



"Peop  
us as

-- Bo

[ACHTOON BABY](#)

[NEW U2 ALBUM INFO](#)

[NEW! @U2 TOURS](#)

# @U2

since 1995

[WWW.ATU2.COM](http://WWW.ATU2.COM)

[NEWS](#)

[LYRICS](#)

[TOURS](#)

[PHOTOS](#)

[CALENDAR](#)

## @U2 INTERVIEW: FRANK KEARNS TALKS ABOUT HIS EARLY DAYS WITH U2 (PART 1)

@U2, March 24, 2015

By: [Aaron Govern](#)



ABOVE Early days at Mount Temple. Left to right: Paul Hewson, Dave Evans, Larry Mullen and Frank Kearns.

(image provided by Frank Kearns)

Almost 40 years ago, 15-year old Larry Mullen placed an advert on his school notice board hoping to attract fellow students interested in forming a band. Six others replied, leading to the now-famous auditions that took place in his parents' kitchen in September 1976. There has been much myth about the events of that time in U2's history, and very few people outside of the band have spoken about it. Frank Kearns was there, and now he's opening up about it.

Kearns, Larry's closest friend from that period, recently talked with @U2 to discuss his relationship with the fledgling U2, and how he became involved in the music industry as lead guitarist in a series of bands -- including the one-time "next big thing," Cactus World News, who in 1985 released their debut EP on Mother Records, the U2 imprint. Kearns, who said he has never discussed the story before, provided revelation after revelation with honesty, insight and candour, all delivered with a typical Dublin sense of humour.

In the first of a two-part interview, Kearns talks about joining the new Mount Temple School in the same year as Larry, then meeting the future U2, whose other members would come to the school the following year. He talks about life on the road with and without U2, and how his friendship with U2 remains to this day -- as a gang of five Dublin boys who bonded over their mutual love of rock music.

I caught up with Frank from his coastal North Dublin Studio, where he runs the [Frank Kearns Rockschoo!](#) and was working on the soon-to-be-released *Found*, an album of lost recordings by Cactus World News.

### **Aaron Govern: Frank, how did you end up going to Mount Temple School?**

**Frank Kearns:** Before I entered Mount Temple in 1974, I went to Marino National School, and Larry was in School Coileanna, an all Irish-speaking National School -- both of them were run by the religious, and the two of us were Roman Catholics. I went to a Christian Brothers school, and at that time, you could say the Christian Brothers were known as the military wing of the Catholic Church! So I was pretty traumatized at the end of my time there, and I struggled. My mother couldn't accept that I failed all the Catholic high school entrance exams, but mercifully someone mentioned to her that there was a new school opening locally called Mount Temple -- but cautioned her to watch out as there were Protestants there! *(laughs)*

### **In 1974 Ireland, a nondenominational mixed gender school was fairly revolutionary, wasn't it?**

Absolutely. There was serious unrest going on only 90 miles up north and we were the first intake in what was to become an experimental school. It was so radically different, in fact, my mother had to get permission from the local parish priest to let me go there. I remember waiting in anticipation for my mother to come home after meeting with him. Permission was granted and I was allowed to go to Mount Temple providing provision was made for separate religious instruction. The irony of all this is that Larry met his life partner, Ann, there when they were only 15, and both Ann and Janice -- my wife -- have been friends since 8 years of age. So the priest's fears were realized: I married a Protestant!

### **What was it like for you going to Mount Temple?**

Coming from an all-boys school, I'd no experience mixing with people of different race, class, religion or gender. In fact, it was considered dangerously radical to mix religions and sex in 1970s Ireland. I thought back then it made perfect sense and still do. John Brooks, the principal of the school, was a rare visionary. His philosophy was that the student was at top of the pyramid. This gentle and kind man led from the front and displayed one standout trait, curiosity, which served us all so well in later life.

