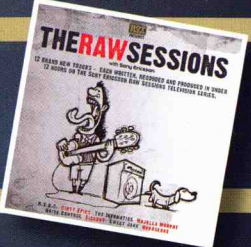


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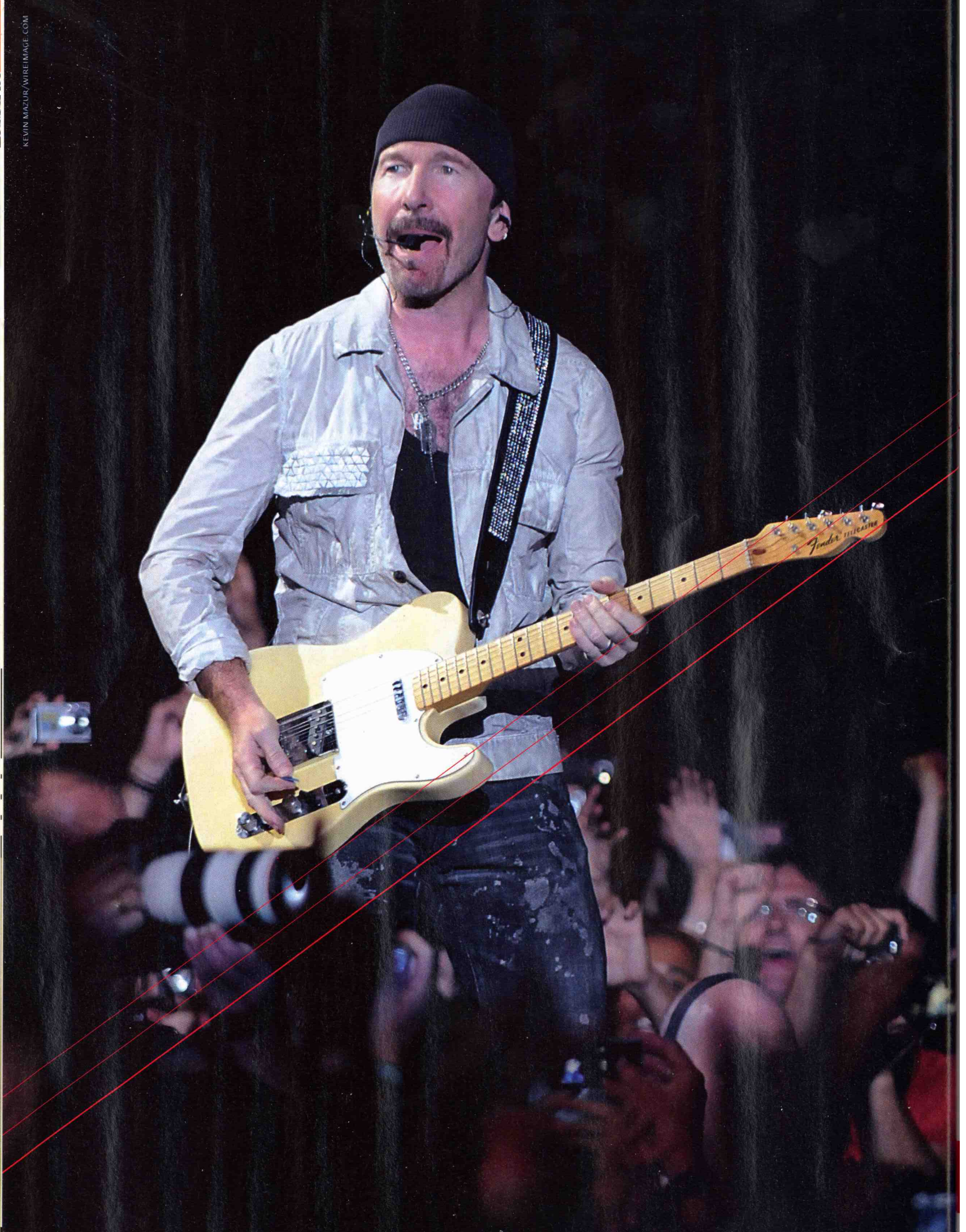


U2:

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INSIDE THE 360° TOUR
The Edge interviewed
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Shock Of The Nou

The opening night of a U2 tour can be fraught with peril. But in the Camp Nou in Barcelona they exorcised the demons of previous tours and started on a winning note. Plus, **The Edge** talks about the challenges of taking *No Line On The Horizon* on the road, his memories of Michael Jackson and the controversy over the band's carbon footprint

WORDS Olaf Tyaransen

It's been a beautiful day in Barcelona (hardly surprising for sweltering June), but will it be a beautiful night? The near 90,000 U2 fans gathered here in Camp Nou certainly hope so. As, of course, do the band themselves! But nothing is guaranteed. This, after all, is the opening night of a U2 world tour. Anything can happen and it usually does...

