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## ‘In 2005 I woke to a flurry of texts from Sinéad asking me to follow her to Jamaica... What followed was part odyssey, part superfan lottery win’

Sinéad O’Connor’s death in July shocked the nation and led to an outpouring of tributes and anecdotes. In this piece, long-time confidante Dónal Lynch looked back at her life and legacy, the icon and the real woman



Sinead O'Connor and Donal Lynch in Jamaica in 2005

Dónal Lynch and Sinéad O'Connor in Jamaica in March 20



### Dónal Lynch

Sun 30 Jul 2023 at 02:30

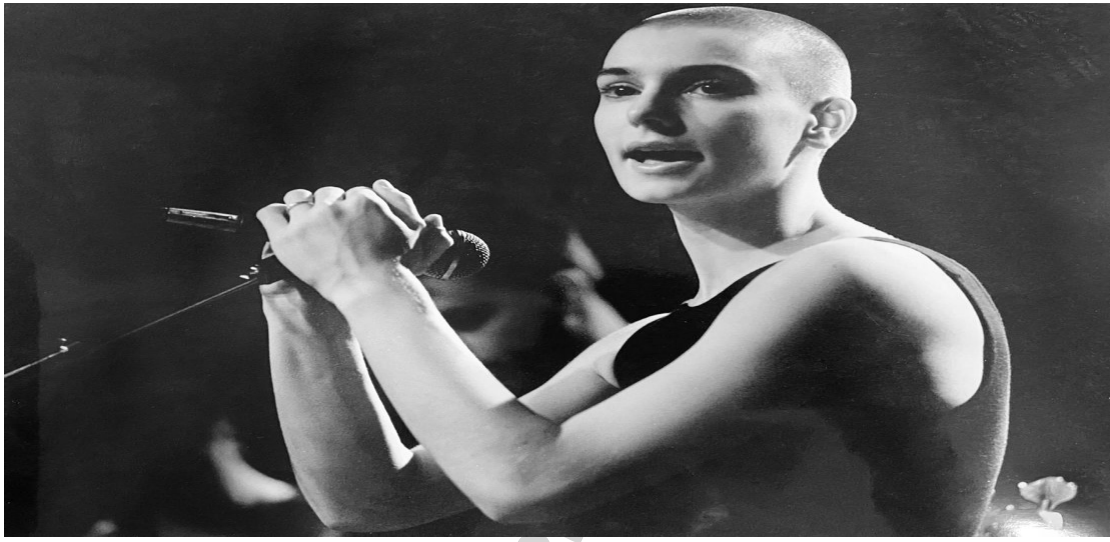


The Smiths, whom Sinéad O’Connor loved and covered, have a song called ‘Paint a Vulgar Picture’. It’s something that, she once told me, echoes so much of what disgusted her about the commodification of music and the cha-ching noises that sound every time one of the greats takes their leave of us. ‘At the record company meeting,’ the song begins, ‘on their hands — *at last!* — a dead star... The sycophantic slags all say, I knew him first and I knew him well.’

Over the last few days the records – especially ‘Nothing Compares 2 U’ – will have played on a loop, the royalties tills will have sung, and the slags will have jostled with their black plumes to the front. In many ways I am not much better than them, except to say that for me, she was so much more than a star.

As a journalist I interviewed her often and had the disorientating sense of trying to look through a telescope from both ends. At a great distance there was the myth, the legend, preserved forever in the amber of nostalgia, and then, up close, there was something else entirely: a person whom I knew as a friend and someone who took me on the adventure of a lifetime. Her music and her wonderful warm, witty generous self have marked my life and childhood like no other. And I always felt nothing I ever did could possibly repay her.

We were both told who we were by music. Sinéad’s awakening came aged 10 when her brother, Joe – the novelist – brought home the record *Slow Train Coming* by Bob Dylan. I was the same age in the bleak fag-end of January 1990 when her face – by turns devastated, accusing, furious – first filled up our screens in the video for ‘Nothing Compares’.



Rebel singing – O'Connor was the female pop singer the world didn't know it needed. Picture by Mandel Ngan

The album on which it appeared, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, was the first record I ever got as a birthday present. It was a piece of high art that had somehow crashed the mainstream charts, giving kids like me the nutrition we craved.

Later that year I made my mother take me to see her at the Point Depot, where Sinéad bounced onstage and ran roughshod over the ushers' attempts to get everyone into their seats, telling us all to "just get up and dance".

“ I did later confess my nutty fandom, but Sinéad had a deft way of puncturing worship, farting theatrically and cracking jokes if I ever threatened to glaze over in awe

I was sweating in my confirmation outfit, standing, balanced, on the back of the chair so I could see over the heads of the crowd. In the distance, writhing in the dry ice, was a woman who would provide an affirming, consoling soundtrack to all the pain and confusion to come.

