

The Magazine

CRANBERRY SAUCE

Rock's little rich girl
By Mark Edwards



1000 MAKERS OF
THE CINEMA
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STRANGE FRUIT

The Cranberries are a breath of fresh Irish air in the stiflingly hip world of rock. They have sold 13m records, making the diminutive lead singer Dolores O'Riordan the wealthiest, if also the unworldliest, woman in British pop. Mark Edwards and Noel Hogan on their sweet success. Photograph: Richard Croft



The Cranberries, left to right: brothers Noel and Mike Hogan, Dolores O'Riordan and Fergal Lawler

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every other year, in the main square in Marostica — a picturesque town in northern Italy, an hour's drive inland from Venice — the locals play chess. Or, rather, people play chess with the locals. They dress up in medieval garb and become the chess pieces in a giant game — the *Partita a Scacchi* — which commemorates the match played in 1454 between two suitors for the hand of one Lionora Parisio. Her father had suggested chess as a more reasonable alternative to the traditional method of husband selection — a duel to the death.

Today, however, another scene is unfolding. An Italian pop TV show, *Festival Bar*, is being filmed, and the square is full of music fans sitting patiently, damply in the persistent drizzle as the various acts rehearse. Bjork has already come and gone. Now the Cranberries are walking out onto the stage to rehearse two of their recent singles, *Zombie* and *I Can't Be With You*. But the playback — the backing tape to which the band will mime — starts too early. Brothers Noel and Mike Hogan — guitarist and bassist — are hardly on stage; Fergal Lawler hasn't sat down behind his drum kit yet, and Dolores O'Riordan, who is supposed to sing live over the playback, doesn't have time to reach her microphone before the music reaches the first verse. At first, O'Riordan decides to start singing *Zombie* — a song about the Irish troubles — anyway. But, seconds later, she changes her mind and stomps off the stage. The band slowly follow. The audience meanwhile continue to sing along to the playback.

Backstage, O'Riordan cuts through the throng of liggers, a Presleyesque sneer on her face. Tiny, even in high heels, and purple-haired, she leaves a trail of four-letter words behind her. Nobody looks surprised at this behaviour. The record company executives suggest to the Italian TV crew that when O'Riordan comes back out they should film the rehearsal "just in case" she doesn't want to come back again for the actual performance.

O'Riordan returns. The band play the songs. The audience applauds. The crew film the whole thing. O'Riordan disappears back to her dressing room to prepare for the interview I've just travelled for 10 hours to conduct with her. Or not, as the case may be. "Dolores doesn't feel like doing an interview," apparently. Again, there is no hint of surprise in the PR's voice.

There is — as the title of the Cranberries' second album puts it — *No Need To Argue*. Clearly nobody in the band's entourage is prepared to debate the point. "I'm sure you understand," says the PR woman.

No, not really. Although the Cranberries *are* still quite new to this fame thing. Perhaps O'Riordan thinks this is how rock stars behave. Or perhaps this is how you *do* behave when you're only 24 and you've suddenly found yourself the highest-paid female pop star in Britain, pulling in £3.25m a year.

According to a survey undertaken this spring, O'Riordan is the fifth highest-paid woman in Britain, beaten only by authors Barbara Taylor Bradford, Jackie Collins and Jung Chang, and actress Angela Lansbury. (The survey ignored the technicality that O'Riordan is in fact not British at all but Irish.) O'Riordan's earnings

dwarf those of far more established singers such as Sade (£2.06m), Enya (£1.8m) and Lisa Stansfield (£1.3m).

The secret to O'Riordan's earning power is that the Cranberries are successful in almost every country in the world. While hipper bands like Suede, Elastica, Oasis and Radiohead have been dominating the headlines in Britain in the past couple of years, the Cranberries have been busy cracking the huge US market and then winning over the rest of the world with their delicate, melodic pop, topped off by O'Riordan's mesmerising, haunting voice. *Zombie* was a top 10 hit in 25 countries.

Although they're still far from household names here, the Cranberries have sold 13m records worldwide in the past three years. Their management estimates that the Cranberries are now the second biggest act on the Polygram label, for which only Bon Jovi shifts more units. Not bad for a band who, only three years ago, were completely dismissed by the English music press, and for a young girl who, only five years ago, was still at school and earning £30 a week from her Saturday job.

The band were all raised within a few miles of Limerick. The Hogan brothers and Lawler formed a band in 1989 when Lawler, the eldest, was 19. They called it The Cranberry Saw Us, and by all accounts it was as bad as its name. The then lead singer had a penchant for comic songs. A year later, he was out and a mutual friend told O'Riordan about these lads who were looking for a singer. She was 18 — fortunately (she'd always wanted to be in a band, but her mum wouldn't let her join one before her 18th birthday). They shortened the band's name and started gigging locally. Jim Carroll — now the owner of the Lakota record label, then a scout for English record companies — remembers seeing them in October 1990: "It was the university bar — a thousand students drinking subsidised beer, and in the corner just a few of them watching the band. And the Cranberries were mindblowing — easily the best I'd seen in all my time in the music business."

