

'The Cranberries without Dolores just isn't The Cranberries' - Limerick band on why they won't replace their friend and lead singer

In the End, the poignantly-titled new album from the Limerick band, is to be their swan song. Still trying to process the untimely death of their friend and lead singer, they will not replace her, they tell John Meagher



Dolores O'Riordan, Noel Hogan, Fergal Lawlor and Mike Hogan

John Meagher April 20 2019 2:30 AM

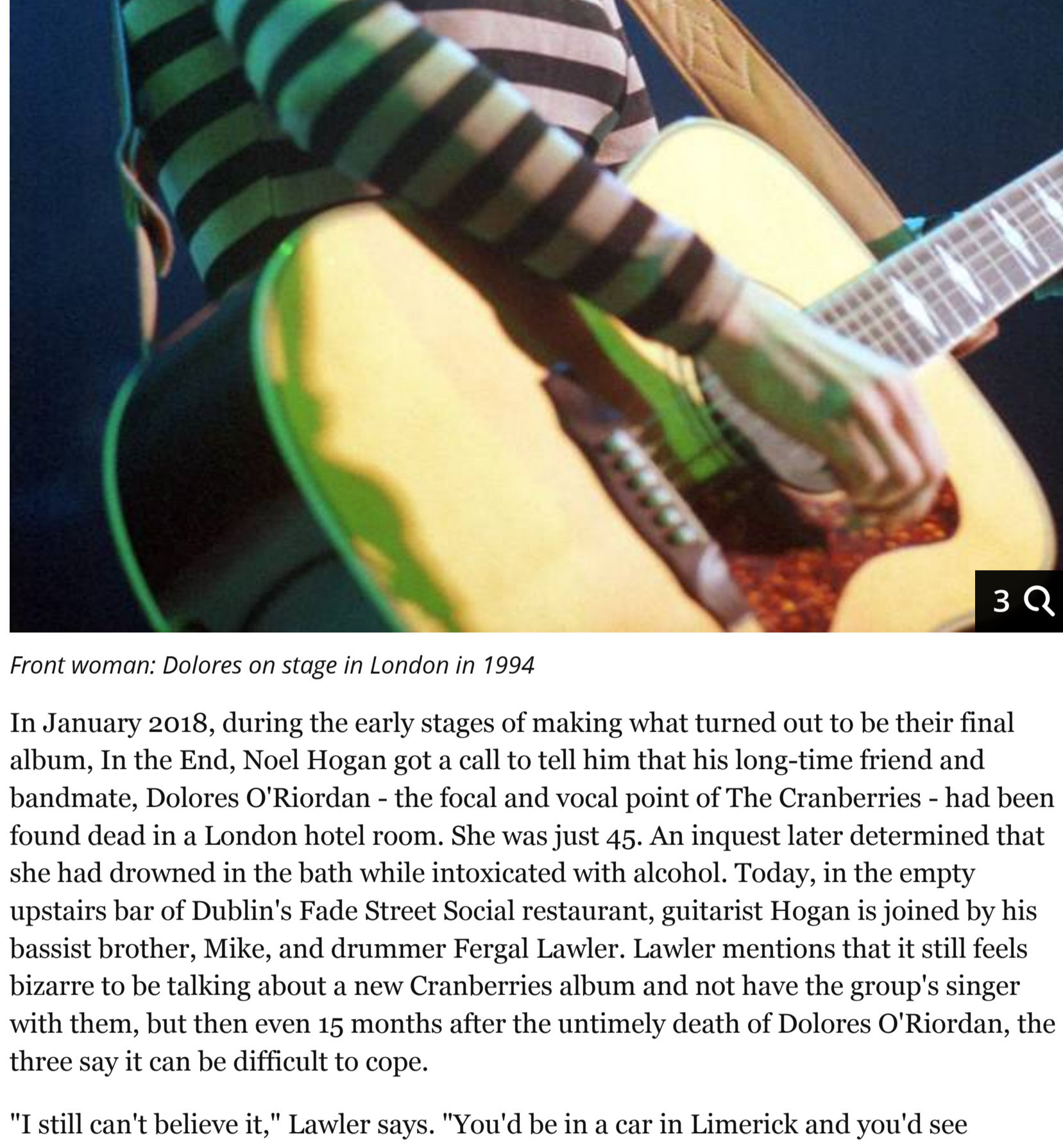
Of the countless shows The Cranberries played in their 30-year history, one, in particular, stands out for Noel Hogan. It wasn't a stadium show, or a big arena performance or a festival. It was far more modest than that.

