

WOX

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mmmm... isn't it?

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RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE
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We regret that, for copyright reasons, the free tape is not available outside the UK

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The Cranberries 'To The Faithful Departed'

featuring the hit single: 'Salvation'
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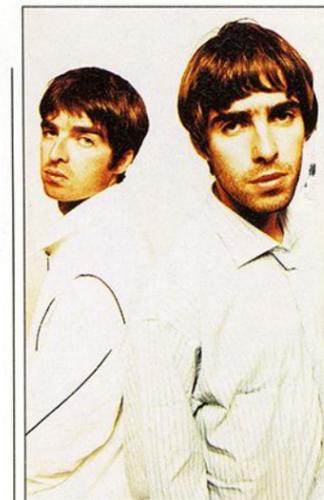
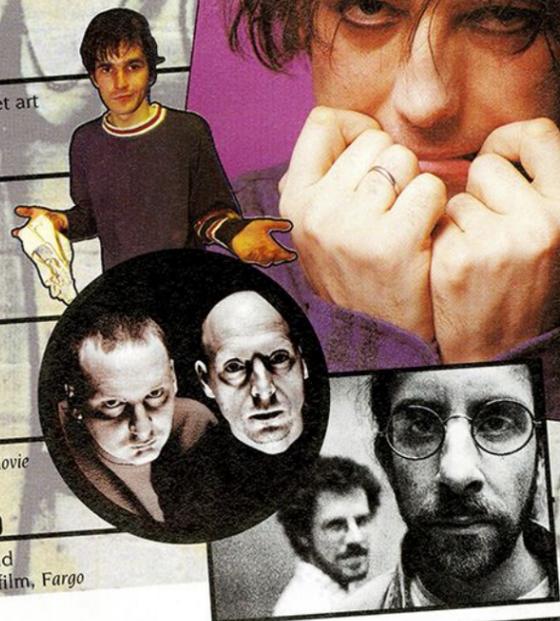
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Shaun and Bez's footy capers



All about that tape...

'WHAT'S THE STORY?', the BBC
Oasis documentary, was originally
broadcast on Radio 1. It tells, in the
band's own words, the full, hair-
raising tale of how they became the
rock'n'roll success story of the '90s.
Your free VOX version includes
eyewitness reports of all the
rucking'n'rolling along the way.
Prepare for an ear-bashing! Easy
listening it ain't!

THE CRANBERRIES
To The Faithful Departed
(Island)

AS THE title suggests, this album is a requiem for the victims of the modern world. Little children are dying for lack of bread. Bad men with guns are staking out the cities. Our most sensitive artists are driven to madness and death. The youth stare blankly with heroin eyes. And sadly, few have the willpower to try and improve the situation.

