and aesthetics”¹². Rock music in Ireland is no way different. Especially after the cultural revival of the 1890s, culture and politics were assumed to be intimately associated realms in Ireland, and this relationship came to constitute one of the island’s dominant self-formative images¹³. That way, a particularly subversive subgenre like punk rock, whose impact proved somewhat limited in the Irish context (especially compared to those in England and the US), still succeeds in opening different paths that other Irish musicians were keen to explore during the years that followed. In fact, as Gerry Smyth says,

[...] as a socially salient form of popular music, rock both *reflects* the social order and *anticipates* its metamorphosis; [in this way,] Irish rock music of the 1980s is [...] the foremost contributor to the imagination of change. Therein lies its power and its importance¹⁴.

Thus, a new generation of Irish performers and bands began to surface in the 1980s which, while taking much of their energy and attitude from punk, blended such characteristics with the rock and pop sensibilities of previous eras. These artists were involved in creating original, local responses to both the musical and the ideological ideals instigated by punk rock before because their anger derived from the repression and the conservative forces that still were dominating Ireland, where there was also recession, unemployment and some of the highest rates of emigration since the 1950s. One of those bands which would expand the boundaries of what Irish rock and popular music could be about was U2. However, in order to understand why U2 became the voice of a whole generation in the 1980s, and

9. Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination...*, p. 361.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

11. John Street, *Rebel Rock...*, p. 86.

12. Bertrand Ricard, *Rites, code et culture rock: un art de vivre communautaire*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, p. 7; translated in Višnja Cogan, *U2: An Irish Phenomenon*, Cork, Collin Press, 2006, p. 11.

13. Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature*, London, Pluto Press, 1998, p. 36.

14. Gerry Smyth, *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2005, p. 79.

why the band is important to later generations still, it is essential to understand the U2 phenomenon first.

To begin with, Irish historian Roy F. Foster points out that much of the story of Ireland in the late 20th century "concerned the breaking down of boundaries in notions of Irishness, and in identity politics, manifested through globalization, feminization, and other changes in economics, politics and religion"¹⁵. These phenomena intersected with Irish politics and economics, sometimes in unexpected ways, and as he says:

There is something symbolic about this bizarre coincidence, occurring at a moment when Ireland was about to become "globalized". And there is something symbolic about [U2's frontman] Bono, the new-model Irish cultural icon, occupying an international space while representing a new-Irish intersection of money, art and politics¹⁶.

However, U2 have always managed to hold a narrow line between social awareness and partisan political allegiance, belonging to a broad category of music that Rachel E. Seiler calls "contemporary conscious popular music", which includes "music of any genre that focuses on social issues and perceived problems in society and may or may not include music that carries an overtly political message"¹⁷. At the beginning of their career, they would sing about social and political situations, relate events and talk often about surrender and non-violence, but had never intended to represent a political party or a strong political opinion in their music, like most punk bands at that time were doing. In fact, as Jeffrey F. Keuss and Sara Koenig point out, in a 1981 interview for *Rolling Stone*, Bono identified the goal of the band as "moving beyond punk" and "reestablishing rock music as a vehicle for people to think about their actions in relation to one another". He said:

The idea of punk at first was, "Look, you're an individual, express yourself how you want, do what you want to do." [...] But that's not the way it came out in the end. [...] We want our audience to think about their actions and where they are going, to realize the pressures that are on them, but at the same time, not to give up¹⁸.

U2 were also atypical from the beginning because they did not want to be part of the London or New York punk rock scene; rather, they wanted to stay and play rock in Ireland first, and later, all over the world. In fact, John Waters points out that the band emerged "from a place and a time – Ireland in the 1970s – which was the product of a historical and evolutionary process", and thus, "they are as faithful a representation of that place and time as it is possible to conceive of"¹⁹. In

15. Roy F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change 1970-2000*, London, Allen Lane, 2007, p. 147.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

17. Rachel E. Seiler, "Potent Crossroad...", p. 40.

18. Bono, quoted in Jeffrey F. Keuss, Sara Koenig, "The Authentic Self in Paul Ricoeur and U2", in *Exploring U2...*, p. 58.

