

Memories that linger: Remembering the Cranberries visit to Cork in 1991

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As the Cranberries re-release their debut album, **Ed Power** looks back on a landmark gig at Sir Henry's in Cork in 1991.

On June 1 1991, a slight young woman wearing an oversized waist-coat, shirt and tie stood on stage at a dimly-lit nightclub in Cork and turned her back to the crowd. Her eyes were closed and she visibly trembled – but her voice had the quality of a rising gale.



O'Riordan and her fellow Cranberries at Sir Henry's, guitarist Noel Hogan, bassist Mike Hogan, and drummer Fergal Lawler. Picture: Siobhan Bardsley

It was to prove a historic 12 months for Sir Henry's, the stygian South Main Street venue that played host to the three-day Cork Rock festival that bank holiday weekend. The venue's golden era as a venue included a visit two months later from a scrappy three-piece from Seattle named Nirvana on the first date of their European tour with Sonic Youth.

Of all the Irish bands to alight at Sir Henry's in 1991 the one with the most enduring legacy were The Cranberries, led by the late Dolores O'Riordan.

Having smartly jettisoned their original moniker, The Cranberry Saw Us, the Limerick four piece were already regarded as a name to watch and their appearance on the Saturday night of the RTÉ-backed showcase had drawn a scrum of a'n'r men from London-based record companies.

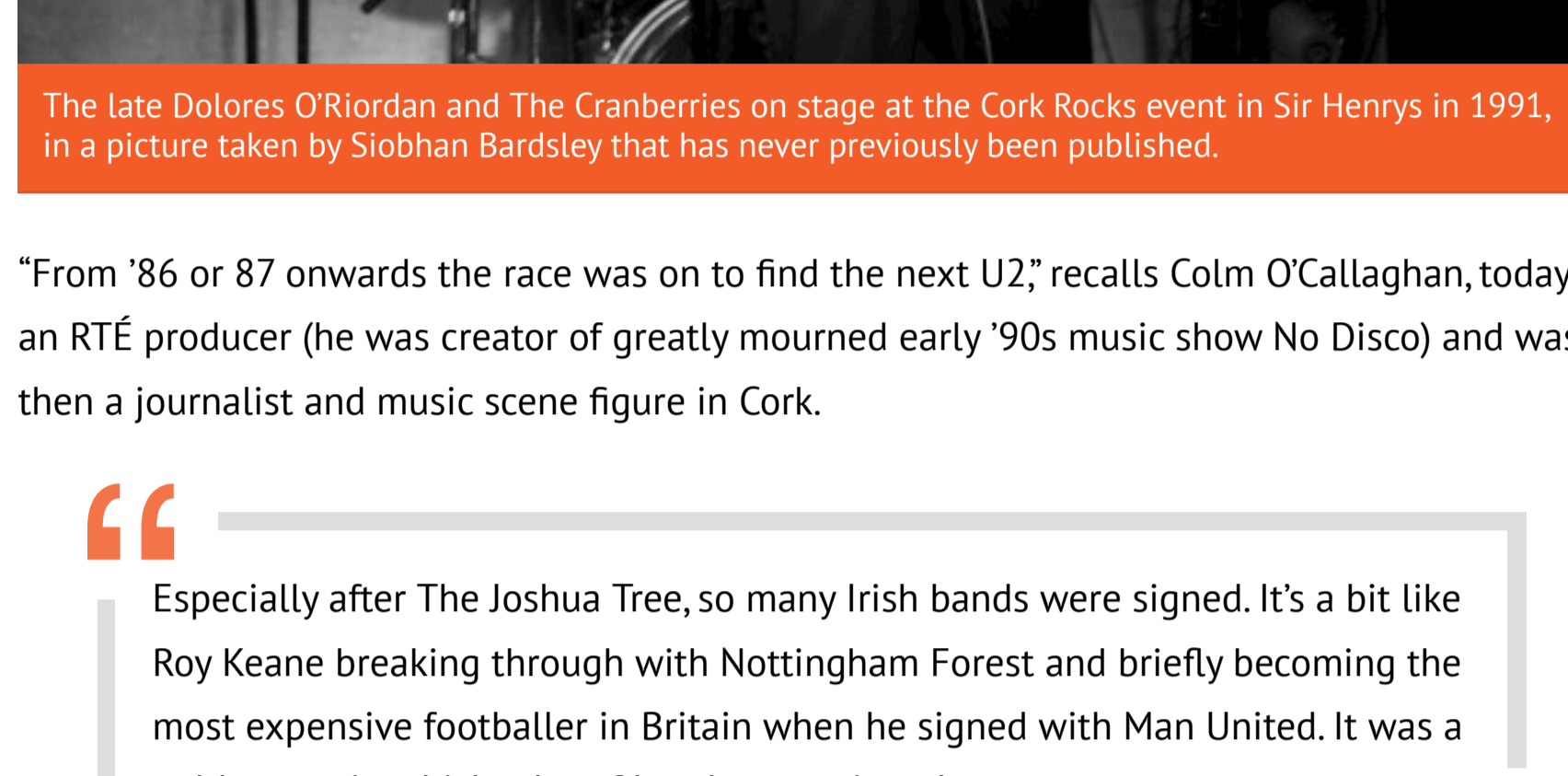
The excitement of that moment can be sampled anew, with three tracks from the gig – including an early version of Dreams – featured on a four-disc reissue of their debut album, Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We?

