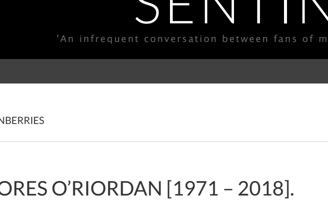
THE CRANBERRIES

DOLORES O'RIORDAN [1971 – 2018].



Dolores O'Riordan

During the first series of the RTÉ music show, 'No Disco', the presenter, Donal Dineen and myself travelled west to Limerick on a couple of occasions to pick up long interviews that we'd use to populate what was, in essence, a niche video clip show. And because the show didn't have a bob in its budget, our filming model – if we had one – was based on piggybacking regional news gathering units and working in tandem with the often irregular schedules of some of the RTÉ correspondents who were based outside of Dublin.

And this worked for the most part, at least during those early days, even if we routinely left high-profile musicians and songwriters hanging-on indefinitely in hotel lobbies and cafés while we awaited the return of a veteran film crew from the scene of a crash or a local political press jaunt.

On December 17th, 1993, The Cranberries were back in Limerick, their home-town, where, having recently become the first Irish band to sell one million copies of a debut album in America, they were being feted by the city council, local dignitaries, hail fellas and the great and the good of the local social circuit. At that time Limerick's physical heart – like many other large Irish cities – was ailing and in need of urgent renovation and an infusion of imagination and renewal. And its reputation wasn't helped either by cheap national stereotyping.

But not too far beneath the surface, Limerick was far more a fab city than stab city, and this was nowhere more apparent than in its emerging alternative music scene which, for at least ten years from the early 1980s onwards, was as energetic and diverse as anywhere in the country, and often far moreso. If Tuesday Blue and Toucandance maybe set the early pace, and while The Cranberries would eventually become the focus, the real heavy lifting was done for years by distinctive, urgent pop groups like The Hitchers, They Do It With Mirrors, Those Stilted Boys and A Touch Of Oliver. To this day, the music they produced between them during that period provides a formidable soundtrack to a formidable city of formidable people.

I've written previously about that scene and I consistently return to it to remind myself of the prominent gulf that existed at this time between some of the loftier aspects of Dublin's music establishment and those movers and groovers who emerged and took shape far from it. And often in spite of it. From 1988 until 1994, give or take, easily the most breathtaking and enthralling new Irish music was being stewed far from the capital, and it was easy to understand how and why.

Without the distraction of the maddening crowd, removed from the lazy sloganeering and what could often be an insidious and self-celebratory circuit, a handful of bands emerged from around Ireland that displayed as instinctive a grasp of the potential of sheer pop dynamics as they did brass neck. And they were bonded, not by geography or [dis]location, but by a shared sense that they neither knew better or cared less.

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They crawled from Larne, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, Limerick, Galway and Cork and, the sterling, energetic fumes of a selection of local promoters, hacks, hangers-on and the odd national radio producer apart, were left largely to their own devices. At least until such time as the pennies dropped – literally – and, on the back of positive press abroad and genuine label deals for Therapy?, Ash, The Divine Comedy, The Cranberries, Toasted Heretic, The Sultans of Ping F.C. and The Frank And Walters, this crack squad ceased to be mere disconnected curiosities ['there's something in the water, boys'] and, instead became attractive propositions in many different aspects. Unlike many of their better-known, over-hyped Dublin-sponsored contemporaries who, to me at least, seemed to often exist in name only.

Donal Dineen fetched up in Limerick that afternoon, December 1993, for a pre-arranged exchange with Dolores O'Riordan and Fergal Lawlor, The Cranberries' enigmatic singer and lyricist and practical pulse, respectively. The interview, which was aired on 'No Disco' in early 1994, had been arranged to coincide with the broader hometown celebration of the returning minstrels. To which they responded with typical courtesy and no little bafflement ;– for the band, it was an opportunity to thank their parents and their road-crew in the presence of their peers.

Fresh off of what could often be a torturous train ride from Cork, Donal dutifully bode his time until RTÉ's mid-West correspondent, Cathy Halloran, had completed her own filming, satisfied that she had enough raw material for the two-minute report on the triumphant return of The Cranberries she was filing for that evening's Six One News. At which point the master went to work.

Dolores was instantly taken by Donal's choice of trouser :– he was kitted out in one of his preferred ensembles of the time, a serious designer hoodie and salmon-pink corduroys. And as opening gambits go, 'I love your pants', delivered in the singer's trademark Ballybricken accent, became one of the more memorable ice-breakers from the entire 'No Disco' canon. One million albums sold, still not caring less.