### **And you met Larry in this first year there?**

Yes, we were in the same school year. The structure of the school was that there were six classes in each year, each given a letter forming D-U-B-L-I-N. Each class would have about 25 students, which contrasted with my primary school experience of upwards of 50 students crammed into a room. Larry and I often shared the same class, such as Irish or English. Larry would always be tapping the desk. This is what first brought my attention to him. I knew he was in a post office marching band, but it was not until first rehearsal after the notice was put up on the notice board in September 1976 that we became firm friends.

He would talk excitedly about the band he was forming and I was intrigued to find out more. Larry's house was in Artane, which is the next town up from mine, Donnycarney,

so I would walk up to his home on Saturday mornings, where we would both take the No. 42 bus into the city center. His mother was a generous and kind woman and she was always encouraging in her words. We would walk around the Dandelion Market, which at that stage was still hippy land with patchouli and incense flooding the air. However, it was the record stalls selling used LPs that we were interested in.

### **And the rest of the guys -- Bono, Adam and Edge -- were in the year above?**

Yes, they were one year older than us, but I got to know the others thanks to Larry inviting me to watch his new band at rehearsals on Wednesday afternoons. Larry had

planned to place the notice up in the central mall of Mount Temple, but I wasn't a musician at that stage, and he said to come along and watch. At this point Ivan McCormick and Peter Martin had gone to the auditions, but it hadn't worked out for them. So the fledgling band settled into Adam, Bono, Edge, Dik and Larry.

Walking past Mr. McKenzie's room you could hear a loud drone punctuated by bursts of feedback from the vocal mic. Eventually they would run through The Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar," Frampton's "Show Me the Way" and sometimes even the *Hawaii Five-O* theme tune! I would just sit there with my legs swinging on the edge of a table, five feet away performing my role as "the audience" every Wednesday and Saturday. I remember hearing Adam always having rows with Edge about what key they were in, and Edge arguing back, the usual banter within a band. I had no doubt they would make it. I thought they were brilliant.

**I guess at this stage no one had the names they would later adopt? This is all before the Lypton Village period?**

Absolutely not. This is all well before that; we're right at the beginning. It was a magic time. At their rehearsals, to the right of me was always an old acoustic that belonged to Edge, and I would just grab it hoping that if I held it long enough I would be able to form chords with my untrained fingers but I hadn't a clue! There was no hope of me joining any band at that point because I couldn't play, and I was just enthralled by it all and knew deep down I wanted to play guitar. Edge would always tease me when I picked up the guitar, egging me on to learn. I would help the guys dismantle the gear and Larry would pull apart his kit and put it into his mother's car, drive straight back to his house and have tea, and discuss what had gone on in rehearsals that day. A couple of times during rehearsals Paul (Bono) would say to me -- "Frank, you're our first fan, don't forget about this!"

Reading back through my diaries of that time I am amazed at the intensity of it all but it was clear I foresaw even then, the hugeness of what was about to unfold. They were committed, determined and about to shake our world, and I was the first person to know it!

**It wasn't long then until the band played their very first concert at Mount Temple.**

Yes, they played their concert in the gymnasium, literally on a stage that was just a foot off the ground. It was like a talent showcase day, and the band got a chance to play in front of a real audience. There was a lot of noise as amps were handed onto stage, Larry's kit was assembled and the occasional drum hit could be heard, all heightening the excitement and expectation of something wild about to happen. *Kerannng!!* Edge struck the famous D chord and it was like 2,000 volts passed through my body. There were screams of delight from the girls and they were jammed in at the front with their Bay City Rollers tartan scarfs, and even Larry had a tartan jacket on with furry collar. Teachers looked on concerned as the lads played through "Show Me The Way" and "Bye Bye Baby." Bodies rushed to the front.

My memory of that concert was that Larry had a cast on his arm. This was my very first live concert and probably the same for most of the audience; it would be about late October 1976, around the mid-term. This show really did cause shockwaves. It was a case of "What the hell just happened?" and we all knew that something was going on. There was this alchemy of sorts, and a spark had created a fire. Larry would be looking over to me, and I was giving him the thumbs up, saying this is cool, man! The teachers were getting a bit upset as it was too loud, and then it stopped, but the crowd kept screaming for more, so they came back on and played the same two or three songs again. If I remember right they also played The Bay City Rollers "Bye Bye Baby" twice! It was a great crowd-pleaser, especially among the girls.

