

21: the heart of the matter

A simple envelope, with the return address from New York, mingled with a consortium of junk mail and bills. I knew exactly what was inside, my U2 ticket pre-sale paperwork from Propaganda for the upcoming tour supporting *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. Naturally, I opened the envelope, before the bills, and scanned the ticket order form for the Chicago dates. My fan club membership allowed me first right of refusal for concert tickets. I grabbed a pen and filled out my request for general admission tickets, a new option, making each show an “intimate club feel” by eliminating physical seats on the arena floor and allowing everyone to have an opportunity to be in the front row. I recalled the disaster from my childhood, in the late seventies, when The Who tried a similar ticket idea in Cincinnati. Eleven fans were crushed to death. I had to have some belief U2 wouldn't repeat the same mistake. I took the risk and ordered a pair of what would become the golden tickets to the upcoming U2 tour aptly titled Elevation.

I'm a Fan - 202

Nicholas, in the throws of finishing law school in Boston, received the same envelope, but didn't succumb to the general admission idea. His preference was to be higher up in the stands. Neither Nick nor I rested upon our Propaganda laurels. Thanks to our PopMart Tour fiasco, we both knew we needed to go to the public sale just to be safe. Over the coming days, we chatted strategy via e-mail and once we heard the public sale dates, we put our separate plans into action. Mine was to go stand in line at our local grocery store at eight o'clock in the morning. Unlike the old days of buying tickets for shows, the spot where you stood in line today didn't determine your ticket fate. Instead, the new way was to get a line number, upon arrival, and wait. Half an hour before tickets went on sale, a random number was drawn by the store manager. Said number would represent the first person in line and everyone else would have to fall behind. As always, my luck would again relegate me to the back of the procession. By the time I got to the ticket machine, my only options were scattered seats in the nosebleed sections. Without hesitation, I took what I could get.

Shortly after my purchase, U2's first show sold out. An announcement of a second show followed soon after. I shuffled back in line and bought tickets to the added show, lower and closer to the stage. Before the end of the hour, U2 had sold out four nights at the United Center. I had tickets to three of them. It sounds selfish, yet I really wanted to see my band on multiple nights because I blew off the third night of PopMart at Soldier Field to see Lyle Lovett at Ravinia with mom. This time, I had an opportunity to see U2 for the full stand. It was expensive, but I had no worries, the charges for these tickets were on my credit card and the bill wouldn't arrive for another month.

After waging the ticket sale war on limited sleep and a lot of caffeine, I collapsed on my couch and dialed Nicholas in Boston.

“Nick? It’s Eric.”

“Oh, hey, mom’s on the other line. Let me say good-bye to her,” he said. There was a click. I waited. A minute later, Nick came back on the line.

“What did you score for Boston?” I asked.

“Well, I got seats in the Mezzanine section at half court opening night. On the second night, I’m in the 20th row and the third night, I’m behind the stage. Plus, whatever Propaganda sends me.”

“Really? You didn’t get any floor seats?”

“No, I’m not interested in them.”

“Why not?”

“They just don’t appeal to me. I hate standing at shows.”

“You’ll be standing no matter where you have seats in the arena you moron,” I said, laughingly.

“I’ll at least have a seat to park my ass on if I need to fart knocker,” he fired back and laughed.

“Well cool. Looks like we’re going to see the boys ten days apart in our fair cities.”

“Yeah, it’ll be cool, but you won’t believe this, Eric.” A long pause came from the other end of the phone. “My mom got us tickets to opening night in Fort Lauderdale!” Nick shouted through the phone.

“Nick, you’re shittin’ me. Opening night of the Elevation Tour in America? In Fort Lauderdale? Tell me you’re pulling my leg?”

Nick then proceeded to tell me the story about how his mother, my Aunt Bev, was on the phone with Ticketmaster. She immediately got through for the Fort Lauderdale show, but was put on hold for forty minutes. When a sales rep finally returned to the call, she asked why Bev was still on the phone. My aunt replied by explaining that she was waiting for the confirmation

number, but the woman never came back. Ticketmaster double-checked the credit card and seats. Sure enough, the order was in a hold state and never processed. The sales lady reprocessed the tickets. I was shocked.

“Fuck yes!!!!!! We’re seeing U2 on opening fucking night!” I shouted with the phone away from my mouth and sinking into my couch while scissor kicking in the air like a little girl. I came back to the line. “That my friend is incredible. I can’t believe your mom had the will to stay on the phone for forty minutes, waiting for someone to answer.”

