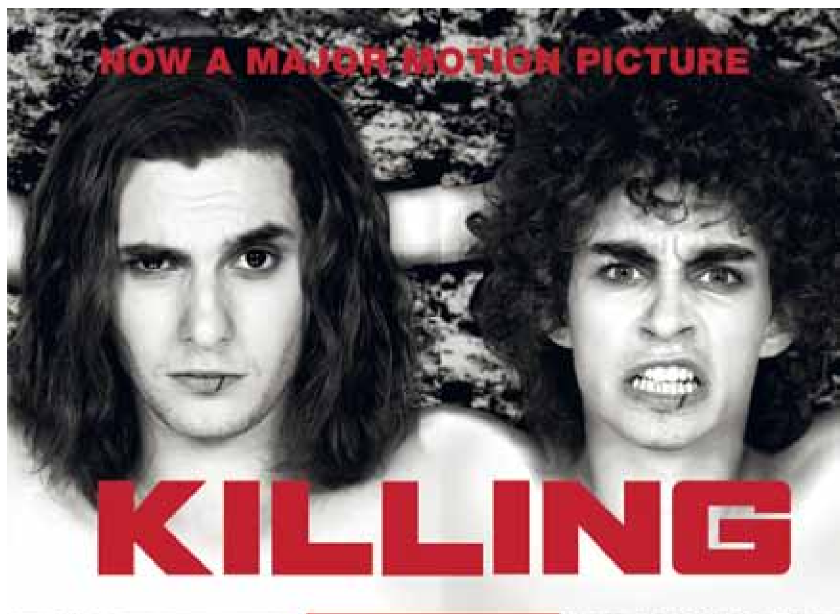

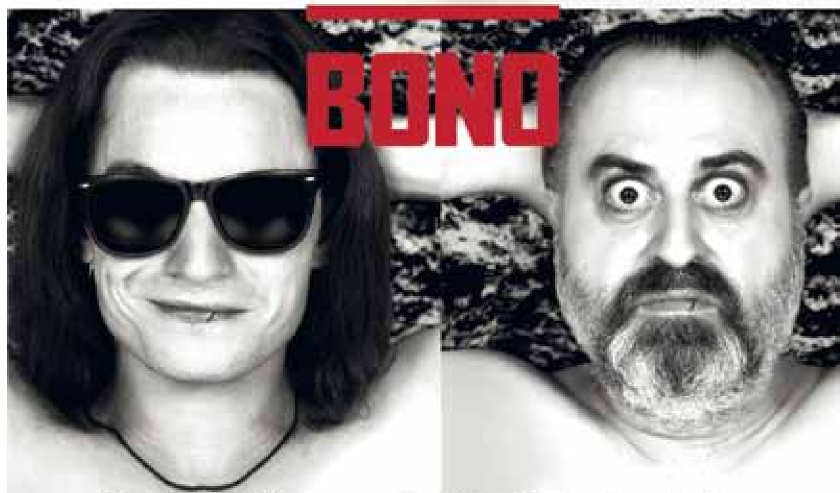

'The best book I have ever read about trying to make it in the music business' Elton John

Neil McCormick

Formerly published as *I Was Bono's Doppelgänger*

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I did have a life before U2.

In common, I suppose, with many children of the late-twentieth century, my earliest memories are of television. Specifically, in my case, a five-minute afternoon show for mother and child called *Bill and Ben, The Flowerpot Men*. I won't bore you with a detailed description of plot and premise. Everything you really need to know is encapsulated by that particularly prosaic title. One day, feeling the time had arrived to discuss my career plans, I solemnly informed my mother that when I grew up I was going to star in *Bill and Ben*.

My mother affectionately explained that my idols were actually puppets. But I was way ahead of her. 'I know,' I petulantly insisted. 'I'm going to be a puppet too.'

She just didn't get it. You see, what I really wanted was to be inside that magic tube, looking out, with all of my little friends watching my every move, laughing and applauding. I was only an innocent child but I had already been bitten by the Bug, that most sinister and pernicious creation of the mass-media-saturated modern era. You must know what Bug I'm talking about. It breeds in celluloid and vinyl, crawls across cinema screens, rides the airwaves and mingles with the beams of light emanating from cathode tubes, infecting vulnerable egos with delusions of grandeur. And it had me in its grip.

I wanted the camera to confirm my existence. I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to be a contender. I wanted to be . . .

. . . a Flowerpot Man.

Over the years my career plans changed, but the fundamental motivation remained the same. To paraphrase David Bowie, a much later influence of my psyche but no less damaging: fame was the name of the game.

My family moved from Scotland to Ireland in 1971. The Beatles had broken up, a new brand of so-called glam rock was in the ascendant with T-Rex, Slade and Sweet and the pop charts seemed to be crammed with singalong gobbledegook with titles like 'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep' and 'Bridget the Midget' but the truth is that none of this was of much significance to me. At the age of ten, I regarded the music business with a healthy disdain, an attitude which, had I managed to maintain it for another twenty years or so, would have spared me a great deal of personal pain.

While my older sister, Stella, watched *Top of the Pops* with something akin to religious veneration, I saw myself as having much loftier tastes. I liked Frank Sinatra, a mature artist who could act as well as sing and never wore eyeliner. My younger brother, Ivan, was a willing ally in the hugely entertaining sport of tormenting my sister about whatever teenage idol currently occupied centre stage in her fantasies. But I began to harbour deep suspicions about Ivan's allegiances when he started wearing tartan trousers with turn-ups in the style of the Bay City Rollers.

