

The Sunday
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LIMERICK
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The people, products
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Limerick pop

LET'S GO DISCO
The grown-up guide
to summer festivals

WHITE NOISE
Has TV finally had
its day?

HER DARK MATERIALS

Dolores O'Riordan is back in the spotlight, but is that where she wants to be? **Nadine O'Regan** meets her as the Cranberries go back on the road



Dolores O'Riordan: 'You have to be strong'

ANDY EARL

Something NEW

The Cranberries are back with a new album and a world tour ready to go – but frontwoman Dolores O'Riordan doesn't seem very eager to talk about either of them

Words: **Nadine O'Regan**

Having Dolores O'Riordan stare at you while saying barely a word for the guts of 40 minutes is intimidating. She's beautiful, Dolores O'Riordan. Sometimes the cameras don't capture that. Today, as she sits in the Cobblestone pub in Smithfield in Dublin, the Limerick-born singer looks as dainty as a doll – her skin is porcelain, her close-cropped hair is a shiny black, and her military-style jacket from Marc Jacobs in Brown Thomas is on trend: tough, but also reinforcing her fragility.

But from the moment I arrive, I feel that the atmosphere is slightly off between us. With most interviews, the thing about doing the interview is that you spend the first ten minutes gaining the interviewee's trust, and then the rest of the time recording the information they'd like to communicate.

But with O'Riordan – and her stare – I feel I have to tell her outright that I like her band and I'm not trying to do some kind of hatchet job. I don't need to ask particularly about the air-rage incident in which she was involved in 2014, and to which she pleaded guilty; or her 2013 fall-out with Cranberries co-founder Noel Hogan (the pair nearly wound up in the High Court, after O'Riordan initiated proceedings against him for undisclosed reasons); or her 2014 marriage break-up from Don Burton, her partner of 20 years, with whom she has three children. Her personal health issues – she has been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder – are not the point of this interview.

I'd like to ask about the Cranberries' new album, *Something Else*, which is strong and good. It's a collection of acoustic tracks largely culled from the band's early years, and reinterpreted with orchestral enhancements from the Irish Chamber Orchestra's string quartet, alongside three pretty new songs. It's gentle, uplifting and worth hearing. I'm also interested to hear about their tour, which takes in sold-out dates this month in Dublin and Belfast. O'Riordan plans on being on tour for the next 12 months, living in hotels and in her tour bus. That's no joke for any musician, no matter how seasoned. It's going to be gruelling. ➤

But O’Riordan either doesn’t trust me or isn’t interested in being interviewed today, or both. The structure of our interview has been pre-arranged. I’m getting 20 minutes with the whole band; then they leave for a flight and I’ll have a further 20 minutes with O’Riordan on her own. “So it’s 20 minutes and then I can go back to the hotel?” O’Riordan says, in front of me, to her tour manager, who nods, and reminds her about another appointment she has at her hotel in Dublin at 6pm.

Have you ever watched a football match where one team is leading and you can see them actively trying to count down the clock until they can emerge victorious? That’s what happens when we sit down together on our own: O’Riordan speaks in clipped tones, using few words and speaking in bland terms, staying on broad conversational highways and relying on positive mental attitude-type tropes. Simple exchanges, such as the one reproduced below, are oddly fraught and tense.

NO’R: Where do you live?
DO’R: I live between Ireland, Canada and New York. But I am an Irish resident.
NO’R: Where in Canada?
DO’R: North of Toronto.
NO’R: And in New York? Are you in Manhattan?
DO’R: Yes.
NO’R: Is it an apartment?
DO’R: Yes.
NO’R: Do you live there in summer or winter?
DO’R: Right now, to be honest, I’m going to live in hotels for the next 12 months.
NO’R: How do you feel about that?
DO’R: I feel good about it. I’ve spent a lot of time on the road. I’ve done seven world tours. So I’ve spent a lot of time in hotels.
NO’R: Does returning to the road fill you with a sense of...
DO’R: Excitement.
NO’R: What are you most excited about?
DO’R: Touring.

I ask her to tell me about something she likes, in the hope that this will spur a burst of conversation: rather mortifyingly, I find that I’m the one doing all the talking.

O’Riordan enjoys swimming and meditating – she’s not into Spotify; she’s not much of a music listener by her own account, but she downloads meditations from iTunes. She travels with a yoga mat, she says, and she’ll meditate every day if the hotel room she’s in has space for her to lay out her mat. I ask her why she likes meditating so much, in particular.