From their not-so-humble perspectives, there's a lot more than just money riding on this tour. With the likes of The Killers, Coldplay and Kings Of Leon snapping all too eagerly at their Cuban heels, and Bono, Edge, Larry and Adam now well into their middle years, this is as much about pride, about being the biggest. About being the best. Still.

Fair fucks to them for still caring. It's no accident that U2 have chosen Europe's biggest football stadium to launch their first major tour in over four years (and, seeing as the *Elevation* and *Vertigo* tours were mostly played in arenas, their first proper stadium tour this century). And it's interesting to note that, to this writer's eyes, at least one in five of the audience probably weren't even alive when *The Joshua Tree* was first released back in 1987.

Of course, opening nights of U2 tours don't exactly have a flawless history. It's just over a decade ago that, in one of contemporary rock & roll's most celebrated Spinal Tap-ish moments, Bono and the boys found themselves trapped inside a giant lemon in Las Vegas, on the very first night of *Popmart*. They learnt their lesson then, and have apparently been feverishly rehearsing this show for a full fortnight (last night they did a full live run-through for an audience of 500 special needs kids). But the best laid plans of mice and superstars...

Sitting not quite slap bang in the centre of the field, the much heralded 360 stage looks... well, bizarre. It's not a lemon, but it's coloured a strange lime green. The aliens have landed (and Bowie's 'Space Oddity' is played more than once throughout the build-up to tonight's performance). Designed and built by longtime U2 associates Willy Williams and Mark Fisher, the massive 164 foot-tall structure (twice the size of the stadium set used for the Stones' *A Bigger Bang* tour, fact fiends) requires 120 trucks to transport. It's been nicknamed "The Claw", but it actually looks more like a giant sized Star Wars stormtrooper doing a yoga-stretching exercise. Or position number 91 from the *Kama Sutra*.

But more of that later. Unlike almost all of their contemporaries, U2 have continued to challenge

themselves almost as much as they've challenged their audience. They'll take on all comers – as their support acts, that is. There are numerous potential heirs to their rock 'n' roll throne, none of whom have ever been shy about admitting it, and their choice of one of the main contenders, Snow Patrol, as tonight's second string says a lot about their lack of fear.

Opening with 'Take Back The City', the Patrol, who've been touring *A 100 Million Suns* for months now and are consequently tighter than ever, play a safe and steady run-through of some of their biggest hits ('Chasing Cars', 'Chocolate', 'You're All I Have' etc). Unfortunately, it's no easy task, with the stadium still filling up and bright sunshine diluting the light show.

Still, Gary Lightbody is a natural born charmer and well up to the task of winning people over. "You know what our job is?" he asks, midway through 'Shut Your Eyes'. "Our job is to warm you up! So please do us the honour of singing along with us!" The crowd duly oblige. It's a genuine moment of connection.

However, this isn't Snow Patrol's audience and well he knows it. The biggest cheer of all comes when he dedicates 'Run' "to the world's greatest rock band – U2!"

The legendary headliners are due on stage at 10pm, and the atmosphere is absolutely electric as the Mexican-waving audience cheer wildly through several false starts. Suddenly the lights go out and the stadium is plunged into darkness (so that wasn't sunlight?), thousands of flashes punctuating the blackness. Here we go...

Larry Mullen walks on first, striding proudly up the walkway, and takes his seat behind the kit. He bangs into 'Breathe', Edge and Adam appear as if from nowhere, and suddenly a leathery Bono's leathering out the lyrics (possibly he wanted to get the most vocally demanding song out of the way first). It's a spectacular and impressive, if relatively conventional, opening.

Bono straps on a guitar, mutters something totally unintelligible in Spanish, and then it's straight into 'No Line on the Horizon' as the entire stage lights up like a Chinese lantern. Curiously, it blinks like a malfunctioning one, between the maddest of visuals, for the sexy, rhythmic 'Get On Your Boots'.