The last of the McCormick siblings was our little sister, Louise, seven years my junior, who was too young to have an opinion on the great Sinatra/pop schism (or, at least, too low down the family pecking order to have an opinion that counted). Louise listened to whatever anyone else played and seemed to like it, even tolerating the Aran-sweater-wearing, kilted folkies from the Scottish highlands whose tunes my father favoured and the collections of classical highlights my mother would occasionally try to foist on us in the name of education.

Apart from musical differences, a symptom of a sometimes unpleasantly intense sibling rivalry, ours was, by and large, a happy family. I report this with no pleasure whatsoever, for reasons that I hope will become clear. Both my parents came from staunchly working-class, British-coal-mining backgrounds but my father had (through a process of apprenticeship, night studies and endless exams) hauled us up to the comfortable

plateau of middle-classness (to which my mother, in particular, had taken like one to the semi-detached born). Having started on the factory floor at fifteen years old, Dad had become a qualified engineer before being fast-tracked for senior management in car manufacturer Chrysler. We relocated to Ireland for his latest promotion, moving from a bungalow in a dreary Scottish town to a five-bedroom, two-storey house in Howth, a beautiful fishing village on a peninsula at the northern tip of Dublin. It was quite an idyllic place to grow up – fields and forests bordered by the sea, with a city within easy reach.

I have to say that my parents treated us children exceptionally well, apparently wishing upon their offspring the education, opportunities, financial security and, crucially, freedom of expression and artistic fulfilment that had never been an option in their own childhoods. I have often complained about this to them.

'Do you think we should have made you suffer more?' my mother tuts whenever I essay my theory that family hardship is an essential ingredient in the otherwise almost intangible metaphysics of fame, acting as a kind of psychic spur on the drive for stardom, especially in the music business. Think about it: how many well-balanced rock stars can you name? From the shared grief over the premature deaths of their mothers that united John Lennon and Paul McCartney to the divorce that rocked the childhood world of Kurt Cobain and the paternal abandonment that fired up the Gallagher brothers, the family backgrounds of rock idols are littered with misery. In particular, there is something about an absence of parental love that drives some individuals to entirely give themselves over to audiences, seeking out the approval of mass applause not just for glory but also as a balm for their tortured souls.

Perhaps, like my mother, you think I am being melodramatic; but while I was comfortable in the bosom of my family, positively revelling in the sense of freedom and almost unlimited possibility I felt in those early years in my newly adopted

country, over in another part of Dublin a boy I had yet to meet was having his world turned upside down.

Paul Hewson – the boy who would become Bono – was fourteen when his mother died, suddenly and unexpectedly, in September 1974. He grew up, with his older brother, Norman, and father, Bob, in a household of men numbed by grief, unable to share their feelings. It is something we have talked about over the years. 'You don't become a rock star unless you've got a lot missing somewhere – that's becoming increasingly obvious to me,' Bono once admitted during another rambling call down a transatlantic phone line in the middle of a US stadium tour. 'If you were of sound mind you wouldn't need 70,000 people a night telling you they loved you to feel normal. It's sad, really. It's the God-shaped hole. Everyone's got one but some are blacker and wider than others. When you've been abandoned, when someone's been taken away from you, when you feel like a motherless child, the hole opens up. I don't think you ever fill it. You can try to fill it up with time, by living a full life, but when things are silent you can still hear the hissing.'

For Bono, the opening up of the God-shaped hole was the defining moment in his life, pushing him in two directions simultaneously: towards the emotional sanctuary of rock'n'roll and towards the salvation promised by a profound faith in his maker. If I had anything resembling a God-shaped hole, I think it would have been God (Him, Her or Itself) that was missing.

I was raised as a churchgoing Catholic boy, and my gradual estrangement from the comforts of faith was a long and torturously painful process (as much, I suspect, for those around me as it was for myself). At seven years old, I served a brief tenure as an altar boy in the local church. For me, the altar was a stage, the worshippers merely a captive audience, but my scene-stealing posturing during service did not go down well with the priest, who quietly took me aside after a particularly melodramatic dispensation of the Holy Host and suggested that I might not be cut out for the job. (As it turned out, neither

was he: some months later he eloped with a member of the congregation.)

My faith was to be seriously tested by our move to Ireland – still a rigidly Catholic country, with little separation between Church and State. At the tender age of ten, I fell into the grip of the Christian Brothers, an order of repressed sadists who operated a policy of beating the fear of God into you. Violence was deemed a healthy way for boys to occupy their time. Certainly, the pupils in St Fintan's Primary School did little else but fight, usually under the approving supervision of their teachers. At breaktimes the playground was a seething mass of young bodies gripped in a variety of wrestling positions. I think I spent most of that first year in a headlock.

With spirits low, my parents made the decision to remove all their children from the clutches of the various religious orders (Stella was being educated by nuns up the road) and install us in a private school of excessively liberal inclinations. In its own way, this proved every bit as ill judged. Sutton Park was full of rich kids whom no one could discipline for fear that their parents would withdraw their fees. Needless to say, I loved it.

There was no religious education in my new school. Acts of worship were reserved for music appreciation classes, to which pupils were encouraged to bring in their own records. Our teacher would play us a piece of Mahler, which we would listen to in bored silence, and then it would be the turn of someone in class to get up and stick on an Alice Cooper or Mott the Hoople record, every aspect of which would be furiously debated while the teacher rolled his eyes in despair.

