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Bono: the shades come off

Egomaniac. Relentless do-gooder. Family man. We spend six months getting close to the world's most influential rock star



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Bono can hold the undivided attention of a sold-out stadium. When he works a much smaller space, say in the White House, Downing Street or the Vatican, he rules that room with those who rule the world. When he put his sunglasses on the Pope, that picture became iconic because of his glasses, not because of the pontiff. How? Why? His father told him never to have dreams because he didn't want him to be disappointed, which encouraged him to dream even bigger. But that's only part of the long answer.

Contrariness, caring deeply, ridiculousness, egomania, it's all there. There's never been a rock star who wielded so much power. There's nobody in power who doesn't take his call. During the writing of this piece, there's nobody in power who doesn't return my call within 24 hours. Few people say no to Bono, whether it's Blair, Clinton, Bush. And Bono didn't say no to Obama when he asked U2 to play at his inauguration concert.

There's no shortage of Bono jokes. Quite a few of them begin: "What's the difference between Bono and God?" "Bono thinks he's God, but God doesn't think he's Bono"; that sort of thing. And there's no shortage of criticism at his ubiquity: when U2 released their album in March with a concert on top of BBC Broadcasting House in London, listeners were furious that the band seemed to be on almost every BBC radio station. Does he ever stop?

Not often. Up early. Sometimes 13 meetings a day. Late nights. Having shadowed him for over six months, I've seen how stretched he is and how much he can do. There are many Bonos all in one: the rock star, the activist, the writer, the family man. It's tough to get him alone. He's usually only interviewed — and always with the band. It's even tougher to get him to talk about himself. But after years of interviews with U2, this time he agreed to let me look closely at what it means to be Bono — taking me with him as he made an album; met senior politicians; made speeches; chilled out with friends and, unprecedented for him, taking me home.

This journey begins in October 2008 at the Women's Conference, Long Beach, California.

I have seen Bono shrink a stadium, make it intimate. But only as a singer in a rock band. As a speaker here, it's pretty much the same thing. He follows Billie Jean King and Gloria Steinem, who had 14,000 women — the groomed, the earnest, the curious and the militant — roaring with approval. They're a hard act to follow, but he topped it. "My name is Bono and I'm a travelling salesman. I come from a long line of travelling salespeople on my mother's side. Sometimes I come to your door as a rock star selling melodies. Sometimes I come as an activist selling ideas of debt forgiveness." He flatters and cajoles.

He says: "Africa's our neighbour. When it burns, we smell the smoke. It stings our eyes, it sears our conscience, but maybe not as much as it should. We accept it, men especially. A lot of men have developed an ability to live with this absurdity. Most women haven't." Everyone is swept up.

He talks about when he first went to Africa and a child was dying in his arms; the look in that child's eye of innocence and no blame. He says that's when he became that thing he despises most: a rock star with a cause. Then he talks about how 20 cents can provide life-saving drugs and how you can do this by buying a Red T-shirt. (Red is the organisation he set up so big brands like Gap, Armani and Apple give up to 40% of their profit directly to the Global Fund. To date it has raised over \$130m.) It was a 40-minute speech but we felt scooped up, like at a rock concert.

Backstage, there's Maria Shriver, the conference founder, scion of the Kennedy clan and married to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. She looks big-haired, well put together. A purple Alaïa suit skims her, accessorised with pink rosary beads that signal quirky, heartfelt. I told her she looked gorgeous. She looked at me blankly, somehow insulted, and looked at Bono with a "Who is this woman you brought here?" look. Bono refused to acknowledge the moment. He moves on. On stage he'd called Shriver a lioness, a term he uses for powerful women. Later on that's what he called Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House of Representatives and arguably the most powerful woman in America. It seemed to make her purr.

