

U2 FAQ

**Anything You'd Ever Want
to Know About the Biggest
Band in the World . . .
and More!**

John D. Luerssen



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The Future Needs a Big Kiss

No Line on the Horizon

Although Brian Eno, Daniel Lanois, and Steve Lillywhite eventually earned the production credits for *No Line on the Horizon*, it was American Records founder and award-winning producer Rick Rubin who first started out with the job. U2 and Rick Rubin had begun working together in July 2006 in both Abbey Road studios and in the South of France on new material, two tracks of which eventually saw release that autumn when the band released new material on its *U218* compilation.

Those songs, “Window in the Skies” and a collaboration with Green Day on the Skids’ classic “The Saints Are Coming” surfaced, but the band eventually decided it would abort its efforts with Rick Rubin. The producer and the band had a fundamental difference in approach: Rick wanted the band to bring its finished material into the studio, but U2 was ardent about continuing with its proven practice of piecing material together in the studio.

The band wasn’t sure which way it wanted to go stylistically, with Bono quoted by *Billboard* in early 2007, “We’re gonna continue to be a band, but maybe the rock will have to go; maybe the rock has to get a lot harder. But whatever it is, it’s not gonna stay where it is.”

U2 didn’t stay where it was, either, leaving Nice for Fez, Morocco by May, where they decided to work with Eno and Lanois in a songwriting capacity. “It’s very different, quite experimental and kind of liberating because of that,” Larry Mullen told U2.com the following month, after two weeks of sessions held in a Moroccan *riad*. Having been invited to attend the World Sacred Music Festival in the city, Bono suggested his bandmates and collaborators follow him.

The goal was to create “future hymns” and the exposure to Hindu and Jewish music helped the band to craft songs like “Unknown Caller,” “Moment of Surrender,” “No Line on the Horizon,” and “White as Snow.” The trip to Fez encouraged U2 to take more musical risks with its new

material, but the group also knew that in some point it needed to pull in the reigns, because—according to Brian Eno, “it sounded kind of synthetic . . . like a ‘world music’ add-on.”

Returning to Dublin, but also working in studios in New York and London, U2, Eno, and Lanois continued writing and tracking music for well over a year. With fifty or sixty songs already penned by September but not yet convinced it had a proper album’s worth of material, it considered releasing two EPs titled *Daylight* and *Darkness*. Instead it opted to bump the project’s release from November 2008 release into early 2009 to allow it time to finish the project.

By November, the group had announced the disc’s title, *No Line on the Horizon*, and plans for a companion film by Anton Corbijn called *Linear* was also revealed. But the band was still hard at work perfecting the songs—including some that became known as the “beach clips,” after they were uploaded to YouTube but soon taken off the site at the request of Universal Music that same month. The rough-sounding versions of these songs had been recorded by a fan who overheard them emanating from Bono’s beach house in Eze, France in August 2008.

By December 2008, the band gathered at Olympic Studios in London where it picked the best songs it had tracked. As a result, songs mentioned in pre-release reviews like “Winter” and “Every Breaking Wave” were left off the album.

The final product marked a new lyrical direction for Bono, who had grown sick of writing in the first-person and instead took on characters that he made up including a junkie, a soldier in Afghanistan and a traffic cop. Able to broaden his outlook this way,

Bono was able to use these subjects—who all took on an intentional ignorance of the rest of the world—as a means to develop the album’s central theme of periphery vision.

Stylistically, he explained upon the release of *No Line on the Horizon*—which U2 dedicated to Rob Partridge, who first signed the band in 1979—that there were three sections of the album: the first was “a whole world unto itself, and you get to a very ecstatic place,” the third was “a load of singles” and the last consisted of tunes that were “unusual territory.”

The Songs of *No Line on the Horizon*

From the relentless groove of the title track to the thoughtful, self-searching aura created by “Cedars of Lebanon” to the sonic fury of “Get on Your Boots,” this album may be the most far-reaching in the band’s career. “It’s very raw and very to the point,” said The Edge.

