

## Bono

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



U2's 2002 Super Bowl performance is the most memorable and inspiring half-time show ever. I will never forget that performance. U2 insisted on doing the production live rather than lip-synching as most half-time acts do. The band began their set with Bono walking through the crowd singing "Beautiful Day," a song about guarded hope and optimism, and then the names of all the victims who had died on 9/11 scrolled up the screen. Then U2 performed "Where the Streets Have No Name." Bono finished the song opening his jacket displaying the American flag. It was a grand gesture of extraordinary communion; a gesture of Bono's sense of the dramatic and it was well received by all Americans. This half-time performance was astounding. You could feel Bono's energy and passion as well as his flair for the dramatic right through the TV. This showed me how far in front this Irish rock group was.

Bono is the energetic front man and lead singer of the Irish rock band U2. But unlike most entertainers, Bono maintains an extremely high political visibility. He seems to be everywhere. At a tribute concert for victims of 9/11; performing in a Kyiv subway station; getting out the vote before a Northern Ireland election; in an Ethiopian village; on the cover of news magazines; and on all sorts of award shows. Pictures of him on stage competed with picture of him with Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, George Bush, the President of Brazil, and the Pope, to name a few; stories about Bono's work at relieving world debt or tackling the AIDS epidemic seemed more common than album or concert reviews. Bono was named a "Person of the Year" by *Time* magazine in 2005, and Queen Elizabeth II made him an honorary knight in 2007. He is the only rock musician who was nominated for an Oscar, a Grammy, a Golden Globe, and the Nobel Peace Prize.

As recently as September 29, 2023, U2 moved to Las Vegas as part of their three-month residency performing concerts at the high-tech venue called the Sphere celebrating their 1991 album *Achtung Baby*.

There are several stories as to the origin of Bono's name, the most common being that it was from the word's *bono vox*, meaning Latin for "good voice." But the more mundane truth is that he and his friends used to hang around a store on O'Connell Street that sold "BonoVox" hearing aids. And boys being boys, the name looked good, and so they christened the man Bono – after a brand of hearing aids.

Bono was born Paul David Hewson in 1960, in a poor North Dublin neighborhood of Ballymun. His was a family of mixed religions; his father was Catholic, and his mother was Church of Ireland, and in this way, Bono avoided the common religious prejudices that many of his contemporaries had inherited. Bono developed a more universal sense of religion – or spirituality – which plays an exceptionally large role in the lyrics he writes for his music.

In 1972, Bono enrolled in Mount Temple School. This was Dublin's first comprehensive, coeducational, and nondenominational school. When Bono was fourteen, his mother died. Her death was extremely hard on Bono, as would be expected, but he reacted in two opposite ways: he became rebellious and he became religious. The Mount Temple School provided the perfect haven for him at the time. There he met those people who would stay with him for the rest of his life: Alison Stewart, who would become his wife, and his classmates, who would become U2.

In 1976, Bono answered an ad posted on a message board by Larry Mullen, who was looking for people wanting to form a band. And with two other fellows from school, Dave Evans and Adam Clayton, Bono went to see what it was about. While Bono claimed he could play guitar – he could barely – the band liked his flair for management and his comfort in assuming a particular stage persona. And so, they made him their lead singer and front man. All the while, as the band was developing, Bono was writing lyrics. He had long written poetry, and had impressed the band from the beginning, so they considered him a songwriter. At first the songs were heavily laced with religion; then, they veered into the typical boy-girl adolescent love genre of pop music; but then suddenly they became more intense in personal feeling, revealing the beginnings of Bono's global humanism and spiritual depth. He was obviously profoundly influenced by Martin Luther King Jr.

Americans might struggle to believe the reaction they get when they ask an Irish person about Bono. Outside of Ireland, Bono is known simply as one of the world's greatest living rockstars. In Ireland, the man born Paul David Hewson has a different reputation. There was a recent article written "Where the streets have no statues: why do the Irish hate U2?" If another country produced the biggest guitar band in the world, in a country of just 5 million, you would expect airports to be named after them. But walk around the musicians' home city of Dublin and you will barely see an image of Bono, The Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen Jr. There is no major mural solely dedicated to the group. The phrase 'Bono is a pox' is graffitied onto the stalls of so many bathroom walls that "manufacturers might as well just carve it in themselves and save the rest of us some time," one person said.

The Irish nations dislike for Bono (or U2 in general) is classic Irish begrudgery – the phenomenon that Irish people are predisposed to feel envy and resentment towards those who achieve a certain level of success. The biggest issue that dogs the band is their tax status arrangement. In 2006, U2 moved part of their business to the Netherlands, where the tax rate on royalty earnings is more favorable for artists. Ireland was hurt by the global 2008 financial crash. Communities were eroded by austerity, while the band's reputation as "tax dodgers" persisted. Bono was seen as part of that cohort of wealthy people who avoid paying tax in Ireland to support the hospitals, roads, and other essential public services but enjoy the fruits of living there.

Love him or hate him, Bono fits perfectly well in the new and evolving Ireland of today. He is lyrical and has the Irish way with language. He is full of practical and engaged spirituality. He is political and willing to fight for the issue he believes in. He is musical and energetic and full of life. And more than anything else he represents, on an international platform, the New Ireland: vigorous, cosmopolitan, ballsy, committed, and proud.