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'Zombie': The Story Behind The Cranberries' Deathless Classic

A furious anti-terrorism lament, 'Zombie' found the The Cranberries unleashing "the most aggressive song we'd written".

ARTISTS

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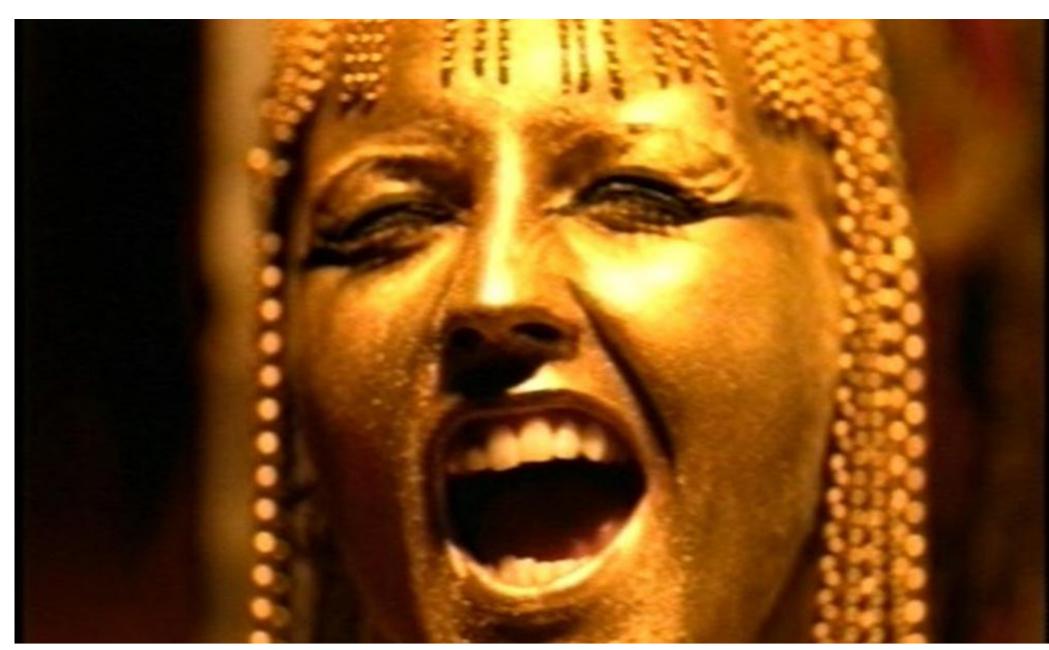


Photo: Universal Music Group

Presaged by shimmering spin-off hits 'Dreams' and 'Linger', **The Cranberries**' landmark debut album, *Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We*?, suggested its creators had taken up the baton handed down by jangly indie-pop classicists The Smiths and The Sundays. However, that preconception was swiftly turned on its head by 'Zombie', the furious anti-terrorism lament with which the rising Irish stars trailed their second album, 1994's *No Need To Argue*.

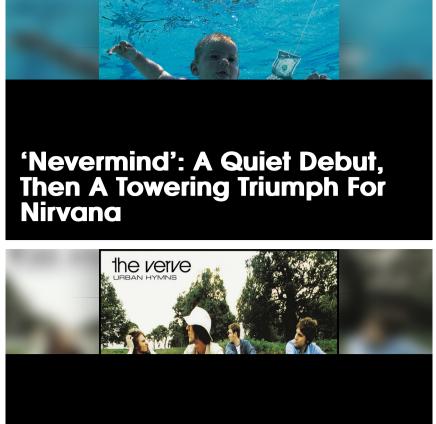


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"There were a lot of bombs going off"

'Zombie''s genesis is traceable to 20 March 1993, when two bombs, planted by the Irish Republican Army, exploded in the northern English town of Warrington. The blast from the second bomb injured dozens of people, but most cruelly claimed the lives of threeyear-old Jonathan Ball and 12-year-old Tim Parry: a twin tragedy that shocked and appalled both the UK and Irish public.