19. John Waters, *Race of Angels: Ireland and the Genesis of U2*, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1994, p. 121.

other words, the sociopolitical and philosophical context shaped U2's view of the world and its own identity from the start. Still the musical genesis of U2 cannot be detached, however, from "a desire to escape a place that they did not feel comfortable in, that prevented them from being themselves"²⁰. Consequently, while much of the analysis of their songs claim that these are only a mere description of the terrible situation countries such as Ireland and the US were facing at that time, I am, however, encouraged to examine the sociopolitical significance of U2's songs as an appreciator of their cultural contribution, showing that the events which formed the backdrop to some of U2's most explicitly political songs in the 1980s – especially those included in *War* and *The Joshua Tree* – are etched indelibly into the text of both Ireland's and America's troubled colonial and political history. In fact, both countries have long been debatable lands (literally and metaphorically), open to multiple readings and conflicting interpretations, in which identity appears as adaptive and contestatory, endlessly argued over. Therefore, the lyrics here analysed will also provide a good way of exploring how rock music, identity and sociopolitical ideas combine.

War (1983)

After two albums that dealt with the band members' coming of age, as well as with family, religion and identity issues, U2 thought that their third album would rather be a document of the times. Paramilitary activity and ceaseless killings in Northern Ireland, Israeli forces in Lebanon, the British-Argentinean conflict in the Falklands, the Christian-Muslim slaughter in the Middle East, revolutions and counterrevolutions against American corruption in Central America, and so on and so forth: in 1983, everything pointed towards war, everywhere. *War* was, therefore, the chosen title of a record which rallied the coldness of the 1980s, an era that had seen the increasing influence of right-wing governments, the worsening of East-West relations, the threat of nuclear destruction, and international terrorist acts becoming commonplace. Meanwhile, the four members of U2 (Bono, The Edge, Larry Mullen Jr. and Adam Clayton) had grown up in a country, Ireland, that had become more stable economically, but which was still extremely conservative. The underlying reality was, however, that the young people had begun to move on, and the seeds of a more tolerant and liberal society were beginning to take root. In the 1970s, when they reached adolescence, the country had grown culturally and changed dramatically, and the youth that were growing up to the sound of punk rock were also growing up with more knowledge of how close the world was to self-detonation and how much power rested in the hands of the few.

In those early days, U2 already avoided any classic formulas such as those adopted by many other rock bands, and sought instead a unique sound described by Bono

20. Višnja Cogan, *U2: An Irish Phenomenon*, p. 64.

as "atmosphere", "bigger" and "grand"²¹. In addition, as there was much unrest on TV and in the media, they focused the lyrical content more on these issues. This was made obvious in the album's first single, "New Year's Day". The opening line is beautifully arresting, and what emerges in the first stanza is a haunting love song:

All is quiet on New Year's Day.
A world in white gets underway.
I want to be with you, be with you night and day.
Nothing changes on New Year's Day. (lines 1-4)

However, it is the political backdrop which infused the song with a real sense of separation and longing that gives it its distinctive resonance:

Under a blood-red sky
A crowd has gathered in black and white
Arms entwined, the chosen few
The newspaper says, says
Say it's true, it's true...
And we can break through
Though torn in two
We can be one. (lines 8-15)

Consequently, the song ended up connecting with the mood of the time in a unexpected way:

And so we are told this is the golden age
And gold is the reason for the wars we wage
Though I want to be with you
Be with you night and day
Nothing changes
On New Year's Day. (lines 22-27)

The record's opening track is, however, the controversial "Sunday Bloody Sunday", the source of its title being in Ireland's blood-soaked history²². Yet, surprisingly as it may seem, in 1983 U2 found it hard to make audiences understand the political stance expressed in their songs because their views on the North were vastly different from those of either side²³. This exemplifies that, as Jean-Jacques

21. Bono, quoted in Terry Mattingly, "U2: Rockers Finally Speak Out about their Rumored Faith", *CCM*, August 1982, on line: <https://www.atu2.com/news/u2-rockers-finally-speak-out-about-their-rumored-faith.html>.

22. There are two incidents called "Bloody Sunday" documented. The first occurred during the British-Irish War of Independence, when in 1920 English soldiers gunned down several people indiscriminately at a football match in Dublin's Croke Park. The second had been incorporated already into songs by both Paul McCartney and John Lennon, and was the January 1972 massacre of thirteen civilians by British troops in Northern Ireland.