**This concert was clearly important to you.**

Incredibly so. The whole setup of a concert with the drums, the amps, is just like an altar and the whole concert is just like a huge primal ritual. After this show, I just said to myself, "This is it, I don't care what it takes, this is what I want to do; I'm going to form a band." Now, having set my intention, I didn't have a clue how to begin! So I just carried on going to the rehearsals with Larry every Wednesday and Saturday, simply watching them play, and taking it all in. There was no one else there but me and the five guys.

At this point they were called Feedback. They needed a name for the first real show, and at the time they were plugging microphones into guitar amps, and all this noise would just come out, it was just inevitable, and so they named themselves Feedback. Each time I would go to rehearsal Edge would have a new gadget, for instance a stomp box or a distortion pedal, and we would all hear these fantastic sounds, like distortion.

## **Did Edge already have his signature sound?**

No, all too early for that. There was no delay being used, from my diary recollection. That came during the Gingerbread house period; for now it was all Rory Gallagher-type stuff. He was still listening to Yes and bands like that. He was using an old Stratocaster, and his guitar was slightly warped with a resultant high action, so he had to alter his style of playing to accommodate the difficulty in bending strings so thick, especially when playing lead guitar. He was using heavy gauge strings so that they didn't break, and the restriction caused by these heavy strings influenced his playing and subsequently became a vital part of his developing sound. It all came about by accident. One of the benefits of a high action, when the strings sit high above the fretboard, is a superior resonant tone. This is an important factor, as having these limitations meant that you had to be very creative to overcome.

There would be tuning sessions that would last half an hour, and no one had a clue what they would be doing, but there was a strong will to make it happen somehow! They would play and play, and I would be watching how he was playing power chords, and I would be begging my fingers to do the same when I held his old acoustic! It was all innocent stuff.

## **When did you start Frankie Corpse and the Undertakers?**

It was 1977, and it would have been as a result of watching my enthusiasm at their rehearsals that Larry asked me if I wanted to start a band with Ivan McCormick. Of course I did! Very shortly afterwards I was borrowing 35 pounds from my parents to buy a guitar from Peter Martin. Then, equipped with this Fender Telecaster, I arrived in Neil and Ivan's house in Howth, and we started a band called Frankie Corpse and the Undertakers, playing punk that was just starting to be known in Ireland.

Dublin in 1977 was a black-and-white place, and quite grim, but punk brought the sun out for us. U2 were also learning to play cover songs like "Johnny B. Goode" and Tom Robinson's "2-4-6-8 Motorway." I wanted to learn these, too, so I got Ivan to teach me the chords and eventually we played our first gig at the Onyx youth club on the North Strand before supporting Feedback at that seminal gig in the Mount Temple Cellar -- it's the concert that you see re-created in the opening minutes of the *Killing Bono* movie. We opened that concert with an Eddie and the Hot Rods number, "Do Anything You Wanna Do." It was a time of firsts for me -- first band, first performance, first kiss....  
(laughs)

## **What bands were influencing U2 and you in 1977-78?**

Ramones, Ramones and, eh, The Ramones! Well, OK, one of the bands that had a big influence was Penetration -- their songs like "Life's A Gamble" and "Don't Dictate," and their guitarist had a Gibson Explorer; Edge bought one later in 1978. Their *Moving Targets* album is cool. One of the first songs that I remember Bono playing on guitar was Wire's "Mannequin." I heard it coming out of the sixth year common room off the central mall (near where the famous photograph of myself, Larry, Edge and Bono was taken) and asked Bono what that chord was. "That's an E-minor," he replied. I'd never heard an E-minor chord before and when I hear that song now it always takes me back to that day. Funny how small details stay with you. Bands like Television, The Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks all had an influence for various reasons, it might be musical, lyrical, image or just the attitude.