Within weeks the British record company executives started arriving. The first was Lauren Bromley, then running the London office of Imago, who describes the experience of seeing this band of shy youngsters as witnessing "a God-given explosion of talent bursting from oblivion". Through the early months of 1991, the buzz continued. Bromley recalls one flight out from London where "there must have been 40 people representing 15 labels all going to a Cranberries gig". Eventually the band signed with the Polygram-owned Island label (significantly, as it would turn out, with Island's *American* office), and set about recording a debut single in the Limerick studios owned by their manager, Pearse Gilmore.

Then things started to go horribly wrong.

"Because you're quiet and you're Irish, they think you're a bloody moron." It's a week after Marostica, and O'Riordan is in Dublin, explaining the roots of her mistrust of journalists. She's recalling the first two articles written about them, at the end of 1991, when she and "the boys", as she calls them, were made out to be dim-witted yokels. In the *New Musical Express* they were called bumpkins, while the *Melody Maker* made fun of the "tacky religious icons" on the walls of Dolores's parents' home in Ballybricken. She talked openly in that article of her recent trip to London, her anxiety when she'd seen black people for the first time, and referred to heavy metal music as "Satanic". If she had been made anxious by her first encounter with other races, the journalists were equally thrown by their first meeting with a rock singer who still played the organ in her local church and espoused a strong belief in family values with no discernible sense of irony. O'Riordan sums up their mocking attitude as "an ignorant English thing".

"The band hated being called 'naive,'" recalls John Best, their press officer at the time. The press may have misrepresented four genuinely unworldly kids as country-fied freaks (they were actually living in a dingy flat in



Pan-global modern pop stars: O'Riordan is described as 'she who must have all the attention'

FIVE YEARS AGO SHE WAS AT SCHOOL, WITH A SATURDAY JOB

decidedly unrural Limerick), but there *was* a purity to the band that came as a breath of fresh air. Their naivety was at the core of their success. "The reason they were so different," says Best, "is that they weren't hot-housed like a band would be in England. Anyone who wants to be in a band over here starts reading the music press when they're 13. By the time they're 16, they know all the moves you're supposed to make."

O'Riordan didn't know any of the moves at all. When the audiences at Cranberries gigs started getting bigger — fleshed out by an increasing number of record company executives — O'Riordan became so shy that she sang with her back to the audience, only occasionally turning her head to catch a glimpse of her new fans.

"It was obvious how talented Dolores was," says Lauren Bromley, "but at the same time she was like someone who'd fallen from space. She was very raw, very unworldly-wise. She was like a chrysalis about to transform, and she was as interested in how she would become a woman as she was in being a rock star. She wanted to know what I wore, what restaurants I went to, what shops I went to. I think she'd been a bit starved growing up where she did. The band themselves were more naive than anyone I've ever met."

The Cranberries decided that, since very few people would buy a first single by a little-known band, they wouldn't release their best songs first. But the music press had already heard their best songs on the demo tape. So when the debut single, *Uncertain*, was released, the critics were disappointed and reviewed it harshly.

Then the band fell out with their manager over the recording of the first album. There was a good side to this: they ended up with a new manager and a new producer for the record — Geoff Travis, who had run the Smiths' record label, and Stephen Street, who had produced the Smiths' albums. But the messy process of changing management, and re-recording a whole album,

was so time-consuming that by the time the debut album appeared, everyone had forgotten about them. The almost apologetically titled *Everyone Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We* was an excellent debut, but it received at best lukewarm reviews. "We'd been this cool little band with a nice demo," O'Riordan recalls. "Everybody had loved us. We were the cool Cranberries from Ireland. But by the time the album came out it was a year too late. So nobody cared. The British music press — they kiss your ass and then they kick your ass. They trample on you."

The band headed off to America. Through the autumn of 1993 they toured as support act to Suede, Duran Duran and The The, and after a while reports came back of the Cranberries drawing bigger crowds than the bands that were headlining. Three things made America different. First, since they were signed to the American arm of Island, the label promoted them properly, instead of just going through the motions for the latest import from the London office; second, the band toured for month after month, building an audience, while most British bands play for two weeks; and third, MTV took a liking to their videos.

They returned to Britain triumphant. This time round, shy little Dolores swaggered on stage, swathed in an American flag, just to make it clear that they now had the world's biggest record-buying market in their pocket. Astonished reviewers dubbed her "Tank Girl", and suggested that with her new blonde bob and high-laced boots she looked like someone "diverted from a Clockwork Orange convention". One critic, noting how her new stage presence overshadowed the boys, referred to her as "She Who Must Have *All* The Attention".

