

“The Joshua Tree”--U2 (1987)

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Essay by Stephen Catanzarite (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



The band

Across four studio albums, beginning with their 1980 debut, “Boy,” the Irish rock band U2 created a signature sound and built an adoring international fan base, delivering spiritual (and increasingly political) songs and live performances brimming with the irrational exuberance of youth. But it was their fifth studio album, 1987’s “The Joshua Tree,” that cemented the band’s iconic status. The astonishing success of “The Joshua Tree” may, in retrospect, seem to have been inevitable. A critically-acclaimed work that has sold more than 25 million copies, produced two chart-topping singles, and inspired not one but two of the highest-grossing concert tours ever, it’s become ingrained in the popular imagination--particularly in America, the country whose myths, legends, and ideals inspired its creation. Yet, at the time of its release, “The Joshua Tree” bloomed in stark contrast to the pop music landscape that surrounded it.

In an era when popular culture gleefully celebrated unabashed materialism and professed a credo of “greed is good,” here was an album that seemed to herald asceticism as ideal. Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn’s austere cover photos present the band’s members (singer Bono, guitarist the Edge, bassist Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen Jr.), as four modern-day sons of the Desert Fathers, casting wary eyes upon the Day-Glo fashions, big hair silliness, and conspicuous consumption that epitomized the times. Taking its title from the hardy desert plant native to the more arid portions of the American southwest (which was itself named by early Mormon missionaries who saw in it the Old Testament image of Joshua raising his hands to the sky in prayer), “The Joshua Tree” represented all of the things most of U2’s contemporaries renounced: earnestness, austerity, and introspection.

More to the point, the music of “The Joshua Tree” transcends the time and place in which it was created. Set against the background of an America that is at once awe-inspiring in its expansiveness and beauty, and confounding in its contradictions and distortions, the songs explore both the gleaming heights of the American Idea--President Reagan’s “shining city on a hill,” where the creative energies of the people are called forth in and through freedom--and the desperation, loneliness, and sorrow found in America’s valleys and shadows. This American paradox--a place where love is being both built up and burned down--is plainly laid out in the panoramic opener, “Where the Streets Have No Name.” The Edge’s trademark guitar chimes are

set against a slow, cinematic chord progression, reminiscent of a cathedral organ, building to and sustaining a wall of sound over which Bono's striving vocals leap, dodge, and proclaim. It's U2 at its most anthemic, and has become a mainstay and highlight of its live shows.

Another anthem, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" follows. A slice of blue-eyed gospel sung over layers of ringing guitar and propelled by a plodding bass, this song, like most of the others on the album, ventures beyond the merely spiritual into the realm of the scriptural. Professing his belief in both "kingdom come" and the Christian understanding of Jesus's salvific death and resurrection ("you broke the bond / loosed my chains / carried the cross / and all my shame"), Bono revels in both the joys and the tribulations of a life of faith. It became the second song from the album to reach number one on Billboard's "Hot 100" charts.

U2's first-ever number one, "With or Without You," is a dark ballad that explores the challenges and contradictions of love in both its earthly and spiritual manifestations. Again recalling Christ's passion ("see the stone set in your eyes / see the thorn twist in your side") the song prayerfully approaches the need to surrender one's ego and will in the service of, and sacrifice to, the dictates of love--a theme that forms the core of the band's canon. Featuring a spare arrangement crafted around a single, sustained guitar note, the song builds to a climactic crescendo before dissolving again into a long, quiet fade out. Both musically and lyrically, "With or Without You" prefigures what many consider to be U2's best single, 1991's "One."

With "Bullet the Blue Sky," the Edge solidified his reputation as one of the most innovative and influential guitarists of his generation. Working from Bono's request that he put the sound of war-torn El Salvador through his amplifier, and playing off a martial drumbeat, the Edge delivers rousing bursts of slide guitar that usher the listener through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. With lyrics that channel the defiant spirit of the American Beat writers (including a dramatic spoken-word passage that evokes the energy of poet Allen Ginsberg), Bono witnesses against what he sees as the Reagan administration's unjust military interventions in Central and South America. These interventions reached their nadir with the Iran-Contra scandal, and President Reagan's acknowledgment that the United States sold arms to Iran in order to free American hostages being held in Lebanon, as well as to fund anti-communist forces in Nicaragua. Another staple of U2's concert performances, "Bullet the Blue Sky" has been used by the band to exorcise the specters of violence and conflict, particularly in the realms of politics and religion.

Side one of "The Joshua Tree" closes with "Running to Stand Still," another standout track that sees U2 deepening their exploration of American blues and folk music, under the influence of experimental rock pioneers the Velvet Underground. The song chronicles the heroin addiction of a young woman subsisting in the Dantean environs of Dublin's Ballymun Flats housing complex (the "seven towers" that offer "no way out"). Part of a 1960s social scheme to deal with inner-city poverty, the Ballymun Flats became, instead, an infamous symbol of destitution, crime, and social alienation. By 2015, the complex had been completely demolished, but "Running to Stand Still" remains an unadorned depiction of the de-personalizing and soul-crushing effects of bureaucracy, and the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of central planning.

The second half of "The Joshua Tree" is less even and consistent than the first. Most of the songs on side two were seldom played live until 2017, when U2 embarked on a tour celebrating

the 30th anniversary of “The Joshua Tree,” which included performing the entire album at each concert. The standout tracks include “In God’s Country,” which offers a spiritual travelogue of the band’s American journey in capsule form, and “Red Hill Mining town, which dramatizes the impact civil discord has on small, close-knit communities, as well as on families. “Trip Through Your Wires” is an interesting if not fully successful country rave-up, while the closing track, “Mothers of the Disappeared” gives voice to the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, an association of women whose children had disappeared under the dictatorships in Argentina and Chile, as well as the CoMadres, a similar group whose children were abducted in El Salvador.

On December 30, 1989, during the third of a four-night concert stand in U2’s hometown of Dublin, Bono announced that it was “the end of something” for the band, and that they would be going away to “dream it all up again.” It was a poetic conclusion to a decade that saw U2 ascend from post-punk upstarts to worldwide acclaim as one of the greatest rock and roll bands of all time--an ascendancy fueled in large part by the success of “The Joshua Tree.” When they returned with 1991’s “Achtung Baby,” they described it as “the sound of four men cutting down ‘The Joshua Tree.’” Nevertheless, the “Joshua” album continues to loom large, enduring not only as a high-water mark in the annals of rock and roll, but as a living artifact from the cultural landscape of late-20th century America.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.