DO’R: It stops time. It stops your mind from racing. It helps you come into the moment.
NO’R: Does your mind race sometimes?
DO’R: Yes.
NO’R: What triggers that?
DO’R: Just life. It’s natural.
NO’R: Have you meditated more often in recent times?
DO’R: No, I’ve always meditated. I took it up when I was 18. I brought a yoga instructor on tour with me for two years.
NO’R: It must be amazing to have that luxury. Do you ever think about how young bands fare now, in a more financially tricky climate for musicians?
DO’R: Not really, no.
NO’R: Even with your previous role on The Voice of Ireland, as a guest judge seeing new talents?
DO’R: It must be hard for them.

O’Riordan is never rude, but it’s clear that she’s far more comfortable talking to me when her band are present. Even with them in the picture, however, and providing a kind of emotional blanket, there are topics that are verboten. Earlier, when I chat to her with the rest of the band present, I politely ask them about the inner-band disagreement which almost derailed them.

In 2013, O’Riordan initiated High Court proceedings against her songwriter partner and Cranberries co-founder Noel Hogan for undisclosed reasons.



Above: Noel Hogan, Dolores O’Riordan, Michael Hogan and Fergal Lawlor of the Cranberries

ANDY EARL

“It’s strange growing up in the public eye. All of your mistakes and downfalls are out there

In 2015, the pair signed a publishing partnership to move their back catalogue to Warner/Chappell Music UK publishing – and the High Court case was struck out just weeks afterwards.

With songwriting credits shared between Hogan and O’Riordan, any disagreement between them would have been massive news: their back catalogue includes five multimillion selling albums, or up to 40 million in sales, including international hits such as Linger, Zombie and Dreams.

When I shake hands with the band and sit down with them in the Cobblestone, Hogan – a bearded, affable presence in regulation black indie hoodie – is sitting beside O’Riordan and, for what it’s worth, from an outside eye – they look easy with one another. “We found that, for us, any problems have come from outside influences,” Hogan says, adding that it’s better when he and O’Riordan sit down and “thrash out” issues.

His response is genial. But it’s also vague and virtually word for word the response he gave half an hour previously, when I arrived early to the Cobblestone, to watch the band as they filmed a television interview with an Australian presenter, to be screened on CNN International at a later date. So I stop Hogan and ask: could they be more specific?

“It’s in the past,” O’Riordan says, shutting down the query. “We’ve moved on. That’s probably the most specific I could get.”

It wasn’t always like this. Back when the Cranberries formed in 1989 in Limerick, O’Riordan was just a slip of a thing – a teenager with formidable ambition. She joined the band a year into their life cycle, when they were still named The Cranberry Saw Us, responding to an advertisement the brothers Mike and Noel Hogan, and drummer Fergal Lawlor, had placed, after their previous vocalist Niall Quinn had decided to quit.

Her vocal presence gave an instantaneously different edge to the Limerick outfit: ethereal, defiant, Irish-accented – conjuring up comparisons to Sinéad O’Connor and Kate Bush.

Their early song Linger was a case in point: simple

enough for the postman to whistle and yet gifted with a point of difference in O’Riordan’s vocals that granted it a certain elusiveness. The band took a chance and sent an early demo, containing the tracks Linger and Dreams, to record companies in Britain. When they heard back, and their music subsequently sparked a bidding war between labels, they could hardly believe it.

“For us, four kids from Limerick, who did a demo, took a chance and posted it to London – for us to get a positive letter, we were ringing each other, going: ‘Oh my God,’” says Lawlor, the gregarious drummer, as he sips a soft drink around the small table in the Cobblestone. “You have that buzz. Geoff [Travis, the founder of Rough Trade Records] was managing us a year later.”

Thanks to Travis’s canny stewardship, the Cranberries recorded their debut album, Everyone Else Is Doing It, So Why Can’t We? with respected studio wizard Stephen Street – the man famous for producing The Smiths – at the helm. Released in 1993, it didn’t initially look like the record would do much. Then MTV, sniffing a hit, intervened in their futures.

At the time, the network had an unprecedented amount of power in breaking new acts: put a video on heavy rotation on MTV and you could make a Seattle grunge outfit like Nirvana or Pearl Jam world famous, or you could break an act like the Cranberries. MTV liked the track Linger.

“It was on heavy rotation on TV,” says O’Riordan, looking at her bandmates. “How many times did they play it?”

“Nearly every hour,” laughs Hogan. “We were opening up for Hothouse Flowers in Europe,” adds Lawlor. “We got a phone call to say that Linger was taking off on college radio in the States and we had to come over there. It was fantastic.”

O’Riordan soon became a famous face. “It was a lot on me,” she says. “It’s strange growing up in the public eye. All of your mistakes and downfalls are out there. It’s difficult, particularly if you’re going through a difficult time. But that’s the price of fame.”