1. “No Line on the Horizon”: Unlike most U2 songs, “No Line on the Horizon” was tracked in one take. Originating from a variety of drumbeats that Larry Mullen, Jr. had been working on, Brian Eno sampled them and arranged them to his liking. From there the band began to build from it, with The Edge using a Death by Audio distortion box to craft his guitar lines.

Bono’s lyrics were written in response to a photograph of Lake Constance, which is in the Alps between Germany, Switzerland, and Austria that is called the Boden Sea and was taken by Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto. That image was also used as the artwork for the album’s cover.

The singer has described it as a place “where the sea meets the sky.” The lead track on U2’s twelfth studio album is expansive in its sound and passionate in its purpose. The spirited opus did not go unnoticed—*Time* magazine named it the third best song of 2009.

2. “Magnificent”: The second single from *No Line on the Horizon* was a surprisingly poor performer when it was released as a single in May 2009. In the U.K. “Magnificent” wasn’t, stalling at #42 and becoming the group’s worst charting tune since 1982. Initially titled “French Disco,” the song emerged from a jam session in Fez, and was upheld by a commanding chord progression. “I think we all knew that it was inherently joyful, which is rare,” Edge said later of the song.

According to Bono in the magazine included with some versions of *No Line on the Horizon*, its lyrics were about “two lovers holding on to each other and trying to turn their life into worship.” There was also a message of sacrifice that one makes for their art; and while the song has a classic, uplifting U2 approach, it failed to connect commercially. Just the same, Coldplay loved the song, and often played it over the loudspeakers as it took the stage for shows during the final leg of its *Viva la Vida* trek.

3. “Moment of Surrender”: Written in Fez in June 2007, “Moment of Surrender” was improvised during the course of a couple of hours and recorded by the band with Eno, and Lanois in a single take. Only the cello part that introduces the song was added later.

Beginning with a percussion loop created by Brian, the group spontaneously crafted the song and fully developed it with each member of the band in a manner so impressive the producer later told U2.com it was “the most amazing studio experience I’ve ever had.” Its end-product sounds as if it could be at home on *The Joshua Tree*.

Typically, Bono slipped into his drug addict character, and transformed himself into a man who was having a crisis of faith. His gospel-like performance was emotional and resonant, prompting *Rolling Stone* magazine to

name “Moment of Surrender” the best song of 2009, despite the fact it had never been issued as an actual single. It described it as “the most devastating ballad U2 or anyone has written since “One.”

4. “Unknown Caller”: Also recorded in a single take during U2’s two-week journey to Fez, “Unknown Caller” reprises the drug-addict character of the preceding track, who begins to receive odd, cryptic text messages on his cell phone after attempting to use the device to buy drugs. Bono also draws inspiration from Jeremiah 33:3 in his tale of this spiritually shattered character on the verge of suicide.

The song launches with a birdsong by Moroccan swallows which was captured in the Riad where the song was recorded. A few variations of the track existed in its infancy, but if The Edge is to be believed, the final version was played only one time.

5. “I’ll Go Crazy If I Don’t Go Crazy Tonight”: Initially stemming from the band’s visit to Fez, “I’ll Go Crazy If I Don’t Go Crazy Tonight” was based on a song called “Diorama” that Brian Eno had developed. Reworking it with Steve Lillywhite, the upbeat rock song took on a new shape and meaning with lyrics that were based on Bono’s life experience and his observations on Barack Obama’s run for the presidency.

With the Black Eyed Peas’ brainchild will.i.am assisting in a production capacity, the song earned praise from the likes of *Q*, which called it U2’s “most unabashed pop song since “Sweetest Thing” but not everyone was convinced of its greatness. The *Irish Times* called it “U2’s most lackluster offering to date.”

