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The release last month of the highly informative DVD "Achtung Baby: A Classic Album Under Review" (MVD) helps us understand his journey between these two points. 1991's "Achtung," as the panel of journalists, authors, and professional U2-watchers collected for the hourlong program all agree, represents the moment at which U2 stopped chasing the sacred and dived wide-eyed into the profane. The cowboy-hatted breast-beating and the rock 'n' roll classicism of its "Joshua Tree"/"Rattle and Hum" period were ditched in favor of ambiguity and the nightcrawling Euro-vibe of Iggy Pop's "The Idiot" and David Bowie's "Low" (both recorded, like "Achtung," at Berlin's Hansa Studios). Moral stridor was out: Now we had the creeping complexity of "Until the End of the World," in which Bono sings in a voice that could belong either to a date-rapist plucked at by his conscience or to Judas Iscariot. Onstage, sucking on a cheroot, he would make theatrical sorties into low-grade diabolism, playing now a demon, now a pervert, and now an aging lounge singer at the end of his rope. When a devout fan expressed anxiety at these new manifestations, he advised her to go and read "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis -- a satirical work of Christian apologetics in which the author takes the part of a devil. "Achtung," in other words, was no less religious than any other U2 album.

The critics on the DVD explore the disjuncture between "Achtung" and "The Joshua Tree," but the more interesting comparison is with "October," which was recorded 10 years earlier in Dublin. My favorite U2 album: Ringing, world-spurning post-punk, defiant of subtlety and produced under huge spiritual pressure. The pressure was real: Fellow celebrants in Shalom, the charismatic Christian group to which Bono, the Edge, and drummer Larry Mullen belonged, were claiming to have received a prophecy -- a request from the Lord that U2 renounce their music for him. Bono had also lost all his lyrics before going into the studio, and was obliged to write new ones on the spot. The result is the most naked, rapturous, imperiled, and queerly-lit album U2 would ever make, a seizing at God that dragged their still-unwieldy music clanking behind it. By the time of "Achtung Baby" such accidental intensities were no longer possible or desirable. Everything, right down to the little red horns that Bono wore onstage when playing the demon/trickster MacPhisto, had been thought through. A different, more worldly creative calculus was at work, one that would serve Bono well as he began to attend summits and glad hand world leaders. As Larry Mullen once said of his singer: "He'll have lunch with the devil himself if it gets him what he needs."

- James Parker