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Comeback kids: Why bands such as the Cranberries are touring again

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"It's a great gig, really," says Dolores O'Riordan of the Cranberries. "Getting on stage, playing the guitar, singing. For a living, it's super."

Many bands have reunited recently, and more regroupings are likely to come. Why is this happening? Money, often – the demand is there, a band is a business and a brand, and there's just too much at stake not to put aside any of its past differences.

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Video: Cranberries' first new album in 10 years

The Cranberries, broken up in 2003 after a successful run, first reassembled for a tour in 2009. The experience was, shall we say, fruitful, and the band currently tours with a new album to support: *Roses*, a collection of tuneful rock that bears stylistic resemblance to the brash and lush sounds fans will recall from the 1990s – O'Riordan's distinctive Gaelic hush and wail set against tight guitars, stirring strings and dogged melodies.

O'Riordan, a singer-mom who now resides with her family north of Toronto, was in town recently with guitarist Noel Hogan to discuss the Cranberries's first crop of new songs in more than a decade. She describes the band's relationship as "pretty good." Adds Hogan: "I think age has been a massive help to us. When we were 21, we were highly strung. We enjoy it a lot more now."

They no longer play to the arena-sized audiences they once commanded. Tuesday's show in Montreal was booked at the Metropolis club, a venue that holds 2,300 *Zombie*-singing fans at maximum capacity, while Wednesday's concert at Toronto's Sound Academy should see about 3,000 diehards.

Album sales are down across the board, so the Cranberries and another resurrected crew, Jane's Addiction, don't exist in 2012 as they used to. They were the last of the MTV wave – an era of blockbuster sales and consistent exposure to targeted audiences. Still, they've held on to enough of their formidable base to ensure a market for their music and concerts whenever they do decide to pop back into the game. "We're kind of lucky, aren't we," admits O'Riordan, more mom now than the fierce pop-pixie of the past. "I know it sucks getting older, but it would be hard to start out now."

And so, older acts have a leg up. Van Halen (with original singer David Lee Roth) reunited in 2007 for its most lucrative tour ever. A new album followed, and the run with the devil continues – the hard-rockers are back on the road this year.

Even Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys have resolved to play nice in the sandbox long enough for a new album (*That's Why God Made the Radio*, out June 5) and a 50th-anniversary tour, including stops in Toronto and Montreal (June 19 and 20, respectively).

However, the reunion of Black Sabbath, those *Never Say Die!* metal heads, is on hold. When the iconic guitarist Tony Iommi was diagnosed with lymphoma, a planned Sabbath tour was pared down to a schedule of dates by the unlikely enduring singer Ozzy Osbourne and "friends." An album, produced by Rick Rubin, might still happen.

Neil Young has saddled up with his Crazy Horse posse for *Americana*, a grunge-guitar treatment of folk standards, due to drop June 5. No tour has yet been announced.

Elliott Lefko, a concert promoter with the California-based Goldenvoice, which stages Coachella, an annual reunion magnet, took in a performance at this year's festival by the regrouped post-punkers Firehose. "They were like the audience," explains Lefko, who cut his booking teeth on the Queen West scene in Toronto during the 1980s. "They're balding and big, and yet everyone was having an amazing experience."

To Lefko and other promoters, any minuses involved with reunions are outweighed by the pluses. "The bands rediscover why they like to play music," he says, "and the audience has this part of their brain that opens up. They remember why they liked the songs so much."

Memories are thorny things though, which don't wish to be rudely updated. Do we really want to have our nostalgia ruined by bands in lesser form (and often missing key members), stumbling in smaller spotlights and dinky stages?

Joe Strummer never succumbed to the promoters' pressure to reunite the Clash. He preferred for the image of the band in its prime to remain undisturbed. Likewise, no number of Benjamins is enough for Robert Plant to refloat Led Zeppelin – a one-off concert in 2007 was a benefit show – and Rod Stewart has resisted the call to properly reunite the Faces. The British bar-rock heroes were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last month without the *Stay With Me* singer, and the band has committed to a few summer festivals with Simply Red front man Mick Hucknall.

Cynics saw the Police reunion tour of 2007-08 – three players and three tour buses – as a money grab by bandmates who don't get along with each other. And, following a "farewell tour" in 1982, the Who haven't ever been able to hit the road without the tour's integrity being called into question each time.

For the Cranberries, the reunion experience is rather surreal after so many years off. "I was a full-time mom for seven years," O'Riordan says. "You go back on tour, you're back in hotels, you're ordering room service and you're getting an itinerary slipped under your door everyday. You're kind of thinking, 'Did I go home for seven years, or was that just a dream?'"

Maybe it was a dream. Or maybe it's a dream now. "It's like somebody hit pause, and then hit play again," Hogan says. "And that was it."

The Cranberries play Montreal's Metropolis on Tuesday; Toronto's Sound Academy on Wednesday.

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