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Music Review: U2, *The Joshua Tree* and Two Contrary States of Faith

**“The Joshua Tree Thirtieth Anniversary Tour”,
Twickenham Stadium, GB: Sunday, 9 July 2017**

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark the will of some one and then others,
who said I need to see what’s on the other side.
I know there’s something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Elizabeth Alexander, “Praise Song for the Day”

So the hands that build
Can also pull down
The hands of love

U2, “Exit”

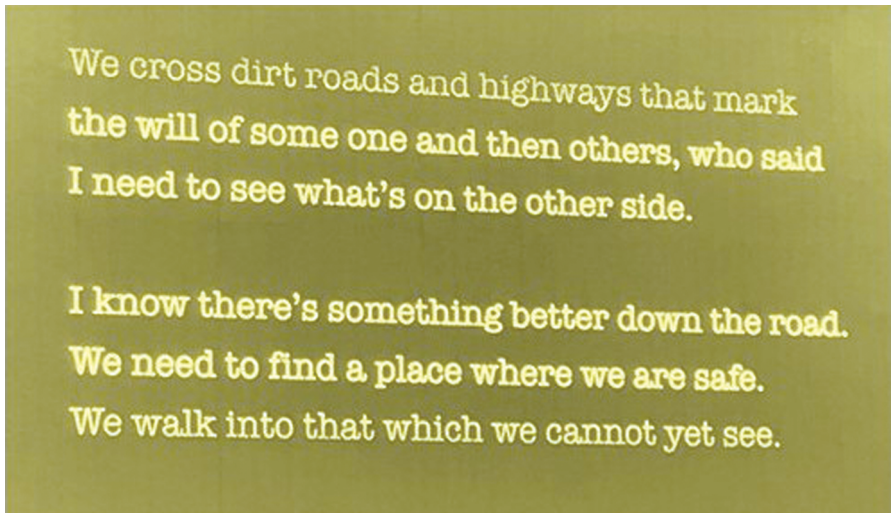


Fig. 1 “Praise Song for the Day” on screen, Twickenham, 9 July 2017.

BREAKING THROUGH

The Joshua Tree (1987) is a record of U2's discovery of America and, in a real sense, the Thirtieth Anniversary Tour was a road trip from the 1980s rerun three decades later. It began in Vancouver on 12 May 2017 and concluded in Sao Paolo on 25 October 2017. The centrepiece of each show featured the band playing *The Joshua Tree* (1987), frequently described as U2's "breakthrough" album, in order and in its entirety.

The concerts most often began with four songs released before *The Joshua Tree*: "Sunday Bloody Sunday", "New Year's Day", "Bad" and "Pride". These were followed by the eleven tracks of *The Joshua Tree*¹ and two encores (or one extended encore) including popular songs from the band's more recent work and, as the tour progressed, some tracks from their next album, *Songs of Experience* (2017).

These stadium concerts were presented in a relatively simple fashion over two stages within each amphitheatre and against the backdrop of a large LCD screen. The B-stage, in the shape of a Joshua tree cactus, extended into the audience, whilst the main stage provided the setting for *The Joshua Tree* songs, played against vivid images on the screen. This layout contrasted with U2's earlier arena tour for *Songs of Innocence* (2014), which had an innovative screen that extended far into the auditorium within which the band could stand and play, as well as move to the B-stage.

I saw the "Joshua Tree Tour" at Twickenham Stadium on the band's second London date on Sunday, 9 July 2017. The following are reflections on that concert (which is available online)² informed by observations from other commentators on the tour.

Elements in the show had clear religious aspects. Examples from the concert I attended include: an extract from The Revd. Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech was given at the conclusion of "Pride"; at the end of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" Bono seemed to give one of his regular references to making the show "a church";³ there were biblical references such as "Jacob wrestled the angel and the angel was overcome" in "Bullet The Blue Sky" and the use of a Salvation Army band in "Red Hill Mining Town". There were numerous other such references, together with potentially religious tropes that are open to interpretation and debate.