Featured in a cross promotion with Blackberry for the “U2 Mobile App”—which was developed as part of Research in Motion’s sponsorship of the U2 360° Tour—the song was heard most in television commercials. Radio played the song regularly in the summer of 2009 and it was ultimately nominated in the categories Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group With Vocals and Best Rock Song for the 2010 Grammy Awards. It lost out, however, to “Use Somebody” by its one-time opening act, Kings of Leon, in both instances.

6. “Get on Your Boots”: A fuzzy blast of futuristic noise pop first concocted by The Edge at home with GarageBand software, this song—which has been compared in its vocal approach to both Elvis Costello’s “Pump It Up” and Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues”—was released on January 23, 2009 as a precursor to *No Line on the Horizon*. Reviews of “Get on Your Boots”

were mixed, however, because of its drastic departure from U2's traditional rock approaches heard since the millennium.

Part "Vertigo" and part "Numb," the song's topical inspiration came from Bono observing warplanes overhead while vacationing at his house in France at the start of the Iraq War. Initially titled "Four Letter Word" and then "Sexy Boots," Edge can be seen working on the track in the documentary *It Might Get Loud*, in which he stars with Jack White of the White Stripes/Raconteurs/Dead Weather and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin fame.

At 150 beats per minute, "Get on Your Boots" may be the fastest song U2 has ever recorded but it's also among U2's weakest first-single debuts ever, just cracking the U.S. Top Forty in its first week of release before slipping to #96 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 the next. In the U.K. it stalled at #12.

It does succeed, however, in upholding those aforementioned Costello comparisons. When U2 appeared on the Bravo TV show *Spectacle: Elvis Costello with . . .*, in late 2009, Bono, The Edge, and Costello performed a medley of it with the host's 1978 classic "Pump It Up."

7. "Stand Up Comedy": This song began as "For Your Love" before it was titled "Stand Up" and eventually, "Stand Up Comedy." Originating in the June 2007 Fez sessions, it went through many changes before its completion. At one time, the song counted mandolins and was based upon a Middle Eastern rhythm.

During its first-ever live morning television-show performance, U2 performed on the American program *Good Morning America* on Friday, March 6, 2009, from the campus of New York's Fordham University.

Photofest



It eventually became home to one of The Edge's heaviest riffs ever, after the guitarist again felt the influence of Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page and Jack White—who crafted the 2003 riff-tastic “Seven Nation Army”—during the making of their mutual movie *It Might Get Loud*. At its core, it was held together by a funk foundation poured by Adam and Larry.

Lyricaly, Bono said to U2.com, “It’s saying, stand up to rock stars. That’s about choosing your enemies, too. What are you gonna stand up for and what are you gonna stand up against? I love the notion of standing up rock stars. Because they are a bunch of fucking megalomaniacs.”

Bono also cited the “Stand Up and Take Action” event of 2008, which saw 116 million people in 131 countries reminded the leaders of countries of their promise to reduce poverty by 2015, as an inspiration. “It’s not a ‘let’s hold hands and the world is a better place’ sort of song. It’s more ‘kick down the door of your own hypocrisy.’”

8. “Fez—Being Born”: A strong contender to open the album at one point, this song—which began on Rick Rubin’s watch—was relegated to the back half of the record. And wisely so. Starting with the working title “Chromium Chords” that later became “Tripoli” and finally “Fez,” Daniel Lanois and Brian Eno rescued pieces of the slow-tempo number and suggested U2 implement elements of a much faster song called “Being Born.”

But the outcome is downright clamorous as the sounds of a Moroccan outdoor market fuse into the “Fez” piece of the song. It’s experimental and it’s faulty. The song’s story is based on Bono’s Parisian traffic cop character who travels to the Mediterranean Sea in an effort to see his girlfriend, who is in Tripoli.

9. “White as Snow”: The lone political song on *No Line on the Horizon*, the song was written from the mindset of a soldier in Afghanistan who is dying. The tune—which is evidently based on the hymn “Veni, veni Emmanuel”—lasts the length of time it takes for the man to expire after coming into contact with a roadside bomb. Bono has explained that he came up with the idea for the song from the book *Pincher Martin* written by William Golding.