"We were really young," remembers guitarist Noel Hogan.

“It was a case of put the head down and get this done. We were nervous and hadn't a lot of live experience. Dolores would sing facing [drummer] Ferg [Lawler].”

Cork Rock 1991 has gone down as one of the more significant Irish music events of the era. It captured a moment when half a dozen of the decade's most exciting Irish groups were on the cusp of greatness. Alongside The Cranberries, that year's bill featured Sultans of Ping, The Frank and Walters, Therapy, Lir and Toasted Heretic. Those who had paid the £4 entry fee (£3 for the Friday) will have judged it cash well spent.

Each of the above bands would go on to be major participants in the story of Irish rock – though none would be as huge as The Cranberries. Not that anyone would have guessed from O'Riordan's bashful body language but the Limerick quartet had already begun the ascent that would see them sell more than 40 million albums and conquer America.



The late Dolores O'Riordan and The Cranberries on stage at the Cork Rocks event in Sir Henry's in 1991. In a picture taken by Siobhan Bardsley that has never previously been published.

"From '86 or '87 onwards the race was on to find the next U2," recalls Colm O'Callaghan, today an RTÉ producer (he was creator of greatly mourned early '90s music show No Disco) and was then a journalist and music scene figure in Cork.

“Especially after The Joshua Tree, so many Irish bands were signed. It's a bit like Roy Keane breaking through with Nottingham Forest and briefly becoming the most expensive footballer in Britain when he signed with Man United. It was a golden age in which a lot of bands were signed.”

"A band like Something Happens released four albums on a major label. A House were signed to Blanco y Negro, a subsidiary of Warner. The year An Emotional Fish played Cork Rock there was a massive buzz. There would have been 20 or 30 a'n'r people because they were subject to a bidding war."

SNAP HAPPY

Also at The Cranberries was Siobhan Bardsley (nee O'Mahony), back then a regular at Sir Henry's. As well as her love for music, she counted photography as one of her hobbies, and was one of the few people who used to bring a camera to gigs.

The 18-year-old was aware of the growing buzz around the Limerick band, so took a few photographs during her set. Those pictures have languished in her own collection for all these years and are published here for the first time.

READ MORE: "The Cranberries were really anticipated, even though they weren't signed." Linger really stood out," recalls Bardsley.

Meet Paul Charles - the agent to the stars

Hogan and the band were aware talent scouts from the UK were in the audience – and that the event, organised by 2FM producer Ian Wilson, would be broadcast on the national airwaves. But for all their outward nerves they weren't fazed. Behind the jittery exterior Hogan in particular had a nuanced understanding of how the industry worked. However embryonic The Cranberries were in 1991 – still two years out from their debut album – they certainly weren't naive.

"We had gone to the UK very early on," says Hogan.

“I had seen a lot of Irish bands coming through Limerick. They'd be back again a month or two later, and then a month or two after that. I didn't want to do that. We thought, 'Let's try and find someone that will give us gigs outside of Ireland.' We didn't want to get into the rut of doing a circuit.”

So while Cork Rock wasn't their only show in the city – they also played the College Bar at UCC and the Shelter around the corner from Sir Henry's – they were by no means over-familiar to the local crowd.

"The fact people remember is to so clearly may have been because we did so little," says Hogan. "It stood out a bit more at the time."

Because of their chronic introversion they didn't interact with the other groups on the bill. In fact the real point of excitement for Hogan was knowing U2's Cork-born soundman Joe O'Herlihy was in the room.

"That was the one thing for us. I was really excited he was in the audience. We didn't really hang around. It was very much into the van and back home."