December 2008: Olympic Studios, Barnes, London, a few days before the album *No Line on the Horizon* is finished. I'm sitting next to Bono in the canteen. He's eating spicy spaghetti and wearing a soft grey cashmere jumper flecked with little metal bits. Hard and soft, I observe. "Yes, that's me," he says. I once told him he wears his inside on his out. "You did, didn't you?" He has the memory of an elephant for stupid minutiae and life-saving facts. But some things are too deeply buried to remember. The first time I met him, we talked about his mother. She died when he was 14, yet he has few memories of her. He recalls her chasing him with a cane and laughing. He recalls his dad at the top of the stairs doing DIY with an electric drill. The drill was screaming. It was going to drill him to death. He remembers his mother convulsed with laughter. Laughter and danger got mixed up in his head.

Bono, 49, has always loved to embrace a contradiction. In his life and lyrics he is always mixing God and sex, poverty and romance. He is supersensitive, but a bulldozer, relentless when he wants something; self-conscious yet without fear. Sometimes saintly, never a monk. Hard and soft Bono lives in two different worlds, exposing himself to two different standards of judgment. Artistically, he is painfully self-critical. When U2 started, he would ask how many people were at the gig. If it was 400 and the venue held 450 he would worry about the 50 who didn't come. He's still like that, although the venues are now holding tens of thousands. Yet he can walk into a room on Capitol Hill knowing what he's asking for is likely to be shot down. The man who pursues success so relentlessly has rewired himself to accept failure as part of his course.

Paul McGuinness, U2's manager, often referred to as the band's fifth member, agrees. "He's a bundle of contradictions, a spoilt-rotten rich rock star who became successful from his own talent. He didn't trick anyone. He enjoys life to the full, but he does a lot of good. He has difficulties; one day he'll win a Grammy for album of the year, the next he's called a terrible hypocrite, a force for bad. Yet the organisations that support his activism are sophisticated. Red is extremely successful. As is One [his global advocacy and campaigning group]."

Earlier that day in December, Bono had a One meeting in London with a video link to the organisation's office in Washington, DC. They talked about plans for 2010: a World Cup campaign for mosquito nets and education. They talked about what's going to happen when Obama has to make tough decisions and makes himself unpopular. Could they still count on him? What Republicans should they now work on? How to encourage Cameron on side? How Sarkozy has let them down by not paying what he had promised. Bono jokes Carla is going to make Sarkozy change; he says he'll have to call her and say: "I know who you're sleeping with."

Back at the studio there's mounting concern about getting the album finished. "This album is all about surrender," Bono says. "Spiritual surrender, sexual surrender. Quite difficult, don't you think?" He takes me into the studio where he's laying down his vocal and sings to me. Mesmerising. I'm sure this isn't the first time he's sung to seduce. He seduces leaders of faith like Bush and Blair by giving them Bibles, but singing is his other way in. It's easy for him to move people's emotions, possibly even addictive.

Early January 2009. Half an hour's drive from Dublin. Christmas lights are still outside Bono's home. It's a big Georgian house overlooking a bay. Wood floors, rose and crimson velvet, cosy. A painting of a

nun is in the hallway. Downstairs is a swirling picture painted by Frank Sinatra and a picture of Bono with half a mouth. "Shall we go for a walk? Shall I show you around?" says Bono. But it's dark and it's freezing.

Down some steps we get to a folly, a Victorian addition. Downstairs, his wife, Ali, is having a meeting with people from her sustainable-clothing company, Edun. Upstairs is an Edwardian bed, the guest room. On the balcony he points to the homes of his friend and bandmate the Edge and the film director Neil Jordan. In the guest bathroom, everyone who has stayed has left their mark. Graffiti and scribbles from film directors, actors, writers. Bill Clinton has written "A+B=C". I wondered if it means "Ali+Bono=Clinton". Later on, Clinton tells me it doesn't. "It means if you make enough effort and face the facts, you can change things. It was both affirming and tongue-in-cheek, putting down the earnestness with which we ply our trade."

Bono is very good at impersonating the people he meets. His Clinton, Blair and Javier Bardem are extremely funny in their execution. His Bush is less good. Perhaps he has to like you to be you. Not that he says he doesn't like Bush, and Bush was certainly good to him. He increased America's foreign budget to help Africans fight the diseases of poverty from around \$2 billion when he came in, to about \$8 billion today.