The aforementioned hymn was suggested to Daniel Lanois by fellow Canadian Lori Anna Reid of Newfoundland. Lanois recorded himself playing a piano version of “Veni, veni Emmanuel” and Bono crafted a vocal as part of the group’s two-week session in Fez. Adam Clayton pushed for the song to make the record because it offered the listener a calmer moment.

At one point, the band considered starting it with the sound of an explosion but opted against it. As it stands, it’s one of the album’s finest moments, and among Bono’s most underappreciated vocal turns to date.

10. “Breathe”: Another song drawing on Edge’s exposure to Jimmy Page and Jack White during their collaboration on the film *It Might Get Loud*, it came to the band virtually intact, but after working on it for a while they scrapped it and rewrote it. According to Daniel Lanois, the song was remixed a staggering eighty times during sessions to perfect the record.

Bono also overworked himself for the track, first writing lyrics about Nelson Mandela before opting to write from a “more surreal and personal” perspective. The song is set on June 16, which is a deliberate allusion to James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*.

According to Bono in the bonus promotional magazine for *No Line on the Horizon*, the idea behind the lyrics stemmed from a desire to “become more intimate . . . I want to get away from subject and subject matter [and] into pure exchange. Not even conversation. Often, it’s just like grunts or outbursts.”

11. “Cedars of Lebanon”: The final song on U2’s *No Line on the Horizon* consists of a melody based on a sample of “Against the Sky,” a song Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois had worked on back in 1984 when collaborating on *The Pearl*, an album by ambient and avant-garde performer Harold Budd.

Lyricaly, “Cedars of Lebanon” comes from the viewpoint of a journalist covering the war in Iraq. It’s as observational in lines like “*Unholy clouds reflecting in a minaret*” as it critical, in the warning, “*Chose your enemies carefully ’cause they will define you.*”

Anton Corbijn’s *Linear*

Linear was a companion film to *No Line on the Horizon* that was included in special formats of U2’s 2009 album. Directed by the band’s photographer, Anton Corbijn, it was contained in the Digipak, magazine, box, and deluxe iTunes versions of the project. The concept came to Corbijn after he worked on a June 2007 video shoot with the group where he asked them to stand motionless while he filmed them.

Using this idea, objects moved around U2 while they remained still, creating what Corbijn called a “photograph on film.” By May 2008, the group had commissioned Anton to work on the project, which would allow fans what they described as “a new way to use film to connect to music.”

Structured around a story created by Bono and Anton, it revisited characters from the album, including the Parisian motorcycle cop played by actor Saïd Taghmaoui. The music in the film was based on the running order of *No Line* as of May 2008 and, as a result, had a slightly different track listing from the final album. It included “Winter,” which was omitted from the final disc.

“As U2 never do anything in half measures,” Corbijn explained to U2.com in February 2009, “the record that emerged from the studio in late 2008 was a very different one than the one I’d made images for. Not only had the running order changed, now there were completely new songs on the record while another song had gone, new lyrics without the characters had emerged, and different sounds dominated the songs I had worked on. Disaster!”

Release and Reception of *No Line on the Horizon*

Despite the announcement in June 2008 by Paul McGuinness that U2’s new album would be ready for an October release, by the time that month came and went the reality was that the disc with the tentative title *No Line on the Horizon* wouldn’t be under any Christmas trees that holiday season.

Bono explained to fans that U2 had “hit a rich songwriting vein” and “there’s more priceless stuff to be found” in a post on U2’s website. “We know we have to emerge soon but we also know that people don’t want another U2 album unless it is our best ever album,” he continued.

U2 had aspirations of delivering its most innovative and challenging record yet. When they finally released it on February 27, 2009, in Ireland, March 2 in the U.K., and March 3 in North America, it had been four-plus years between albums, the longest gap since its inception.

