

## 26: the anxiety of vertigo

In the fall of 2004, Jessica and I descended on San Francisco for her cousin's wedding. On the first evening in the California wine country, Jessica's cousin Ethan, a fan of Bob Dylan, leaned over the dinner table in order to start a conversation about U2.

"Rumor has it there's a new U2 album on the horizon," Ethan said, as he poured me a glass of wine.

"Yeah, have you heard the new track?" I asked.

"'Vertigo?' Isn't that the title? I think I heard it on a television spot for Apple's iPod."

"Yeah, that's the one," I said, as I leaned forward and grabbed the breadbasket.

"Very punk. I like it. Not sure about the Apple tie in though," Ethan said.

"Yeah, me neither. I feel they're selling out," I replied, as I swiped butter onto a piece of bread and popped it into my mouth.

"What do you mean?"

“Well, there’s a history with U2 and advertising.”

“Really? Explain.”

“They were approached in the 80s about using one of their songs for a car commercial and the band turned it down. Now, however, they have changed their tune, excuse the pun, and are promoting themselves on television with Apple.”

“Wouldn’t you call this self-promotion? Are they not trying to reach a broader audience?”

“Yes, but it still has a corporate undertone. We all know the record industry is in the shitter and this is a move for them to get to a broader, more youthful and wired group. My fear is that they will go the way The Rolling Stones did in the late 80s.”

“You mean like Budweiser’s underwriting of The Stones’ Steel Wheels Tour.”

“Exactly. U2’s musical influence came from punk and I feel it’s not very punk rock when you invite a corporation into your bed. I’m scared of what might happen when U2 does turn to a corporate underwriter. The backlash from fans may be great. Fortunately, they’ve never had a tour sponsor because the band has always figured out a way to fund them personally, which means sticking their necks out. I have always found their self-funding quite commendable.”

“I understand and agree with you. However, I feel the musical landscape is changing and bands have to adapt no matter how long they have been around. U2’s iPod and iTunes exposure are a way for them to widen their audience base and I’m sure they felt it was the way to go.”

“True, but I just don’t want to see their commercial all the time on television ad nauseam.”

“Sounds as though you are falling off the U2 bandwagon.”

“No, never. Just dismayed. I want this new album to be on the level of “War,” “The Joshua Tree” or “Achtung Baby.” Not as a

copycat album, but in the sense of pushing the creative envelope again as they did before,” I replied, as I took a drink of my wine.

“Didn’t they scrap a part of the new record?”

“Yeah, producer Chris Thomas, who worked with INXS, Midnight Oil and I think the Sex Pistols, was at the helm for the first round, but the band just wasn’t feeling it. I think the history with Howie B, and how the “Pop” record came out, forced them to go back to the familiarity of working with Lillywhite, Lanois and Eno.”

“I hope you feel that scrapping a record is no indication of the creative process or lack thereof,” Ethan said, while he put his wine glass near the edge of the table and leaned back in his chair.

“No, I call it knob fiddling. It has been happening ever since the recording of “The Unforgettable Fire” album.”

“Dylan wouldn’t do that.”

“What? Scrap an album or knob fiddle?” I asked.

“Overwork the production.”

“Oh, I agree completely. Dylan’s a control freak. Once it’s done, it’s done. That’s my observation of his work and I say that with all good intentions. Plus, he has been at it quite a bit longer than the boys of Ireland and could give a shit less about what people think of his work,” I said, picking up the menu in front of me and moving on with my diatribe. “U2, on the other hand, ebbs and flows both sonically and lyrically. If they don’t feel it in the studio, they move on. The other issue is getting all of them in the same workspace at one time, which has become a burden with the four hundred pound gorilla in the room, if you know what I mean.” I paused and collected my thoughts. “Not that I’m knocking Bono and all of his great deeds, but their albums are now taking longer to execute because of all of his good-hearted endeavors.”

The intellectual music discussion with Ethan fueled my hunger for a fresh U2 album. With reports of the impending release of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* on the horizon, fans were getting excited and glad that an ending was near to their start and stop recording process of the last four years. Bono preached to us, in the press, about how Edge was finding his groove and the album was their best work to date. What he was really trying to do was get in front of a potential album leak since a copy of their upcoming album had been stolen a few months earlier from their compound in the South of France. A potential leak to the Internet, within days before the album's release date, could have been devastating for the band.