When it came to my turn to bring in a record, I did not exactly have a lot of choice. I only owned one single, Terry Jacks' number-one hit 'Seasons in the Sun'. It remains a source of embarrassment to me that the first record I ever bought should be something so trite. I wish I could claim, like most rock critics, that I was into the Velvet Underground before I even learned to read. But there you have it. In 1974, this maudlin ballad of a dying man bidding farewell to those he has loved appealed to

the tragic self-dramatist in me. All together now: 'We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun . . .'

To my horror, my selection did not go down at all well among the young bohemians in Sutton Park, some of whom groaned loudly while others sang along with the chorus in silly voices. My teacher praised the song's melody and economy of story-telling, which only made my peers' mockery worse. I felt my cheeks burning with humiliation when he decided to spin the B-side, a sentimental country song about an old lady who couldn't feed her dog because there were no bones left in the cupboard. I was suddenly confronted with the sheer banality of my musical tastes. Terry Jacks did not even wear make-up, for goodness' sake. I was thirteen now, and there were no excuses for being so uncool. When I got home, I contemplated the seven inches of black vinyl with a sense of intense shame. Stella, who had always hated the song, finally put me out of my misery. She took the single from my hands and with a nail file proceeded to gouge an enormous scratch across the record's surface before coolly replacing it in its paper bag and handing it back to me. 'There,' she said, with assured finality. I didn't even protest. I simply returned the scratched record to the rack, never to be played again.

The next single I bought was Ralph McTell's 'Streets of London'. Would I never learn?

The McCormicks liked to think of themselves as a musical family, although our instrumental skills left something to be desired. My grandfather would proudly proclaim that he had never had a lesson in his life as he regaled us with near-unrecognizable organ renditions of 'Amazing Grace' and popular classical pieces replete with false starts and bum notes. He was the first in a mercifully short line of self-taught musicians. My father learned to play guitar by following a series on television, frequently blaming his inability to play a complete piece from beginning to end on the fact that he had missed episodes two and five. My mother, meanwhile, shrugged aside the minor handicap of being tone deaf to apply herself to mastering the out-of-tune piano that occupied

our dining room. Our regular family sing-songs were not for the faint-hearted.

Ivan was the first to apply himself to learning to play an instrument properly, attending guitar lessons from an early age. While at Sutton Park he formed his first group, Electronic Wizard. They made their debut at a lunchtime concert in the school, kicking off with an original composition, the opening couplet of which I still vividly remember: 'Electronic Wizard is our name / Playing electric music is our game'. This bold assertion was somewhat undermined by the fact that the quartet's line-up consisted of three acoustic guitars and a snare drum. I swiftly concluded that Ivan's musical ambitions represented no significant threat to my plan to become the first famous McCormick.

I wanted to be an actor and, while waiting to be discovered by Hollywood, I landed the lead role in the school's annual end-of-year theatrical production. In 1975, at only fourteen years old, I was to make my debut as Hamlet. I prepared by walking around reading poetry, muttering to no one in particular and generally affecting intense self-absorption, although I doubt anybody but me noticed a great change in my behaviour. I even started spending time in the cemetery that bordered the rear of the school, which was where, two weeks before the end of term, disaster struck. Posing dramatically on a cemetery wall, I lost my balance and plummeted to the gravestones below, breaking my ankle quite badly. My drama teacher visited me in hospital, where I was lying in traction. I gamely tried to persuade him that I could play the part on crutches.

'The show must go on, sir,' I insisted.

'It will, Neil,' he cruelly replied. 'One of the other boys will play Hamlet.'

This was not the first such incident during my time at Sutton Park. I had previously received seven stitches after someone struck me over the head with a chair during a fight in the library. And the Mayor of Dublin's son, a classmate of mine, had blown the skin off his face in a bomb-making experiment involving gunpowder extracted from fireworks while his friends looked on

shouting words of encouragement. When a pupil was expelled for a sexual assault in a classroom my parents, fearing that it was only a matter of time before one of their offspring ended up dead or in jail, decided it was time for us to change schools once again.

Thus, at the beginning of the 1975 autumn term, Stella, Ivan and I lined up for assembly at Mount Temple. A progressive establishment that had opened only three years before, it was the first State-subsidized, co-educational, non-denominational school in Dublin. A thin, rigid old man who identified himself as the headmaster, John Brooks, delivered a speech about enabling us all to fulfil our potential. Standing among a throng of unfamiliar faces, I felt nervous yet optimistic about the future. Perhaps, down these dusty corridors, my destiny would, at last, begin to unfold.

If some time traveller from the future had told me then that, one day, Mount Temple Comprehensive would become a legendary institution in the annals of Irish showbusiness, I would not have been remotely surprised. And if they had informed me that among this generation of students were four individuals who would become the most famous Irish exports since Guinness, why, I would have shrugged bashfully before looking around at my schoolmates to try to work out who were the other three.

2

Paul Hewson was in my sister's class, a year ahead of me, but we soon established something that was more than a nodding acquaintance if less than a friendship, falling into conversation at choir practise and morning assembly and during brief encounters as we made our way to separate classes. It was a passing relationship fuelled by one characteristic we have always had in common: a capacity to talk about anything as if we were experts on the subject, no matter how limited our actual knowledge.