Bono's seduction of the American right began in part with Jesse Helms, then head of the Senate's foreign-relations committee. Helms was the ringleader for the religious Republican right and was said to believe Aids was God's retribution. Bono is said to have convinced him it was a human responsibility to treat Aids sufferers in Africa. Clinton says: "I was impressed. He converted Jesse Helms, and that's something I could never have done. Jesse found it fascinating that a man from a radically different culture would court him, and he was disarmed by the same thing that disarms everybody who doesn't know anything about Bono: Bono knew more about the subject than Jesse did. And Bono made an argument about why it was in America's interest to relate to conditional debt relief, whether you were a conservative Republican or a liberal Democrat. They have to spend the money on healthcare, development or education so those countries would be better for America and they would produce no terrorists. They would be part of a co-operative that would not throw America into conflicts down the road.

"And Bono is the genuine article, a real person. He also pointed out that debt relief would work from a budgetary point of view, and that was when I was there and made them run a balanced budget..." A pause. I laugh. Clinton's always ready for a dig. "He got people to take him seriously because he did his homework."

Clinton also detects his contradictions. "Bono has a peculiar gift of mind and emotion and has a grace and power about the way he does it that is quite a thing to behold. There is no question that the way his mind works and his powers of persuasion have been decisively important."

Lullaby-voiced Clinton would have been a good rock star. He tells me he once had a three-octave singing range, and when he was 16 played the saxophone for 10 hours a day until his lips split. But he decided if he wasn't going to be better than the jazz legend John Coltrane, he would go into politics.

Bono and I are sitting in his study. Lots of books, tea, home-made biscuits. It's an intimate room. It's a happy house that's properly lived in. You wonder why he would want to leave it at all. In many ways I think he doesn't. That's just more of the conflict. "Contradiction is just the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your head. I am a family man [he has four children — Jordan, 20, Eve, 17, Elijah, 9, and John, 8], I am a loyal if unreliable friend, I am a rock star. If I go out, I sometimes set fire to myself and others.

I am an earnest activist, a reflective and a religious-ish person. The right to be ridiculous is something to hold dear and never too far away."

The view from the window, sky and sea is what inspired the title No Line on the Horizon. The album took four years to make. It suffered delays. Why did it take so long? "The whole idea of an album is in jeopardy, it is an outmoded notion. We wanted to see if we could have 10 or 11 really great songs. It turned out to be harder than we imagined. We worked twice as hard to get there, and that either means we're half as good or it took twice as much concentration."

The last album, How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb, sold 9m copies. Was he finding that success hard to live up to? "It could be that, that overachieving personality." Is it because he doesn't like to fail? "I'm sure I have failed at things. The two things I haven't failed in are the ones that mean the most to me: my

music and my family. Activism is all about failure. You think about the people who didn't get the medicine."

What if it becomes too hard to swap the part of the brain that writes speeches for the part that writes lyrics? "If I'm honest, this is the first album where I thought that might be true. Certainly, the last two albums were very easy for me, though I'm not saying they were perfect."

His voice on the latest collection of songs speaks in different characters. "I was getting bored with my own point of view and thought I might be able to express more about myself by disappearing into other people." There's a song called Cedars of Lebanon. It's the voice of a war correspondent sitting on his hotel balcony. He says that could have been him if he hadn't been a rock star, because he is attracted to conflict and to danger. Another song, Stand up Comedy, is about small men with big ideas. "Totally me."

There are books everywhere. He likes to read about three at once. Currently there's one about a tribe of pirates from the Barbary coast who took 130 Irish people from a town in County Cork and sold them as slaves in Algeria. And he's reading Richard Dawkins's *A Devil's Chaplain*. An edition of Seamus Heaney is never far away, and beside it is the Koran given to him by Tony Blair.

