

A FLOWER OF FIRE

25 years ago, The Joshua Tree pointed U2 to America

By Chris Neal

In the middle of the 19th century, members of the still-new Mormon religion found themselves under attack from theological opponents. By the time the church's founder, Joseph Smith, was killed by an angry mob in Illinois in 1844, his followers were already making their way westward in search of more tolerant climes. Their journeys brought them by the mid-1850s to the Mojave Desert, where they were struck by the appearance of a plant whose twisted but triumphant limbs reminded them of the Biblical leader Joshua raising his arms to God in prayer. They gave a name to the plant they hoped was leading them to the promised land: the Joshua tree.

ANGEL OR DEVIL?

In the mid-'80s, the four young Irishmen who made up U2 were also a bit lost—and also eager to make sense of the double-edged American dream. Formed in 1976, the group spent the first several years of its career forging a blunt, powerful sound from the tattered shreds of

Bono and the Edge had fallen under the spell of American authors like Raymond Carver, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor and Norman Mailer. Growing up in hardscrabble Dublin, America represented boundless opportunity and possibility. But there was also a dark side. "I started to see two Americas: the mythic America and the real America," Bono said. "It was an age of greed, Wall Street, button-down, win, win, win, no time for losers. New York was bankrupt. There was a harsh reality to America as well as the dream." There were also the effects of U.S. foreign policy, which Bono saw for himself while traveling in Nicaragua. There he and wife Ali were literally caught in the crossfire of a civil war in which he felt America was supporting the wrong side. "I'd never been shot at before," he noted. "I remember the really dull sound of bullets zipping over our heads."

He resolved to put his feelings into words in a more concrete way than he had done in the past. Bono had previously employed a free-form, improvisational approach to lyric-writing, often coming



Larry Mullen Jr., Adam Clayton, The Edge and Bono, December 1986

punk and New Wave. Singer Paul "Bono" Hewson, guitarist David "The Edge" Evans, bass player Adam Clayton and drummer Larry Mullen Jr. began building a cult audience in the U.S. thanks to dogged touring and some college-radio airplay. By 1984 the group scored its first Top 40 hit in America with "Pride (In the Name of Love)." The accompanying album, *The Unforgettable Fire*, matched U2 for the first time with co-producers Daniel Lanois and Brian Eno, who brought out a more abstract, expressionistic side of the group.

In late 1985 the four gathered at a rental house in Dublin for a couple of weeks to work up the musical ideas they'd been formulating while on tour. The group had in hand early versions of what would become the songs "With or Without You," "Red Hill Mining Town" and "Trip Through Your Wires," as well as one that never got past the joke title "Woman Fish." "It was a hard period, which it often is to begin with," Edge recalled. "It felt like we were going nowhere with the music. Bono, at least, had a strong sense of the tone and color of the lyrics. He wanted to get into America."

up with phrases off the top of his head during rehearsals. "I used to think that writing words was old-fashioned, so I sketched," he said. "I wrote words on the microphone." Edge was thinking along the same lines from a musical point of view. "We just wanted to leave the record less open-ended, atmospheric and impressionistic," he said. "Make it more straightforward, focused and concise."

At the same time, the group was becoming acutely aware of its roots—or its lack thereof. "Our record collection began in 1976," Bono said. "We weren't there when rock 'n' roll began." Conversations with new friends like Bob Dylan and Keith Richards incited their curiosity about the history of American music. Crisscrossing the highways of America while listening to public radio, Edge recalled, "For the first time I heard the music of Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell and other seminal blues and country singers and players. I knew it was time to take another look."

THE HANDS THAT BUILD

In 1986 the group played a selection of its demos for Eno and Lanois: "With or Without You," "Red Hill Mining Town" and a more recent song, "Bullet the Blue Sky," which had grown from a jam at STS Studios in Dublin. The duo agreed to produce the album, commencing work in August. In the meantime, tragedy called. On July 3, trusted crew member Greg Carroll was killed in a motorcycle accident in Dublin. "His death really rocked us," Mullen said. "It was the first time anyone in our working circle had been killed." The loss inspired a new song, named for a volcanic peak Bono and Carroll had visited in the latter's homeland of New Zealand: "One Tree Hill." The loss lent urgency and purpose to the band's new music. "We had to fill the hole in our heart with something very, very large indeed," Bono said. "We loved him so much."

U2 rented Danesmoate, an old Georgian house in the foothills of the Wicklow Mountains near Dublin, and set up a studio with Mark "Flood" Ellis acting as engineer. The main room, Lanois recalled, gave

song is about torment—sexual, but also psychological, about how repressing desires makes them stronger," he said.