My rapport with Paul did not much impress my sister, who was proprietorial about such matters and did not think I should be fraternizing with any of her contemporaries. Indeed, in normal circumstances, there tended to be little socializing between pupils from different years. When you are young, even a year in age difference is usually perceived as an unbridgeable chasm. But, long before the days of his A-list celebrity, Paul was already something of a star in the school corridor, known to one and all.

Even now, I think of Bono as the Man Who Knows Everyone. His visage is inescapable in modern media. Open a newspaper or magazine and there he is, standing shoulder to shoulder with world leaders and political agitators, poets and pop stars, show-business legends and flavours of the month. I've seen him pictured with his arms around presidents, glad-handing prime ministers, quaffing wine with Nobel Prize winners and swapping sunglasses with the Pope. Mention his name to movie and music stars and you are almost guaranteed to hear an amusing anecdote about their friend Bono, with a coda about what a nice guy he is.

He was always a gregarious charmer, loping about Mount Temple like a stray dog, sniffing out interesting conversations and activities, making sure he was part of whatever was going on. There was a lot of mischief in his smile and he had a stubborn,

jaw-jutting, bull-headed streak that emerged whenever he felt put upon, but at his core there was a tangibly gentle, compassionate aspect that made him popular with girls (who always seemed to be fluttering about) and tolerant of younger pupils, such as myself. You felt honoured when Paul spoke to you.

He could often be found hanging out in our common room because Paul was engaged in a vigorous, amorous pursuit of Alison Stewart, one of the most beautiful and universally admired girls in our year. Alison had thick, black hair, smooth, olive skin, dark, warm eyes and deliciously curled lips. Being a hormonally charged fifteen-year-old boy, I could not help but notice these things. She was also smart, kind, good-humoured, strong-willed and, frankly, way out of my league. Actually, at that stage in my adolescent development, pretty much any member of the opposite sex seemed out of my league. But with some, at least, you felt you might have half a chance. Alison had a sort of aura of impermiability about her. I never really felt she belonged in the same world as an ungainly youth like me. On principle, I was against older boys going out with girls in our class, since their seniority and bullish air of experience seemed to grant them unfair advantage, but Alison and Paul seemed to fit. He wooed her over the course of a long year, until, when you saw them nestle intimately among the stark arrangement of chairs and lockers in the common room, it became apparent that they were an item.

One of our principal topics of conversation at that time was God (the existence or non-existence thereof); and, indeed, this was to remain a subject of vigorous debate between us over the next twenty-five years. My personal problems with the deity had not subsided, but my confidence in challenging the religious order imposed by Irish society was growing daily. To be fair, religious education at Mount Temple was a very different proposition than under the Christian Brothers. A consequence of it being the only non-denominational State school in mainly Catholic Ireland was that most pupils were drawn from Dublin's Protestant minority. The school itself, however, toed no sectarian line, offering RE classes characterized by a kind of woolly Christian liberalism,

presided over by a well-meaning but – as far as I was concerned – drippily ineffective young teacher named Sophie Shirley. There would be Bible readings and class discussions in which Jesus took on the character of a beatific hippie while God seemed to be personified as an avuncular old geezer who only wanted the best for his extended family – if that was the case, I wondered, why was I being kept awake at night wondering if the torments of Hell awaited me when I died? I would fire this and related questions at my long-suffering teacher but I never received satisfactory answers, just platitudes about Jesus loving me.

While the school's official policy on religious matters seemed nebulous at best, there was a curious, almost fundamentalist, born-again style subculture among a section of pupils known as the Christian Movement. Loosely organized in an unofficial capacity by Miss Shirley, they held regular prayer meetings to which a sign on the door announced that everyone was invited. Everyone except me, that was. One day I stopped by to see what was going on and was informed by a literally holier-than-thou classmate (one of Miss Shirley's leading disciples) that my confrontational approach to matters of the spirit meant I would not be welcome at their mysterious jamboree.

'That's very Christian of you,' I commented as he barred my way at the door.

'Ah now, Neil, don't be like that,' said my flustered classmate. 'You know you'd only sit at the back making trouble.' Which was, to be fair, my intention, but I still felt it hypocritical not to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Excluded from an organization I had no intention of joining, I made it my business to antagonize them at every opportunity. The thing that really perplexed me, and indeed intellectually infuriated me, was that the group's members included many of my closest friends, not to mention some of the most attractive girls and coolest guys in the school. Paul and Alison occasionally attended the meetings, where they apparently studied the Gospels, unencumbered by secular ritual, and found solace, harmony and truth there. Yet when I read these same books I found nothing

but illogic and contradiction, fairytales passed off as history. The apostle I identified most with was Doubting Thomas. While his scepticism about the appearance of the risen Christ was presented to us as a weakness of character, I always thought that insisting on poking his fingers through his ghostly leader's stigmata was the only sensible course of action under the exceedingly strange circumstances.