23. Knowing U2's members' backgrounds is a crucial aspect that could help explain the band's political views. In this sense, even their own religious mix might explain their open mindedness and a more conciliatory view of their country and of the situation in Northern Ireland.

Nattiez notes, no matter how a song appears to those who made it (“poietics”), it is impossible to predict how it will translate aesthetically to each and every potential listener²⁴. However, by focusing on what is imminent in the music, we can perhaps hazard a guess at what was intended by its producers. Thus, while many analysis of the song, such as that of Barbara Bradby, claim that the song “is merely another attempt to impose unity at the level of ideology on the different cultural traditions”²⁵, I suggest that “Sunday Bloody Sunday” cannot be considered a partisan statement, but a militant pacifism which matches a martial drumbeat to a non-violent sentiment. Still, it does articulate the band’s own sense of bewilderment at the Northern conflict: “I can’t believe the news today / I can’t close my eyes and make it go away / How long, how long must we sing this song?” (lines 1-3). It was also an artistic response to what, from any perspective, was a terrifying political reality:

The trenches dug within our hearts,
And mothers, children, brothers, sisters
Torn apart.
Sunday, bloody Sunday.
Sunday, bloody Sunday. (lines 18-22)

In this stanza, for example, all the pain and suffering and frustration come through palpably – an emotion that would prove universal. Next, the somewhat rhetorical question “How long, how long must we sing this song?” referring to how long must the situation go, is indeed a statement, and “[i]t’s not even saying there’s an answer”²⁶. Similarly, the “We can be as one” line on the chorus is across the divisions of Irish society, to Catholics and Protestants, nationalists and loyalists, which shows that this is a protest song against a terrifying cycle of violence. In the next stanza, however, “we” is opposed to “they”, who are now apparently “the starving millions”:

And it’s true we are immune
When fact is fiction and TV reality.
And today the millions cry
We eat and drink while tomorrow they die. (lines 36-39)

Here, while the line “When fact is fiction and TV reality” clearly points to the numbing and corrupting effect of television on our minds, the ones that immediately follow expose a double meaning in our “eating and drinking”: certainly, the band is linking what was happening in Northern Ireland back to the original Christian sacrifice and subsequent resurrection on Easter Sunday. This idea is further reinforced in the final stanza of the song, in which Bono sings that: “The real battle just begun / To claim the victory Jesus won / On Sunday, bloody

24. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 11-14.

25. Barbara Bradby, “God’s Gift to the Suburbs?”, *Popular Music*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1989, p. 114.

26. Bono, quoted in Niall Stokes, *U2 into the Heart*, London, Carlton Books, 2005, p. 38.

Sunday" (lines 40-42). Much has been written about these lines, but I suggest that they are not an inducement to convert people to Christianity but an attempt to lift oppressed people up the way that the Bible says Jesus did. This impulse to lift people up is evident not just in the lyrics but also in Bono's cathartic, emotional vocal performance and in the musicians' restless, urgent playing. Therefore, we can conclude that, although later it would bring up its message beyond Irish-only connotations and into an international context, in the early 1980s, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" effectively reflected the anger of so many Irish men and women at senseless brutal acts of violence, which articulated for a whole younger generation the terrible pointlessness of sectarian hatred and violence taking place in the country. In fact, given the international circumstances and the need for young people to have songs they could believe in, the official release of *War* on February 1983 saw U2's third record make Irish music history by dropping into the no. 1 position on the British album charts. Nonetheless, the band was determined to continue the search for answers to the questions that had first animated it.

By the mid-1980s, there was in Ireland an awareness of the need to look outwards, to learn from other cultures and other societies; there was also a growing rejection of repressive religious and political orthodoxies. In this context, U2 developed more and more, especially in their songwriting. Bono in particular had been reading the work of Paul Celan, one of the major German-language poets of the post-World War II era and an intensely spiritual writer. Celan said in his "Meridian" speech that "Poetry is a sort of homecoming", something which any musician constantly away from home and on the move like Bono may resonate with²⁷. Consequently, if Celan's influence on Bono's writing was already present in the lyrics of the record that followed *War* in 1985, *The Unforgettable Fire* (which includes a song explicitly titled "A Sort of Homecoming"), it was also obvious in the next one, *The Joshua Tree*. In this album, Bono's lyrics range from political and social issues – such as American imperialism, human rights violations, drug addiction and war – to more personal songs of love and bittersweet relationships between characters who feel lost and are eager for spiritual growth, struggling to remain faithful to their values and to their desire to fulfill their potential. Bill Graham and Caroline van Oosten de Boer point this out when describing the album as "concise and [...] politically specific [...] [Bono's] lyrics would become far less vague and he would start to write in narrative idioms [...] often harsh, daylight realities"²⁸. Therefore, in what follows, I will argue that U2's lyrics and imagery on this record not only reflected the alienation and striving of a whole generation – which was waking up to a new perspective about Irish identity, too – but also of those in a migrant or exilic situation who struggle to find their place in a given society.