You have to remember to put this all into context. Just to illustrate this, as the punk shockwave was beginning to reverberate around Dublin, myself and the Edge met in Fairview Cinema to watch Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains The Same* concert movie, and on arriving there appeared to be a split audience. We ended amongst the hippies, and the other side, the punks, were all standing up, punching the air shouting "Punk! Punk! Punk!" The Edge and I just stared at each other thinking, "What's going to happen now?!" The next thing the cinema staff came in with policemen and cleared out all the punks, but we stayed to see the movie and came out of the cinema shaking our heads, in awe of Jimmy Page, and I just thought to myself, "How could I ever play guitar like that?"

## **I guess that for you and many others this was the end of the progressive rock period and the advent of punk rock in Dublin?**

Very much so. That movie was really the bookend on the dinosaur period. If there is one thing I can say about punk, the temperature was rising all the time, and it gave us the permission we needed to go out there and express ourselves and not be burdened by the restrictions of practicing for years.

## **U2 entered the Harp Talent Contest in March 1978 in Limerick, where they won 500 pounds and the chance to record some demos. That would have been a very exciting time?**

Well, I didn't go down to Limerick for the talent contest, but I will never forget Adam's face when he told me they had won. But of course you are right; they were rewarded with some recording time in Keystone Studios on Harcourt Street in Dublin -- that would have been April 1978.

Jackie Hayden, who was working with CBS Ireland, had paid for the demo session, and Larry and I had turned up at the studio, where you had to walk down the steps to go into the recording area, a cavern of strange leads and mics everywhere. It was the first time we had ever been in a recording studio, and I set up the drums with Larry. I noticed he had headphones on, a direct communication with the guys in the control room. I remember the control room being like the Starship Enterprise and being completely freaked out by it. Just the guys and myself, and I'm like their first roadie, handing out drumsticks to Larry and making sure I have a replacement ready should he drop one!

### **I assume that by this time all the guys in U2 had left school?**

No, no -- not at all. We are all still at school. One thing that I remember was that I had brought some sandwiches, as we didn't know how long it was going to take. You have to remember that there were no phones, no texting. I remember going into town with the guys after school that day, and telling my parents that I was going to be helping with the recording, but hadn't told them exactly where I was or when I would be back home. I looked into my bag where my mother had packed batch loaf sandwiches and throughout the day I would take a bite now and then just to keep the hunger away. But by about eight o'clock I was starving and would have to reluctantly eat the remaining soggy tomato sandwiches and this caused the tomato juice to run down my wrist -- not a good idea when I am supposed to hand Larry's a drumstick if he lost grip mid-take!

I recall listening to a playback of "Street Missions" in the studio and thinking that Edge wasn't playing his solo this time. Were they aware of this? I had no idea what overdubs were and that he would play this part separate! I wasn't sure whether I should tell Larry that this was missing or not! Of course I knew all the songs by heart by this point.

The session went on for a few more hours, and then there was a very loud banging on the door, followed by loud talking and movement in the control room. An enraged Larry's dad stomped into the recording area and staring at Larry, announced, "Just *what* do you think you are doing? Mrs. Kearns has been on the phone wondering where Frank is." I looked down in agonizing shame. Next thing we knew, Larry Sr. was saying to pack things up. They had exams the next day, and that meant the session would have to be abandoned. In fact, they were supposed to do five songs, but they ended up only doing three, as my mother had phoned Larry's dad. So that was it -- we had to pack up the gear! We drove home in complete silence.

### **How did the other guys get on in the studio?**

I was pretty much hunkered down beside Larry's drum kit and never entered the control room. It was an overwhelming experience for everyone. The other guys were very keen to learn how this magical recording process worked. Barry Devlin must have told them to take off shoes in case their shoes made a sound while recording, but it's funny how certain small details stay with you.