“Yeah, can you believe it?” Nick asked with excitement.

“I’m shitting bricks. This cannot be true,” I replied.

“It’s true. Trust me. Mom called about ten minutes after I got home from the sale at Tower Records with the news.”

“Dude!! This is so cool because my mom, your Aunt Sharon, lives in Miami. Even better, mom’s best friend Emily lives about twenty minutes away from the arena in Fort Lauderdale. I’m very sure Emily will let us stay with her and her husband on the night of the show.”

“No shit! Amazing. Cannot believe our luck.”

“Yeah this is going to rock. I’ll call mom and let her know we are coming. Oh, and make flight arrangements. When’s the last time you saw my mom, Nick?”

“Aunt Sharon? Wow, I think it was grandpa’s eightieth birthday. No, it was the summer of PopMart in ‘97. So, four years ago.”

“Been a while. Well listen, I’m going to call her but first, I’ll ring your mom. Will you be out on spring break when we meet up in Miami?”

“Hell yeah! The show lands on the second weekend of break!”

“Awesome, I cannot believe we are going to opening night.”

“Listen, I gotta split. Homework beckons me! Love you!” Nick replied.

"Love you too. Let's stay in touch via e-mail."

I called my aunt to confirm Nick's story. She told me the account in exact detail, including what music was playing in the background and how many times the recorded message of upgrading her Ticketmaster account was played.

"Drove me nuts, however, I had to stay on the line, Eric. I had given them everything they needed and then they left me," Aunt Bev said.

"I cannot believe they didn't come back to the phone with the confirmation number."

"Can you believe it? Christ! They gave me your seat information and said, 'be right back with the confirmation number.'"

"You have the patience of a saint. Did you ever fear the line would go dead?"

"Yeah, it crossed my mind, shit."

"So, the wait was how long?"

"Forty-minutes or so. Poor girl got on as sweet as can be to help me. Here's little old Beverly from Vinton, Iowa left out in the cold. I wasn't going to give up on my boys for U2. No way."

"I'm so shocked you took the time to try to get us tickets. Now, I need to ring my mom," I said, as my hand was covering my yawn.

"She's going to be so excited to see the two of you. Cryin' out loud, I think it's been five years since she's seen Nick."

"Actually, it's been four years and I think you're right, mom will love seeing us boys."

"Well say hello to her. I love her dearly. So great to see her that summer Nick and I came for that U2 concert in Chicago. Hopefully, you two can come to the farm sometime. Love ya, Love ya, Love ya!"

I hung up the phone.

Five weeks after the public sale and a few days ahead of Nicholas, I landed at the Miami International Airport. I was on

vacation and euphoric. A week off from the office, to see my mom, my cousin and our favorite band, was a much-needed break from programming in HTML and meeting production deadlines. Those few days before Nick's arrival was important to me. I needed to reconnect with mom after Monica and I split five months prior. Mom watched my relationship with Monica begin and then fall apart as she was on sabbatical, in Rogers Park, just a stone's throw from my apartment the previous year. She met Monica several times, knowing we had issues, yet played it neutral.

In fact, one of the greatest memories I have with my mom, on her sabbatical leave, was a conversation we had in her car after a matinee movie shortly before her departure back to Miami. For two hours, we sat in her car outside my apartment and talked about life. She spoke freely about all of her relationships, including those with dad, Stefano and her current boyfriend. She understood the trials and tribulations I was going through and knew I was going to have to end the relationship with Monica. Mom wasn't one to directly interfere with my life, but stayed on the sidelines with suggestions. She knew I was hurting and left it up to me to make the decision to cut it off. It was the greatest mom and I time I ever had.

Upon Nick's arrival at Miami International, we picked up a convertible and headed to South Beach blaring *Mysterious Ways* out of our rented car's speakers. Nick had never been to Miami before and you could tell as his eyeballs feasted on all of the hotties down on spring break. It was great to be together in the Florida sun and away from the cold climates we had escaped from. Nick and I slowly made our way to the beach where we unrolled our towels. Next to us were four middle-aged married men drinking beer and hitting on the college girls surrounding us in all directions, only to be busted by one of their daughters

later when she arrived back from the surf. It was hilarious and just the comedy Nick and I needed to bond for the weekend.