Although the band’s label, Universal Music Group, did its best to guard against copies leaking by preventing advance copies from getting into the hands of critics, UMG’s own Australian arm leaked the tracks two weeks early when it made the album available for digital sale on February 18. Just the same, the group kept a positive outlook about the accidental sale and subsequent leak to file sharing sites. “The one good thing about that is a lot of our fans have already given us their thumbs up,” Edge told London’s XFM.com. “Even though it was fans getting it for free.”

Upon its formal release, *No Line on the Horizon* debuted at #1 in thirty countries including the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Ireland, France, Ireland, and Japan. In the U.S., first-week sales totaled 484,000, and with seven number one albums to their credit, U2 were now behind just the Beatles and the Rolling Stones for the number of chart topping long-players.

Reviews of the disc were strong, with *Rolling Stone* giving the disc a five-star review. Calling it “their best, in its textural exploration and tenacious melodic grip, since 1991’s *Achtung Baby*” the assessment seemed over-inflated. *Q* also gave it a perfect rating, and the glowing evaluations came in from *Mojo*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Uncut*, and *NME*. On the other end of the spectrum, *Time* magazine called it “mostly restless, tentative, and confused.”

Pitchfork also panned it, with a 4.2 out of 10 assessment that read, “the album’s ballyhooed experimentation is either terribly misguided or hidden underneath a wash of shameless U2-isms.”

Despite the production of three singles, “Get on Your Boots,” “Magnificent,” and “I’ll Go Crazy If I Don’t Go Crazy Tonight,” U2’s album sales for the project were a serious disappointment, dipping to its lowest in a decade. With just five million sold worldwide and just over a million in the U.S.—paltry by the comparison to its two predecessors—*No Line on the Horizon* was a commercial flop.

Meanwhile, concert ticket sales for U2’s 360° Tour were as brisk as ever. But the band wasn’t going for another mainstream-rock album. “We weren’t really in that [commercial] mindset,” Bono told the Associated Press eight months after the album dropped.

“We felt that the ‘album’ is almost an extinct species, and we should approach it in totality and create a mood and feeling, and a beginning, middle, and an end,” he continued. But in the digital download world of 2009, where pop singles could be had on iTunes at ninety-nine cents apiece, U2 wasn’t sure where it—or the traditional rock and roll album format for that matter—fit in any more.

Also speaking to the *AP*, Adam Clayton said in late 2009, “The concept of the music fan—the concept of the person who buys music and listens to music for the pleasure of music itself—is an outdated idea.”

Songs for Ascent

With a six-month break between legs of its 360° Tour, U2 continued to make progress on the follow up to 2009’s *No Line on the Horizon*. The Edge was promising that the material it had been working on for its as-yet-untitled thirteenth studio set would cover a myriad of styles, from folk to electronic music.

“We are working on a lot of new songs,” The Edge told *Entertainment Weekly*. “Some of them are really, really happy. We’re convinced that we have something really special. It’s like deciding whether we are going to release the album before the tour starts or leave it for a while, we don’t really know yet. Literally, within a day of getting off the road [in October 2009] Bono and I were working on new songs. On a roll.”

As for the sonic approach, Edge explained they were trying to keep things moving forward. “We are experimenting with a lot of different arrangements, and electronic is one of the things we are playing with. But there are other songs that are very traditional, almost folk. In some ways,

that's the thing we haven't figured out yet, is where this album is going to end up. We're having fun with the process."

It wasn't clear at the completion of *U2 FAQ* if this was the same project as the *Songs of Ascent* album previously announced by Bono in a February 2009 interview with the *Guardian*. At that time, Bono had suggested that U2 would release this disc by the close of 2009 and it would be a sister album to *No Line on the Horizon*, much in the way that *Zooropa* had emerged closely on the heels of *Achtung Baby*. At the time, Bono suggested a single, "Every Breaking Wave" might be out by early 2010 although that timeframe came and went.

An interview with the *Irish Independent* in June 2009 found Bono rethinking those plans, admitting that nine tracks had been completed but they would only see release if the group felt the songs surpassed the quality of those on *No Line on the Horizon*.