BILL STICKERS

The Cranberries had performed second last on a bill that included the Brilliant Trees, the Chelsea Drugstore (later The Devlins) and the Wishing Stones. This was in acknowledgement of their status as newcomers to watch. The logic had been that, were they to go on early, a'n'r men who'd tarried in the pub might miss them.

"We weren't on at the beginning because there was a bit of record company interest," recalls Hogan. "It was a case of 'put them up a little bit later because if they get signed it would be nice to say... oh we had them here'"

Siobhan Bardsely recalls the band's trademark feature.

"One thing that stood out about The Cranberries was that Dolores was singing in her own Limerick accent – that was very unusual at the time."

She also feels that Cork was the ideal proving ground for The Cranberries. Not only did the city have its own thriving scene. International acts often passed through too – so it took something special to stand out.

"Live music in the city at the time was fairly vibrant," she says. "There was a good scene. With this one, there were RTÉ people down – it made it a bit special, that helped with the overall place special and not just us. Sir Henry's was a great place for gigs. People showed up. There were a lot of discerning music lovers in the audience."

A woman fronting a rock band may not be particularly revolutionary today – though still more of a novelty than it perhaps should be. In 1991, in Ireland especially, it was fairly remarkable. Indeed it's thought that O'Riordan was one of just two women to play across all three nights of Cork Rock (the other being a member of the band Bird).

"They were very few women fronting bands," says Colm O'Callaghan.

“Not just in Ireland but anywhere. That is what was so great. Okay Kim Deal was in the Pixies, Kim Gordon in Sonic Youth. But in terms of front-people, there were very few.”

Cork Rock would sputter out a few years later. One theory is that, as dance music emerged as the great youth movement of the 1990s, there simply wasn't enough interest to sustain an annual showcase.

O'Callaghan theorises that the event had perhaps been so successful in shining a spotlight on talent outside of Dublin that it had essentially fulfilled its function and become a victim of its own success.

It had certainly helped The Cranberries. Within two years, they'd signed to Island and were touring America with Suede. And when the single 'Dreams' cracked the Billboard top ten, everything changed beyond recognition.

"When we went to the States we were completely out of our comfort zones," Hogan recalls. "But it helped that the album was doing well. 'Linger' was number eight. That helped with our naivety. We knew things in the US were going to the next level. But it hadn't fully sunk in."

The irony is that The Cranberries had started to worry that their careers were falling apart before their eyes. Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We? had been dismissively reviewed in the UK – this in the early years of Britpop – and audiences at their shows were meagre. Unbeknownst to them, though, 'Linger' and 'Dreams' were taking off on college radio in the US. The contrast between the reception there and elsewhere was incredible.

“We were surprised – more surprised than anyone, really. Four or five days before we went to America, we had toured Europe opening for Hothouse Flowers.”

"When we went on, it was to empty rooms. Literally four or five people. It was very disheartening as we'd been at it a while. The album had bombed. We felt the writing was on the wall. Then we went to the US and everybody was going crazy. They knew all the songs. We were just standing there thinking, 'This is unbelievable.'"

With success came celebrity – something O'Riordan had to bear the brunt of.

"With a big band, the singer is the one who gets the attention. I felt bad at times. I could come home and it was fine. I could do my thing, get on with stuff. Her life changed dramatically. It was her face on the front of the magazines and newspapers."

It came to a sad end for O'Riordan back in January, but she will be fondly remembered for her band's great music, and for special gigs such as Cork in 1991.

The All-Ireland Cranberries singalong

Noel Hogan on the Limerick fans' singing along with Cranberries songs at the All-Ireland hurling final:

"I was surprised at the response and the outpouring of feeling in Ireland. The height of the band's fame was in the '90s. You think that time is passed.

"We'd been working away in other countries – we would spend a lot of the time in the States or France or Italy. We came back into people's minds in Ireland when they heard about it [O'Riordan's death].

"It was amazing to see that the songs we wrote so long ago meant so much. You started to hear stories of how they touched peoples' lives. You don't think of that when you're doing it. You write a song and you move on. You don't realise the knock-on effect these things have. In a way you take it for granted.

“I was in France when Limerick won the All-Ireland. But my phone started erupting – it was people at the match.”

"The following week 'Dreams' and 'Zombie' were being played constantly in bars around Limerick and people were singing along. Dolores would have loved it – big time."

- The 25th anniversary boxed set edition of Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We? is out now

- Further reading on the Cork Rocks weekend and The Cranberries can be found on Colm O'Callaghan's blog, The Blackpool Sentinel

KEYWORDS

- DOLORES O'RIORDAN | THE CRANBERRIES | IRISH MUSIC | LIMERICK | 1990S MUSIC