U2's Larry Mullen Jr does not have much time for Blair. He has branded him a warmonger. Paul McGuinness says that Larry and Bono are like brothers, so they are bound to have arguments. Says Bono: "That's why I'd never want to be in politics. I'd never want to be in that position where you have to make that decision, sending people into battle, knowing there will be fatalities, but believing you are saving more lives. But because of Blair and Brown, through their interventions in HIV and Aids, millions are alive who'd have been dead in other far-off places."

Later on, Tony Blair called me from Rwanda. He speaks about Bono with some devotion and certainty. Why did he give him the Koran? "We'd been talking about Islam, so it seemed like an appropriate thing to do." Was religion the thing that really connected them? "Africa connected us primarily. He is completely sincere in what he says, and people in power respect him not because he is nice to them, but because he really does understand the complexities of our business. He's not been a fair-weather friend to me. He disagreed with me strongly over Iraq."

Bono and Blair first met about 14 years ago.

"I was the leader of the opposition and it was an awards bash," says Blair. "Bono was receiving an award and for some bizarre reason he spoke in Spanish. He said of me, 'This guy wants to be prime minister. You've got to have big cojones to want to have that job.' It was a surprising introduction. But since then, he's one of the people I like and respect most in the world."

Ali comes in with a glass of white wine for me and red for him, remembering that the last time she saw me that's what I was drinking. Ali has pale skin, big dark eyes, black hair, is fond of wearing black. She is the kind of woman who amazed President Clinton when she turned up at a gala dinner that was held for him in Dublin at Trinity College because of his contribution to the Irish peace process. It was a day after she had given birth to John, their youngest son. Clinton said: "You would never have believed she had given birth just the day before."

Ali has always struck me as being strong, but with a naughty streak. Bono says: "People always think of her as so graceful and elegant and butter wouldn't melt in her mouth." How did she end up with him? "I happen to know she's messy and fun. I don't trust people who have no joy. I go back to music and people who have joy. This house has had a lot of laughs, for sure, probably more than the missus would like. But at the same time she's got more mischief in her than people think."

We talk some more about how darkness can be a sexy place, how his favourite combination is "rage and joy". And about self-consciousness.

"Some people put me on the defensive, and self-consciousness of course makes an ugly face. As soon as you put a camera on someone, if they're self-conscious it makes them ugly. I know it's happened to me. The human face changes just by the act of putting a camera in front of it."

I had to learn that — I wasn't necessarily built for rock'n'roll. There's a certain narcissism that every writer must have. But there's another kind which a performer has, and I'm not sure I have the second one. I have to work up to professional vanity. Just right now, I'm having to be a rock star again. I had to do a photoshoot the other day.

I took off my glasses, but I put on black, mad eye make-up. It was like I needed a bit of a mask to step into being a rock star because I felt a bit of a charlatan, a bit of a part-time rock star. Speak to me in a few months and the problem will be trying to put 'rock star' back in the box."

I used to think he wore dark glasses to hide some kind of inspirational fire behind his eyes. Now I think he needs them as a barrier. Does he dread the idea of a full-on stadium tour?

"Yes, I suppose leaving here, leaving this house, leaving these five people who I love so much, and the safety of the place. It's like a cave."

Do you feel more fearful about stepping outside your cave these days? "It happens every time. It's always been like this. You wouldn't be a performer if you weren't insecure. There's always that feeling: will the crowds turn up?"

We go to eat dinner, joined by Ali and the two directors of Edun, all childhood friends. Bono is at the head of the table, very much the performer now. A brilliant mimic, he treats us to his repertoire but disappears early for a conference call with LA, leaving the rest of us drinking.

I spoke to the Edge, who is in New York working on Spider-Man songs. "I've never written a waltz before," he says, feeling pleased to have risen to a challenge. How does it affect him, Bono not being there much of the time? "It works pretty well. Ideas come to him quickly. In a funny way, it may work better for us to have him coming and going. If you're working on a project for a long time you probably struggle with it, because I'm the guy working most closely with the music, initially on my own. So what I really love is being able to hear it through Bono's ears."