I was genuinely baffled as to how such a dynamic and evidently intelligent individual as Paul Hewson could be so committed to these ancient myths. He never became infuriated by my regular challenges to his convictions, however, but would always indulge my penchant for argument. 'I like a good fight' was one of his mantras. 'It's good to ask questions,' he told me once. He would listen to my barrage of misgivings and criticisms of Christianity in all its guises and try to persuade me that the leap of faith required to open yourself up to God was worth it. 'When you look around,' he insisted, 'you see the oceans, you see the sun, you see a storm, a beautiful girl; don't you think there must be something above man? Apart from women?!?!' He would keep coming back to the issue of faith, although he himself was not immune to doubt. He didn't like organized religion or empty ritual and seemed to be engaged in a struggle to quell his own demons. Paul had a temper which could suddenly flare up, his face going red with rage, although I never felt it directed towards me. In the aftermath of his mother's death the year before, there had, apparently, been little explosions in class, with tables being tipped over and chairs kicked across the room. He told me once that there was a period of two weeks about which he could remember nothing. He had a total blank. He was undergoing some kind of existential crisis and almost buckled under the psychological pressure. 'I faced ideas of suicide,' he admitted. 'I was very unhappy; my mind was speeding.'

The school's response had been exemplary. Paul was told he could attend whatever classes he wanted, could come and go as it suited him until he found his feet again. One teacher in particular made himself available to talk and listen: Jack Heaslip, a coun-

sellor to the pupils and responsible for overseeing classes in career guidance and social issues. Heaslip was a gentle, thoughtful, soft-spoken, bearded man with strong spiritual leanings, who would eventually leave teaching to become a Protestant minister. Now Paul evidently had some strong childhood experience of 'otherness', a sense that there was something bigger than mankind. He once told me he had been full of questions about existence and had called out, as he put it, and a voice answered from inside. But it had not been enough to change his life. 'I just wandered on,' he said. 'I refused to believe in God. Why should I? I'd go to church and there just seemed to be people there, singing psalms of glory but they didn't seem to feel anything – it seemed all wrong.'

The death of his mother was undoubtedly what tipped the balance. 'It shocked me into the insignificance of human life,' he said. 'One minute you can be alive, the next you're gone. I could not accept that people would just disappear. If life meant being on the earth for sixty or seventy years, I'd rather go now!' It is an argument that never impressed me. The notion that there has to be a God because there's no point otherwise is emotive rather than rational. But I hear myself saying this and I can see Bono gently smiling, chiding me about my preference for logic over faith. Somehow Paul had made a huge leap of faith and found himself standing on a rock of belief. He didn't have to question the past. He didn't have to let his own mind chase him round in circles of torment. He could pick himself up and move forward. God, in a sense, became the defining ground to his character.

Oddly enough, my RE teacher was unable to demonstrate quite the same sense of equable conviction. I would sit at the back of the class, flicking through a Bible, seeking out anomalies to bring to her attention. Miss Shirley would be in the middle of some happy-clappy sermon when my hand would shoot up. 'Miss! Miss!' She would visibly stiffen while my fellow denizens of the back row stifled their giggles.

'Yes, Neil?'

She had a way of saying my name that conveyed both long-suffering irritation and nervous apprehension. I never got the

impression that she much enjoyed the cut and thrust of scriptural debate. One day, faced with another unanswerable contradiction from the good book on which she had based her life's work, she simply burst into tears. We all sat staring at her in stunned silence, a few of my more devout classmates casting dirty looks in my direction. Miss Shirley eventually managed to control herself enough to say, 'If you don't want to be here, Neil, you should feel free to spend these periods in the library.'

Well, cast thee out, Satan! I didn't know whether to feel triumphant or disappointed, because I did actually enjoy the hurly-burly of these classes, where I got to pit my sceptical wits against a member of the religious establishment, however lowly. On the other hand, a free library period every week was not to be sniffed at. I gathered up my books and made for the door. Whereupon the malcontents from the back row started sticking up their hands and asking if they could go too. 'Anyone who wants to spend RE in the library should feel free to do so,' declared Miss Shirley sharply.

One by one we filed out of the class, leaving a rather forlorn-looking teacher preaching to the converted, all six of them.

I spent a lot of time in the library, and not just because I was a voracious reader who had been dismissed from RE classes. I was also excused from Gaelic, which was a relief: under the nationalistic ordinances of the era, if you failed your Irish exams you failed everything.

The library is where I became properly acquainted with Dave Evans, the boy who would become known to the world as iconic guitar hero, musical boffin and the coolest bald man in rock'n'roll: the Edge. Having been born in London of Welsh parents, Dave had also managed to wangle his way out of Irish classes. Though his family had relocated to Malahide, north of Dublin, when Dave was aged one, so strictly speaking he should have been trying to get to grips with the ancient language of Eire along with the rest of the poor native suckers, Dave somehow convincingly masqueraded as a Welshman, born and bred.

I have to say, there was nothing particularly Edgy about Dave

in those days. He had hair, a big, dark mop of it as I recall, but this would not have been considered worthy of note at the time. We all had hair, most of it pomped up in appalling, blow-dried seventies bouffants that made our heads look twice the size they actually were. Dave was quiet and somewhat studious, more inclined to use his library time to do his homework than to sit and argue with me about whatever was the latest controversial concept percolating in my hyperactive brain. I remember him being respectful to adults, poised and serious, but with a quirky and sometimes cutting sense of humour. We were civil rather than intimate. I was probably too rebellious and argumentative for his disposition, while, for my part, I felt intimidated by his perpetual air of intellectual superiority. I felt certain that he took a dim view of many of my antics, such as my prank of loosening the library bookshelves so that they would collapse whenever somebody returned a weighty volume. Dave's scepticism towards me was probably not much helped by the fact that he held strong religious beliefs and was close to the school's Christian Movement, with whom I, for some reason, had a bad reputation.

