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U2: Lyrical Messages Beyond Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll in America During the 1980s

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David Corio, *U2*, February 4, 1980, Giclée Print, Rockarchive Edition 100, <https://www.rockarchive.com/prints/u/u2-ut007dc>

Intro:

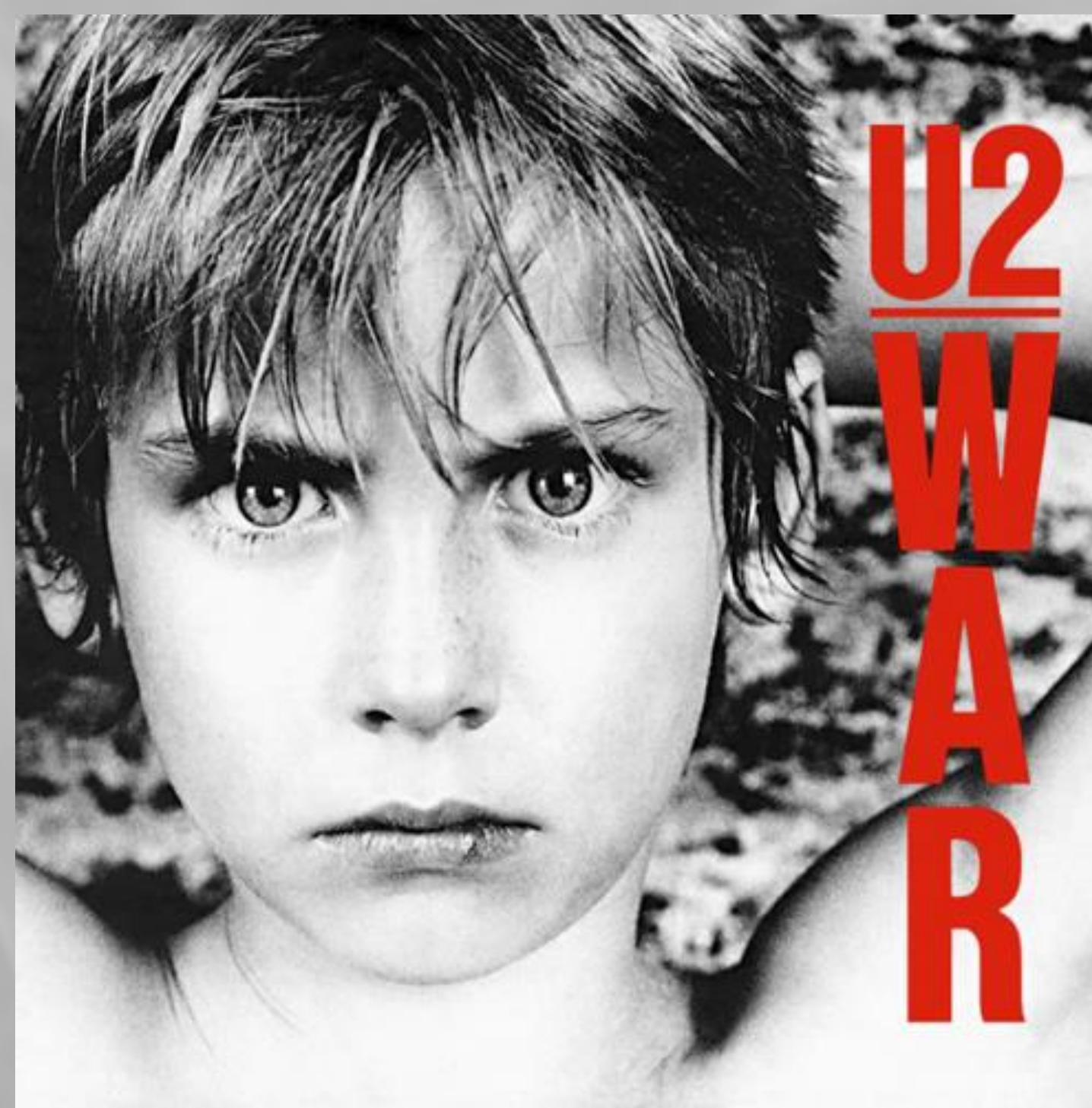
The 1980s was arguably one of the most important decades for U2, and they used these years to raise awareness to ongoing global issues. Through their music and concerts, U2 addressed issues regarding the sad, uninviting landscapes of modern cities, drug abuse and hopelessness, as well as war and famine overseas. They also explored the relationships between the band and their audience, the emigration of people out of Ireland; belonging to a generation who were “waking up” to what was happening around the world. U2 used their music to promote activism differently than the stereotypical rock’n’roll bands of the 1980s. This study focuses on the lyrical messages within U2’s songs, the reason they were written, and the effects they had on their fans during the 1980s. U2 hoped to raise awareness and promote change through their music. To bring a face to the ongoing issues happening globally. They used America as one of their biggest stages.