The Edge and Bono are that close. It's not a problem for him to hear through his ears. They choose to spend time together, even though they get to spend less time together now. "He always relishes coming back," says the Edge, "which is another good thing. U2 gave Bono a platform and the opportunity, so in many ways Bono's work is just an extension of the band. Our life informs our music. It's a natural development. The interest in civil rights was there from the start. We don't necessarily agree on every single aspect of his work. For instance, when he did his photo with George Bush, I was set against it because photos speak so loudly. There was some disquiet from U2 fans, but ultimately I think what he did turned out to be right." Has your relationship with him changed? "No. We are very close. He is my best friend."

U2's Adam Clayton doesn't worry that Bono's campaigning could ever jeopardise U2. "It's hard to see into the future, but there's no reason why Bono's activism would mean he'd give up the band. I think he couldn't campaign without the band. It's much less of a proposition for him to be a campaigner without the weight of the band behind him." Has it changed the dynamic, though? "He'd always find things to occupy himself. Back in the days when we were loading gear into the back of a Transit van and everyone was pulling together, he'd always be off finding someone to talk to rather than unload the van, and I don't think that's really changed."

January 2009. I meet Jamie Drummond, the co-founder of One. Now 38, it was Drummond who helped promote the idea called Jubilee 2000, which set about giving Africa a new start by cancelling billions of dollars of debt. He didn't know Bono, but tried to enlist his support as a way to help sell his idea to the White House. When an Irish voice came on the phone he thought it was a friend playing a joke, but Bono is prone to just picking up the phone to people when they least expect it. Drummond recalls: "We got involved in the first place because of a grass-roots jubilee movement for global justice and specifically because the great moral leaders of our time, Mandela and Tutu, asked that Bono and others who had supported the anti-apartheid campaign get back involved in the campaign for justice and against poverty. We've been working for them and that mandate ever since. When we negotiated the Millennium Challenge Account — giving more money to countries that were democracies, fighting corruption, with no linkage to the war on terror — we got Bush's support. They realised that development could be part of winning the war on terror. By the end of 2002, after negotiations at the Monterey summit, President Bush appeared in a photograph with Bono."

It was a picture that took negotiation and positioning. It's one thing to appear in a picture with Clinton when there was no war and they were like-minded individuals. But in aligning himself to Bush, Bono risked alienating people. But his view was, if you want aid you can't pick sides; you have to make everyone feel you are on the same side. How do you think he won over Bush to get this money? Was it charisma or charm? "If he had just charm but didn't have a credible grounding in policy, it would only get him so far," says Drummond. "It's charm, passion, credibility together. Often, a prime minister or

president doesn't read the briefing before meeting with a rock star because they don't expect to be challenged on policy details.

"Our goal is to get them to read the briefings on our issue in the first place; with most politicians there's an idealistic kernel, a seed, that sets you on your way. Then they start to own the issue, and Bono is reminding people why they got into politics in the first place. He goes back to that original DNA file that's in every politician. He nurtures it with a few facts and a bit of charm; a feeling like if you team with this guy you can make a disproportionate difference."

March 2009. We are in Nancy Pelosi's office, a symphony of peach and beige, as is the woman herself. She is glowing, tangibly excited to be with Bono. As speaker of the House of Representatives, she has invited chairs of various caucuses, special campaigning interest groups within the party, to discuss the aid budget. She introduces Bono. "The one good thing President Bush did was to increase the aid budget for Africa. That was the only good thing he did, and you were the transformer — you persuaded him to do that."

There follows a sometimes tense discussion about a proposed \$4 billion cut to Obama's aid budget. It's a powerful group of about 12 that includes the people who write the laws that govern foreign policy and the people who write the cheques. Jan Schakowsky, an influential Democrat from Illinois and a member of the Progressive Caucus, gets a buzz on her BlackBerry. It's a campaign e-mail from the One organisation urging her to restore the cuts, a complete coincidence. Bono sees it as a sign; not a mystic sign, but evidence that the organisation is absolutely connected.