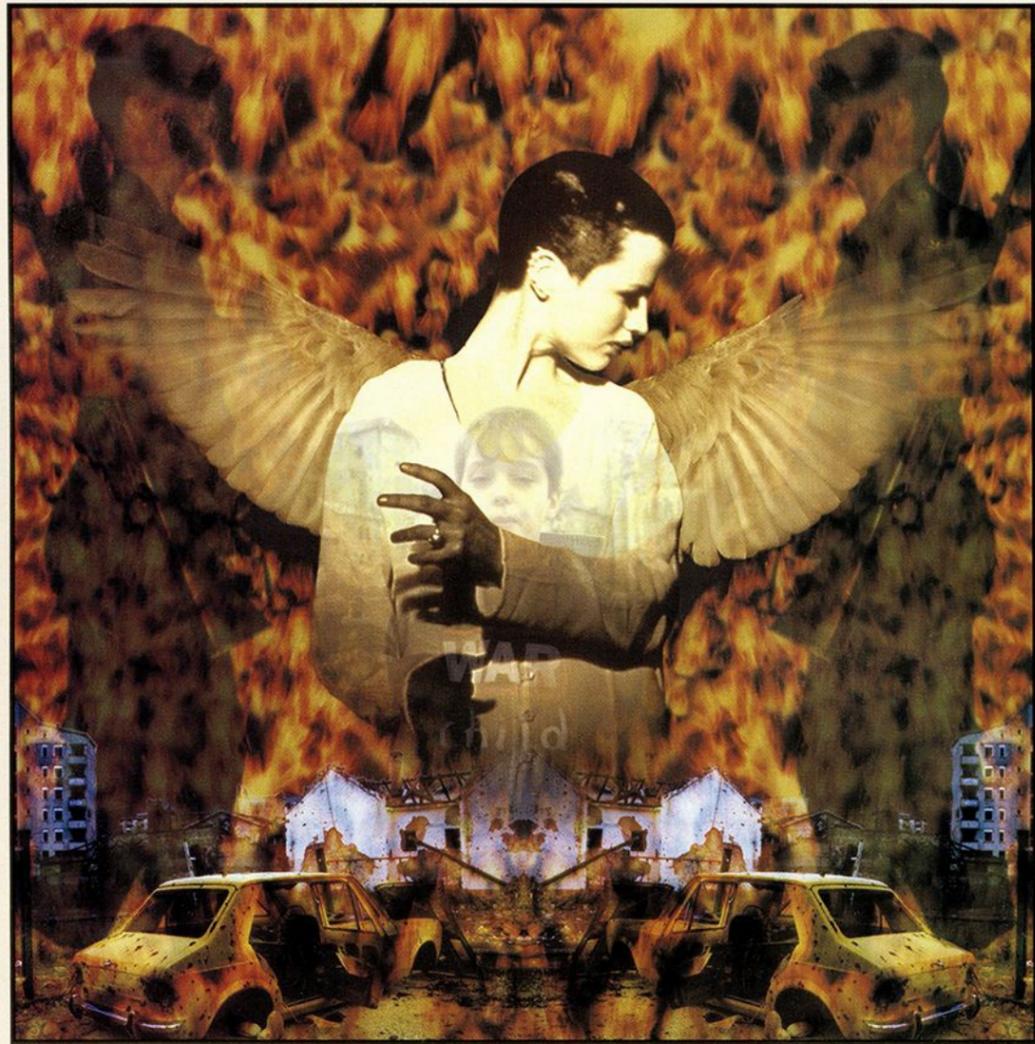
Enter Dolores O'Riordan, the Kate Adie of rock. In her mind, she tours the battlefields and the ghettos, noting diligently the awful prospects. She zooms over Eastern Europe, appalled by the scenes before her. In a New York park, she talks to an old tramp who once served in Vietnam. He shows Dolores his war wounds, and very soon, the tender-hearted singer is in bits.

But what more can a poor girl do? She's also busy taking her 'No Need To Argue' tour across the world - involving more than 200 shows in 23 countries. She's coming to terms with her fresh marriage, with the hassles of celebrity, all the while missing her family back home. An obvious option is to turn her thoughts into an artistic statement - to sing the blues like never before. Therefore, in a succession of hotel suites, Dolores writes down her thoughts, sometimes channel-hopping back to the CNN news programmes, catching up with the latest humanitarian disaster.

Some of her sad feelings are caused by personal events. She mourns the death of her grandfather in Limerick, and as she writes a song about old Joe, she thinks of other good spirits who might have made a difference out there. People such as John Lennon and Kurt Cobain, God rest their souls. Then she writes fond words about John F Kennedy, that great Irish-American President, "ever-saintly, in a way".

Dolores' new songs have titles like 'Warchild', 'Bosnia', 'Joe' and - oh yes

'Berried alive



STEVE DOUBLE

- '(I Just Shot) John Lennon'. They demonstrate truckloads of compassion and heart-throbbing liberalism. A phrase comes up in the lyric of 'When You're Gone' that encapsulates many of these impulses. "In the day, everything's complex," she muses, "there's nothing simple."

And if Dolores feels aghast at the complexity of life as it stands, so the brief in her latest songs is to make our perceptions simple again: to measure innocence against experience, life against death, peace against war.

We've been this way before, most recently on Manic Street Preachers' 'The Holy Bible'. The latter record was the most appalling evocation of

suffering and evil that we may ever hear - a testament that proved too haunting for lyricist Richey to endure.

We can go even further back in this musical tradition, to a record like Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On'. Again, that was a powerful stroke of social observation, as Marvin watched '60s America implode with drug abuse, political assassinations, rotten housing and wars. He sang the music from his heart, but he also themed and arranged his record with astonishing skill.

You wish you could say the same for The Cranberries album. But it's not possible. There are some revelatory moments on 'To The Faithful

Departed', when the voice, words and music manage to transcend their parts and razor your emotions and intellect the way that the Manics and Marvin once did. But such instances are hard to find. Mostly, this record is sloppy, sentimental and patronising.