Early Years:

U2 formed in Dublin Ireland in 1976, consisting of singer Paul David Hewson (Bono), guitarist David Howell Evans (The Edge), drummer Larry Mullen Jr., and bassist Adam Clayton. After signing with Island Records in 1980, the company allowed the band to have an unusual amount of creative independence. This creative independence was crucial in allowing U2 to raise awareness and advocate for change through their music. Following the release of their first album, *Boy* (Oct. 1980), U2 began their touring journey in America. They were determined in conquering America on a business front and to make an expression of their own.

Political Climate:

Ireland during the 1970s was characterized as dreary, oppressive, and bereft of hope. Politically, it was ravaged by nationwide inflation, endless public-sector strikes, high unemployment, and high emigration. Dublin, where the band formed, was considered the epicenter of Ireland’s crisis, specifically, the inner city. In the North, major political struggles such as religious sects being divided, soldiers patrolling the streets, and people being tortured led many young people to turn to hard drugs in an effort to escape. America during the 1980s was characterized by pinched privatism, smug selfishness, glib pragmatism, grim status consciousness, greed masking as taste, and brutal superficiality.



Ian Finlay, *U2 – War*, 1983, Cover Art Photograph, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/u2-album-covers-explained/>

Lyrical Messages:

Three of the most influential albums U2 has written, produced, and released during the 1980s include *War* (1983), *The Unforgettable Fire* (1984), and *The Joshua Tree* (1987). *War* could be viewed as one of the band’s first overtly political albums because of songs like “Sunday Bloody Sunday” which was written as a response to an incident in Northern Ireland, Bloody Sunday. “New Year’s Day” is also featured on the album, inspired by the Polish Solidarity movement. The album deals with the human effects of war, most notably, suffering, loss, and the reminder of mortality during wartime. *The Unforgettable Fire* album title and song lyrics were inspired by an art exhibit created by survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. The album features songs like “Pride (In the Name of Love)” and “MLK”, which were written as tributes to Martin Luther King Jr and Malcom X. It also features “Bad”, written about heroin addiction, referring to the heroin addiction outbreak in Ireland during the 1980s. *The Joshua Tree* album was concerned with the state of America, personal tragedy, political upheaval, and Bono’s experiences volunteering in South Africa. This album features the song “Bullet the Blue Sky”, a political song condemning US foreign policy for causing unrest in Central America in the 1980s. These three albums easily demonstrate the lyrical influence current and past historical events had on U2’s music.

Ideas of Rock’n’Roll:

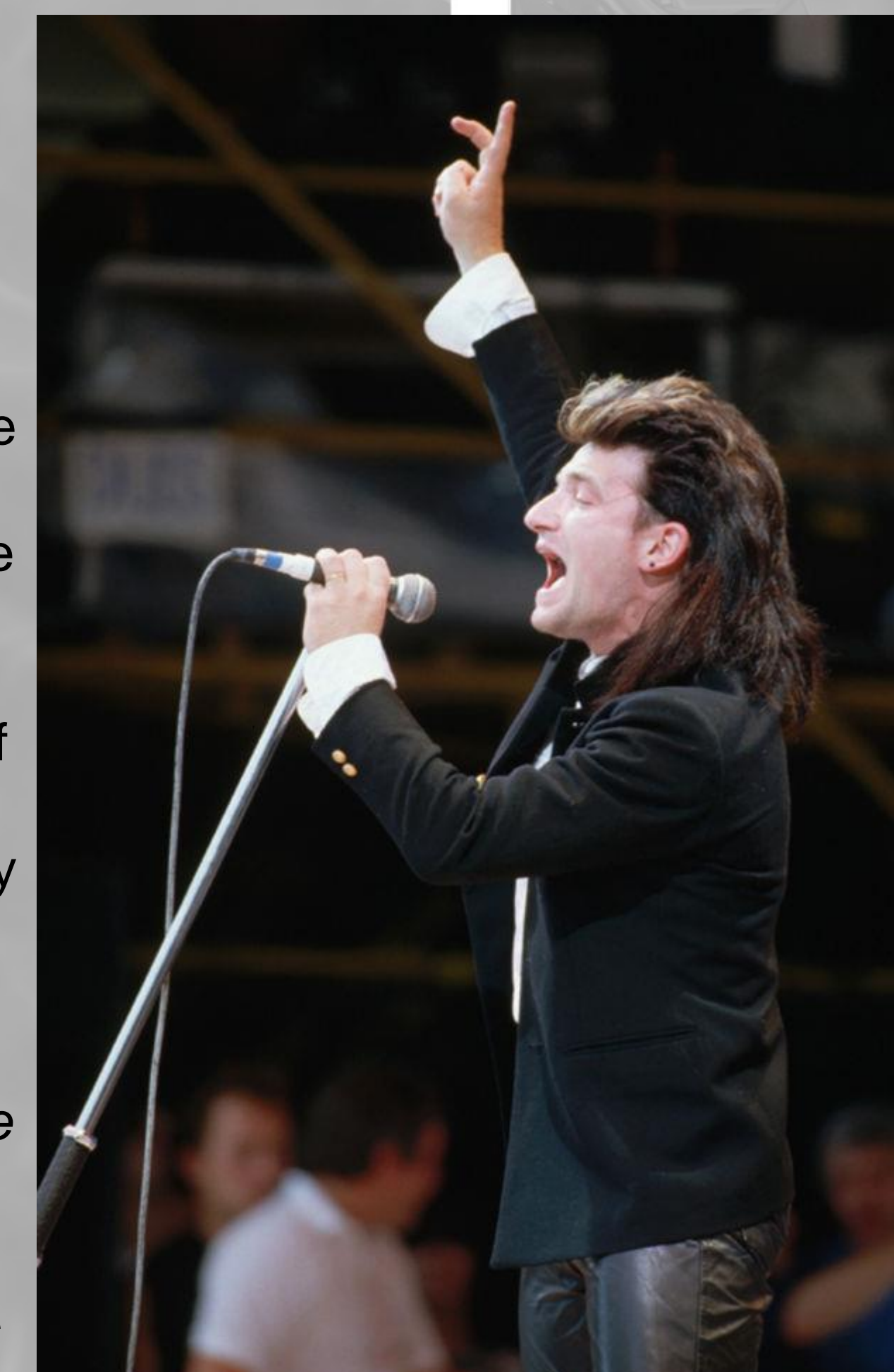
Throughout the 1980s, rock’n’roll was closely associated with sex, drugs, and drinking. Most members of the band, from their formation, did not partake in these activities, specifically Bono and The Edge. They relied on their faith and being devout Christians to keep them away from those activities. In regard to the music scene during the 1980s, marketing became an essential component of an artist’s success. Being a rock’n’roll star became a job and true to the 80s ethic. U2 participated in marketing but aimed to produce a different kind of message through their musical creations and the selling of their image.

Philanthropy of Bono & the Band:

U2 has had unique success through philanthropy that also offers lessons to other activists. Bono has always been inspired by activists like Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., both of whom practiced and employed nonviolent resistance, inspired and led movements for civil rights, and promoted freedom. Bono claims to have grown up with a sort of violence in him, that he uses in his songwriting to call for action and raise awareness, in a peaceful way. In terms of writing songs, U2 has always had the notion to write what they believe in. Through the work of Bono, he was able to achieve more by inserting himself in the political world rather than encouraging people to form mass protests in the streets. U2 encourages their fans to think for themselves, through their music.

Live Aid:

On July 13th, 1985, U2 performed at a dual-venue benefit concert called Live Aid. This concert was held to help raise further funds for relief and increase awareness of the 1983-1985 famine in Ethiopia. Bono decided to use their twelve-minute set to sing one of their hit songs from *The Unforgettable Fire*, “Bad”, and also to interact with the crowd while he sang. Playing for Live Aid was a good way for U2 to show their commitment to a new era of responsibility for rock and roll. U2 filled this responsibility by using these benefit concerts to not only try and help raise money, but to promote their music and what they believe in, in terms of needing the world to change.



U2, Bono at Live Aid, July 13, 1985, <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/750834569108076792/>

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