

# Music Review: U2's latest offers â€œgrace inside a soundâ€œ

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP)—“This is the most thoroughly Christian thing they’ve done yet.”

That was my initial reaction to the last two U2 albums in 2000 and 2004. In retrospect, that was just as true of the triad of albums U2 released in the 1990s, but I admit that wasn’t what I thought on first listen to them. Their nuanced irony required a few more listens and a good bit of rewarding theological reflection to get there.

Once again, my early impression of *No Line on the Horizon* has been, “This is the most thoroughly Christian thing they’ve done yet.”

*No Line on the Horizon* is the 12th studio album by the Irish rock band U2.



Like the last two albums, *No Line* is much more overt in its Christian rendering of the world, what with lyrics like “Justified until we die/You and I will magnify/Oh, the Magnificent” from the album’s second track. (So Bono is a fifth-point Calvinist. Who knew?) Yet what qualifies this album as thoroughly Christian is not so much its pervasive biblical/theological images as its overarching eschatological vision.

## Eschatology

For those uninitiated in my profession’s art of unclear communication, “eschatology” is the technical term for the division of theology that deals

with “last things,” from the Greek eschatos, “last,” and logos, “ordered thought” about something. But eschatology isn’t only about what happens at the end.

Baptist theologian James McClendon Jr. helpfully defined eschatology much more broadly: it’s “about what lasts; it is also about what comes last, and about the history that leads from the one to the other.”

In other words, eschatology has to do with God’s goals for all creation, from creation to consummation and everything in between, as well as our participation in what God is doing to realize these goals in a world in which they are manifestly not yet realized.

U2’s music has long occupied the tension between the present experience of what lasts— “all that you can’t leave behind”—and the present absence of its full realization—“I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

### **Earth is not yet Heaven**

The basic message of *No Line* is that earth is not yet heaven, and therefore the album summons us to “Get On Your Boots” and work toward the day when things will fully be on earth as they are in heaven—when heaven and earth will be indistinguishable, and there will at last be no line on the horizon.

Moving in that direction requires the triumph “of vision over visibility” (“Moment of Surrender”), an echo of an earlier formulation of the same insight: that the things that last and that come at the last constitute “a place that has to be believed to be seen” (“Walk On” from 2000’s *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*). It also requires an inner transformation wrought by a receptive hearing of the voice of God (“Unknown Caller”) and a faithful reception of the love of God which requires that one both “stand up” for it and “sit down” to receive it (“Stand Up Comedy”).



The central eschatological metaphor of No Line is the sound of the divine song, heard only by those who have the ears to hear it, yet unconsciously sought by everyone, for all people were created to hear and sing this song. Seven of the album's 11 songs invoke that metaphor in one way or another. Key expressions of it are the lines "Let me in the sound...meet me in the sound" from "Get On Your Boots," reprised at the beginning of "FEZ — Being Born," and the concluding declaration of "Breathe," "I've found grace inside a sound."

### **Discordant dimensions**

Within this framework, No Line also calls our attention to the discordant dimensions of our world. For me the album's highlight is "White As Snow," set as the dying thoughts of a soldier fatally wounded by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan to a melody loosely inspired by the medieval plainsong tune for the thoroughly eschatological hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The song's musical and narrative zenith, accompanied by crescendoing French horns, is the soldier's remembrance of his baptism, having received the forgiveness of "the lamb as white as snow." But he also remembers his post-baptismal life with regret, for neither his heart nor the hearts of others who have brought him, and the world, to this point have been "as white as snow."

The album's final song "Cedars of Lebanon," cast as the world-weary random musings of a foreign correspondent, closes with a question addressed to God—"Where are you in the cedars of Lebanon?"—and a warning: "Choose your enemies carefully 'cause they will define you/Make them interesting 'cause in some ways they will mind you." We're still asking the question voiced earlier in the album: "Where might we find the lamb as white as snow?"

The theologian in me can't resist pointing out that Karl Barth, who

incidentally shared a May 10 birthday with Bono, likely would have resonated with this couplet from “Stand Up Comedy” in light of his aversion to rational apologetics: “But while I’m getting over certainty/Stop helping God across the road like a little old lady.” And the laughing theologian probably would have chuckled in agreement with the assertion of “Get On Your Boots” that “laughter is eternity if joy is real.”

Did I forget to mention that the sound U2 is now hearing and inviting others to hear sounds really, really good?

*Steven R. Harmon is associate professor of divinity at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala.*