Another early victory in the recording process came with a gospel-infused number built atop a stop-and-start drum part rescued from a discarded jam dubbed "Under the Weather Girls." "At first I wasn't so convinced," Edge said. "It sounded to me a little like 'Eye of the Tiger' played by a reggae band." But as the track filled the studio and Bono began singing nonsense syllables in search of a melody, Edge recalled a phrase he'd scribbled down in a notebook earlier. He wrote it down on a piece of paper and handed it to Bono, who duly began singing: "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." Immediately, Mullen said, "We knew it was going to be our trophy."

HEAR THEIR HEARTBEAT

U2 and its production team began splitting time between Danesmoate and Edge's house on Dublin Bay, called Melbeach. While most of the



The Edge and Bono onstage in Europe, 2009



Bono and Clayton, 2011

the album's sound a jolt. "It has this big rectangular room with a tall ceiling and wooden floors," he said. "It was loud, but it was really good loud, real dense, very musical." Lanois and Eno took turns with the group in the studio, working for a week or two at a time each.

The makeshift control room was dubbed the "lyric room," and was used for vocals and guitar overdubs. Among the key guitar parts captured in the room was one for "With or Without You," using a new invention dreamed up by Edge's friend Michael Brook. The "Infinite Guitar" allowed a guitar sound to sustain indefinitely by continuously feeding back into its own pickups. Bono and pal Gavin Friday were listening to the bare-bones backing track of bass (Clayton playing an Ibanez owned by Eno) and Yamaha drum machine that had been applied to Bono's chord sequence when through an open door they heard Edge fiddling with his new acquisition. The two sounds melded in the air, and inspiration struck. "We brought in Edge and started recording immediately," Bono remembered. The result sounded like a potential hit, giving spirits a much-needed boost. Bono conjured a lyric that matched the track's sense of tension and longing. "That

basic tracks were captured at the former, Lanois recalled the latter as the locale where the album was fleshed out and largely mixed (further recording took place at the more professional environs of Dublin's Windmill Lane Studios). A key track captured at Melbeach was "Bullet the Blue Sky," the album's most aggressive song and one whose lyric harkened back to Bono's experiences in Nicaragua. "I wanted it to feel like hell on earth," Bono said. Toward that end he hung up photos of the violence in Central America, asking Edge to make his guitar work

as brutal as what he saw in the pictures. "The sound of 'Bullet' is the sound of U2 playing in a room," Edge said. "It is essential for that song that we have that feeling. It's the same for a lot of the other

tracks, too, like 'Running to Stand Still.'" Much quieter but no less haunted, "Running" was inspired by the epidemic of heroin addiction in Dublin at the time. The song was born when Edge began idly playing piano and Lanois joined in on guitar. "There was just a wonderful communication happening in the room at that time," Lanois said.

Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* inspired the brooding "Exit." Like its sources, the song attempted to dig into the motivations of a murderer. "I have a side of me which, in a

'There was a harsh reality to America.' -Bono

P:29 Anton Corbijn, U2 1986; P:30 Kevin Mazur, U2 2009; John Shearer, U2 2011

corner, can be very violent," Bono said. "It's the least attractive thing in anyone, and I wanted to own up to that." The track was propelled by Clayton's relentless bass. "It was quite a long piece originally," Clayton said. "We played it just once and then Eno cut it down into that shape." Bono composed what would become the album's closing song, "Mothers of the Disappeared," on his mother-in-law's Spanish guitar. Lyrical inspiration came from the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, a group of outspoken Argentinean women whose children had been euphemistically "disappeared"—kidnapped, and likely tortured and murdered—for political reasons. "That song means as much to me as any of the songs on that album," Bono said.

The anthemic "Where the Streets Have No Name" appeared late in the album's recording, as the group began to imagine playing its new material live. "It dawned on us that we were short a certain kind of song," said Edge, who responded by setting up

keyboards, guitar and a drum machine in one room at Melbeach and attempting to fill that need. "I imagined being at a U2 show and tried to dream up what I would want to hear," he said. "It was my attempt to conjure up the ultimate U2 live song." When the demo was complete, he knew that was what he had. "I remember listening to the complete silence of the house for a few seconds after the music had stopped," he said, "and then doing a dance around the room punching the air."

As good as Edge's demo was, U2 had trouble committing "Streets" to tape—so much, in fact, that at one point Eno wanted to erase everything the group had recorded and start from scratch. At one point, tape operator Pat McCarthy returned from getting a cup of tea to find the producer preparing to record over "Streets." "Pat had to drop the tea, run up and grab Brian physically and hold him back," Flood recalled. "In the end, the version we've got was cobbled



The Edge and Bono, 2011

THREE ON THE TREE

Tucked away on *The Joshua Tree's* second half is a trio of lesser-known tracks often overshadowed by the album's hits—with good reason, according to the band members.

"RED HILL MINING TOWN"

This delicate song was inspired by the National Union of Mineworkers' strike in 1984. "It was overproduced and underwritten, one of those great ideas that never quite got there," drummer Larry Mullen Jr. said. "Bono had a quite clear idea about how he wanted it to sound, but I don't think anyone was quite sure where he was going with it." U2 has never played "Red Hill Mining Town" live.