As she talks, it feels like she’s alluding less to her early years than to more recent times. She tours separately from her band. We get to this topic when

we talk about her hobbies, one of the few areas of life she seems truly at ease discussing.

DO’R: I love to swim. I swim every day in hotels.
NO’R: The crawl? The butterfly?
DO’R: The breaststroke and the backstroke. Because I had a herniated disc last year. I had to cancel a couple of festivals. I’m hoping it doesn’t come back to haunt me. If I had this disc out, I’d have to be in a wheelchair, so that would be bad. I also like walking and painting.
NO’R: When are you most likely to paint?
DO’R: When I’m off the road. You can’t do it on tour on the bus.
NO’R: Do you sleep on the bus?
DO’R: Yes, I have a double-bed at the back of the bus with a TV. It’s important that I lie down with my back.
NO’R: Do you have your own bus separate from the guys?
DO’R: Yes.
NO’R: Well, I guess you deserve your own bus by this point.
DO’R: I’ve always had my own bus. From day one.

Luxuries have always come easy to the Cranberries: as a band, they have relatively little experience of not being famous and successful. Early in their careers, the Cranberries wound up opening for acts including the Rolling Stones and AC/DC. Their second album No Need to Argue debuted at No 6 in the US charts in 1994 and outsold its predecessor. The album spawned the number one hit single Zombie, which signalled a heavier direction for the previously more mellifluously melody-led outfit.

Although Zombie had a peculiar chorus lyrically (“With their tanks and their bombs/And their bombs and their guns”), it stuck in the head, as did O’Riordan’s plangent, impassioned delivery.

Go on YouTube and watch footage of her singing the track with the Cranberries on the David Letterman show, and you can see how the studio audience is somewhere between awed and cowed after it; they’re not sure what just happened to them. Zombie remains one of the band’s most streamed

Right: Dolores O’Riordan performs at a concert during Festival Jardins de Pedralbes in Barcelona in 2016

XAVI TORRENT/WIREIMAGE



tracks on Spotify.

All of the band have fond memories of those early days. “I duetted with Pavarotti,” says O’Riordan, a note of pride in her voice. “At the gig, I was the only girl. At the end everyone came on stage – Bono, Meat Loaf, we were all singing together. Those are the nice memories you have.”

As they toured, the band found themselves thrust not only into the spotlight, but into new roles as ambassadors for Ireland. “A lot of people were asking about Ireland, but they had this image in their heads of the Bord Fáilte version of Ireland,” says Lawlor.

The Cranberries – with their military-inspired outfits, anthemic songs and willingness to plug in their electric guitars and deliver thrillingly heavy indie tracks – did a lot to blow away cobwebs and put the bullet into outdated notions of Peig, thatched cottages and forty shades of green.

These days, the Cranberries retain a huge pulling power abroad – in 2015, they performed their hit song Linger to an audience of more than eight million on an episode of The Bachelorette, the US show in which girls compete to win the hand of an eligible man. The sequence couldn’t have been more schmaltzy – the band performed an acoustic version of Linger in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, serenading the winning couple for the season finale.

The footage is on YouTube and it’s so bizarre it’s almost trippy. It was hard to know what was happening watching it, I say.

Noel Hogan laughs. “I don’t think we know what happened and we were there.” O’Riordan stares at me. “It was a nice venue,” she says.

I presume it played a significant role in bringing the music of the Cranberries to a younger generation? O’Riordan nods. “That was part of it. We thought it could be a nice vehicle for younger listeners. Marketing.”

Abroad, people have very little idea of O’Riordan’s personal dramas or the troubles she has been through. They don’t know much about her air rage-related arrest, for which she has apologised, her marriage break-up, or her other travails. They don’t particularly care either. They just listen to the music.

It’s mainly in Ireland that the tabloidisation of O’Riordan’s struggles has been rampant. So it’s perhaps no surprise that this interview doesn’t feel like a normal interview – how could she really affect an air of unconsciousness, after all, when she has already been so scrutinised by the Irish media?

There’s one point, though, when O’Riordan opens up a little, and it’s when she talks about the people she meets on the streets in Ireland. She says she doesn’t get recognised all that much these days, but that when she does, people are lovely to her.

“Most people are really good,” she says, with warmth in her tone. “People like to see you coming back, particularly if you’ve been through a hard time. It’s all about recovering.”

It is, I say. People want to see her do well. “You have to keep going,” O’Riordan nods. “You just have to be strong. And keep soldiering on. You just can’t lay down and die. There’s light at the end of the tunnel.” ■

The Cranberries’ new album, *Something Else*, is out now. They play the Waterfront in Belfast on May 17 and the Bord Gáis Theatre in Dublin on May 18

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