1 Songs of the record are: "Where The Streets Have No Name", "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For", "With Or Without You", "Bullet The Blue Sky", "Running To Stand Still", "Red Hill Mining Town", "In God's Country", "Trip Through Your Wires", "One Tree Hill", "Exit", "Mothers Of The Disappeared".

2 Part 1 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtSaJvyYJCE> and Part 2 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWlypubmHn8> [accessed 16 January 2017].

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtSaJvyYJCE>, (00:34:40) [accessed 14 November 2017].

KUMBAYA?

As we might imagine, the @U2 fansite (<https://www.atu2.com/>) has given extensive coverage to the tour, itemising the songs played, the celebrities who attended the shows and comments about what took place. On 5 November 2017 the site published “Final Thoughts on *The Joshua Tree Tour 2017*” from @U2 staff. Many were complimentary, but Sherry Lawrence, a longstanding fan and contributor to the site, offered this sharp critique:

U2 had the ability to make a more compelling statement about the state of world affairs, and they chose not to. Instead, their inclusive “message of love” did little to change hearts and minds. This is why *The Joshua Tree 2017 Tour* will rank below PopMart for me. The band played it safe and did not take a risk. As I said on a recent podcast, this tour felt like a speed bump to *Songs of Experience*, and I hope the band regains its desire to be the proven risk takers they have been for decades. “Kumbaya” this tour was, and I expected more from them.⁴

Personally, I have some sympathy with Lawrence’s view and it articulates my own fear ahead of the show I attended. In an interview before the tour, U2 bassist Adam Clayton was quoted as saying, “*The Joshua Tree* seemed to in some ways mirror the changes that were happening in the world during the Thatcher/Reagan period. It seems like we’ve kind of come full circle and we’re back there with a different cast of characters.”⁵ Would this show be anything more than a rendition of Kumbaya?

“EXIT”

For me the track which best achieved that aim of holding up a mirror from the 1980s was “Exit”, the penultimate song on *The Joshua Tree* album. The Twickenham performance was an apocalyptic reclamation of a song that had been mothballed, for it had not been played since 1989.⁶ It is interesting to view that performance alongside its live-TV debut in 1987, when Bono introduced it as “a song about a religious man, a fanatic, who gets into his head the idea he calls ‘the hands of love’”.⁷

On the Wikipedia page for “Exit”, David Werther compares it to a track from U2’s follow-up studio album *Achtung Baby* (1991). “Until the End of the World” places listeners in the position of Judas Iscariot, and Werther notes: “‘Exit’ evokes feelings of fear, fear of losing control, giving into one’s dark side,

4 @U2 Staff 2017.

5 Mojo Staff 2017.

6 See the performance of “Exit” at Twickenham, 9 July 2017, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NB1EgOJ8JRo>.

7 See the first broadcast of “Exit” in 1987 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kl9uSNoXZg> [accessed 21 November 2017].

perhaps even taking one's life", contrasting it to the "waves of regret" experienced by Judas.⁸ The juxtaposition of Judas and Jesus from the latter song is often enacted in performance as a kind of duel played out between Bono and The Edge.

The connection with "Until the End of the World" is alluded to at a point just under three minutes into "Exit" at Twickenham, when Bono holds out his hand to The Edge in a way that is similar to their Judas/Jesus interaction.⁹ The dramatic connection is even clearer in the Dublin performance, where the two more clearly re-enact the characters of Jesus and Judas from "Until the End of the World".¹⁰

TWO CONTRARY STATES OF FAITH (1)

The idea of two contrary states of the human soul enters the work of U2 through their use of William Blake's volume of poems entitled *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* of 1794. As already noted *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are the titles of complimentary U2 albums released either side of the "Joshua Tree Tour", and I would contend that their reimagining of "Exit" with its dichotomy between the constructive and destructive sides of faith is making a strong statement about the positive and negative aspects of religion. But arguably this song is not just about faith and religion – it is also about faith and politics.

