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THE CRANBERRIES

EIRE TO THE CROWN

After months of anticipation, **THE CRANBERRIES** are finally releasing their debut single. **EVERETT TRUE** travelled to Limerick to find out more about the much-heralded Irish band, whose singer has already been described as a cross between Liz Cocteau and a young Sinead O'Connor. **Pics: JOE DILWORTH**

IT COMES DOWN TO THE VOICE. DOESN'T IT ALWAYS?

The Voice: A gentle, pure Irish whisper with a tinge of huskiness which sends melancholy-splattered shards of pain and hope and love straight to your heart. The Voice: a melodic mini-scream which oscillates and reverberates out into the darkening, overcast sky. The Voice: a gentle hiccup, a dropped "r", a missed heartbeat, an impassioned yearning. It can sound both young and ancient simultaneously. It can span the ages. It's so filled with emotion, it will break your heart with the merest slipped quaver.

Already The Voice has been compared to Harriet Wheeler, early Sinead O'Connor, Julianne Regan, Patti Smith (?), Liz Cocteau, an escapee from Les Mystere Des Voix Bulgares, Siouxsie. Lazy comparisons all, and by lazy journalists all. Doesn't it strike you that if something has to be compared with so much, that it must be truly unique, that if it takes even the most seasoned of cynics so long to pin down, it must really be something to write home about, to shout down the overwhelming, stifling consensus of rock with? Yes? You'd be right.

Dolores O'Riordan, a good Catholic girl from the countryside near Limerick who still occasionally plays the organ in her local church, is the possessor of this voice. The Cranberries are her band and please, please don't shout too loud. You might drown her trembling whisper.

The kitchen that Dolores spent many hours of her formative years in, is covered in tacky religious icons. There's a Jesus clock on the wall opposite me, a cross full of some nameless red liquid that glows eerily in the afternoon light. To one side sit gallons and gallons of Lourdes holy water, to the other, the pantry door is covered in flies, seemingly immobile, caught up in the slower pace of life that rules here.

Her band sit nervously round the table, slightly awed by their surroundings, munching on good home-made fare of ham and cheese sandwiches, apple sauce and steaming great mugs of tea. There's Fergal Lawler, their cheerfully friendly drummer who studied to be a hairdresser before forming The Cranberries. With his leather jacket and freckles, you can imagine him roaring down Sunset Boulevard in five years time, sipping cocktails by the hotel pool.

There's Noel Hogan and his brother Mike, baker's sons, who grew up on the grey streets of Limerick, Southern Ireland's third largest city (also nicknamed Stab City due to a recent spate of stabbings). Both brothers are almost painfully shy, Mike in particular barely saying a word during the interview.

Finally there's Dolores herself, who co-writes most of the songs with Noel; she's petite, sparky, raven-haired, down-to-earth and slightly apart at the same time. Dolores used to sing in both her church and school choirs as a soloist, the latter winning the all-Ireland singing competition five years running. Up in her bedroom is a 300-year-old organ her local vicar gave her. She's slightly embarrassed by the thought the "city slickers" might be looking down on her country home, but proud nonetheless. She takes us outside to see the turkeys her parents are fattening up in readiness for Christmas (kept permanently in a shed, deprived of sight, they present a pitiful sight) and chickens peck at our ankles.

The light's fading fast, so photographer Joe Dilworth suggests we wrap up the day with some photos at what turns out to be the largest stone circle in Ireland. The lads run across it pell-mell, uncaring. Dolores is more respectful of her past, of the mysticism which she can still feel around her.

Through my mind, intangibly as though part of the very air I'm breathing, run the words to "Nothing Left At All", one of four Cranberries songs on their forthcoming debut EP. Music has never seemed so appropriate to surroundings.

WHEN we eventually settle down to discuss The Cranberries, their music, their lives, loves and least favourite journalists, it's in the more-familiar (for me) surroundings of their manager/

producer/mentor Pearse Gilmore's studio, where every Cranberries song has been recorded to date. Dolores is barely audible above the slow whir of the tape recorder.