27. "The Meridian" was delivered on the occasion of Celan's receiving the Georg Büchner Prize, Darmstadt, 22 October 1960. See Paul Celan, "The Meridian", in *Collected Prose*, Rosemarie Waldrop (trans.), New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 37-55.

28. Bill Graham, Caroline van Oosten de Boer, *U2: The Complete Guide to Their Music*, London, Omnibus, 2004, p. 27-29.

The Joshua Tree (1987)

By 1987, rock music had been decimated by the MTV video age and the quick sell. Yet, on the contrary, *The Joshua Tree* was specifically created as a “cinematic record”, in which every song would conjure up a physical location²⁹. The Edge outlined this in more detail as the search for “music that can actually evoke a landscape and a place, and can really bring you there”³⁰. As a result, *The Joshua Tree* is a highly contextualised album, with every song defined by a specific context. Thematically, the songs re-iterate a fair amount of the subject matter of previous albums, such as the mysteries of love and death and the paradoxes of the modern world. Still, there is the fact that this album was mainly inspired by the band’s experience of America, both as a real place and as a “mythic” idea. In fact, U2 differed from other contemporary Irish rock bands in that it set its sights on America rather than Britain. Bono was drawing from American musical and lyrical inspiration, and out of this involvement it was that he actually discovered his Irish identity. He said: “[...] [U2] didn’t really discover our Irishness until we travelled out of Ireland. And then you go to America and find yourself totally alienated by it”³¹. However, this Irish identity the band created would also be the result of a country, Ireland, undergoing deep sociocultural changes. Thus, according to Waters:

U2 came to hold a mirror up to their own generation because in many ways their experience was a kind of topsy-turvy version of the generality of their generation’s experiences. They represented a mix of backgrounds and sensibilities which belies the conventional insistence that we are all the same. These Children of Limbo, born in the blank space between a thousand different versions of their country, grew up with a need to express dissent from everything we had taken from granted³².

Furthermore, after a visit to Africa, the singer would connect the images of the African desert to his ideas of America as a “political desert” – something that is embodied in the album’s title and artwork, too. Thus, a certain sobriety pervades the sleeve photographs of the band, which were taken in Joshua Tree National Park (California). The photograph of the back cover highlights the prickly contours of one of the oldest types of American flora, the Joshua tree itself, a giant cactus, which has spiritual connotations: named by early Mormon settlers, it symbolised for them the struggle of Old Testament prophet Joshua, as he led the people of Israel into the Promised Land. In a similar way, U2 saw America as a sort of modern Promised

29. On 17 March 1987 (that is, St. Patrick’s Day), *The Joshua Tree* hit the no. 1 position in the British charts, making it the third U2 album to do so. Granted in Ireland and the UK, *The Joshua Tree* sold more copies in its early weeks of release than any other rock or pop album in history before, including those of The Beatles.

30. *The Joshua Tree* (Classic Albums Series 2), DVD directed by Phil King and Nuala O’Connor, Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2000, 00:26:40–00:26:47.

31. Bono, quoted in Colin Irwin, “Once, We Were Asked to Set Up an Audience with the Pope...”, *Uncut Ultimate Music Guide*, 2009, p. 63.

32. John Waters, *Race of Angels...*, p. 121.

Land, where thousands of Irishmen and women before them, since the Great Famine in the 19th century, had gone for better or for worse. For them, America also became the place where "Irishness" could be rediscovered, redeveloped, and even reinvented from. In this regard, Bono thinks that,

It was never about where you come from, it's always about where you're going. And people accept that beginning again is at the heart of the American dream. The Irish came over from a death culture, of famine and of colonisation, which of course was emasculation. [...] They began a new life in America³³.

