

Minister Says Rock Group U2 Preaches a Solid Christian Message

Presbyterian Steve Stockman publicly defends the faith and mission of the Irish rockers in the new book Walk On

They're one of the most successful live musical acts in entertainment history. One of their albums was voted the greatest of all time. Their vocalist has been named "European of the Year." And for the last 20 years they have been slipping the name of Jesus into the conversation of an entire generation.

But most Christians have misunderstood and criticized the faith of famed Irish rockers U2, states a new book about the group and its spiritual side.

Using research gathered from the public domain, Northern Ireland minister, writer and broadcaster Steve Stockman has written Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2 (Relevant Books) "to challenge the Church—not to challenge U2."

In spite of the generally skeptical eye Christians have fixed on U2—the Dublin-bred foursome of Paul "Bono" Hewson, David "The Edge" Evans, Adam Clayton and Larry Mullen applauds the band for its spiritual anthems and political activism, while chastising the body of Christ for not supporting them. During the 1980s, U2 became the most widely followed rock band in the world, and their staying power is evident still from the four Grammy awards they received in February, which included best Rock Album.

The band's members may have indulged in smoking, drinking and swearing, but they also have pursued a radical biblical agenda amid a normally shallow and hedonistic rock culture, Stockman claims.

"Christians have missed what U2 were doing," Stockman told Charisma.

The band's Christian roots are a fixed truth in rock canon but an unsettled point of debate among evangelicals. "Christians in general have been the doubters," Stockman said.

Growing skepticism among fellow believers led in part to the Presbyterian minister's writing his "spiritual companion" to U2's career. But he's also an avid fan and has peppered sermons with references to the group.

Florida-based publisher Relevant tracked down Stockman and asked him to write a book. Within three weeks, Stockman had penned 35,000 words. The importance of his writing project was underscored when he met a fan who had started an Alpha evangelism course because, as she put it, "You can't understand U2 until you understand their faith."

"I realized there's stuff that people don't know [about them]," he said.

Stockman cites the band's spiritual highlights—including, after their formation in 1978, their early days with the Shalom fellowship in Dublin when they recorded the albums *Boy* (1980) and *October* (1981) between Bible studies and revival meetings. The song "Gloria" (*October*) thrilled Christians with the lines: "O Lord, if I had anything / Anything at all / I'd

give it to You.”

The October sessions were rich with worship. “I don’t think anyone has made an album that makes you want to worship in that euphoric way,” Stockman said.

Everything changed for the band after the release of the album *War* (1983). With the album’s political-rock song “Sunday Bloody Sunday” U2 gazed out from their charismatic cocoon and expressed their yearning for peace in Northern Ireland. “Many Christians were suspicious of the band’s political awareness,” Stockman writes of the church’s reaction to the record.

Becoming one of the busiest acts on the planet, they had less time for formal churchgoing. But behind the scenes they maintained “spiritual dialogue” with friends such as American musician T-Bone Burnett and Australian preacher John Smith. However, their No. 1 single “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (1987, *The Joshua Tree*) didn’t exactly bless the church, either.

Stockman said of Christians’ reactions to the song: “They concluded their case that anyone who had not found what they were looking for could not have found Christ.” Defending the track, he believes it actually offers “a concise creed of redemption.”

If evangelicals had headaches about that, they had heart attacks when Bono dressed as a devil on the group’s Zoo TV Tour. Challenged about his horned persona, Bono referred to C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* and added, “That’s where I got the whole philosophy of ‘mock the devil, and he will flee from you.’”

Stockman brings readers up-to-date with U2's most recent album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (2000), and accompanying Elevation Tour, which saw Bono publicly thanking God and leading thousands in choruses of "Hallelujah." Stockman hopes his book will help set the record straight about U2's spiritual walk and encourage Christians to learn how to interpret the arts.

"Out there, there's a conversation—and Christians need to be involved," he said, echoing the words of rock journalist Steve Turner.

Veteran rock musician Laurie Mellor defended the band's mission as long ago as 1987 in his own analysis of the Christian music scene *A Desert Song* (Slim Volumes).

"U2 saw their music as prophecy for those outside the Church," he wrote.

Clive Price in England