That was the moment when The Cranberries could have done what many ordinary in a similar situation have done - quietly quit and return to more stable, more ordinary lives.

That something was Linger. Their song - the first they ever wrote before they had emerged from their native Limerick - was picked up by the influential 'college radio' in the US and doors started to open.

Hogan talks about the TJ's gig because he wants to make the point about being resilient in the face of adversity.

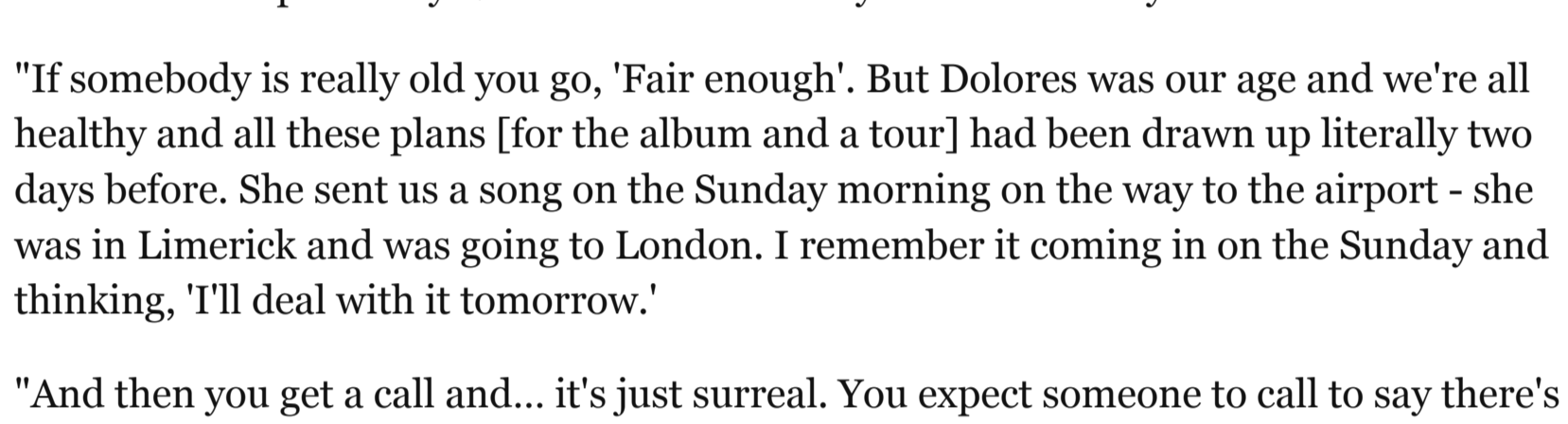
"Unfortunately, what's around the corner is not always a good thing."



Front woman: Dolores on stage in London in 1994

In January 2018, during the early stages of making what turned out to be their final album, In the End, Noel Hogan got a call to tell him that his long-time friend and bandmate, Dolores O'Riordan - the focal and vocal point of The Cranberries - had been found dead in a London hotel room.

"I still can't believe it," Lawler says. "You'd be in a car in Limerick and you'd see someone walking down the street with their hoodie pulled up and you'd think it was Dolores."