She certainly got all the attention in the

summer of 1994 when she married Don Burton, a 32-year-old tour manager whom she had met when he was running the Duran Duran tour. Held at Holycross Abbey, an 11th-century monastery in Tipperary, it was very much a rock'n'roll event — the invitations looked like laminated backstage passes. "It was hilarious," Jim Carroll recalls. "All the paparazzi were there, and she got married in her knickers!" He thinks hard how best to describe her outfit, before deciding: "It looked like cheap thermal underwear."

At the end of 1994 the group changed their management again, signing with a company called Left Bank, which boasted clients such as Meat Loaf and Duran Duran. It was all preparation for the release of the band's second album, *No Need To Argue*, with which they planned to convert the rest of Europe and Australia. While the songs on the first album had been mainly about loss and abandonment (O'Riordan wrote them after the breakup of her first "big love"), the new songs



Dolores O'Riordan and Don Burton, tour manager, at their Tipperary wedding

address wider issues. The lyrics have a detachment to them, however, perhaps because O'Riordan's exposure to wider issues has mainly been through news channels in hotel bedrooms. You won't find complexity in her lyrics, but that may be part of the secret of their success. Bands with clever lyrics tend only to sell well in their country of origin. Depending much more on the sound of O'Riordan's voice than what she sings, the Cranberries have universal appeal. Her voice is an ethereal instrument with a slightly new age edge, which, when placed over the band's bright guitar-driven pop, creates a very particular, and very successful, sound. Modern pan-global pop stars, the Cranberries not only appeal to

the grunge generation, but also to their parents. *No Need To Argue* has so far sold twice as many copies as their debut, and has indeed won over Europe and Australia, and most of Asia. It has been an astonishing success story, and for O'Riordan an amazing transformation. "My life's changed," she says. "I went from being a schoolgirl living at home, to living in a dingy flat and being in a little band when we made the first album, and then we made the second album, leaving it all and growing away and becoming a little pop star."

The thing about "becoming a little pop star" is you can never switch it off. "Sometimes people yell at you," she says, "and you're tired or you're just trying to take a break. If you try to ignore them it's 'Stuck up cow!' and you're just going, 'Please leave me alone'. When you choose the fame thing, yeah, you make a lot of money, but sometimes your life's just not your own. At the same time, it's part of the whole deal, you know? I'm the one with the Mercedes. It's got its pros and cons."

Ah yes, the Mercedes... the £3.25m. "When I got back from the tour, the press officer had all the cuttings, and there was a ton of articles about my money," she says. "Why is everyone so obsessed with my money? I'm not obsessed with it, I'm bloody well working."

The music business is famous for the length of time it takes for royalties to actually get paid to the artists. O'Riordan hasn't seen much of her millions yet, but the band have been staying in nicer and nicer hotels on tour. "That's important," says O'Riordan. "It really does help. You come off stage with tight security around you. You wave at people. You jump in the bus. It takes you three hours to unwind. You get into the bunk bed. I share my bunk with my husband, so that's like really squashy; but I won't go into another bed because that's too weird. When you're only married a year, you have to kip with your husband. You get up about six, seven. You get to a hotel. You go back to bed for a few hours. Then it's time to go to the gym. Then it's soundcheck. Then it's make-up. Then it's the gig and the whole day's gone again."

The Cranberries have lived life on the road almost permanently for the past three years. Their manager, Lewis Kovac, claims this is vital to their success. "Wherever they play, sales go up."

For all her theoretical wealth, O'Riordan hasn't had a lot of time to enjoy it yet. "There's a job mentality there," says Carroll. "It's probably the same as working for the county council or on a farm. It's much the same in their minds. Dolores isn't really a glamorous pop star. She just acts it a bit because she's the frontperson."

Carroll clearly feels that, deep down, O'Riordan hasn't changed much. "She'll have been a tomboy, a bit of a tearaway, a cool kid in her own way back in Ballybricken. She's just doing that on stage now."

O'Riordan confirms both of Carroll's points when I ask her about our non-interview in Venice. At first she is the work-orientated professional: "That's really nothing to do with me. That's something you should take up with the press officer. I'm really professional. I didn't get my schedule the day before, and if I don't get my schedule... you can't just live your life with people clicking their fingers, 'Do this, do that'. It was a mishap on behalf of those business heads. I was doing my gig. They weren't."

And then there's a hint of the old, shy Dolores from Ballybricken — the one whose mother wouldn't let her join a band till she was 18. "I'm just a little small body that's only able to do a certain amount," she says. "It's like every day of your life you have a gig for two hours, you travel overnight, you're really tired, you could have had a really bad period. But who cares? You're a rock star. Nobody cares about the fact that you're just a little girl. So, really, I put Dolores first."

"And if somebody gets offended or doesn't understand, it just means that they didn't care to find out why," she continues. "I'm glad you asked, rather than just going 'Oh, she's a bitch.'" ■

MICHELE LAURITA