While we took in beach life, we steeped ourselves in conversations about life. Nick was headed from Harvard Law to a clerkship in Minnesota. He was a studious undergrad at Iowa, however, with grad school coming to a close, he was at a crossroads in a newfound relationship with a gal he met on a flight back from Chicago a semester prior. He knew it wouldn't last past the U2 shows in Boston because she had no intention of moving with him from the safety of her city, Boston. As the conversation was about relationships, Nick was right, I needed to move on from Monica. Hanging out on the beach together, and seeing U2 opening night, validated my departure from the relationship he witnessed several months back.

When I woke up the following morning, ready for the coming evening with U2, Mom made a simple breakfast of toast, coffee and fruit for us. It was typical for Nick to rise later. I, however, took in the Florida morning with mom on the patio. The grass was still wet with dew as the radio blared NPR from the open kitchen window. It was comfortable as summer's humidity had yet to blanket South Florida. When Nick rose, he made himself a bowl of cereal and packed his bag for the next leg of our journey to Fort Lauderdale where I would introduce him to Emily, one of mom's old grad students, and her husband Horace, our gracious hosts for the night.

Emily, like my mom, was an English professor and collaborated with mom on several published pieces. Horace taught film theory and knew of our U2 obsession while still willing to open his doors to us. It had been a few years since I had last seen them. Horace and Emily heard a lot of things about my cousin, Nick, including his love for the *Star Wars* films. Nick hit it off with them during our porch-side introduction, as the halo of ex-

citement around us was intoxicating. Our “inn keepers” basked in our enthusiasm. After our introductions, we soon departed for the National Car Rental Center where the concert was happening.

As the venue loomed in front of us, the air was heavy with excitement. It was U2. It was South Florida. It was opening night of the Elevation Tour! As we slowly moved into our parking spot and closed the roof of our convertible, we absorbed the spectacle. Our neighbor’s SUV was cranking various U2 tunes. The buzz engulfed us, which encouraged Nick to purchase one hundred fifty dollars worth of U2 merch before we sat down in our second level seats. I waited. The need to buy my U2 schwag before the show was never my *modus operandi*. Instead, I wanted to get seated as I hungered to see the new stage with the center cut out. Nick wasn’t concerned. He was still reviewing the merch he wanted to buy while figuring out how to pack all of it into his suitcase. I bought a beer to calm my nerves.

“Nick, you’re going to see them in Boston. You don’t need to buy everything here,” I said, as I swigged my beer.

“I know. I’m just taking stock. I want to get a poster in case they run out after the show.”

“Understandable, but really, do you need every shirt and trinket like you did on PopMart?”

“Yeah, I’m sure I’ll buy all of them.”

“When you get old, will you have a U2 shrine in your house, along with all of your “Star Wars” shit, and charge me an entry fee?” I laughed.

“Hell yeah. Well, you’re family so I may give you the senior, family discount.”

“Oh, thanks, fucker.”

A few moments later, we finally arrived to our seats. The stage was pretty simple. The band had given up on the media

explosion of Zoo TV. Also, missing from the stage was any ode to an arch, a mirrored lemon or neon from PopMart. What was in front of us was a stripped down performance space, just like I remembered on the Joshua Tree Tour, but something new was added, a sizable, heart-shaped ramp which projected outward from the stage into the arena floor, creating a glorified walkway into the throngs of fans who purchased general admission tickets. It looked like a huge swimming pool filled with people, which I couldn't wait to jump into when the tour got to Chicago. Nick took notice, yet he was still sure he made the better choice for his Boston shows being up in the stands. At this point, it didn't matter as we killed time between the opening act and chatting with our neighbors. During the conversation, it was revealed to us that some had come all the way from Europe. What we had created, in our seating section, was a small United Nations. It was so U2.

Suddenly, all conversations halted when we heard a roar from the crowd near the far corner of the stage. Adam walked onstage first followed by Larry then Edge, who wore a Miami Dolphins T-shirt. Last, but not least, was Bono. The house lights were still up. Edge kicked into the opening riff of *Elevation*, from which the tour got its name, and the show began. When the band hit the third verse, the stadium lights dropped and the heart-shaped stage lit up like a Christmas tree. Long forgotten were those cold days standing in line for tickets in Chicago and Boston. Vanished were our worries of daily life as we relished in the excitement of opening night not knowing what song was next on the set list. I lived for the anticipation. Hearing the first notes of *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, or watching Edge move to the keyboards, hoping he might play *Running To Stand Still*, was thrilling. The buzz of the night would only be comparable to waiting for Bono outside his hotel for that one glimpse.