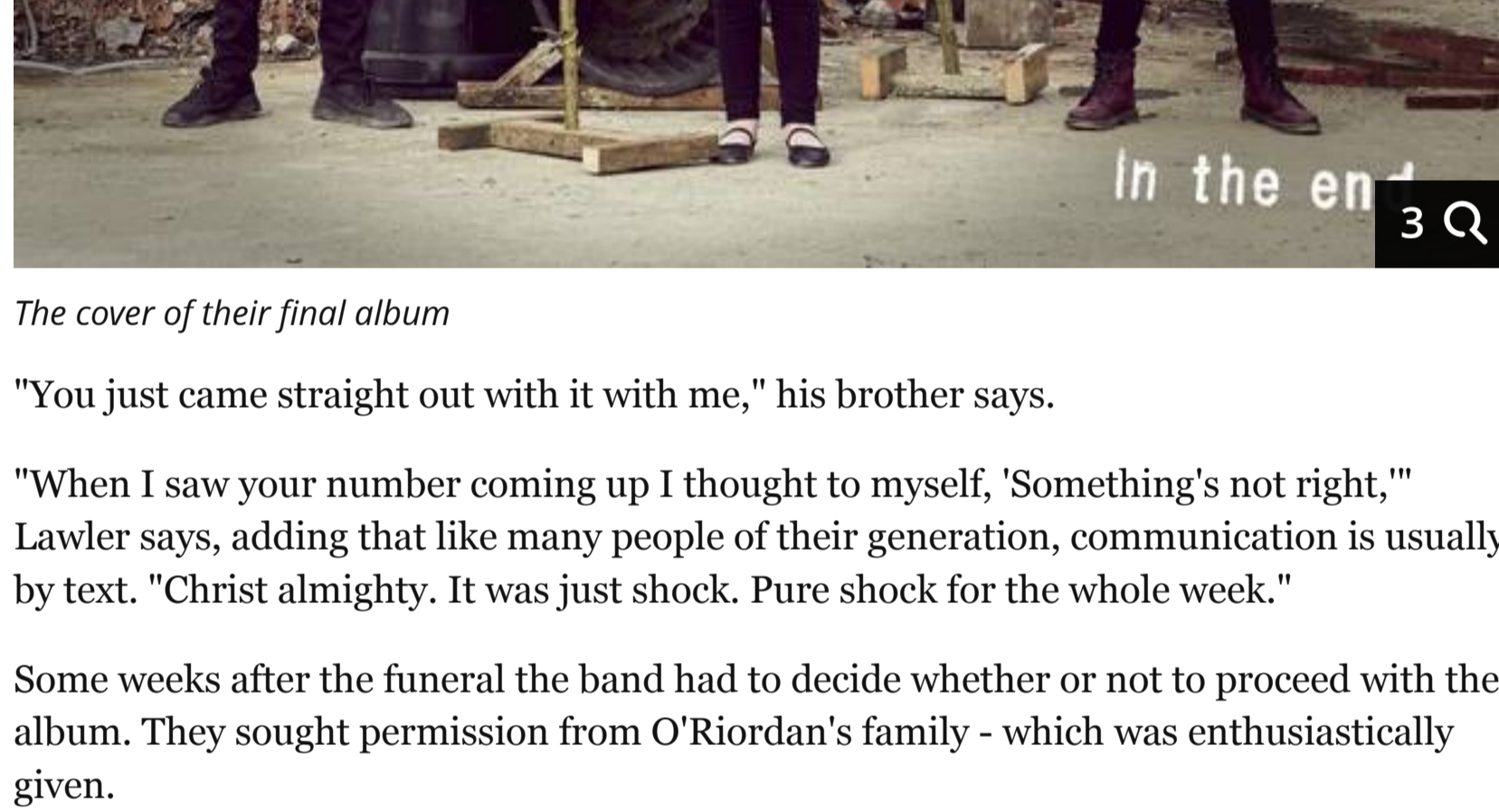


Noel says he will never forget the moment he learnt that Dolores had died. "It's that cliché of time standing still," he says. "But it really does. It was an ordinary Monday. You're just doing your normal things and suddenly the phone rings."

"If somebody is really old for you, 'Fair enough'. But Dolores was our age and we're all healthy and all these plans [for the album and a tour] had been drawn up literally two days before. She sent us a going on the Sunday morning on the way to the airport - she was in Limerick and was going to London. I remember it coming in on the Sunday and thinking, 'I'll deal with it tomorrow.'"

"And then you get a call and... it's just surreal. You expect someone to call to say there's been a big mistake. I mean, you know there's going to be no call, that what's happened has really happened, but you can't process it."

It was Noel who told the others. "They [Dolores' family] were obviously devastated. Making one phone call was hard enough. When I had to ring the boys I could feel my heart going 100 miles an hour. I was in so much shock I can't even remember what I said to ye."