"I grew up singing both traditional and religious songs," she tells me in her soft, lilting country accent. "I used to love hymns. I don't have any influences from modern bands, just whatever I was brought up with. My voice was born with that kind of thing on it." Do you feel an affinity for the land?

"Definitely," she replies. "Whenever I'm writing songs, it's better for me to get away from everything - town, cars, all that stuff. Usually, the lads or I might do the music and then I'll take the tape up into the fields and I'll listen to it over and over, lying down in the grass."

This natural approach to songwriting manifests itself in The Cranberries' music. Without wishing to get too "Big Noise" about it: in every beaten drum, in every plucked string you can feel the rhythm of Ireland's rivers and paths, in every hiccupped syllable and every wondrous harmonic, you can sense centuries of easy-paced living and an openness not possible on this (jaded) side of the water.

That may sound wanky and pretentious, but it's true. Except, The Cranberries, being more folksy than rock 'n' roll, never once even vaguely approach sounding bombastic. The best parallel here is early (young) Sinead. The Cranberries are all around 19 years of age.

"I went to this disco in London, now," Dolores continues, "and it was really, like, modern - it was full of punks and everything. Upon my life, I was crying, I couldn't handle it at all. It was too much to the extreme to what I love. It was all that heavy metal and funny bass riffs. I was sitting down and wanting to go home. I just love nature and my home: you can't buy things like that."

THE first time I came across The Voice was quite by accident. It was another boring evening in London, with nothing do but go out and check out The Scene-sters down the university. Moose were in town, and no, my hopes weren't high.

Yet I was caught unawares by a sound coming through the windows which was so beautiful, so moving, so passionately unlike anything heard in these cynical parts for so long, I couldn't believe it could be a live band. It was like all the best parts of 4AD and Rough Trade rolled into one.

I rushed into the venue, only to be confronted by four awkward-looking children on stage in front of a near-deserted hall, the female singer painfully shy, hiding her face from us all. The sound and The Voice continued, causing chills to rivulet down my back. So this was The Cranberries, then, the band with the most highly-touted demo in town, the band who managed to sign to Island Records without even a review in the music press?

It must have been weird playing in England that first time.

"The strangest thing was seeing how the audience reacted, seeing as how we were such an unknown band," Ferg(al) replies. "I don't like the crowds at gigs, the lack of space, the smokey air," Dolores says, delightfully. "Sometimes I'll be looking out at the crowd from the stage, thinking 'God help us, they're all squashed!'"

Did you travel much when you were a child?

"Never," replies the country girl. "The first time was when I went to London when I was 16 to see my sister. That was it. We used to go to the beaches when I was small. We just lived always in the countryside."

"I've gone to London a few times this year," she continues. "So I'm getting used to it, but when you're back here it's so different, it's like you were in a dream. It's hard to explain to someone over here what it's like - you know the way you were saying about the air here, how you got a nice feeling from it? That's very hard to explain to someone from London who's never left it."

THE Cranberries originally formed three years ago as an after-school band, The Cranberry Saw Us, by Noel, Mike and Ferg, who were going to concerts together in Limerick at the time. Influenced by The Smiths, R.E.M., U2 and The Cure, they practiced for a while with a mate of theirs on vocals until 16 months ago, when he left.

How did Dolores get to meet the lads?

"It was last year, just before I did my leaving," she recalls. "There was a girl in my class and she told me there was a band looking for a girl singer. They were called The Cranberry Saw Us and I thought it sounded really funny, and I didn't know whether to go up or not."

"So I came up here and they were all sat in this room," Dolores continues. "Of course, their style was all different from me: they were all wearing these tattered denims and things, and I was

wearing this nice little pinkie pants. They were all laughing at me and I was really embarrassed, cos there was about nine fellas in the room and I was the girl from the country. They thought I was a scream. But Noel, he was really nice to me, and Ferg was nice, but the bass-player, Mike, he had to go out the room, he was laughing so much."