Appropriately enough, it's during 'Magnificent', classic U2 updated in the most exhilarating way, that the stage set starts really showing what it can do – rotating bridges, flashing lights, mad visuals all co-

ordinating in a display of technical wizardry the likes of which we have never seen before in the context of live rock'n'roll. Words fail, but suffice to say it's all very Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind...

"We wanted to build our space station in the capital of surrealism – Barcelona!" Bono explains, before draping himself in an Irish tricolour and launching into 'Beautiful Day' (the crowd reciprocate by humorously chanting, "Ole! Ole! Ole!").

On the night of the gig, Michael Jackson has been dead for less than a week, so it's hardly surprising that he's acknowledged tonight (strangely, he's one of the few artists that U2 haven't really connected/collaborated with over the years, though they did knock *Thriller* off the UK No 1 spot with their *War* album way back in 1983). "We wrote this song for Billie Holiday, but we're gonna play it tonight for Michael Jackson," Bono explains, as Edge hits the distinctive intro to 'Angel of Harlem'. Towards the end, he segues into samples of 'Man in the Mirror' and 'Don't Stop If You Get Enough'.

Then things get really surreal. During the *Zoo TV* tour, Bono used to call the White House, Downing Street and other political power centres. Tonight, he sets his sights a little higher. Actually, a lot fucking higher! "It's almost 40 years to the month that Neil Armstrong stood on the moon," he explains, before he calls the International Space Station on video phone.

For a surreal few minutes, Bono and the band actually interview some of the astronauts currently orbiting the earth (Adam asks if they've seen any flying saucers today; Larry asks if the world is really round?). It's a bizarre, and somewhat nerdy, interlude – and presumably not one they'll be repeating every night of this tour. Appropriately, this is followed by 'Unknown Caller', one of the most dramatic and impressive tracks on *No Line On The Horizon* – which goes down a treat live too.

The real highlights of the show aren't gimmicky, though. They play 'Unforgettable Fire' live for the first time in 20 years (or so Bono explains): it's brilliant and you wonder why on earth they left it so long. The audience doing the "Uno!... Dos!... Tres!... Catorce!" before a scorching 'Vertigo' is also something special, as is the manic remixed version of 'Crazy Tonight' (with Larry on bongos) – a real crowd pleaser if ever there was one.

It's undoubtedly their intention to bombard the senses, but at times there's almost too much going on. On occasion, the band members are standing what looks like 100 metres apart, the screens are showing the most incredible images, and the stage set is rotating, gyrating and generally doing amazing things. There's a massive 'wow!' factor – but you are left feeling that wherever you're looking, you're maybe missing something better.

The 'wows!' keep coming – but the set ends with a succession of golden oldies that takes the crowd on an emotional roller coaster ride. At least fifty people



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wearing Aung San Suu Kyi masks walk around the stage during 'Walk On', and Bishop Desmond Tutu delivers an impassioned pre-recorded speech before 'Where the Streets Have No Name'. The best moments, however, come when it's just band and audience, especially when they're becoming 'One'. They actually fuck up the closing number at one point – or that's the way I heard it – but are almost all the more loveable for that moment of surrender...

Ultimately? While it wasn't quite the perfect performance, U2 360 is shaping up to be a near perfect circle, (rocking and) rolling onwards. They'll refine the show as the tour goes on. The future needs a big kiss and I've a feeling it'll be getting it from these boys when they've bedded everything in fully. Even now, this show is using its tongue.

I've a hunch you'd need to see 360 several times to fully appreciate the potential of its luminescence, brilliance and innovativeness. On the opening day of the season, they ground out a great result. Barcelona was a winning start – and from here on things can only get better. They still have it, they're still having it. Roll on Croke Park.

Close To The Edge

OLAF TYARANSEN: Where are you calling from, Edge?

THE EDGE: I'm in Nice. We just did Milan [for] two nights, so we flew here after the show. We have four shows under our belt at this point, so we are starting to get back into the saddle, so to speak.

And how does it feel?

It feels *amazing*. There's something so familiar about it, but there's something so *new* because of the production. It's really like a new way of performing and presenting the band, and it's throwing up all kinds of great challenges and opportunities, and it's like no show we have ever put on, in that we really set about trying to make these big huge stadiums as intimate as possible, with this particular staging, which is designed to really get 'into the middle' of the audience. Particularly in Milan because of the size of the field – we really felt like we were incredibly close to everybody in the stadium [San Siro]. There was no seat that you felt people were too far away. It was really intimate.