When the band moved into *Beautiful Day*, the arena sang back the chorus, almost drowning out the boys of Ireland. Bono was taken aback by the love in the big room. Nicholas could tell from the band's reaction that the Irishmen were where they loved to be, playing live and onstage. As the euphoria came to a head, Edge began the distorted wailing of the opening notes of *Until the End of the World*. Bono's excitement rushed to a fevered pitch as he strutted around the heart-shaped catwalk, protruding into the arena. He sang the first verse and headed for the chorus. Drunk with excitement, he fell off the four-foot high walkway. We lost him in the darkness and a hush came over the stadium. The band played on. Security shoved the lead singer back up onto the catwalk without missing a beat. He caught the lyric and ran with it. The spectacle didn't end the show. It was a hiccup of passion.

The opening piano riff of *New Year's Day* came next. A visit to the back catalog was exciting as I was on edge. What I really wanted to know was what songs were they going to pull from *Pop* in this strip down show. I was sure it wouldn't be *Mofò*, too powerful and very techno. *Staring at the Sun* was a safe bet, but its tempo would slow down the show. My answer would arrive a few songs later with *Gone*, an excellent choice but like on the PopMart Tour, it impeded the flow of the show. *Gone* fit like a puzzle piece that was just a little too tight and brought the crowd to a halt. The band marched on to *Discothèque*, another *Pop* tune, which seemed to clunk along as well and nothing could save it. U2 had to move on before they lost the converted. Familiar territory followed with the warhorse tracks, including *I Will Follow*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *Bad*, and *Where the Streets Have No Name*. Sprinkled among them were new tour gems *Sweetest Thing*, a B-side track from the *Where the Streets Have No Name* single release, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* from the *Million Dollar*

Hotel soundtrack. *Bad* made its long awaited return after being dormant for eight years. The song was never one of my favorites and I had all, but forgotten it until this night. Willie Williams, U2's set designer, decorated the stage with a few barrel-like lanterns. Each of them had cutouts of various shapes, allowing the inner ambient light to project outwards. The lanterns rotated slowly as the lyric dived into the addiction of heroin. It was a haunting effect that worked well.

Eventually, the stage went dark as a video wall appeared, on cue behind Larry's drum kit, and flooded the crowd in red light. It was time for *Where the Streets Have No Name*. Willie, nor the band, was never tired of this stage effect as the show closed with *The Fly*. At the end of the song, Bono jumped off stage, into the general admission area, and made his exit to the back of the arena. The rest of the band said good-night and left. The stage went dark except for the lights hovering over Larry's kit. They were lit ever so softly and then turned off. Members of the road crew scurried about resetting microphones and putting out guitars. Anticipation of the encore was building.

I had an idea for one song U2 could possibly play. The other two, guessing it would be a three-song encore, would be anybody's game. Nick, on the other hand, was running through a mini-set list. The video wall reappeared with National Rifle Association President, Charlton Heston, answering questions about guns. The band dropped into *Bullet the Blue Sky*. Once again, we rose to our feet in order to soak it all in. I was still in shock it was opening night. The show was moving too fast for me. The band closed out the night with *Walk On*. It hit me like an eighteen-wheeler. I reflected on what Monica and I had been through. I would be fine. In fact, I was fine. Bono's singing the song live was the validation I needed.

As the show slowly tapered off into the night and the band

said their final farewell, the house lights gradually turned on. Nick and I high-fived one another, knowing tonight was special. We exited our section and fought the masses at the merch table where I came away with a program, a shirt and impulsively bought a knit hat, similar to the one Edge wears, emblazoned with the Elevation Tour logo. Nick was now at four bags worth of U2 shit as we exited into the moist night of South Florida. On our drive home, we went over every minute detail of the show.

“Can you believe he fell off the stage, Nick?” I asked.

“Unbelievable, Eric. Unfuckingbelievable. I thought it was over!”

“I think he was drunk on excitement.”

“I would love to hear what Edge was thinking when he took the spill?”

“I know! ‘Oh fuck, tour’s over. Lost the singer on opening night,’” I replied.

“Yeah, Larry, Adam and Edge would now have to create a jazz trio and orchestrate the whole tour without Bono,” Nick said laughing.

“It would’ve sucked if that incident went south, Nick,” I said, as I looked over at my cousin while the dashboard lights illuminated my face.

“Oh, I’m sure if he had to, he would sing from a wheelchair. Trust me. Bono would’ve made it work,” Nick replied as we both laughed, knowing full well the tour was on as we readied ourselves for another year of U2 on the road, reading stories daily, on their official site, about their escapades crisscrossing the states.