"IN GOD'S COUNTRY"

A slight number born of Bono's desire for the album to have more rock 'n' roll songs—and his goading of Edge with a demonstration of what Mullen jokingly calls the singer's

"appalling guitar playing." Although the song later became a minor hit, none of the members were thrilled with it. "The lyric was really good, the tune is pretty good and the hook is pretty average," pronounced Bono.

"TRIP THROUGH YOUR WIRES"

Another track worked up swiftly thanks to Bono's aim for more uptempo material. "It was inspired by a series of phone conversations I had with somebody who might have meant well and who was fascinating in their own right," Bono said. "It's just they were pretending to be someone else." The completed recording is perhaps the album's most straightforward. "Trip Through Your Wires" has that lovely, loose, sloppy, throwaway side of the band that we can sometimes capture," said bass player Adam Clayton.

together from a few different takes," Clayton said. "The third verse is probably the best section, where it really works." "Where the Streets Have No Name" only found its full potential when it became what it was always designed to be: the first song of the set on U2's upcoming tour. "It only became a truly great song through playing live," Mullen said. "On the record, musically, it's not half the song it is live."

THE ARMS OF AMERICA

Recording continued through the end of 1986, and mixing commenced in January 1987. Lanois and Eno were annoyed to discover that the band wanted to bring in Steve Lillywhite, who had produced its first three albums, to mix several of the tracks. "Neither of them really understood rock 'n' roll—or, more importantly, how to get rock 'n' roll on the radio," Mullen said. "We needed to be on the radio. We had always wanted that. Steve has 'pop ears' and understands what's necessary to get songs on the radio."

John Shearer, U2 2011

Lillywhite's wife, singer and songwriter Kirsty MacColl, was on hand and asked for something to keep her occupied. The band put her to work sorting out a running order for the album, indicating only that they wanted "Streets" as the opening cut and "Mothers" as the closer. The rest of the songs remained in order formulated by MacColl, who died in a boating accident in 2000. The album found its title during a December 1986 photo shoot in the U.S., where the group encountered the titular plant and learned the origin of its name. "Calling the album *The Joshua Tree* was in some ways an acknowledgment of the influence that American culture had on U2," Mullen said. "America was having a bigger impact on us than we would ever have on it."

The Joshua Tree was released on March 9, 1987. The first two singles, "With or Without You" and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," topped the U.S. pop charts. U2 immediately found itself selling millions of albums and filling arenas and stadiums across America. *The Joshua Tree* eventually sold more than 25 million copies worldwide, reaching No. 1 in 22 countries. "One moment you are on one side of the fence, the next moment you are catapulted to the other," Mullen said. "This was something most bands only dream about. We were *the* band." The group was both thrilled with its success and anxious about meeting its potential. "We were always running to catch up—that was the sense," Edge said. "It had taken us way out of our comfort zone



Clayton, The Edge, Bono, Mullen, 2009

SONS OF THE DESERT

The band traveled to the Mojave Desert in December 1986 to capture images for the cover of its upcoming album, playing on the lyrics' repeated invocations of desert imagery. The portrait on the front cover was taken at Zabriskie Point, in the eastern part of Death Valley National Park. Other photos from the album package were taken at the Harmony Hotel in Joshua Tree National Park and the ghost town of Bodie, Calif. "The look the band was going for was a displaced European immigrant arriving in the desert," recalled bass player Adam Clayton.



The members were intrigued by their driver's description of a particularly striking piece of local fauna, the Joshua tree—and endlessly amused by Dutch photographer Anton Corbijn's tendency to pronounce "Joshua" as "Yoshua." Once a suitable tree was located along Route 190 just outside Death Valley, Corbijn spent about 20 minutes getting shots of the group with it. The members' decision to name the album after their desert discovery was influenced by the fact that, unlike most trees, Joshua trees have no rings inside them to indicate their age. Said drummer Larry Mullen Jr., "Maybe that's a good sign for the record."

in terms of the size of venues we played and what was expected of us."

A 1988 concert film and soundtrack, *Rattle and Hum*, further explored U2's fascination with American music. By the end of 1989 the members were exhausted from touring and ready to put *The Joshua Tree* well behind them. The group reemerged in late 1991 with the grinding, industrial-tinged *Achtung Baby*, which Bono famously called "the sound of four men chopping down *The Joshua Tree*." Yet 25 years later, the album still looms large in U2's long and impressive career. "I think *Joshua Tree* captures a spirit that maybe hadn't been paid much attention to in music—a spirit of yearning, of searching for something real," Clayton said upon its release in 1987. "I certainly hope its effects will be felt for a very long time." **M**

Deirdre O'Callaghan, U2 2009

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