I noticed in Barcelona that the stage is so enormous that you were often all physically far away from each other. Is that difficult?

It can be. Sometimes you really have to make a point of making that visual connection because of a lot of the moments of improvisation and the cues where we take the song in a new direction – you miss those moments if you are not visually in connection with one another. And we've come a cropper a couple of times because of that! *(laughs)* People are just not used to that distance. But we are working around those problems. We have the technology; the ear monitors now mean that I can hear Larry, and Adam and Bono [just] as well if I'm 50-60 feet away as I can if I'm right there next to them. So it's not really a case of hearing one another, it's that visual connection – you've got to make sure that you don't lose that. But that's always the way. You turn your back if you're 10 feet away – it's the same as if you were 50 feet away.

Is that what happened with 'One' in Barcelona? You had to restart the song...

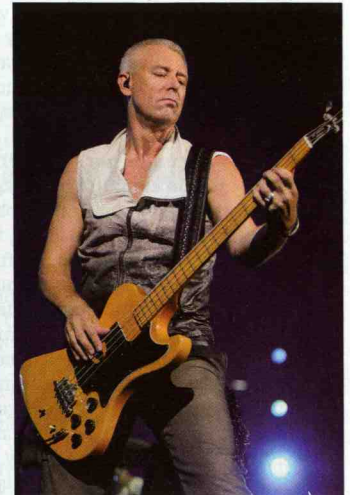
Bono, yeah, he kind of decided to re-start the tune and I could tell that not everyone heard him, it was kind of under his breath – "*We'll take that again*" – and it was literally a case of not everyone made the corner, so we literally had to re-start and then it was fine. But exactly for that reason, just the scale of the staging and what have you, and also probably, you know, it was the opening night – people were not expecting Bono to tear up their script so to speak. But what we are struggling to do with this show is to make sure that it doesn't get too slick. We might have the most sophisticated production in the history of rock and roll, but we want to keep the band as loose as possible. So, mistakes, train wrecks, are part of it. That's the way we want to keep it – fluid and visceral. Because we're not, and would never want to be, so professional and slick that it just becomes automatic. That's not where we came from, and we have no interest in going there.

Is there not an element of spontaneity lost with a production of this size?

There's one or two songs that are well routinized, to the point that there are visuals that are set, but actually most of the sets are the opposite, most of it is very fluid and open. We don't want to be on train tracks. Only when there is something very clear-cut that we are trying to create – a combination of visuals and music that, as it were, the two are part of the same idea – do we stick to a fairly close arrangement.

Is there a danger that, with so much going on visually, it can almost overshadow the music?

It's a balance, but we like a challenge. If this was



a band like Pink Floyd, you know, they are actually quite happy to be the soundtrack to the visuals, but that's not what we are about. Our ambition is that the show helps us to put the music across in a more powerful way. And if ever there was a situation where we felt it was overshadowing the music, we'd roll it back. So, ultimately we are in control of it. And there's no doubt in our minds as to what's most important. You haven't seen the show since the opening night and *already* things have changed radically, already so many things that we tried, we weren't happy with, and we changed them around. This thing is constantly evolving. Every night there's things that are different. Some things shine, some things don't. That's the nature of it, we want it to be a plan for the night and then we might even tear up the plan half-way through the show. There has to be that sense of jeopardy, and that sense that it's happening in the moment.

You opened the show in Barcelona with four songs from *No Line On The Horizon*, which I thought was brave – starting with 'Breathe'.

It was what we wanted to play first, and we thought it was a great opening. It just felt right. Once we had decided that 'Breathe' was the opening song, the rest of the tunes fell into place. I'm not saying it'll be like that for the whole tour, but it just felt like a true statement of intent for where we are at the moment as a band. It felt fresh, it felt real. And by the way, we may end up opening up with some old songs at a different time. It's very alive.

How important is the location in terms of determining a set-list? Would you be more inclined to play more material from *Achtung Baby* in Berlin?

It does affect it, definitely. Sometimes in subtle ways, some in very profound ways. In Italy, we bumped into the G8, which is starting in Italy today I think [Thursday, 9 July 2009]. And the fact that Berlusconi has basically reneged on, or failed to follow through on, promises made in terms of Italian development aid, inevitably ended up being referred to in the show, something that would totally never happen anywhere else. So those things then take the show in a different direction.