The cover of their final album

"You just came straight out with it with me," his brother says. "When I saw your number coming up I thought to myself, 'Something's not right,' Lawler says, adding that like many people of their generation, communication is usually by text. "Christ almighty. It was just shock. Pure shock for the whole week."

Some weeks after the funeral the band had to decide whether or not to proceed with the album. They sought permission from O'Riordan's family - which was enthusiastically given.

Making the album would prove to be a challenge as they were relying on demos featuring Dolores singing. "Some of them were more advanced than others," Noel says, "and at first I thought [first single] All Over Now was incomplete.

"What I had at home was a verse and chorus and nothing else and the rest of the song was an empty void. And when I listened to it, I thought, 'What a pity - it would have been a great song.'"

But then Dolores' partner, Olé Koretsky, brought her hard drive over to Limerick from her home in New York, and the song could be saved. "As soon as I heard the hard drive I realised there was so much more that had been done on it - she'd pretty much finished this thing.

"And then there were songs like Wake Me When It's Over - that was her song - and when we opened it it was pretty much done. We had enough of the idea from those demos that her vocals were perfect and we realised just how strong the album was."

They turned to their regular producer Stephen Street and they set to work on completing the album. Lawler says the process of completing it from that point on wasn't that much different to how they had worked in the past.

"Dolores," he says, "would come in on the first day [of recording] and she would put down rough tracks and we'd keep her 'guide vocal' and the three of us would work away with Steve. Dolores would get bored of singing the same song over and over. She felt she'd lose the passion if she had to sing the same lines over and over. By the time of the second or third album she would do guide vocals to a click-track [audio cues, often used during studio recordings]. We'd work with Steve and then in the evening she'd come back and do her actual vocal. We'd head off then because it was more intimate with herself and Steve than having us standing around."

In the End makes for a poignant listening experience and although the lyrics were obviously written while O'Riordan is still alive it is difficult not to read more into them. There's an eerie feeling of finality about some of the songs.

Lawler reckons she would have loved the album, we grieve. "I think she would have been really happy. When we finished the finished, gave copies to her family and they commented that they would all be really proud and that puts our minds at ease."

The three realised early on - without verbalising it to each other - that they couldn't go on as The Cranberries. In the various promotional activities they have been doing around the world for this album, they haven't performed any of the songs and they refused to countenance the thought of recruiting another singer to take Dolores' place.

"The Cranberries without Dolores just isn't The Cranberries," Mike says.

When the album was completed and downtime returned, thoughts of their earliest days first flooding back, Noel says. "I always think that the first of everything is nice. Your first demo. Your first gig. Your first album. Your first tour. It's so special. You can never recapture that feeling.

"We did this because we wanted to be like our heroes - The Cure, The Smiths, a lot of that late '80s indie. And that's why we asked Stephen [Street, who had made his name as The Smiths' go-to producer] to work with us."

He says their ambitions were modest at the start. "You hope you will have a little bit of success - that we might get to play in Dublin, for instance. I never thought that we would be what it ended up being. The first time you go on Top of the Pops or Saturday Night Live, it's wow! We used to watch those shows and you think it's such a glamorous life. And then you get to do them. Unfortunately, you get more cynical as you get older and you go back doing it and it's like" - he puts on a sort of teenage, moany intonation - "Oh God, how long are we going away for?"

It's a sentiment echoed by his brother. "Funnily enough," Mike adds, "the things that we think about most and have happiest memories of are those days before it got really big and we were all together, on a tour bus, living on a tenner a day, not washing, just having the craic. It's that more so than all the glamour that feels really special. You're that little gang - the four of us. Us against the world. You make your own entertainment because you had no money."

Although they realised they had something special with Linger - and would sometimes play it twice in their early shows - none of them thought it would be the song that would break them in America.

"Denny Cordell who signed us to Island [Records] had a real soft spot for the song and he pushed it to Stephen," Noel recalls. "Stephen was paranoid about getting it right. He'd say, 'I think the bass needs to be changed again. Do this again'. All the other songs on that album we did one time and we moved on to the next time but he would go back to Linger time and again.