However, this desert location also reflects an emptiness, inviting (at least metaphorically) to re-evaluate one's life in terms of an empty or deserted reality. In fact, Gerry Smyth focuses in his book *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* on the band's "desert music", noting that the image of the American desert evoked by U2's music in this album becomes the link of U2's "American album" with Ireland, because "the image of the desert in American culture derives in large part from emigrant European sources, and more especially, from the response of Irish emigrants to American geography"³⁴. In that way, *The Joshua Tree* reveals a through-compositional songwriting method. "Through-composition" is a term used by Peter Mills to mean "how a collection of songs, or album, possesses a unity which runs more deeply than the fact of their being gathered together under one title. The connections may be musical or thematic or both"³⁵. This is not the same, however, as "concept albums" where a narrative framework might be fixed in advance of completion or composition. In through-composition, it is the familiarity of certain connections between a group of songs that makes the songs feel as though they belong to each other. Therefore, in what follows, I will argue that various songs on *The Joshua Tree* deal, in one way or another, with the challenges of acculturation when in displacement and other similar issues of identity and hybridity, especially "Where the Streets Have No Name" and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For".

To begin with, "Where the Streets Have No Name" (the opening track) sounds like the sun coming up over the desert landscape; it is growing light and a slow awakening. Then, the lyrics plead for an escape as Bono, sounding restless and agitated, launches into confession:

I wanna run, I want to hide
I wanna tear down the walls
That hold me inside.
I wanna reach out
And touch the flame
Where the streets have no name. (lines 1-6)

33. Bono, quoted in Michka Assayas, *Bono on Bono*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2005, p. 65.

34. Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, p. 177-178.

35. Peter Mills, *Hymns to the Silence: Inside the Words and Music of Van Morrison*, London, Continuum, 2010, p. 275.

Certainly, the symbol is full of meaning: it refers to the place where the two sides of the country separate, but it is also where the two sides meet. Thus, the song creates, out of words and music, a big, open image of what the country could sound and feel like at its best. Moreover, as much as these lines capture the desperate need for anonymity that someone in Bono's position frequently feels ("run", "hide"), when he sings "I wanna tear down the walls / That hold me inside", he also seeks to destroy barriers between human beings, which brings us to the subject of migrants, immigrants and refugees: people on the move, in a constant state of exile, all to find freedom, somewhere else. These lines also connect to the idea of what a "typical identity in migration" is or should be. According to Wolfgang Welsch, "every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals"³⁶, but there are two main conflicts to this. On the one hand, while most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting and one home, a person who migrates adopts characteristics of that new culture, which combined with the old ones create a new hybrid identity. In this way, the symbolism of the streets without a name speaks directly to the part of a person that innately recognises it as a charged metaphoric space, because it can represent for them "a locality where realms touch, a liminal place, a place literally neither here nor there, betwixt and between, where strong forces are met and decision are made"³⁷. The song becomes next a seemingly desperate wish to get away from physical burdens and boundaries, and reach out for a simpler, more authentic and meaningful existence instead:

The city's a flood, and our love turns to rust.
We're beaten and blown by the wind
Trampled in dust.
I'll show you a place
High on a desert plain
Where the streets have no name. (lines 20-25)

Normally, technical features associated with the blues have been used in rock to imply the authenticity of experience undergone by many artists, as it is in its association with such open spaces that the blues acquires one important strand of its authenticity³⁸. In this way, as Martin Stokes puts it, "migrants and refugees might identify with the popular genres produced by the dominant group [such as African American blues or gospel], especially if these have sentimental points of connection with an imagined rural world and uncorrupted moral order"³⁹. At the

36. Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today", in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash (eds.), London, Sage, 1999, p. 195.

37. Rachel E. Seiler, "Potent Crossroad...", p. 38.

38. According to the musicologist Allan F. Moore: "The authentic is what we trust because it issues from integrity, sincerity, honesty. Intertextuality, however, foregrounds borrowing, the use of material from other sources. As such, it implies fakery and simulation" (Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2001, p. 199).

39. Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music", in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Martin Stokes (ed.), Oxford, Berg, 1994, p. 18.

same time, through its production, music and lyrics, the song creates a sense of space, a metaphor for escaping from the industrialised, urban spaces. Curiously enough, that, in a way, connects the song to the American ballads of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which chimed with the emotional needs of both immigrants and the dispossessed rural dwellers of newly urbanised America. As William H. A. Williams argues in his seminal study of American popular song lyrics:

For many Irish Americans, Ireland had become a mythical place, the Emerald Isle, an ideal within which various vaguely defined but deeply felt needs could be met. [...] A very different place, this imagined Ireland, from the gritty, crowded, multi-ethnic urban cities where most of Irish Americans lived. The Eden-like quality of this mythical Ireland of popular song was reinforced by the fact that this was a "lost" land. Its beauties and joys, like the childhood of the singers, were gone, lost in time or inaccessible across the miles of the gray Atlantic. Thus, the Emerald Isle was drenched in nostalgic yearning for the unattainable⁴⁰.

That way, while the song is rooted in U2's Irish identity⁴¹, we can make a link between the band's "authenticity" and the imagery of open spaces present in the lyrics⁴². I therefore suggest that, in this particular song, the creation of a sense of space within which escape to a pre-modern communitarian ideal carries connotations of removal from cities and industrial areas, and hence, symbolises a nostalgic return to the romanticised idea of life in the countryside, which, of course, is closely related to the concept of Celtic ideal⁴³.

The motif of existential dissatisfaction established in "Where the Streets Have no Name" is further reinforced in "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For", a song about uncertainty and doubt in which there is again a restless spirit at

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40. William H. A. Williams, *'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1996, p. 230.
 41. The title, indeed, refers to certain areas and streets of Belfast where only by the street in which a house is located can one guess the religion and the social position of its inhabitants, sometimes literally by which side of the road they live on.
 42. Following Allan F. Moore, there are two types of authenticity in music: on the one hand, authenticity of execution arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another; on the other hand, authenticity of experience occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is "telling it like it is" for them (Allan F. Moore, "Analysing Rock: Means and Ends", 1998, p. 7, in *Allan Moore Musicologist*, website of Allan F Moore: www.allanfmoore.org.uk/analyrock.pdf).
 43. Throughout the 19th century, but particularly in post-Famine Ireland, there was an increasing interest in the rural customs and stories of the Irish country people. This interest deeply intensified during the early years of the Irish Literary Revival. By placing the romanticised rural lifestyle at the heart of their enterprises, key Revival writers such as Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory and Hyde were participating in a complex cultural discourse motivated by crucial economic, social and political needs, as well as by pressing cultural concerns, far removed from the changing realities of rural life. They also established the terms of an argument that has affected virtually all subsequent Irish literature: from James Joyce to Patrick Kavanagh to Seamus Heaney, the glorification of the countryside has been a nearly endless intertextual regress in Irish literature, and a set of discourses of great relevance to popular understandings of Irish nationalism.

work – one which could never be satisfied with conventional or clichéd answers to the important questions that also provide the base from which great art is cast. Throughout, Bono's voice is again the primary instrument, yearning and hungry for what he has searched so hard for:

I have climbed the highest mountains
 I have run through the fields
 Only to be with you
 Only to be with you.

 I have run, I have crawled
 I have scaled these city walls
 These city walls
 Only to be with you. (lines 1-8)

This time, the narrator goes off in search of something else, but he does not know what because he appears to be searching in the same old material world, mistakenly. Given that the lyrics are written in the first person definitely brands this as Bono's own search, and whatever he is searching and yearning for is clearly desperately personal. From the first chorus, however, more voices join in, softly singing with the same phrasing and the same timing as him, which might suggest that his unattainable goal is shared by countless others. In the musical aspect, the bass and drum combined keep a constant rhythm without ever changing tempo, reinforcing the meaning inferred from the lyrics that this song is about something that might never be definitively found. In fact, the lyrics could refer either to a search for spiritual enlightenment or a search for love, as Bono is singing about God and about a woman simultaneously, going from "I have kissed honey lips / Felt the healing in her fingertips" (lines 13-14), clearly evoking a lover, to "[You] carried the cross of my shame" (line 30), blending the sacred and the profane. Similarly, the line "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" is an expression of spiritual joy and disappointment, both at the same time.