If you weren't keen on 'Zombie', then you'll despise the new stuff. You'll witness that same use of nursery rhyme melodies and blatant slogans to underline the stupidity of war. There's Dolores' tendency to bellow "oh-wahy-ehhy-ahhy-eee-oooah" when the going gets extra emotive. And that endless onslaught of truisms: "Things would change if we

really wanted them to", "we're all the losers now", "there's a war in Russia and Sarajevo too", "the cream will always rise to the top", "who will save the Warchild baby?", and so on.

The song 'Bosnia' is every bit as crappy as you fear it might be. There's lots of military drumming and a doomy string movement. After describing the wasteland and her vision of babies in their beds (terror in their heads), Dolores gets her moral point over. "When do the saints go marching in?" she bleats, whatever that means. The song ends with a child's music box playing a sweet lullaby, while the clouds of strife gather once more. Woof woof.

This ain't rock'n'roll, this

is a sketch. Not even our best comic minds could we imagine a more ridiculous way to enunciate the Bosnian capital as "Saaragh-ah-jay-haay-vhooah". This is beyond parody. There's such a dead weight of piety and concern that you often break up laughing at the intent. There's no sense of irony, no different levels of meaning. No poetry. This makes U2's 'War' seem like a work of lyrical genius.

And while U2 had an interesting musical ideal, even back in those early days, The Cranberries have long given up on such ambitions. Save for the strings and the odd production quirk, this is dismally conservative. Guitarist Noel picks out the notes of the chords in a routine manner. Fergal's drumming is regimented. The structure of the songs is over-familiar.

What angers you is that The Cranberries were once really promising. The three blokes were formerly indie kids. They grooved to The Smiths, The Sundays and 4AD bands. That was the band's defining tension at the start - a trio of hip musicians versus a singer who'd learnt her trade in pub singalongs and who was madly into Gregorian chants. Those early records were weird adventures between Ireland's past and future, and sometimes it sounded unique.

You still catch a hint of this on 'When You're Gone'. It's a close relative of The Smiths' 'I Know It's Over' in its use of tone and melody. But where Morrissey was bizarre, Dolores is banal. And in comparison to Johnny Marr's dizzy arpeggios, Noel plays fat-handedly. There's an improvement of sorts on 'Forever Yellow Skies', when the beat turns frisky and everybody turns out a happy approximation of New Order's 'Temptation'. You feel that this is how The Cranberries desperately wanted to sound six years ago.

But mainly, this record is Dolores' gig. That means allowing loads of space in the mix for her still-impressive vocals. And you have to credit her power on a tune like 'Warchild'. She strikes the emotional

heart of the song in seconds; whispering, cooing, choking up, imploring the listener with her message. It makes you think of Sinead O' Connor's 'My Special Child', which mentioned the singer's experiences with abortions and miscarriages. That's certainly not Dolores' subject, and you don't necessarily want her to address those themes. But you wish that she could move the dialogue on, to open new subject for discussion.

You feel frustrated in this respect, because there was always a potential in the words of the other two Cranberries albums. Think of a song like 'Pretty' on the debut LP. It detailed the pressures on a young girl to conform - how compliments can sometimes be insults in disguise. It was a nery drama, written at a time of personal disintegration (when Dolores was eating 20 packets of crisps a day, lying paralysed in bed for long periods), and signalled an important channel of expression.

Similarly, 'Twenty One' on the 'No Need To Argue' album was a fearsome portrayal of the adolescent horrors. And on that same album, 'The Icicle Melts' referred to the murder of two-year-old Jamie Bulger in Liverpool. Those songs were individual statements that pierced the listener's indifference. Nothing works anything like as well on the third album.

You will almost certainly hate '(I Just Shot) John Lennon'. It's a stinker, a history lesson that rivals Boney M's 'Ra Ra Rasputin' for crass hilarity. But while Boney M closed with the punch-line "oh, those Russians", acknowledging the idiocy of their efforts, The Cranberries sign off, straight-faced, with five pistol shots. The idiots.