But Donal had been formidably briefed and knew well what he was dealing with. I'd enjoyed a long-running game of fox and hounds with The Cranberries and, without ever enjoying their patronage or breaching their inner circle, just wrote glowingly and consistently about them wherever and whenever I could. I was also, in a roundabout way, attempting to coax them onto the growing roster at Keith Cullen's fledgling label, Setanta Records and, as I did so, I kept encountering some of the major, London-based scouts – Premier League opposition – in the most unlikely venues in the country. All of us chasing the same thing.

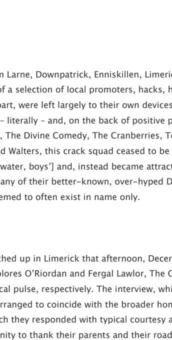
By now I'd profiled The Cranberries for the first time in Hot Press magazine, reviewed their stunning set at Cork Rock 1991 for the same publication and also for what was then The Cork Examiner [where, alarmingly, I managed to make a prediction that was to hold water] and saw them live in The College Bar in University College Cork and The Stables in what is now the University of Limerick campus, both times to what was general audience indifference.

I saw them live in The Shelter, a small patched-together venue on Cork's Tuckey Street, on a magical bill assembled by Shane Fitzsimons and although they often appeared fragile and nervous, I just felt from early that Noel, Mike and Fergal were still just learning their instruments. And while Dolores may indeed have been socially awkward – she was a teenager – I never fell for the line that she was overly shy. The Cranberries knew well how to gild the lily.

And of course Dolores had already mastered her instrument ;– her voice, from the off, was heaven sent and, behind her, the boys were playing perennial catch-up. That learning process went on for several years, during which time the band was forced to grow up quickly and adjust or be lost. And any claims that The Cranberries landed fully-formed is just wrong :– the facts see that off.

The first sessions for their debut album, 'Everybody Else Is Doing It So Why Can't We ?' were junked and the producer, Pearse Gilmore, who also managed The Cranberries [a reveal in itself] was dropped from both portfolios. The singles lifted from that record, 'Linger' and 'Dreams' were all but ignored, as was the album itself when it was first released in March, 1993. An early, holding E.P. for Island Records, 'Uncertain', was critically panned and while the band was always assured of a warm welcome back in Limerick, they were still a difficult and niche sell outside of it. One live show at Dublin's Rock Garden during this time was attended by a score of paying punters.

And by any critical standards, The Cranberries were far from the best band to emerge from Ireland during the early 1990s. Indeed, to my mind, they were far from the best band to emerge from Limerick. But they went on to become the biggest and the brightest of them all because, at their core, they had Dolores, whose voice and whose personality masked a multitude.



Cork Rocks – via Fanning Sessions

On the weekend of my twenty-third birthday in June, 1991, I saw fifteen of Ireland's best emerging young bands perform over three nights as part of the Cork Rock shindig at the fabled Sir Henry's venue in Cork city. The Cranberries performed half-way up the bill on the second night, surrounded on either side by the bulkier, more sophisticated and ultimately faceless pop sound of The Chelsea Drugstore [featuring Colin and Peter Devlin] and The Brilliant Trees, the terrific Finglas guitar band.

The Cranberries stood out because they didn't physically stand out at all. And of the fifteen participating acts, they were one of only two – the other being the jazzy, swing-pop act, Bird – to feature a woman.

She was from another world altogether. Then, now and forever.

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THE CRANBERRIES :- THE FIRST REVIEW

Picture Courtesy of Siobhan O Mahony

Strange as it sounds now but there was a time when The Cranberries were easily the most remarkable young band in Ireland having emerged, quite literally, from out of nowhere. Theirs is of course a well-worn and hoary old story, albeit one pock-marked with crudely-formed testimonials and urban myths. And this is something I'll return to in a future post.

One of the early driving forces behind the band was, I think, Pearse Gilmore who, among other things, fronted his own group, Private World, and also ran Xeric, a studio and rehearsal complex located on Edward Street in Limerick city. A curious sampler album, 'The Reindeer Age', released in early 1990, showcased a mixed bag of Limerick bands, all of them captured on tape in Xeric by Gilmore. The likes of They Do It With Mirrors, Tuesday Blue, Toucandance, The Hitchers and Private World themselves were notables among the large cast. Something was clearly afoot.