"I didn't really care she was from the country because she had a great voice and seemed like a nice person," Ferg recalls. "I used to think she was quiet, but then the mad side of her came out, and she's just as bad as us now, screaming around with us, beating us up."

THE Cranberries made their first demo after three months and a three-track cassette, "Nothing Left At All", went on sale three months later, selling 300 copies locally. The five-track demo followed: they originally sent it out "as a crack" to a few record companies they had the address of, and were totally stunned when Rough Trade replied ("The Smiths signed to them!") After intense competition, Island finally convinced them to sign: one of the conditions being that The Cranberries were still allowed to record in Pearse's studio.

"I didn't think we'd go so far," Dolores says. "I didn't think there was much space for real music and real songs anymore, the way everything is getting so technical."

"Sometimes even I can't watch films," she continues. "Because of the things that happen in them, I don't want to become used to abuse. I stand out like no one's business when I'm watching films, because I just feel it's wrong. It's probably to do with how I was brought up, that I feel I'm getting too far away from nature, from love. I don't like films which are horrible, brutal."

"That's why I could never listen to any of that heavy metal stuff, that satanic music," she adds. "I don't know if that's the right word, but that's what they call it here. Do you know that evil music?"

"Yeah, I reply doubtfully, I think I know what you mean."

"Well, maybe it isn't, but that's what we were taught. It's bad, it frightens you."

LET'S not get too carried away quite yet, however. We're still talking potential. The first shows, the first demo, were astonishing, sure - but since then The Cranberries have played in London twice and something has gone slightly awry.

It seems that since their exposure to the recording industry, to London and touring Britain (with Moose) their sound has changed. What's happened? The guitars sound trendier, more influenced by outside sources, less original than they used to. Maybe it's the new equipment. Maybe it's uncertainty. And someone somewhere is labouring under the illusion that the guitars and drums are as important as The Voice. Not so! The guitars and drums are fine, but the voice is The Voice (if you get me)! Why is it now fighting to be heard in the mix?

"Maybe it's down to a few different things," replies Dolores.

"Maybe you go through a phase of trying out something else which isn't happening. I know for myself the kind of music I like and it might go astray or something, but I can always go back to it. Sometimes it's a pain in the bum, because people are saying, 'Write us another brilliant song, make sure it's not like any of the London bands', but you can't just compute songs in."

The other strange thing is the choice of songs for the first single: good as they are, they aren't as good as some of those on the demo tape. What's happened to the spine-tingling "Linger" (a song to give your heart away to if ever their was one) and the totally awesome "Dreams", which verges on the anthemic, but for Dolores' incredible vocal performance?

"There are songs which are special to us, like 'Linger'. If we released that now, only a few people will buy it," Ferg explains. "Hopefully, if we save it, more people will have heard of us and more people will buy it."

"We don't want to get too big too soon," the drummer adds. "We want to build up fans over a period of time. People should get into us because they like our music, not because we're hip."

But isn't there a problem there, that by the time you come to release those songs, they may no longer be your best songs, or you may no longer care for them so much, or you might be experimenting with a different sound which doesn't suit them as well?

Dolores defends their decision.

"There are certain songs you write, you know forever you'll love those songs," she says, curling her feet into a ball. "You'll know yourself which one sounds better. This pressure thing which London places on a band as soon as they release their first single, that sometimes bothers me. But I know that all I have to do to get away from that is leave the city behind and return to my fields."

Nonetheless, "Uncertain", is an astonishing debut single. Four songs as fresh and stimulating as a breeze blowing in from the North Sea, four songs as pure and harmonic and catchy as anything Lush never released, four songs which will work their way into your heart and stay there, glowing. Check the two songs on the B-side, the rampant "Pathetic Sense" and trickling "Them", in particular. A heaven-send.

"Uncertain" is released on Xeric on October 28.