Furthermore, music critic Jon Pareles believes much of the song's power comes from the way Bono lingers on one word: "still". He explains that

The genius of the chorus is in its first two words [...]. There's the leap from "I still" and "haven't found". That "still" emphasized in the melody tells you he's been looking for a long time. It's a simple thing. But it's a profound thing⁴⁴.

Thus, the song touches on a deep sense of longing and a desire for something that the present world cannot fully satisfy that most of us feel at some point in our lives. American Southern novelist Walker Percy, commenting on the search in his classic novel *The Moviegoer* (1961), touched similarly on this idea:

44. Jon Pareles, quoted in Elizabeth Blair, "In U2's 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For,' A Restless Search For Meaning", NPR, 26 July 2019, on line: www.npr.org/2019/07/26/743620996/u2-i-still-havent-found-what-im-looking-for-american-anthem?t=1574891979235.

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. [...] To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair⁴⁵.

In my view, this also relates to the peculiar condition of the transient and the state of restlessness that afflicts those whose migrant condition makes them uncertain of their own roots and their identity ("internal exile"). When in displacement, if "our identities are indeed hybrid", it becomes "increasingly difficult to describe something as entirely foreign or entirely our own"⁴⁶. Consequently, this "state of exile" is to be neither in one place nor the other, but to be "in-between": not only "'in-between' different nations, 'of, and not of' each place, feeling neither here nor there"⁴⁷, but also in-between two different cultures, in-between two languages, in-between two visions of the world, in-between past and future. In addition, as McLeod defines it,

[...] to be a migrant, or to be in a diasporic location, is to live without or beyond old notions of being "at home" or securely "in a place". It is to embrace movement, motion and fragmentariness as key forms of existence and being⁴⁸.

It is actually this sort of conflated fulfillment that the song describes: a place that will make the searcher whole, and the love and understanding that he or she will find there.

It is clear, then, that in both these songs there is a sense of constant movement and travelling throughout, a shift of places that never quite become home. This sense of being of one place but feeling uprooted in many ways has come to characterise the Irish identity. However, while the lyrics expose the inner conflicts that exiled people have to confront during the process of displacement, the protagonist's feelings of frustration and identity crises are feelings relatable to all immigrant and non-immigrant people alike. In this sense, the songs analysed above not only are connected to each other through the shared experience of displacement and acculturation, but also through the reminding that sometimes we must find a way to escape from the oppressive world around us to find our own voice and purpose, and thus, create our own identity where the streets nor the boundaries have no name.

On a different note, by the time they released *The Joshua Tree*, U2 had also developed an interest in international political issues. Thus, through the sensibility of its songs, they aimed to describe and show listeners the ugly face of apparently "perfect" or "exemplary" countries, such as the US, the UK, and even Ireland, too. In this way, *The Joshua Tree* was not a mere celebration of American culture: it was also an exploration of some of the ugliest American by-products. Nowhere was this more evident than on the fourth track, "Bullet the Blue Sky". The song

45. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, New York, Knopf, 1961, p. 13.

46. Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality...", p. 200.

47. John MacLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010, p. 247.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

was originally created by Bono after visiting El Salvador in 1985. Upon his arrival, the singer was not only disturbed by the poverty and the violence that he was learning about, but also by the American economic blockade and the fact that the US Army was aiding and funding one of the sides as an attack on communism. It was this particular context that would shape the song, as Bono recalled, upon his return from El Salvador:

I described what I had been through, what I had seen, some of the stories of people I had met, and I said to The Edge: "Could you put that through your amplifier?" I even got pictures and stuck them on the wall [of the studio]⁴⁹.

The song was therefore inspired by a personal journey to a particular context and created to describe that specific context (a civil war in Central America), but Bono was also aiming to draw attention to the damage the US was doing in other countries (which most Americans probably did not know the extent of). Thus, the song howls with anger and fear from the very beginning:

In the howlin' wind
Comes a stingin' rain
See it drivin' nails
Into the souls on the tree of pain.

From the firefly
A red orange glow
See the face of fear
Runnin' scared in the valley below.

Bullet the blue sky.