Dave and I were rivals for the affections of certain schoolmates of the female persuasion. He caused me considerable torment when he succeeded in snogging Denise McIntyre, the unwitting object of my adoration, whom I made a point of sitting next to in most classes. My distress when Denise blithely informed me of their brief encounter was only mildly mollified by her appraisal of my rival as a 'sloppy kisser'.

Adam Clayton arrived at Mount Temple in 1976 and made an immediate impact. There was his dress sense for one thing. The school did not have a uniform policy but among the pullovers and anoraks that passed for teen fashion in Dublin in the late seventies Adam's long Afghan coat with shaggy trimmings and decorative stitched flowers certainly stood out. He would, from time to time, sport a kaftan beneath this beloved garment and went through a phase of wearing a yellow workman's helmet on top of his mop of blond curls.

Adam was a gangly, upper-middle-class English boy with an

insouciant line in *faux* sophistication that seemed to implicitly suggest he had already 'been there, seen that, done it' at the age of not-so-sweet sixteen. He had certainly been to more places and seen and done more than most of his contemporaries at Mount Temple, arriving at school fresh from a holiday in Pakistan, where he had hung out with hippies, smoked joints and engaged in a torrid romantic affair (or so he claimed). Adam had a rebellious, confrontational attitude towards authority that was only mildly disguised by his broad smile and impeccable manners. He carried a flask of coffee around with him, from which he would pour himself cups during lessons. When asked by exasperated teachers what he thought he was up to, he would politely explain that he was having a cup of coffee, always remembering to add 'sir' or 'miss' where appropriate. Adam was unfailingly courteous but determined to go his own way – which was often straight to detention.

The last of the future superstars was Larry Mullen. He was in the year below mine, and was a handsome, self-contained blond kid who, at that stage, simply did not register on any of our consciousnesses. But Larry was the start of it all.

In autumn 1976, during my second year at Mount Temple, a notice appeared on the board in the Mall, the corridor that ran the length of the principal school building where we used to hang out. 'Drummer looking for musicians to form band. Contact Larry Mullen, third year.' At thirteen, my brother was a year below Larry, but, as the proud possessor of a Teisco Stratocaster-copy electric guitar, Ivan was invited to audition. On Saturday 25 September 1976, he turned up at Larry's modest semi-detached house in Artane along with Paul, Adam, Dave and his elder brother, Dick Evans.

So that's Ivan McCormick, right? Despite spending most of his life as a musician, being present at the early rehearsals for the group that would become U2 is Ivan's sole claim to anything approaching fame. And then a sloppy biographer handed it to his older brother, robbing him of even this footnote in rock history. So I am happy to have this opportunity to set the record straight.

My brother was the loser who let superstardom slip through his careless fingers, not me.

The assembled ranks of would-be rock stars crowded into the Mullens' kitchen to discuss their plans over tea and crackers. It was, as Ivan recalls, quickly agreed by everyone present that they were ready and willing to form a group. The names of groups such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Fleetwood Mac – all of whom Ivan had only the faintest conception of – were bandied about as worthy influences. Ivan felt nervous and out of his depth, being by some way the youngest person present, but his trump card was that he had the most handsome guitar, clean and modern with a bright white and red body, which everyone admired. Dave Evans, meanwhile, had a small white acoustic which his mother had bought second-hand for the princely sum of £1 (without strings). But, using Ivan's electric, Dave demonstrated that he could play the solo from Irish rock hero Rory Gallagher's 'Blister on the Moon', which put him in pole position for the role of lead guitarist.

His brother, Dick, was the eldest, at seventeen. He had left school the previous year and, as if to signify his adult status, sported an outcrop of facial hair which he unconvincingly attempted to pass off as a beard. He had brought along a strange-looking object with a body shape that was apparently supposed to resemble a swan in flight, hand-painted bright yellow. Dick had constructed this instrument himself in the shed at the bottom of his garden, following instructions in an issue of *Everyday Electronics* magazine. The resulting instrument sounded about as convincing as it looked but at least Dick could play chords and hold down a rhythm. This was more than could be said for Paul, who also had a big, battered acoustic which he tackled with energy and gusto rather than anything approaching skill or finesse. But Paul made up for his lack of musical skills with his sense of passion and conviction, already talking as if they were a band and not just an ill-sorted gathering of schoolboys.

With four guitarists squeezing in between the fridge and the bread-bin, the designated rhythm section comprised Adam (who

owned a cheap Ibanez-copy bass, which he couldn't actually play but could certainly talk about) and Larry, who had opened the kitchen doors to create space in which to set up his drum kit, half in the kitchen and half in a small conservatory precariously attached to the back of the house. In these odd circumstances the meeting concluded with a chaotic jam session involving wobbly renditions of the Rolling Stones classics 'Brown Sugar' and 'Satisfaction'. There were too many guitarists, not enough amplification and no consensus as to the correct chord sequences of the songs being played, but none of that seemed to matter. A new star had appeared in the rock'n'roll firmament. For these plucky individuals – well, some of them, anyway – nothing would be the same again.

Ivan returned home on the 31 bus to announce that he had joined a new band. They were going to be called Feedback (allegedly a reference to the whining noise that emerged when Adam plugged his bass into a guitar amp). I noted this news with only a modicum of concern. If the name was anything to go by, this lot were going to be even less impressive (if perhaps more audibly so) than Electronic Wizard.

