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By [Mark Yaconelli](#) in the [March 21, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas

Michka Assayas
Riverhead

When it emerged in the 1980s, the Irish rock group U2, with its lead singer Bono, displayed a spiritual passion that countered the big-haired, “Girls Just Wanna Have

Fun” synthesizer pop of that era. The band was sincere and idealistic, and its lyrics sidestepped the standard topics of sex, parties and relationships. The band consciously rejected the detached “cool” that most rock stars sought to embody, exploring instead what Bono refers to as “the nature of awe, of worship, the wonderment at the world around you.”

Over the next two decades, U2 became one of the biggest rock acts in the world and Bono a recognizable name not only in music but in international politics. For the past ten years Bono has served as a mouthpiece for such projects as the Drop the Debt campaign, which erased over \$100 billion in Third World debt. In 2000 he cofounded, with Bobby Shriver, the organization DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa), and he has sought to raise money to fight Africa’s AIDS epidemic. His political activism has generated continual press attention, culminating last December in his being named *Time* magazine’s “Person of the Year,” along with Bill and Melinda Gates.

This book of conversations with Michka Assayas may be as close as we’ll get to a Bono autobiography. Bono admits at the front of the book that he isn’t prone to introspection. The death of his father and the prodding of his wife led him to enter into a series of discussions with Assayas, a French journalist and longtime friend. Although the book’s subtitle uses the word *conversation*, the exchange is mostly one-way, with the skeptical, introspective, agnostic Assayas throwing out questions and observations for Bono to field.

Assayas wants Bono to analyze his violent working-class childhood, to question his motives behind his political involvement, and to explain how his Christian commitment squares with a life of wealth and fame. Bono half-jokingly refers to Assayas as his therapist.

What emerges is a man aware of his weaknesses, a man with a keen religious instinct, a man of bottomless energy and passion, a man grounded in long-term relationships, and a man for whom prayer and scripture are critical to his understanding of the world.

Bono’s early Christian faith was often in tension with his musical aspirations. He and fellow musicians Larry Mullen and “the Edge” lived in Christian community during the early years of the group. Band members shared their resources, attended prayer meetings and engaged in regular Bible studies. “We didn’t want the world to change us. . . . We were kind of zealots.” It took years and the near-breakup of the band

before they learned that “self-righteousness, self-flagellation” could be as dangerous as sex and drugs.

The subject of Africa evokes Bono’s most powerful language. He refers to the AIDS crisis in Africa as “the biggest pandemic in the history of civilization. . . . And it is not a priority for the West. Why? Because we don’t put the same value on African life as we put on a European or an American life. God will not let us get away with this, history certainly won’t let us get away with our excuses.”

Bono refers to his celebrity status as “silly” and “ridiculous,” yet he’s learned that “it is a kind of currency” that has given him access to the world’s power brokers. He claims to feel few butterflies when meeting with world leaders like Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Vladimir Putin and George Bush: “I’m never nervous when I meet politicians. I think *they* should be nervous because I’m representing the poor and wretched in this world. And whatever thoughts you have about God, who He is or if He exists, most will agree that if there is a God, God has a special place for the poor. The poor are where God lives. So these politicians should be nervous, not me.”

His success in winning over political opponents like Jesse Helms is inspired by the work of Martin Luther King. Bono’s strategy when dealing with skeptics is to try to make “the light brighter.” Like King, he seeks to avoid responding to caricature and instead looks to connect with even his severest political detractors through humor, conversation and an appreciation of the good in each person. “Find the light in them, because that will further your cause.” Bono can speak with genuine affection about George Bush and even refers to Helms (whose social agenda is pretty much the opposite of Bono’s) as “a beautiful person” while at the same time speaking forcefully against their neglect of the poor.

Bono’s struggle with pride, his political activism, his artistic life are all rooted and informed by his Christian faith. Bono claims it’s his experience of faith that gives him peace beneath the noise and activity of his life—a sense of God that draws him to try and catch each sunrise and retrieve a sense of being reborn each day. Assayas is sometimes bewildered, sometimes annoyed by this aspect of Bono, yet toward the end of the book appears envious of it.

Bono’s genius is in what he refers to as a “religious instinct” that he trusts will lead him toward a greater experience of truth, love and artistic expression. For Bono, this instinct is “more important than intellect.” It’s an instinct that drives him to pursue

art with an almost physical vulnerability (“You put your hands under your skin, you break your breastbone, you rip open your rib cage”), an instinct that drives him to hit high notes that he claims he can reach only in the presence of an audience, an instinct that compels him to construct a life filled with tension and paradox—a life in which he finds himself a friend of both the poor and the rich.

It’s this instinct for life that compels Bono to serve in African orphanages, to learn liberation theology from the poor of Central America and to spend New Year’s Eve in Serbian refugee camps. His egotistic and self-described “messianic tendencies” seem to be tempered by lifelong friendships and a 25-year marriage to a woman he’s known since he was 15. He is drawn to “Sabbath-moments . . . moments when I can be incredibly still and incredibly myself” before God.

The first rock show I ever attended was a U2 concert held in a small theater in Toronto in 1983. When the band was introduced, mayhem broke out. People began climbing over seats, pressing toward the stage. By the second number people were jumping up on the stage, sneaking around the stacks of speakers, grabbing and hugging members of the band. Husky men in yellow jackets appeared from the sides of the auditorium and started dragging people off the stage. Then they leaped into the crowd and began strong-arming people back toward their seats.

Seeing what was happening, Bono stopped the music and asked the bouncers to go back to the stage wings. He then expressed his gratitude for the effort people had made to attend the concert and asked that we all try to stay calm so that no one would be injured or forced to leave.

The security men receded, but it took only a song or two before the stoned and star-struck began scampering back onto the stage. Often Bono didn’t see them, and they were caught by the concert security guards and hauled outside. When Bono did notice, he ran to them, pulled them from the guards, hugged them or danced with them, then gently returned the wayward fans to the audience. Soon Bono was alternating between singing to the audience and rescuing people from the bouncers. The concert became so electric and out of control that at one point Bono stopped playing and whispered something to the other band members, who left the stage. Then the lights were cut except for a spotlight on Bono, who brought the crowd to its senses by quietly singing “Amazing Grace.”

It was a pleasure to recognize in this book the same Bono I had watched on stage—a man singing full-heartedly while simultaneously seeking to rescue those in trouble.

Bono is, in his way, a “community artist.” He feels a responsibility to the larger struggles and issues that burden humankind. The tension between artist and public servant keeps Bono open and alive. He may be one of the most important Christian activists of our time.