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**DOLORES O'RIORDAN**  
**Are You Listening?**

Nils van der Linden  
Fri, 01 Jun 2007

★ ★ ★

Although she was the last to join, it didn't take long for Dolores O'Riordan to take control of The Cranberries. As their singer/chief songwriter/lyricist/keyboard player/guitarist she did virtually everything apart from clean the toilet on the tourbus. No surprise then that, despite featuring new musicians and appearing five years after her band faded away, her debut solo album sounds more than a little familiar.

But there are some small, important, changes.

That voice is still unmistakable but no longer has just two default settings: sweet and piercing. The songs still shift between innocent ballads and hard rockers that continue to recycle the grungy guitar riff introduced on 'Zombie', but the new backing musicians sound more dynamic and powerful. The trademark vocal gymnastics ("ooh ooh, aah aah", "doo doo doo doo") are still there but lyrically she doesn't try so damn hard.

It's probably the most striking change, with O'Riordan moving away from making brash political or social statements that just sounded stupid and ignorant ("At times of war, we're all the losers, there's no victory, We'll shoot to kill and kill your lover, fine by me," she sang so insightfully ten years ago on 'Warchild').

Instead she's returned to the more personal, introspective lyrics and sense of innocence that provided the heart of The Cranberries' never-bettered debut album. Now it's all about relationships, emotions, birth, death and nostalgia again.

Despite its trite message of "be yourself", bouncy first single 'Ordinary Day' is a sincere tribute to her youngest daughter; the sinister Tori Amos flavoured 'Black Widow' which explodes into full-blown yelling is about her mother-in-law's losing battle with cancer; the familiarity of 'Angel Fire' is rendered irrelevant by its surprisingly inspirational yet religion-free message inspired by meeting Pope John Paul II.

And the high octane 'When We Were Young' is obviously about her childhood but for the first time since 1994 O'Riordan's lyrics are obscure enough for them to be interpreted on many levels.

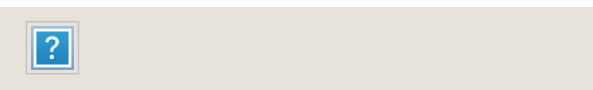
So when Therapy? drummer Graham Hopkins, Whitesnake bassist Marco Mendoza and The Cranberries tour guitarist Steve Demarchi tear into 'Stay With Me' it's easy to identify with the brooding tale of obsession, or understand the venom of the punchy 'Loser'.

But this is still the same woman who preached about "their tanks and their bombs, And their bombs, and their guns", and she can't resist a bit of lecturing most notably on the ill-advised Celtic-flavoured 'Human Spirit'. "Don't let life consume you," she advises, "it could eat you up inside". Thanks.

Slips like these notwithstanding 'Are You Listening' is a mature album that clearly reflects O'Riordan's growth as a person, if not a musician. And, looking back at the latter days of The Cranberries, it's certainly the best album she's produced since 'No Need To Argue'.

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