"I remember at the time there were a lot of bombs going off in England and The Troubles were pretty bad," singer **Dolores O' Riordan** said in a 2017 *Classic Rock* interview. "I remember being on tour and in the UK at the time... and just being really sad about it."

Deeply affected by the tragedy, O'Riordan began working on a song that reflected upon the event. However, unlike many Cranberries tracks which sprang from group collaboration, the formative 'Zombie' was composed alone by O' Riordan during down time from her band's punishing tour schedule.

"The most aggressive song we'd written"

"I wrote it initially on an acoustic guitar, late at night," she told *Classic Rock*. "I remember being in my flat, coming up with the chorus, which was catchy and anthemic. I took it into rehearsals and picked up the electric guitar and kicked in distortion on the chorus. Even though it was written on an acoustic, it became a bit of a rocker. 'Zombie' was quite different to what we'd done before. It was the most aggressive song we'd written."

Recorded in Dublin with producer Stephen Street manning the console, 'Zombie' featured pounding drums and churning guitars, representing a radical departure from The Cranberries' signature sound. However, as Dolores O' Riordan later revealed, the song's beefed-up alt.rock sound wasn't an attempt to jump on the **grunge** bandwagon.

"It came organically, because we were using our live instruments – we were plugging in a lot and we started to mess around with feedback and distortion," she told *Classic Rock*. In a 2012 interview with Holland's *Face Culture* magazine, guitarist Noel Hogan explained that "the heavier sound was the right thing for the song. If it was soft, it wouldn't have had that impact. It would stand out in the live set because of that."

"A very human song"

Released as *No Need To Argue*'s lead single, on 19 September 1994, 'Zombie' was promoted with a powerful video which also made a significant impact. Directed by Samuel Bayer (also responsible for **Nirvana**'s 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' clip), the video was filmed in Belfast during The Troubles, using real-life footage. Dolores O'Riordan memorably appeared covered in gold make-up in front of a cross, alongside a group of boys covered in silver make-up. Though banned by the BBC at the time, the clip has since become one of rock's most-watched music videos on YouTube, clocking up one billion views in April 2020, making The Cranberries the first Irish band to have a song reach that landmark.

At the time, O'Riordan received criticism for 'Zombie''s hard-hitting lyrics ("Another head hangs lowly/A child is slowly taken"), with some detractors suggesting she was taking sides in the Northern Irish conflict. However, as the singer pointedly observed in a 1994 interview with *Vox* magazine, the song was written entirely from a humanitarian point of view.

"I don't care whether it's Protestant or Catholic, I care about the fact that innocent people are being harmed," she said. "That's what provoked me to write the song... It doesn't name terrorist groups or organisations. It doesn't take sides. It's a very human song."