My thespian career was advancing, albeit at a much slower pace than I would have liked. I attended drama classes on Saturday afternoons and experienced a moment of encouragement when I won an acting competition known as the Father Matthew *Feis* (pronounced 'fesh', Gaelic for 'entertainment'. I have no idea who Father Matthew was but presumably he liked to have a good time). It was a hideous affair, characterized by rampant overacting, with starry-eyed juveniles racing energetically about every inch of the stage as if convinced the theatrical arts were a branch of the Olympics. When my turn came I stood stock-still in the central spotlight. I would like to say that this was a carefully contrived dramatic device, but actually my legs were trembling so much I was afraid that if I moved I would fall over. It was my first time in front of a large audience and when the applause began my ego took a direct hit from a bolt of lightning. I staggered off dazed with happiness, physically buzzing from the

adrenalin rush. This was everything I had ever dreamed about, especially when the results were announced and I was beckoned back on stage to receive a medal for first prize. The principal judge, an obscure drama critic whose authority was undisputed simply on the grounds that she had come all the way from England, whispered to me that my performance was the only interesting thing she had seen all day. Could it get any better than this? Well, yes, actually. On the citation I received she had written: 'A performance of powerful understatement and great control. This boy has immense talent – please look after him.'

But nobody did look after me. Nobody would ever look after me. Not that I guessed that then, otherwise I might have had the good sense to jack it all in and concentrate on my technical drawing or some other useful subject. I remained convinced that stardom was my destiny, although I was a little disillusioned to discover that a commendation from Father Matthew counted for very little in Hollywood.

Ivan continued to attend rehearsals for Feedback in the school music room after hours. He was tolerated by the older boys primarily because of his guitar, which Dave would liberate him of for the duration of the sessions, leaving Ivan to strum inaudibly on Dave's cheap acoustic. Dick had been told he could stay in the fold on the proviso that he got himself a decent instrument, preferably one not constructed in his garden shed. Adam had his bass and therefore his position was assured – all he had to do was learn how to play it. But Adam, at least, had attitude, confidence and all the right buzz-words. With a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip, he would talk about sorting out some 'gigs' by making the right 'connections'. They needed 'good management' and to 'go on the road', apparently, if they were ever going to 'land a deal'. It all sounded good to the others, even if they had only the vaguest idea what he was banging on about.

Paul was another matter. He was really a frustrated musician. He simply could not get his guitar to do anything he wanted it to do, so would usually abandon it and instead expend his considerable energy attempting to almost magically summon, coax and

cajole music from the others. During an endless jam of Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water' (a song Ivan was hearing for the first time), Ivan was astonished to see Paul get down on his hands and knees in front of Dave as he played the famous riff, holding his fingers in front of Dave's fingers, as if he was trying to play the guitar himself without actually touching it. Paul assumed the role of organizer, telling everyone what they were going to play and how they would tackle it yet actually contributing little himself. He would sing along as best he could, struggling to find the right notes, but without a microphone his vocal limitations were not immediately apparent to anyone other than himself. As the biggest character in the group he began to assume the role of frontman.

Excited about the band, Ivan decided to invest in a new amplifier and blew his entire savings of £12 on a second-hand Falcon Combo. That very evening, as he sat at home fiddling with his new purchase, sending feedback howling through the house, he was summoned to the telephone by our mother. Apparently there was a very well-spoken young man on the line who urgently needed to talk to him. It was Adam. He wanted to know if Ivan had bought the amp because of the group.

'Yes,' said Ivan.

'I wish you'd spoken to me first,' said Adam, improvising wildly. 'You see, the band has got a gig . . .'

'That's great,' said Ivan, enthusiastically. On the road at last.

'The thing is, it's in a pub,' said Adam. 'And, you know, you're too young to get into pubs.'

'Oh,' said Ivan.

'In fact, all the gigs we'll be getting will be in pubs,' said Adam. 'And you won't be able to play any of them.'

'I see,' said Ivan.

'I knew you'd understand,' said Adam. 'Look, no hard feelings, eh?'

Even at thirteen, Ivan knew when he was being given the elbow, however diplomatically. He put the phone down in a state of utter dejection and went back to his guitar and amp,

turning the volume up to the max and losing himself in a wall of noise.

There was, of course, no pub and certainly no gig. The group could barely string a whole song together, so attempting to deliver an entire set would have been premature to say the least. But, as rehearsals began to illuminate everyone's strengths and weaknesses, so the band began to settle into a core line-up of Larry on drums, Adam on bass, Paul on vocals, Dave on lead guitar and Dick on rhythm guitar. In fact Dick, too, was not really wanted by his bandmates, but he simply ignored any intimations that he might be surplus to requirements and continued to attend rehearsals until he had established himself as a member.

His pride wounded, Ivan neglected to inform the family of this new development. The truth did not emerge for weeks, until Stella asked Paul how he was getting along with her little brother and Paul, rather embarrassed, admitted they had kicked him out.

'Why didn't you tell us?' asked my astonished father.

'It doesn't matter, anyway,' said Ivan, defensively. 'They're crap. I'm going to start my own group.'