The Cranberries didn't feature on 'The Reindeer Age' and yet, within six months, had over-taken their peers on every level.I was on a watching brief at this time :– apart from [over] enthusing about them in a variety of different outlets, I was also scouting them for Setanta Records. Our attention had been drawn the previous year to a slipshod demo that featured an early version of 'Linger' and that had been circulated under the name The Cranberry Saw Us. Indeed there was a point when Keith Cullen at Setanta felt he'd finally snared them. In the end, after a year-long harry-and-chase, the band signed with Island Records instead.

Myself and another young writer, Jim Carroll, reviewed them frequently and with no little zest around this time, often travelling together to shows in Limerick. The fact that The Cranberries were from outside of Dublin – well protected from the scene that celebrated itself– only made them more alluring. By the summer of 1991, a handful of emerging bands based in Ireland's regions were cutting ferocious shapes. And the strength of that scene was reflected in the line-up at that year's Cork Rock event in Sir Henry's, which featured The Frank And Walters, The Sultans of Ping, Therapy, Toasted Heretic and The I.R.S. among others. It was The Cranberries, who also played, who went on to dominate them all.

I first met them for an early Hot Press interview one warm Saturday afternoon in Limerick and I couldn't get over how naïve they were. They told me that they had very few, if any influences, didn't listen to many records and that their songs 'just came out'. Noel Hogan was gilding the lily, without question, but Dolores was genuinely clueless.

Picture courtesy of Siobhan O Mahony

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Live they were fragile and very, very basic. Gilmore had given them a stylish spit-and-polish in studio, something they struggled to replicate when they played live. Noel and Mike were struggling with their instruments [guitar and bass respectively] and the drummer, Fergal Lawlor, was the band's pivot. But even then it was Dolores who dominated. In a flicked page-boy cut, standard indie duds and fresh Doc Marten boots, she cut a familiar but magnetic presence :– after gigs she'd routinely change into a multi-coloured tracksuit and couldn't really give a flying one.

This review, for Melody Maker magazine, is an earnest and awkward attempt to capture the band's charm and their incredible promise, while alluding also to their gormlessness.I was struggling with my craft as manfully as The Cranberries were struggling with their instruments, resorting to An Emotional Fish for my sign-off.

The show in question took place in the confined spaces of the College Bar in University College Cork in October, 1991, to a small but very keen audience. Pearse Gilmore – a tall, lean and most distinctive man – was very prominent around the venue on the night, and especially around the sound-desk. The venue was a well-known sound-trap and quality audio there was often a difficult ask. Not that it mattered.

The Cranberries, in their own mild way, blew the place asunder.

This review appeared originally in Melody Maker magazine on October 19th, 1991. I've made some minor edits to the original copy.

The Cranberries

College Bar, U.C.C., October, 1991

The Cranberries are probably too tender for all of this but, right now, they have all of our hopes to weigh them down. They're charming little innocents, so untouched, so perfect, so astoundingly pure. They've come from a city that isn't Dublin, from a county where politics are conservative and where Gaelic games and rugby offer some small social hope. They think small, embarrassed by what they've suddenly become. By what we've painted them up to be.

To singer Dolores, pop songs have no truck with video and make-up, nothing to do with fanciful clothes. She's stopped reading her band's press because she doesn't need us to tell her who she is. And when she stands still, saying little, in place like this, it's because she's unsure about all of the fuss. The Cranberries, understand, are charmingly naïve ;– its their single greatest attribute. They have no idea how good they are, of how important they might yet become.

The Cranberries had never heard of The Sundays or The Throwing Muses nine months ago – their songs just happened, 'they just came out', and we believe that. They're too frail to be contrived. And while lines like 'I was just 16 years old when I married you, and now its just a stupid mess, I don't know what to do' seem trite, then you should understand that Dolores is eighteen years old and coming from what is essentially a very narrow rural tradition. And she writes nothing like The Saw Doctors.

Tonight is all very full ; lots of songs, gorgeous songs. 'Put Me Down' with its spine-shrill, jangle-and-hum, 'Linger' with its spellbound simplicity, 'Dreams' with its curious drum thud. Dolores even plays some acoustic guitar but it just looks all wrong, all too cumbersome for her. It still sounds very fine, of course, and 'Reason' and 'Pathetic Senses' become the huge, simmering pop songs that Johnny Marr, for instance, would collect and play. 'Liar' owes to Pixies' 'Is She Weird' but we're not here to look for clues.

We're here to love a band wholly. To hug and kiss. Beauty does what beauty does best. Be beautiful.

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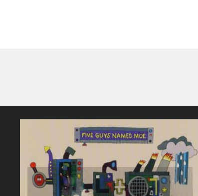
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