

Barry Devlin

# Oppenheimer's Bathtub



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From the mid 80s till the mid 90s, I was lucky enough to be sort of house documentarian for the *U2* circus. Four of us, Ned O'Hanlon, Maurice Linnane, the Great Declan Quinn and the Less Great me, wobbled around in a variety of vans chronicling the adventures of the *Fab Four*, from *The Unforgettable Fire* in Slane and America, through *The Joshua Tree* and *Rattle and Hum* to *Achtung Baby* and *Zoo TV* – that last, the greatest show ever to go on the road.

To say that it was a gas would be to get nowhere near the true gas-ness of it. The *U2* bits were revelatory – and very hard work.

The show was so good that expectations of what our little band would deliver were – rightly – high and there was the occasional bollocking and at least one shelved piece. But there were also randomly zany moments like the time when I was asked to go out to LA on some business connected with *The Making Of Rattle And Hum* (not *Rattle And Hum* itself, that was Phil Joanou's baby) and when I said I couldn't take the time off – I couldn't, Declan Hogan had me chained to the desk working on a Bord Fáilte campaign – Paul McGuinness, for it was he, said I could go as far as New York on Concorde, and slum the rest of the way on American.

So I pleaded with Declan and went supersonic over the Scilly Isles. There's a book in that stuff – which I'm not going to write (I'm told Bono is going to write it).

But there were also bits in between which were pure magic, when there'd be a week off and I'd hire some thunderous and barely roadworthy V8 monster and head off alone into the great out-there...



And so I got to know the roads of Arizona and New Mexico and Utah really rather well, staying in old motor courts in places like *Globe* where the rooms were concrete tepees and *Tuba City* which was run by Navaho worthies and *Thatcher* and - next town along - *Lordsburg*, which as any fule kno is where John Ford's *Stagecoach* was heading in 1939.

But the strangest of many strange moments on these trips occurred in the town of Los Alamos – the place where Robert Oppenheimer and Richard Feynman worked out the equations for the atomic bomb. Feynman is a remarkable figure, movie star good looks and a big engine for a brain and his fingerprints are all over American physics, right up till the time of the *Challenger* disaster.

But Los Alamos is where he cut his teeth and he will forever be associated for better or worse with that town in the high mesas of New Mexico.

I've always been fascinated by him and I wrote a film called *Meeting Mr Feynman* about him in the early nineties. It was a ghost story based around a cod version of one of Feynman's tropes and it nearly got made, but then didn't (as with so many films I've written).

But I wanted the film to be as authentic as possible and so in one of my weeks off from the *Zoo TV* tour I recced Los Alamos.

I brought the director of the film, Berlin theatre director Bettina Wilhelm with me and her friend, novelist Jane Corbett and we set off for Alamogordo and its astonishing White Sands.

We visited Ground Zero, a place designed by geography and history for intense reflection on concept albums, the universe and the meaning of life.



And then we took the 84 up past San Ildefonso and on to the road that corkscrews up to Los Alamos itself.

We were hoping – but without much expectation - to get a sense of the place as it was in the mid forties. We particularly wanted to see Bathtub Row where Feynman, Oppenheimer and the other top men lived - a modest estate characterised by Yuccas and pampas grass and – back then – by the unimaginable luxury of bathtubs. But we knew that parts of Los Alamos are still closed to the public: though most of the research work has moved elsewhere there are still laboratories there.

Ever hopeful, though, we pulled into the Los Alamos Creative District with its big square – basically a mall – that houses the History Museum. The sky was darkening theatrically. If Bach's Toccata and Fugue had rung out over the square, we wouldn't have been all that surprised.

We headed for the information office in the front of the museum.

Hi... We're on the trail of Rich....

The lady behind the glass didn't wait for us to finish the sentence.

OK. You guys are late.

She pointed across the square to where a bus was ticking over.

It's just about to leave.

She handed us three tickets.

Go, go!!

We didn't ask any questions. There was an inevitability. We went...

As we crossed the square, raindrops, huge, individual plovers'-egg drops began bursting in the dust around us. We started to run, giggling. The bus doors sighed open, we bounded aboard, soaked and breathless and we were off. I spotted two women and a man huddled under a shelter in the cloudburst as we took off, but took no account of it.



The other passengers were friendly, talkative, curious.

Just made it, eh. Where are you guys from?

Well, England, Germany... I'm from Dublin.

Oh, Dublin. Lovely. Trinity College. Good school.

I nodded. I didn't say I was from UCD.

And then...

I noticed – we all noticed together – that everyone but us was wearing lanyards. And on the lanyards were IDs with the names of prestigious American Universities. The lady who asked if I was from Trinity was herself from Stanford.

By means of cautious, not to say evasive conversations we established that this was the fiftieth anniversary of Oppenheimer's first reconnaissance of Los Alamos and that everyone on the bus had been invited because of their status in the physics departments of American Colleges.

And so we three imposters went everywhere – including the places beyond the barriers and guardhouses with their saluting MPs – while the three people under the shelter, presumably from MIT or somewhere just as good – got left in our dust.

You wouldn't read it in a book. Not even Bono's book.

But there was more.

Oppenheimer's house on Bathtub Row – and Feynman's – hadn't been open to the public for fifty years. But for us, charlatans and chancers that we were, each had a welcome mat at the door.

We went in and stared at the bathtubs.

And when the bus got back to the square we got off individually - fearful that the true Atomic Tourists whose places we'd taken might have shopped us to the AEC – and regrouped at the car.

And over beer and tapas in San Ildefonso we laughed loud and long...



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**Barry Devlin** – whose series *My Mother And Other Strangers* recently ran on BBC One’s Sunday night slot - has written extensively for film, TV and radio: from TV series like *Darling Buds of May* and mini series like *Soul Survivors* and *Runway 1* to feature films like *All Things Bright And Beautiful* and *A Man Of No Importance*.  
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