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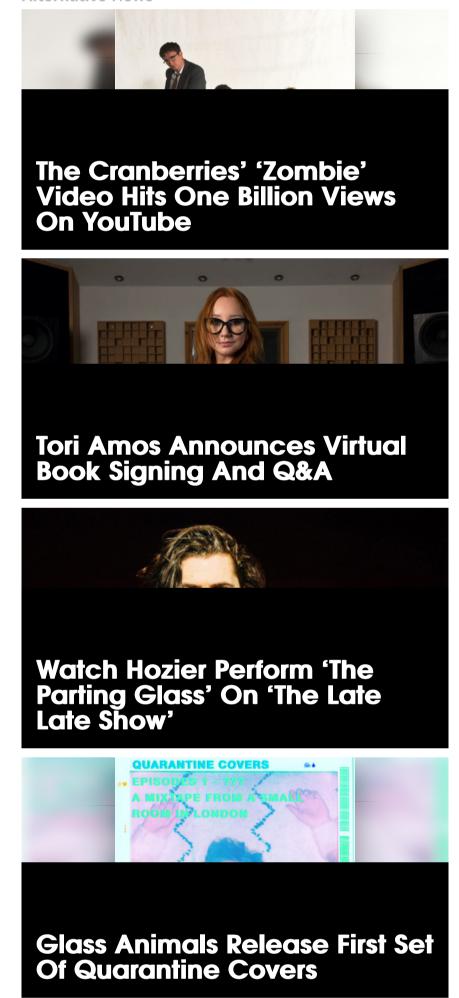
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	2	Glory Box Portishead	5:08	
	3	Ophelia The Lumineers	2:40	
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	5	Walking On A Dream Empire of the Sun	3:18	
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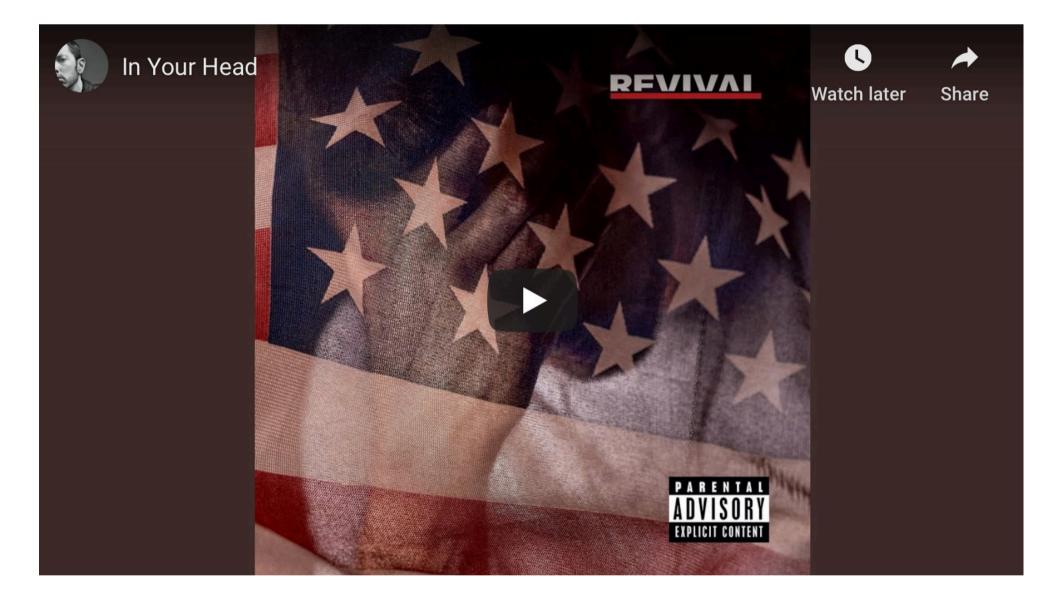


"Her message applies to recent attacks"

'Zombie''s anti-terrorism stance struck a chord when it was first released, becoming a UK Top 20 hit and winning the Best Song award at the 1995 MTV Europe Music Awards. Perhaps more significantly, The Cranberries were later invited to perform 'Zombie' alongside Northern Irish political leaders John Hume and David Trimble at the ceremony for the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize.

The song's anti-violence message continues to endure. During the 90s, Dolores O' Riordan dedicated it to citizens of Bosnia and Rwanda during live shows, while a recent BBC article reappraising the song's accomplishments observed that "her message applies equally to recent attacks in Manchester, Paris and Egypt to name just three".

Artists from right across the musical spectrum have also paid tribute to 'Zombie'. **Eminem** sampled it on his popular 'In Your Head' single, while US metal outfit Bad Wolves recorded an emotive version of the track, which O'Riordan had agreed to contribute to prior to her death in January 2018.



"When you listen to Dolores' recordings, there is a wall of emotional vulnerability, intensity and honesty. That transcends all genres," Bad Wolves' Tommy Vext told *The Irish Times* in 2018.

"For me that is inspiring. That is something that every vocalist and artist should strive for, something honest and raw and real. She masterfully did that. People still love 'Zombie'. It shows how masterful her craft was. It stands the test of time."

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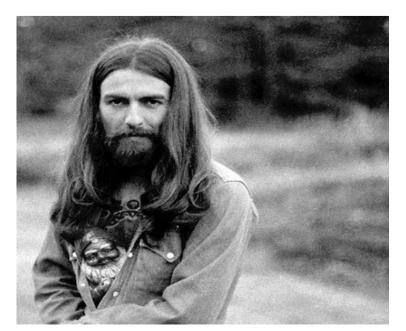


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