### **By this time, Edge started to have his own individual sound in the band, do you think?**

Certainly he was starting to experiment. Remember, as I said before, the whole punk concept was that it gave us the permission we needed. It was around this time he started the whole harmonics sound. One day in rehearsal he was playing this riff nonstop. It was Heart's "Barracuda" -- have a listen to it; he played it all the time. This was a big influence on him with the harmonics. Songs like "Twilight," "Shadows and Tall Trees," all have the harmonics. He had a way of playing an E-major chord by striking the low E strings and top B and E string together, creating a ringing sound.

The thing about Edge is he has a ferocious power in his right hand technique that's not obvious to the viewer. He holds the plectrum upside down and wrenches the raspy grip sideways across the strings in a lightning-like arpeggio, making a unique sound in the process. This is why Bono is so right when he talks about other guitarists with the same setup as Edge never being able to quite get the same sound. Of course myself and Edge know well that the real sound comes from the wrist!

### **Moving on to later in 1978, U2 played a concert in June at Mount Temple -- were you at that?**

Well, what happened was Paul McGuinness had become U2's manager, and Frankie Corpse and the Undertakers were the support band for that gig. Our drummer Keith Edgely did not get on with Larry at all, and at this show we had all agreed not to have

too much gear on stage, so Keith shared Larry's drums that day. The gig was played on top of the boiler room.

### How long did Frankie and the Undertakers last?

We were laid to rest soon after. *(laughs)* We played a few more gigs, but I wanted to sing, and Neil McCormick wanted to sing. I turned up to play our next gig and discovered Neil and Ivan had changed the band's name to The Modulators without telling me. Hours before show time I was told, "Mr. Corpse -- your services are no longer required. You're out of the band." Was it my Ramones fixation? Was I too punk even for them? I noticed Neil had even made a new button badge for his newly named band The Modulators, and incredibly my face was on the badge!

Disgusted, I decided that I was going to form a new band, and in fact, I formed The Fast, the world's first Ramones tribute band, and serendipitously in 1986 I got to tell Joey Ramone this story in person when the legend came to a Cactus World News gig at the Ritz in New York City. By this time, I had already seen the Ramones a few times, including at The Longest Day gig at Milton Keynes in 1985, when they supported U2, but I was too afraid to meet them. When Joey came backstage in New York, I didn't know he was coming, so I was totally dumbstruck, and explained to him how I was one of their first disciples in Mount Temple, and that I saw them in 1978 at the State Cinema in Dublin.

That gig at the State Cinema was explosive, like raw thunder. It was just like a volcano erupting -- the power was incredible, the whole crowd rushed forward, all the seats were knocked down. I clearly remember seeing Dave (Edge) standing precariously on back of a destroyed cinema seat, mesmerized, looking at the band. It was incredible to meet Joey, and I said to him, "Man, you just don't know how you changed my life."

### Frank, your guitar sound, like the Edge's, was unique. Feedback was your forte, wasn't it?

Yes, it was a sound that I was using around the time Cactus World News had started. I love the way harmonic feedback changes related to the room you play in. Actually, when U2 were recording *The Joshua Tree*, apparently Bono had persuaded The Edge to use feedback in some of the songs like I had been playing. You see, The Edge's unique setup wasn't configured for feedback, but Bono had seen me doing it and wanted Edge to experiment with it. However, I think we all agree he managed it splendidly in "Bullet The Blue Sky."

---

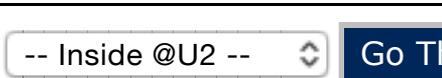
Stay tuned for part two, when Kearns discusses his time with The MysterMen supporting U2 in 1980, Bono producing Cactus World News in just his underpants (!) and more compelling stories.

Cactus World News will release their new album of lost recordings, *Found*, in the spring, if their Pledgemusic crowd-funding campaign is successful. To see footage of Kearns with his former bandmates, you can [buy the album plus exclusives via their Pledgemusic website](#).

(c) @U2/Govern, 2015.



[Return to Previous Page](#)



All material (c) @U2 unless otherwise