

Everything I know about leading worship I learned from an Irish Rock Star.

By Aaron Niequist

In 1993, I tagged along with one of my friends to a U2 concert. Even though I wasn't much of a fan, I had heard a couple of their songs on the radio and thought it might be a good show. I wasn't prepared for what I would experience. . .

Bono just may be the greatest worship leader in history.

Some kind of supernatural group experience took place there in the LA Coliseum. We sang our lungs out and we stood in reverent awe and we raised our hands to Heaven. It was like the best church service I had ever been to. I almost hugged the drunk guy next to me.

What happened? How was he able to take 3-chord rock and roll, a bunch of video screens, and a giant mirror-ball lemon. . .and connect me with God? Why did I arrive wanting to buy a t-shirt, and leave wanting to change the world? How could something as throw-a-way as pop music connect me with the eternal?

I have a couple theories. . .

First, Bono harnesses the power of a group experience. It quickly became clear that the four members of U2 were only a part of the performance, and Bono invited us in every chance he could. It wasn't "listen to us play and then you clap," it was "let's create something beautiful and huge together!" And we did. Their concert turned into our concert, and the rock mega-stars became our backing band.

This gift must burn through the veins of every worship leader. We are artists, but our job is not simply to perform. We use our gifts to engage an audience, but not simply to entertain them. We are accompanists. We accompany the primary instruments, which are the voices of the community. This involves setting the vibe and musical foundation to leap from, being both easy to follow and great at following, helping serve the experience by knowing when to assert ourselves and when to get out of the way, and most importantly, playing in such a way that the music is inadequate without the community singing their hearts out. I often tell our worship band that if our rehearsal sounds complete on Thursday night, then it's too full. As good accompanists, we need to use great skill in crafting space for the main voices, which are not ours.

Second, Bono wrestles with, understands, and can articulate the nature of praise. He always uses stories and word pictures that widen and expand rather than reduce or neuter. He lifts up the stones and explores underneath, but he never tries to conquer such a deep and elusive mystery. This is an excerpt from his introduction to the book of Psalms, entitled "Elvis, the Bible, and Me" (New York: Grove Press, 1999):

"Anyway, I stopped going to churches and got myself into a different kind of religion. Don't laugh, that's what being in a rock 'n' roll band is, not pseudo-religion either... Showbusiness is Shamanism: Music is Worship; whether it's worship of women or their designer, the world or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire... the smoke goes upwards... to God or something you replace God with... usually your self."

Worship is an enormously wide idea that will take all of eternity to explore. And I think it's important to wrestle with it. However, in trying to figure out my role in the church, I've often stumbled trying to expand my job title of "worship leader" to fill this expansive idea. What began with earnest intentions kept ending up grandiose and over-inflated. The reality is that God has created many worship leaders – teachers, community, the bible, nature, pain, doubt, sights, sounds, smells – I'm just the one with a piano. And I get to play my little role with some songs. Musical worship is to Worship the way Q-tips are to cotton swabs. . .one brand of a much bigger thing.

Third, Bono pushes us to action. Is it awkward seeing a rock star shaking hands with George Bush? Yes. Is it odd seeing the lead singer of a band trading sunglasses with the Pope? Yes. Does Bono care? He doesn't seem to. He's too busy trying to change the world, and too busy trying to get all of us to join him. In the last couple years, Bono has crusaded on the behalf of an entire continent that is being devastated by AIDS. . .and not just with a couple rich-person benefit concerts. He's been touring the world – speaking, singing, writing and trying to shake those of us who "have" into doing something for those who "have not." And "calling people to active love" just may be the central role of a worship leader.

Read Amos 5:21-24. God unloads an intensely harsh condemnation on His people about how He hates their gatherings and detests their songs. Why? Did Israel fall into sexual immorality? Did they become too worldly? Did they hang with the wrong kinds of people or play the wrong kind of music? No. They forgot to take care of the poor among them. For God is the God of the poor and the oppressed. And yet after this scathing rebuke, He offered His people a path back to Him: "Let justice flow like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream."

I wonder if God feels similar pain today as He listens to our worship songs of good intention. Maybe He's fed up with hearing passionate promises about what we are going to do for Him, and He's anxiously waiting for us to get up and do it! How many times can a husband make a promise to his wife that he doesn't keep before the words move from a declaration of love to an infuriating insult? God's heart is for the poor and needy, and to love Him is to love what He loves. To follow Him is to join Him where He's at. And to worship Him is to offer all of ourselves, in heart and action, to His Revolution of redeeming the whole world. A couple verses that have helped me wrestle with this are Ex 23:9, Isa 1:15-17, Jer 22:15-16, Micah 6:8, Zech 7:8-12, Psalm 10:13-14, 17-18, Psalm 72:12-14, Matt 5:14-16, Matt 23:23, and James 1:27.

A few more words from the Irish prophet:

"I think God is very angry at the moment. . .Our age will be remembered. This moment in time will be remembered for three things: the war against terror, sure; the Internet, probably; and how we let an entire continent, Africa, burst into flames and stood around with water in cans. This is not acceptable."

"Christ's example is being demeaned by the church if they ignore the new leprosy, which is AIDS. The church is the sleeping giant here. If it wakes up to what's really going on in the rest of the world, it has a real role to play. If it doesn't, it will be irrelevant."

I've seen a handful of U2 concerts – some were mind-blowing and some were not. I've read a number of books about the band and published interviews with Bono – some were gripping and some were not. But with every word and note and smirk and pose, Bono seems to be desperately trying to lead us all upward in what we believe and how we live. Inspiring our hearts and igniting our feet. In other words. . .doing the work of a worship leader.