My acting career was not progressing any better. My parents like to proudly tell people that their son was once in a play in the prestigious Gate Theatre with the venerable Irish thespian Cyril Cusack. What they neglect to add was that after two performances I was sacked for missing my cue. I thought the part was beneath me, anyway. I had no lines and was really a glorified stage-hand whose sole purpose was to move furniture for the other actors. As far as I was concerned, anybody could have done it (well, anybody apart from me, it would seem). I craved the physical rush of performing in front of an audience, the ego buzz of recognition by other human beings allied to the strange sense of power that coursed through your body as you held strangers in your spell by sheer force of will. I wanted to utter speeches that resonated in my soul and made sense of my complex internal world. 'To be or not to be?' That was the question I wanted to ask, almost the only question that mattered. I wanted to be Hamlet. But I couldn't even land a part in a burger

commercial, when it was deemed that my mixed Scottish and Irish accent might be confusing to viewers. The director was not impressed when I suggested that the phrase 'Mmm, deeeee-licious!' would have sounded equally lame in any accent.

I resolved to solve my casting problems by writing plays myself. As the 1976 autumn term drew to a close it was announced that a talent contest would be staged in the school gymnasium. This, I decided, would be the ideal opportunity to demonstrate my writing and acting skills. And so, with a couple of friends, I concocted a short comic play, which involved our teachers being put on trial for crimes against humanity. The parts were filled by various classmates, with the juicy role of judge being kept for myself. Banging my gavel to sentence unpopular teachers to a variety of extravagant punishments was sure to prove a crowd-pleaser. We had a run-through the week before for our avuncular form tutor, Mr Moxham, who was sufficiently impressed to schedule our production as the grand finale on the condition that we went gently on his character and removed certain of our more cruel and tasteless gags.

I gathered with my small cast at the side of a makeshift stage of jammed-together tables as a succession of pupils larked about, singing, dancing, playing accordions, telling jokes. The large audience of schoolkids heckled the performers mercilessly but most took it in good humour, shouting back insults. Mr Moxham cheerfully patrolled the gymnasium, patting pupils on the back, uttering words of encouragement.

'Ready for your moment of glory, lads?' he inquired of my little crew.

'We're ready, sir,' I reported.

'And you have made those changes we discussed?'

'Do we really have to lose the gag about Mrs Prandy's dog, sir?' I asked.

'Only if you want to live through another term,' replied Mr Moxham.

Four members of Feedback stood around their amps and drum kit, waiting to make their live debut. Dick was absent, since he

was not a pupil at the school, but Paul, Dave, Adam and Larry were going to do a ten-minute set, scheduled as the penultimate act, just before our play.

'All right, Dave?' I asked, feeling every inch the seasoned professional comforting a nervous débutante. Dave looked as if he was going to be sick from stage fright, clinging to his guitar and staring anxiously at the crowd. The others appeared considerably more at ease. Larry had played plenty of shows before, albeit with such less-than-rocking outfits as the Artane Boys Band and the Post Office Workers Band. Adam lounged about, affecting his usual seen-it-all-before cool. Paul was practically jumping up and down with anticipation, firing encouraging smiles and nods at his colleagues.

When their slot came, the group started to hoist their equipment on to the stage. It took them about ten minutes to set up, an extended period of inactivity in which any last remnants of discipline in the room evaporated. Kids were running about the gym in all directions, yelling at the tops of their voices, climbing the climbing-frames. I was marshalling my cast, instructing them that as soon as the band were finished we were to get on to the stage and launch straight into our play. I really had no idea what was coming.

An electric hum began to sound in the room as the amps were turned on. Paul stood centre stage at his microphone, guitar slung around his neck, looking defiantly over the boisterous crowd. Dave and Adam stood either side of him. Larry clicked his sticks together and the group launched into a coarse, speeded-up version of seventies pretty-boy rock star Peter Frampton's 'Show Me the Way', kicking off with a roaring D chord that sent a shockwave through the room.

With the wisdom of hindsight, I know this debut performance of the group who would one day rock the world must have been, in truth, a fairly dubious affair. There was nothing remotely cool about their selection of songs, for a start. They played, of all things, a tongue-in-cheek version of the Bay City Roller's pop anthem 'Bye Bye Baby' and a Beach Boys medley.

They had no sound-check, no experience, nothing to go on but hope and desire. But I was completely stunned. Absolutely floored. This was the first live, electric band I had ever heard and a rush of adrenaline shot through my body, apparently disabling my central nervous system and rearranging my entire molecular structure. At least, that's what it felt like. Dave's guitar was splintering in my ears. The pounding of Larry's drums and Adam's bass shook the tables they were standing on and seemed to make the whole room vibrate. I had listened to records in my room, headbanging in headphones, but nothing prepared me for the sheer visceral thrill of live rock'n'roll. When Paul stomped across the shaky stage, grabbed his microphone stand and yelled, 'I want you . . . / Show me the way!' the little girls from the junior classes started screaming.

And that was it for me. I turned to my fellow would-be thespians and announced that there was absolutely no way I was going on after that. It was quickly and unanimously agreed that our play should be cancelled. Mr Moxham, as I recall, seemed quite relieved.

Feedback belted through their bizarre set and then stood there, stupid grins plastered across their faces, as the crowd roared for more. Their repertoire being rather limited in those days, they had to resort to a repeat version of 'Bye Bye Baby'. The gym was in complete uproar, with kids singing, yelling, screaming, clapping, dancing. I looked about me in a daze. A new vision of my future was forming in my feverish adolescent brain.

Forget about becoming a fabulously famous, multi-hyphenated actor-writer-director.

I was going to be a rock star.