On the eve of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb's* release, U2's long-time fan club, Propaganda, was being dismantled. For over twenty years, band management had overseen the fan club. With *How To Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, however, U2 decided to move the club to the Internet to gain a wider fan base and make a connection to fans in real time. Gone was the quarterly printed fan magazine, *Propaganda*, with its in depth interviews, band commentary, observations on politics and merchandising specials. Now, with them moving to the web, access to band information was easier, but the intimacy was gone. Long-time fans felt misplaced and taken advantage of due to increased membership fees and inadequate customer service from the site. Regardless, Nick and I, true-blooded U2 fans, joined up as we were told we would have priority in tickets sales, as long time Propaganda members. Added to the enticement, were web exclusives and an annual membership gift of a limited edition CD not available anywhere else.

Days before the album's release, I heard thirty-second snippets of songs on the band's Web site. I started to feel uneasy about their next creative venture. All of this came to a head

when *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* hit my CD player. My auditory sensation was confused because *Vertigo*, the album's lead single, was such a heavy guitar driven song that the rest of the album paled in comparison. I felt the tune *Love and Peace or Else* was a stretch to capture the fire of *Bullet the Blue Sky*. For that matter, the second track, *Miracle Drug*, was searching for the emotional connection found in the song *One* from *Achtung Baby*. My conclusion was leading me to believe the album was a little too paint by numbers until I found the real gems, and saving graces, which were *Crumbs From Your Table* and *One Step Closer*. *Crumbs From Your Table* is quintessentially U2. It is a stripped down track with Larry's rhythmic drumming, Edge's full on use of his beautiful arpeggio style and Bono singing from the heart. *One Step Closer* follows *Crumbs From Your Table* with a haunting simplicity, much like *Wake Up Dead Man* from *Pop*. It is a soft, steady track with Bono telling the story of how his father, nearing death, was getting one footstep nearer to figuring out what was waiting for him on the other side. The memorable triptych of songs from this album closes with *Origin of the Species*, which was an anthem to youth about loving yourself, no matter what you looked like or what your sexual orientation was. It was a reflection of U2 raising their children giving them the direction. The brilliance in the three songs was how they worked together in harmonious fashion and how the band had always been able to work in one of these trios of beauty into every album since *The Unforgettable Fire*.

Three months later, we received confirmation about the *Vertigo Tour*, the title of the tour supporting the new album. Nick and I awaited a first shot at seats via the online club pre-sale. Our subscription granted us passwords and a time slot to buy tickets for the May shows. When our time arrived, we jumped online and punched in all of the information we were given as fast as

we could. Nick, who was now working in downtown Chicago, was on a high-speed LAN line. I, on the other hand, was on a chopped-up and untrustworthy DSL connection, hoping to land those much-coveted general admission floor seats. Within seconds, they were gone. Never had a chance. The best tickets I could get were in the third level at fifty-five bucks a piece for the second night. I felt snubbed as I was a twelve-year fan club member and wasn't happy. Neither was Nick.

"Nick, we've got to keep the faith," I said on the telephone.

"This sucks! What a load of horse shit!"

"Did you buy anything?" I asked.

"Fuck no! I wanted General Admission tickets. All that came up were the one hundred fifty-dollar seats. We've been long-time fan club members for Christ's sake!"

I could only imagine what Nick's inflamed face looked like by now.

"I bought fifty-five-dollar seats in the nose bleed section," I replied.

"Why?" he responded.

"I had to, Nicholas. Something is better than nothing. I may have a better shot when we go to the venue this weekend along with the masses."

"I agree. You're right. This is such bullshit, Eric."

"I'll pick you up Saturday morning at about seven. Can you get your ass out of bed for the sale?" I asked, knowing he'd probably still be up from his Friday night soiree.

"Yeah, I'll set two alarm clocks. I gotta go. Drop me an e-mail before Friday. Love ya."