In the locust wind
Comes a rattle and hum.
Jacob wrestled the angel
And the angel was overcome. (lines 1-13)

These stanzas refer to the fact that in El Salvador, Bono was witness to the US government fighter planes flying overhead on a mission, and tried to render that sound and feeling. The musical result is impressive, as are the lyrics, notably the improvised spoken lines the singer came up with during the recording:

Suit and tie comes up to me
His face red like a rose on a thorn bush
Like all the colours of a royal flush
And he's peelin' off those dollar bills
Slappin' 'em down
One hundred, two hundred. (lines 25-30)

49. Bono, quoted in Neil McCormick, *U2, U2 by U2*, London, HarperCollins, 2006, p. 179.

The brutality of the lyrics possesses the playing as the guitar writhes and flares, while Bono murmurs like some hallucinating prophet:

And I can see those fighter planes
Across the tin huts as children sleep
Through the alleys of a quiet city street.
Up the staircase to the first floor
We turn the key and slowly unlock the door
As a man breathes into his saxophone
And through the walls you hear the city groan.
Outside, is America.
Outside, is America. (lines 31-40)

In these lines, the burning crosses (like those of the Ku Klux Klan) are contrasted with the liberating sound of a saxophone breathing into the New York night – this is America, after all: land of paradoxes. Similarly, the singer criticises the country's thirst for war and political corruption:

You plant a demon seed
You raise a flower of fire.
We see them burnin' crosses
See the flames, higher and higher. (lines 17-20)

At this point, the music screams tension as various guitars resound in chaos behind the lyrics' stark images like, for example, that of raising "a flower of fire", which means that everything beautiful and everything dangerously repulsive about the world are rolled into one in America – this is, in fact, what the song is about. Lyrically, the singer had never painted a picture so penetrating: the burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan, the gambling men, the pseudo-morality of corrupted America... All these elements run together as the song climaxes with Bono recalling again his trip to El Salvador:

See across the field
See the sky ripped open
See the rain comin' through the gapin' wound
Howlin' the women and children
Who run... who run... (lines 42-46)

Finally, the music stops dead, and in a deliberately American accent, Bono speaks the chilling words: "into the arms of America". We can conclude, therefore, that "Bullet the Blue Sky" is a really strong statement against nationalism and militarism, lyrically connected to a deeply conservative and anti-liberal period of time in the USA and the UK particularly. However, when bringing back a song from the past, performers may modify and update the song somehow so that it continues to speak to the audience, and as Gracyk notes,

Weak iterability encourages the performer to recast the song to bring out its relevance in a specific context and a specific audience. In contrast, strong iterability simply delivers the same text, highlighting its increasingly random juxtaposition with all other texts⁵⁰.

In this way, U2 has continued to play the song live over the years, adapting its original political message to new additional struggles such as consumerism, gun control or the refugee crisis in Europe, thus proving that, while wars might end and new conflicts begin, a song like “Bullet the Blue Sky” should and will indeed still be played.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes clear that U2’s lyrics can be interpreted in multiple and equally valid ways. Most of all, however, songs like those explored above were originally aimed to give people back a sense of values, as well as remind them they can rage against the world – at least artistically – if this is not what they wanted it to be. This idea of U2 “holding up a mirror” to their generation, which is equivalent to James Joyce asking the Dublin of his time to look at itself on his “nicely-polished looking glass”⁵¹, was what made their songs socially relevant in 1980’s Ireland. Furthermore, songs like those included in both *War* and *The Joshua Tree* can actually be considered protest songs which have not lost their power and meaning, nor their relevance, over the past decades, as they fit into this era as much as they did more than three decades ago, and can still be reinvented for different causes. Ultimately, the analysis of such songs has provided us an outline of the band’s sociopolitical ideology, which was, in turn, fulfilled by a sometimes controversial activism (especially that of Bono). However, this analysis has shown that if U2 was ever defined as an “activist band”, it was not really (or only) due to the personal political commitment of its members, but to the lyrical output in their songs, which provided a way for their audience to get acquainted with sociopolitical issues. Therefore, U2 did an excellent job at finding a balance to interpret life, identity and politics through songs, and as a result, their place in music history – Irish and elsewhere’s – is assured.

Elena CANIDO MUIÑO

University of A Coruña (Spain)

50. Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001, p. 57.

51. James Joyce, “Letter to Grant Richards (23 June 1906)”, in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, Richard Ellmann (ed.), New York, The Viking Press, 1975, p. 90.

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