There were Michael Jackson references in Barcelona.

It's very current, it's very up-to-the-moment: the Michael Jackson references – that was spontaneous on the first night, you know, no one knew Bono was going to do that, and he has gone there a couple of times since in different ways with different songs. We did it last night. At the last minute we said we'd do 'Stuck in a Moment' as an acoustic song, and literally, it was half-way through the first verse I

realised that it had connected in some unconscious way – there were some Michael Jackson references in 'Desire' which had been the song before, another acoustic song and suddenly that sequence of songs had turned into a kind of Michael Jackson section. I'm not sure Bono realised it when we had done the set-list. It was kind of like it emerged and we just ran with it.

What are your thoughts on Michael Jackson's death?

It's terribly sad. I mean, it is sad for so many reasons. There is no doubting his incredible talent, and that I hope is what people will ultimately remember – just the great music he made. I wouldn't want to judge the guy, I don't know enough about his situation, but it does seem, as a casual observer, that he had huge problems and his own personal life was a bit of a mess, and that's really a shame.

Did you ever meet him?

Yeah, I met him a long, long time ago. I didn't spend much time with him, but he seemed like a real regular sort of guy at that time. But who knows? It might turn out to have been personal problems related to substance abuse. But he did seem to have a lot of strangeness going on there, which sort of overshadowed people's opinion of him for the last number of years.

You've written in the tour programme that you basically surrender to the music, and you have no thoughts in your head when you are playing – you become the music.

Ideally. Unfortunately, early on in a tour like this you are often struggling with technical things and stuff that's sort of taking you out of the music, but yeah, I would definitely aspire to that, and on a good night it's just the music and yourself and the U2 fans. And that's kind of when it's really happening.

Bono called the International Space Station from the stage in Barcelona; that's obviously not going to happen every night, is it?

No, no. We're hoping to do it again at some point. These guys are in synchronous orbit most of the time over different parts of the world, so the timing becomes impossible. We'll do it when we can. And they are as much into it as we are, which is great.

Impressive and all as it was, it didn't really work for me. It slowed the show down.

Yeah, I thought it went on a bit long, myself. But, you know, that's the sort of thing about our shows: sometimes you are going for something and you over-shoot the runway slightly. I remember the Sarajevo live link-ups that we did during the Zoo TV tour – *Zooropa*. Some nights it was just the most unbelievably powerful thing, and some nights it was just... you were like, "Enough already! Let's move

on!" There's always that chance that these things will not mesh with the rest of the night, but that's the fact that it's live.

Whose idea was it to go into space?

Bono's! Actually our good friend Guy Laliberté, the man behind Cirque de Soleil, is going to go to space himself, and we are looking forward to maybe trying to do a live link-up with Guy. If that happens, it would be amazing. I think hearing that he was going into space was the inspiration, but on another level, there is something quite profound about seeing the globe, seeing the Earth, from that perspective. We heard this story when we were recording *All That You Can't Leave Behind*; I can't remember which of the astronauts it was, but he was travelling back from one of the moon shots looking out of a little window, and he looked at the Earth... and he realised that he could cover it with his thumb, when he put his thumb up against the glass. And it was just that image of everything, absolutely everything being this little blue marble which you could cover with your thumb, that just seemed so big an idea, as small as the image was. Something about that experience is like the ultimate perspective on everything, so we've held onto that.

I was on Matt Cooper's *The Last Word* on Today FM defending your virtue the other day. A company called carbonfootprint.com had a go at U2, basically saying that the band could travel to Mars with all the energy that the tour will consume.

Well there's no doubt that it's substantial, and we would be the first to admit that. We are looking into ways to mitigate it, but there is no getting away from the fact that, from a carbon perspective, it is a costly thing. Certain things cannot, ultimately, be carbon neutral. It just doesn't work like that. So you have to ask the question, "do you not do it at all?" I guess we think that touring is something that reaches a lot of people and ultimately is very worthwhile, and if you look at the things to try and attack, I think that rock and roll tours, while they may be an easy target, there's much better things to target. I'd say most of the carbon produced from a tour is actually people going to the shows, and then you're into all kinds of questions; every single piece of entertainment or culture creates carbon because people have to travel to see it, so where do you draw the line?

In terms of the show, why choose to highlight the plight of Aung San Suu Ki?

It's very of-the-moment. She is going on trial any day. We have tried to draw attention to her for many years – since we were co-recipients of the Freedom