Saturday morning came early as my alarm rang. I looked at the clock. Six in the morning was staring me in the face. I hit the snooze button. Jessica rolled over. She wanted me out of bed before the buzzer went off again as it was her day to sleep

in. I could feel her palm in my lower back; reminding me I had to get my feet on the ground and ass out of the bed. I slid the alarm button to the right and put one leg on the floor. The dog arose and we slowly walked down the darkened hallway to the second bedroom. In my daze, I dressed myself and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. I needed a jolt before sitting in a car all morning, freezing my ass off.

When I rolled up in front of my cousin's apartment building, the clock in the dash showed seven. Nick slid into the car and I drove us to the United Center while still being half-awake. Debauchery greeted us as we pulled into the parking lot. Several drunken U2 fans arrived well before us, wearing next to nothing while doing a few Irish jigs in the back of a pick-up truck. None of them seemed to care that the outside air temperature was hovering just above freezing while they were topless and wearing tricolor clothing of national, Irish unity. We needed the entertainment to kill time, leading up to the sale. Nick, as usual, had to devise a plan. Ironically, his friends pulled up next to us. He hopped cars to strategize. I could have cared less. I preferred to stay in my warm vehicle rather than get involved in an early morning meeting of U2'dom because all I wanted was a shot at purchasing floor seats or at least, obtaining better tickets than what I had via the fan club pre-sale. Eventually, we all trekked to the lone security guard, sitting in a pick-up truck, handing out line numbers. Our bare naked Irish brethren, who were still whooping it up, preceded us.

For the next two hours, I remained cloistered in my car while Nick was with his friends in a car next to us. I kept turning the car on and off to stay warm. The parking lot slowly filled with other fans filing towards the same pick-up truck we did an hour earlier. Nick eventually came back to our car. He complained of being famished. Actually, he had to go to the bathroom. I looked

at the clock. We had half an hour before we were to line up and had limited options.

“There’s a Mickie-D’s over on Western we could go to,” I said.

“Cool. Let me tell the others,” he said. Nick then rolled down the passenger window and shouted at the car next to us.

“Hey, Leo. Roll down your window,” Nick said. He waited for a moment and continued, “Follow us. We’re going to McDonald’s. I gotta piss. I also want to get some hot chocolate in order to warm up.”

It was typical of my cousin to make the wrong call during something important with U2. I would’ve walked a few blocks away and found an alley. Instead, we had to drive somewhere, taking God knows what chance, while Nick bantered on about the “what ifs” when it came to buying tickets. He was driving me crazy. By the time we entered McDonald’s, I was fed up with my cousin’s anxieties because the closer we got to the witching hour of the sale, the worse Nick panicked. To me, I could have given a shit less what the ticket strategy was for the day. I was worried that our short jaunt to McDonald’s was going to put our whole ticket purchase in jeopardy.

Upon our return to the United Center, security was preaching the rules about the purchase. It was the same spiel for every other show we bought tickets for, followed by randomly drawing the starting number. Seconds later, shouts of glee and spirited disappointment came from the amassed crowd as we learned our numeric fate. The drunken, Irish contingent found out that none of them had a number anywhere near the first twenty spots for the sale in order to acquire general admission seats. They were visibly upset. However, their numbers were better than ours, but not by much. To me it didn’t matter, I just wanted to get the process going. Within minutes, the line started to move and when I



got to the ticket window, both shows had sold out. In anticipation of more concerts being added to the existing two night run, I ran as quickly as I could around the huge arena, just to get back in line. I waited to hear those magical words.

“Two more shows are up for sale,” said the United Center employee, running the show.

Nick and I were excited. I headed back to the window in anticipation of buying a golden floor ticket. I asked and scored two of those coveted seats in the general admission section. Again, I circumvented the venue in order to get back in line and buy more tickets. Within minutes, I had bought seats for the fourth and final show in the second balcony, looking straight onto the stage. I was euphoric. Nick wanted to stick around the venue to discuss his victory with his friends. I encouraged him not to.

“Nick, we got ‘em. Let’s go,” I said, as we headed back to the car. Lack of sleep was taking over me as my bed was screaming for my slumbered return and dreams of the coming May U2 shows.