The Senate House is stone-cold, echoey corridors. We head to Patrick Leahy, senator for Vermont. Bono says: "This man is like John Wayne." It's his birthday. Bono will give him a cupcake, since gifts of more than a few dollars have now been banned. Leahy says: "I've seen Bono win over diehard conservatives. A couple of members of our Congress have an almost dismissive attitude to Aids in Africa, yet he gets in touch with them and they get back on the programme. He has walk-in privilege to this office any time. Only Audrey Hepburn, Bono and my grandchildren have had this privilege."

Leahy first met Bono 20 years ago and they have since worked on various humanitarian issues. He is twinkly-eyed, all passion and heart. No surprise that Bono connected with him.

April 2009. Bono and I are in a car on the way to Dulles airport, Washington, DC. He's wearing jeans, a purple shirt, a black tie undone, pink lenses and a grey furry coat. He smells expensive and seductive, like a wooden cigar box.

The meetings in Washington have been partly tense, partly euphoric. There is a threat that the aid budget will be decreased, but Pelosi thinks she'll be able to make it all right. Everybody I have talked to has applauded Bono for his knowledge and charm. The common thread is that he remembers everything about them: their birthdays, their children's birthdays. His brain for detail is exemplary. How come?

"When I was very young I used to play chess and I was good at it. I can learn useless minutiae, but actually I can forget my way home, or I've been known after the tour is long over to come downstairs and get in the back of my own car. But you remember what's important to you."

I remember asking Seamus Heaney's wife how did he remember so many other people's poems and she said, 'Words are very important to him.' "

I tell him that I have been thinking about his mother and I find it strange that he can remember so many inane details, so many facts, but almost nothing about her. Is that because he has to live in the present? "Maybe, that might be the answer. And that there is only a certain amount of real estate. The brain is no different to the body. A couple of press-ups and a few weights and it can reshape. My curiosity in all these different directions has been a boot camp for my brain. People who I'd have thought of as much faster on their feet, you suddenly seem to jog past after these kind of gruelling days. Every meeting is a monkey puzzle."

Are your memories of losing your mother so painful that if you carried them with you, you think it would slow you down? "Are you suggesting I have baggage?" I tell him I've been puzzling about it for weeks. I feel I know as much about his mother as he does. He laughs, not nervously or self-consciously, but tells me in all his memories that she's laughing. "Yes, maybe it is about not wanting to slow down. With U2, we don't think about an album as soon as we finish it: we're on to the next thing."

This fits in with the idea that he can't bear people who moan. "I can't stand cranks and whingers. My favourite quality is lack of self-pity. I really like people who have none. I know people with just a tiny fragment of difficulty and they spend the rest of their life walking with a limp. And I don't think I've had much to overcome in my life — the odd black eye, the odd broken tooth." What about a broken heart? "Heart? You only know you have a heart when it's broken. When you are a singer in a band you stick your neck out for a living, you get used to knocks. And I've noticed that the spleen and ire of your enemy usually take them out, not you, so you don't have to do anything, almost. There is nothing more attractive than energy moving forward. Our band has it, our movement has it? It's exciting to be on that train."

He so often references lioness energy as being powerful and dangerous. Does he see Ali as a lioness? "Very much so. Our relationship has changed a lot. For a while I thought I was in charge, I was the hunter-protector. A few years ago it became clear somebody else was in charge, and I feel I hold on a lot tighter to her than she does to me, and that slightly bothers me. She's so independent and I sometimes wish she wasn't."

At the airport we say goodbye. I've been following him around for so long it feels like a sad separation. Everybody whose life he moves in feels they have rights over him, that he's their special friend. He may know nothing about this. Could Clinton and Bush, Blair, Obama, the Polish Pope, Frank Sinatra, all feel this connection? If you feel you own a piece of him, you also feel an obligation to him. And that's how he does it

U2 play Croke Park, Dublin, on July 24, 25, 27; Wembley Stadium, London, August 14, 15; Hampden Park, Glasgow, August 18; Don Valley Stadium, Sheffield, August 20; Millennium Stadium, Cardiff, August 22. Visit www.U2.com

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