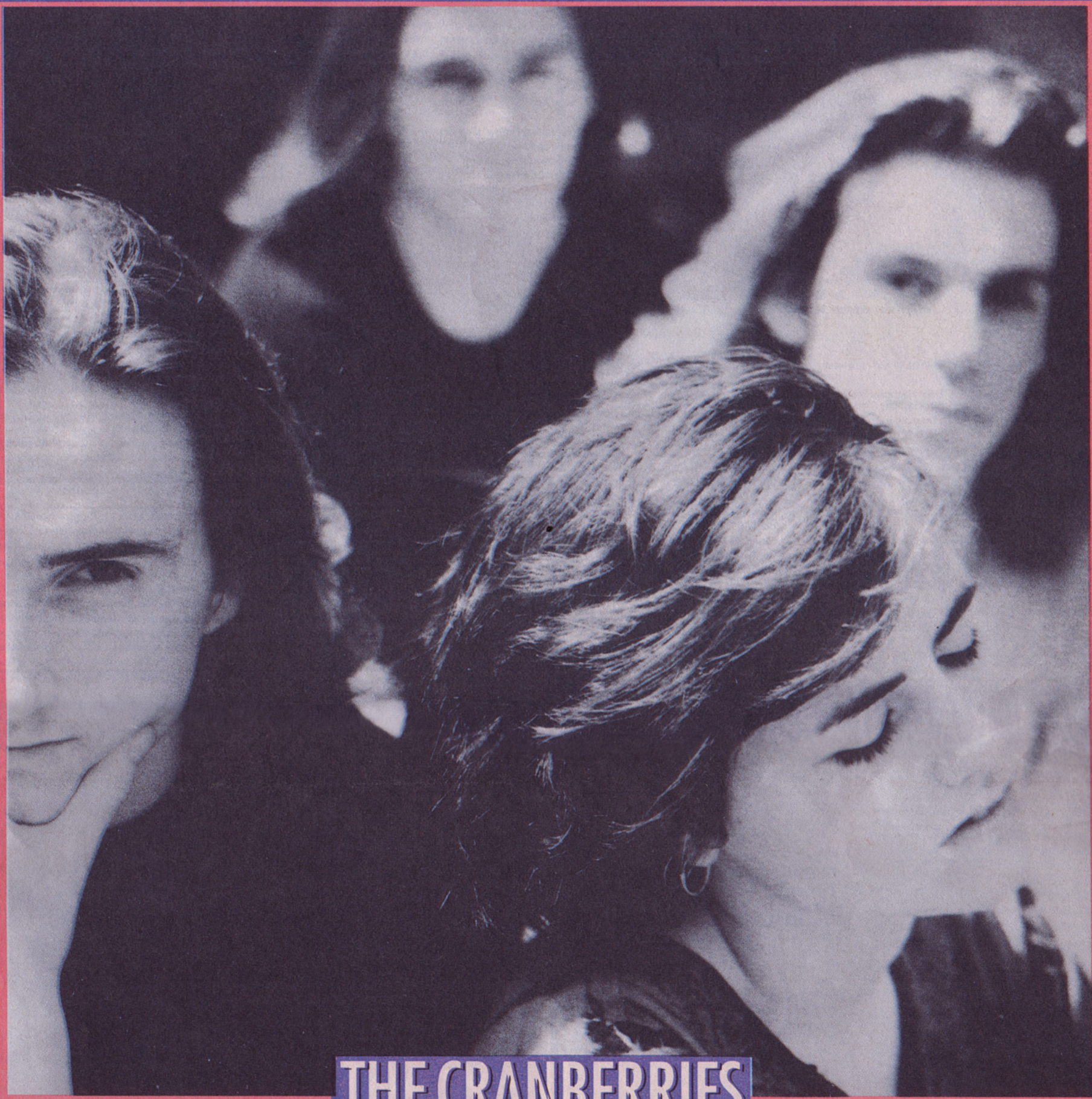


Side lines

THIS WEEK ⇒ BEF ★ THE HOOVERS ★ LFO ★ WARHOL ON VIDEO
THE REEGS ★ JOHN AND MARY ★ THE STARLINGS



THE CRANBERRIES

STRAIGHT outta Limerick, breathing deeply and powered by wildly fluttering hearts, THE CRANBERRIES are indisputably a minor miracle. On second thoughts, let's scratch the minor. Such qualifications are inappropriate for a fledgling band who've produced beyond doubt the most exciting demo tape of 1991, a beautiful, flickeringly exquisite five-track sampler which promises these waifs and strays are casually kicking their heels on the edge of a goldmine. Don't worry, they can cope with mixed metaphors. The Cranberries are surely skybound.

Their origins were unpromising. They began as The Cranberry Sauce, four lads farting round after school, until the singer left in a huff and the diva Dolores replaced him and insisted on a shorter name. But this is history when we should be talking art. More to the point is that they now weave an aching, spectral pop alchemy which is often devastating in its clear-eyed honesty, its spellbinding absence of artifice. No band since The Smiths have sounded quite so spectacularly vulnerable.

The Cranberries play gentle, swirling fairy-pop imbued with an odd, folksy plangency and an unmistakable gaelic air. (Dolores' voice can recall Sinéad O'Connor's early ethereal excursions.) But they all profess dislike for Dublin's bustle and "rock 'n' roll nonsense"; this startling new music comes, physically and geographically, from the back of beyond.

"I think where you live shapes what comes out of you," says Dolores. "Simplicity is the key. We love being with nature. Being in a modern city caves us in. We went to all these old country graveyards lately and had a great laugh, reading all the old gravestones, thinking back to the 17th century..."

Yeah, it sounds a real sidesplitter. But history isn't The Cranberries' forte. Songs like the superlative, haunting "Put Me Down", or "Nothing Left At All", delve deep into Dolores' private life with beguiling frankness and little mind for watching voyeurs. And their highest

point so far is "Linger", an intoxicating, wondrous waltz through gossamer fields which details a dying relationship kept alive by the man's cruel refusal to end the sham. "You had me wrapped around your finger, but you had to let it linger", Dolores' child-voice laments tremulously. Hearts have broken over far, far less.

So was that you, Dolores?

"Yeah, it was," she confirms, grimacing. "See, when I was really young I never wanted flings the way a lot of people did, I just wanted to get serious. So I met this boy I really liked and got really serious on him, but it turned out he'd led me right up the garden path, and it made me really mad. He probably didn't even think twice about it but it gave me a few months of despair where I gave up on men altogether."

Isn't this public confessional business dangerous?

"Oh no, it helps me! I was crying when I wrote 'Linger', but just writing it down helped me get control of myself again. My strongest songs all come from sadness. I don't know why that is. Maybe it's my most creative emotion?"

A new mistress of melancholy? Oh, now and then, but The Cranberries also boast deliriously, delightfully uptempo celebrations like the divine "Dreams" where Dolores finds it in her heart to joyfully inform us "Oh my life is changing every day, in every possible way", then warble like the craziest lark in a clear blue sky. As the wise and astute Sally Margaret Joy noted last week, The Cranberries are the absolute total opposite of the word "jaded".

So when they're good they're very, very good, and when they're better they're... perfect. The Cranberries are going to be a big part of your pop life for the next eternity. Pick of the bunch? You'd better believe it...

IAN GITTINS

The Cranberries have just finished supporting Moose on tour. Their debut EP will be released early in the autumn.