Lennon's crime, according to Dolores, was that he "cared". Not that he was a junkie and a cynic, a hypocrite, a quasi-racist and the selfish asshole who wrote 'Serve Yourself'. No, in Dolores' version, Lennon is without guilt. There's the same rosy gloss to 'I'm Still Remembering', as it bids

adieu to Kurt Cobain ("his presence still remains") and JFK ("ever-saintly", blah, blah, blah). Excuse me, but wasn't Kennedy a philanderer, a warmonger and a horse-fixer of the most repellent variety? Or doesn't that rhyme so well?

'To The Faithful Departed' is a terrible advert for the price of rock'n'roll fame. You'll lose your sense of humour, your perspective and your variety of experience. You'll write a song about the curse of success ('Hollywood') and you'll urge the kids not to do drugs ('Salvation'). You'll even get nostalgic about your first pair of Doc Martens ('The Rebels'), because there's not much left in your crummy life to look forward to.

But by this stage, you're so surrounded by sycophants and toadies that you won't even realise what a dreadful record you've just made. Because you're on a mission to save the world from every variety of evil. You're so emboldened by this stage that you feel destined to prevail, simply armed with three chords and The Truth.

Which was exactly what U2 were gassing on about in 1988, in the last days of their irony-free salvation drive. Then they returned with 'Achtung Baby', the most liberating record of their career. It embraced uncertainty, ambiguity and PVC pants. It acknowledged that sometimes, a conscience can be a pest. And while the punters were digesting this queer career move, U2 could still be sad and concerned and even slip a few of the old ideas in under the wire.

The Cranberries don't have to bunker down in Berlin, or take to wearing bug-eyed sunglasses. But they do need a holiday. They've worked uncommonly hard during this decade, and have given us some decent records. But this is their worst yet. Another album like 'To The Faithful Departed' and even the sappy Americans will have given up on them. Effectively, they'll be 'berried alive. What a gruesome thought. 3

Stuart Bailie

22-Pistepirkko
Rumble City La La Land
(Bare Bone Business)

Raiding the bargain basement of at least four decades, this Finnish trio have produced a guitar-pop LP that veers off into psychedelia, then dives into the blues before resurfacing as Devo.

Although 'Rumble City' is a patchy affair, 'Gimme Some Water' is an inspired stab at garage synth-pop, while 'Snowy Dave' does some atmospheric blues-y scaremongering - underneath Violent Femmes-worthy lyrics - that lead an inspired assault on the English language. If Shonen Knife can get away with recombining the musical DNA on Anglo-American pop, why can't a bunch of Finnish Beefheart fans? 5 (KE)

Above All
Domain

(Roadrunner)
This debut LP from a Southend-based hardcore unit of just two years' standing could do with a bit more oomph in the production, although whether its spare sound is due to inexperience on the part of the band or their producer, Fudge Tunnel/Nailbomb's Alex Newport, is hard to determine. Still, Tony Maddocks' vocals are welcome more coherent than the majority of Above All's genre, and tracks like 'Shadowland' and 'Empire' are sufficiently ambitious to demonstrate that originality is there. It's just a question of waiting until such time as the band have learnt to exploit it more successfully. 5 (VP)

Acetone
If You Only Knew

(Hut)
Aiming to darken the gloomiest night with another album of lonely, homely dirges, Acetone easily scoop record scores on the inadequate-ometer. 'If You Only Knew' is a monument to misery masquerading as inspiration.

Weep! at the keening vocals. Marvel! at the wobbling guitar on the title track. Scratch your head! at the high-hat-based percussion. Wonder! what the bass player got paid for, he's turned down so low. Heartfelt minimalism is all very well when you're Mazzy Star, but the cumulative effect of all these naked, malformed elements is not unlike fingernails being scraped across yer old-fashioned chalkboard. Ghostly. 3 (KE)

Altan
Blackwater

Virgin
After ten years of ace releases on the Green Linnet imprint, Altan's major label debut is the most exciting prospect for Irish trad in a long while. The death of mainstay Frankie Kennedy has surely been a blow, but the dynamism and twin-fiddle power of this Donegal band is still intact.

If there were any pressures to get more 'contemporary', then Altan have coolly gone their way, maintaining the Gaelic airs and Scots-influenced dance tunes. It's a peppy agenda, occasionally recognising sad times with the lovely 'Blackwaterside' and a comradely farewell in 'A Tune For Frankie'. 7 (SB)



Altan:

Albums



Also reviewed: Take That (sniff) and Lightning Seeds