"But he should have gone with his gut because the first version is the one we ended up with, the one that everybody knows. When college radio and MTV played up on it, it all changed. You'd play those opening notes at a gig in America and the place would erupt. There was no turning back after that."

Their rise to fame after Linger took off was meteoric. They were supporting Suede in the US - then the hottest of British bands - but it was The Cranberries the crowds had come to see. Many would leave before Suede had even come on stage. The tour concluded with Suede supporting The Cranberries.

O'Riordan was thrust into the spotlight and her bandmates were able to remain in the background. Despite selling 40 million albums, the Hogan brothers and Fergal Lawler can walk down Grafton Street in Dublin without anyone noticing them. It was all so different for Dolores.

"I felt bad about the pressure she was put under," Noel says. "We'd say to Dolores, 'We'll do that interview.' We'd try to take the pressure off - but every journalist would want to speak to the front person. And I suppose that's the way the media works."

"I remember during the first tour in the States," Lawler says, "we were doing a photoshoot for a magazine and they just wanted her." He puts on a brash American accent. "Okay, we want you naked, in a box and sort of bursting out of it'. And she was like, 'No - what's that got to do with music?' She was speaking to us afterwards and said they wouldn't give us the cover because she wouldn't do it and we were like 'You're dead right'. We were always very supportive about things like that."

Mike says that 30-odd years later, female musicians are still asked to do the sort of demeaning or sexed-up stuff that their male counterparts never have to do. "It's wrong. It shouldn't happen. But it still happens."

Noel says Dolores had to do a lot of growing up in the public's glare.

"She came out of her shell. The Dolores we met was not the Dolores the world got to know. She loved the laugh. She was a bigger messer than we were. But [the fame] did harden her a bit. She wasn't afraid to say what she was thinking.

"She realised very quickly that people will walk all over you otherwise. And that can be mistaken for other things. But all it is was her way of dealing with things."

In between albums and tours, each of the four members would take a break to spend time with their families. Often, there would be no contact for months. There was a long gap after the release of Roses in 2012, but they say there had been no falling out.

"It really wasn't unusual to take those breaks," Noel says, "and even myself and Mike wouldn't see each other. Dolores was living in New York too, don't forget. But you'd always know that we'd be back together sooner or later to work on new music. The nice thing about the last six months of Dolores' life is that there was an awful lot of contact because that was the only way we could glue it all together." Now that she is no longer here, they say there is comfort in knowing that they always got on. There had been no bad splits, no Gallagher-esque warring. "Look, like any band, there were moments where it wasn't plain-sailing," Noel says. "But then the four of us would get in a room and trash it out and it would all be okay. If there were any problems, it was usually a simple misunderstanding."

"I think we were like brothers to Dolores," Lawler adds, "and we were protective of her right to the end. She always had that attention [from fans and media] and she'd have us to back her up."

"She did that for us too," Noel says. "If one of us was sick on tour, she'd be the first down to the room to check we were still alive! Guys just don't do that."

Each of The Cranberries albums before In the End featured a photo of the quartet on the cover. This one features four children, all from Limerick and all related in some way to the band. "We didn't want to be on the cover without Dolores," Mike says. "It would seem wrong, incomplete."

None of them knows what will happen once promotional duties for the album ends. There will certainly be a long break, they say, and if they work together again, the project will have a different name.

For now, there's a look-back at what was a remarkable innings.

"As a band, we wouldn't change a thing," Noel says. "We got to do so many amazing things together and our music went out into the world and touched far more people than we could ever have imagined."

Big as they were in their own country, The Cranberries were huge abroad and Lawler says that fact was brought home after O'Riordan's death when there was an outpouring of grief among fans all over the world.

"We were always bigger outside of Ireland," Noel says, "and we realised early on we'd never get the sort of response here that we got in other countries. We didn't do anything different here that we didn't do elsewhere, but it just seems as though [overseas audiences] were more open to us, more accepting or whatever."

"I've been asked over the years in Limerick, 'What are you doing with yourselves now?' It would be someone thinking the band had finished or something. And you might have just come back from doing something really big abroad!" He chuckles at the thought of it.

"It's been quite a story for us. I just wish Dolores was here with us now."

'In the End' will be released on April 26

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