There is a sense in which in 2017 the North American part of the road trip started with the Obama presidency and concluded with the election of Donald Trump. The text to Elizabeth Alexander's poem "Praise Song for the Day", which was read at the 2009 Obama presidential inauguration, appears on the LCD screen before the show and a con man with the surname Trump appears at the start of the momentous rendition of "Exit". A clip from the 1958 CBS Western TV series *Trackdown* is played, showing a snake-oil merchant named Trump visiting a town and promising to build a wall, which stirs up disagreement between the townsfolk. As the song draws to a conclusion, Bono repeatedly urges the audience, "hold out your hand, hold out your hand". What could this call signify? I argue that it works at a number of levels. First, it is a reflection of the TV evangelists who were such a feature of American culture in the 1980s when *The Joshua Tree* was recorded and remain a significant factor now. Second, like Bono and The Edge playing Judas and Jesus in "Exit", the call to hold out hands could also be looking ahead to the broader critique of TV culture

8 Exit (U2 Song) 2018.

9 Starting at 2 minutes, 55 seconds in the recording of the Twickenham concert.

10 See the recording at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFWc8QAYmwg>, (00:02:42–00:05:10) [accessed 21 November 2017].

from the follow-up album *Achtung Baby*. And third, it could be referencing the screens of contemporary culture and the power of social media, particularly as harnessed by contemporary conman Trump and his use of media to “sell” his wall. How does Trump persuade townsfolk in 2017? The answer: with his hand – particularly through his tweeting.

Thus “Exit” contrasts not only two contrary states of faith in religion (Judas/Jesus) but also two contrary states of faith in US politics (Obama/Trump) which are revealed in “Praise Song for the Day” and the call to us to hold out our hands. This is a call that draws us into the pre-existing world of mainstream media and into the new world (created since *Achtung Baby*) of social media.

TWO CONTRARY STATES OF FAITH (2)

One tantalising footnote to William Blake’s two contrary states of the human soul and to specifically to the show at Twickenham on 9 July 2017 is that the concert was attended by Brian Eno. He was one of the producers for *The Joshua Tree* and was thanked fulsomely from the stage by Bono. Eno expressed a version of his own two contrary states of faith in an interview from 2007. There he described himself as an “evangelical atheist” and noted that religion has some positives, including giving us a chance to surrender: “What religion says to you essentially is that you’re not in control. Now, that’s a very liberating idea [...] everything else in a consumer society is trying to say, ‘You’re in control’ [...] whereas the message of Gospel music is ‘surrender.’”¹¹ In other words, it is possible to be an atheist but yet see religious faith as having value – thus, two contrary states of faith.

HEAR US COMING LORD?

The encore for the Twickenham show I attended comprised six songs: “Miss Sarajevo”, “Beautiful Day”, “Elevation”, “Vertigo”, “Mysterious Ways” and “Ultraviolet” and closed out with “One” from *Achtung Baby*. On the face of it that final track, titled as a singularity, seems the obverse of “two contrary states of faith”. However, a quote from Bono on that song’s Wikipedia page suggests that even “One” has an inherent dichotomy. He is quoted as saying:

There was melancholy about it but there was also strength. “One” is not about oneness, it’s about difference. It’s not the old hippie idea of “let’s all live together.” It is a much more punk rock concept. It’s anti-romantic: “we are one but not the same. We get to carry each other.” It’s a reminder that we have no choice. I’m still disappointed when people hear the chorus line as “got to” rather than “we get to carry

11 Eno 2017.

each other” ... The song is a bit twisted, which is why I could never figure out why people wanted it at their weddings. I have certainly met a hundred people who’ve had it at their weddings. I tell them, “Are you mad? It’s a song about splitting up.”¹²

It is clear from the titles of the albums *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* that William Blake’s poetic imagination and his two contrary states of the human soul are shaping U2’s own collective artistic vision in the second decade of the 21st century. Yet, it is arguable that in songs such as “Exit”, “Until the End of the World” and “One” a similar dynamic was already in play in both U2’s lyrics and their performance. In this respect the “Joshua Tree Thirtieth Anniversary Tour” was not an expression of “Kumbaya” but a re-envisaging of the two contrary states of religious faith and of political faith that have consistently informed U2’s music.

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¹² “One” (U2 Song) 2018.