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There's a kind of feverish fandom that you really have to be a teenager to fully experience. If tattoos had been as big a thing then as now, I might well have her shaven likeness on my calf, but, as things were, it came out in different ways.

Obsessive listening goes without saying – the writing worn off the tapes, the legs danced down to the knees – but there was also the sending away to some nerd in the Netherlands for 50 CDs of various live performances around Europe, travelling to see her on consecutive nights in London, and coming very close to being a stalker when I threw a bunch of flowers at her while she was onstage at Vicar Street.



Kurt Cobain, Courtney Love and daughter Frances Bean Cobain with Sinéad O'Connor in California in 1993. Picture by Kevin Mazur

She was my screensaver, my password, the picture on my wall that reminded me, like Eminem's 'Stan', that it's not so bad. I can recall walking through Dublin and being accosted by some religious proselytiser who asked myself and a friend if we had found God. "Don't worry," my friend assured the preacher, "He has all her albums."

I can't emphasise enough how uncool all of this was. Sinéad, latterly, has been feted as one of the most important Irish artists who ever lived and at the beginning of her career she was one of the biggest-selling singers in the world.

But in the middle people kind of forgot about her. One power ballad, and all those dramatic stances and gestures, often threatened to eclipse a body of work that glittered brilliantly with every idiosyncratic and uncommercial turn.

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“ She was the exception to the rule ‘never meet your heroes’

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What about when she stood barefoot beside the ruins of the Berlin Wall in 1990 and sang the starkest, saddest version of Pink Floyd's 'Mother' ever recorded? Or, two years later, when she entered her jazz phase and, backed by an orchestra in New York, gave an intimate and desolate rendition of 'Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home' while the brass section shrieked dementedly over her plaintive cries? Or, a few weeks after the Omagh bombing in 1998, when she went on the BBC and alchemised Abba's 'Chiquitita' into a hymn to soothe the country's pain?

All were what the music writer Ian Penman calls "collapse inside forever moments". She always connected unbelievably with the sad numbers, as though she were singing to herself rather than to us, trying to salve some inner wound.



Sinéad O'Connor hugs her daughter Roisin during an anti-racism demonstration in Dublin in 2000

Motherhood was the great subject of Sinéad's work and one of the most difficult parts of her life. Her own mother abused her as a child and, many years later, she would endure the most painful thing any parent can experience when her son, Shane, took his own life.

In my early 20s I became a journalist after an article I wrote, comparing Sinéad to Nina Simone, who had died that week, was published in the *Sunday Independent*. Some time after that I wrote to her ("from the young man in the 22nd row...") and met her, bringing an offering of a Roots record.

For full disclosure I did later confess my nutty fandom, but Sinéad had a deft way of puncturing worship, farting theatrically and cracking jokes if I ever threatened to glaze over in awe. I would often go to her house in Monkstown and listen to Roots records with her and took her into town. Sinéad suffered from agoraphobia and as she shuffled amid the throngs, peering from under the hood of an oversized overcoat, there could be a sense of taking ET on walkabout and frequent reminders that she was just as famous. In the George, a Chinese barman asked her to sign a beer mat for his granny back home.



In 2005 I woke the morning after St Patrick's Day to a flurry of texts from her asking me to follow her to Jamaica, where she was making a record, *Throw Down Your Arms*, with the legendary rhythm section, Sly & Robbie. What followed was part odyssey, part superfan lottery win. For a month I lived in a suite at the Hilton in Kingston with her, waking sometimes in the morning to her playing a whistle on the balcony by herself.

We would travel into Tuff Gong studios, made famous by Bob Marley, where she worked with the Rasta musicians, while local kids, aware of her presence in the city, sang over the high walls of the compound in the hope she would hear them. To begin with she almost murmured shyly along with the songs but then one day the dials on the mixing desk danced into red as she let out what the sean-nós singer Lillis Ó Laoire once called "that long public note". Everyone in the studio stared agog and she gave the same impish smile she used to throw at Gay Byrne.

“ When she left abruptly for America I packed all her belongings – the hijabs, Hindu wall hangings and clothes – and sent them on to her. It seemed so cruel and so lonely that her once huge life had been reduced to a few boxes

Sinéad pined for her kids and despaired of my student-like messiness, eventually succumbing to what she called her “Bean an tí moment” and cleaned up the whole place. We both wearied of the endlessly hot days, and on one afternoon, when the skies darkened and a thunderstorm erupted overhead, she grabbed my hand and, fully clothed, the two of us dive-bombed into the swimming pool, while her then-manager, Danny, stood on the bank muttering about “crazy Irish”.

One night the hotel held a karaoke competition on the bank of the pool and Sinéad decided we would enter, under the pseudonyms Sharon and Darren. We sang ‘Redemption Song’ by Marley, with me braying tunelessly over her gorgeous voice. Shaz and Daz gratefully accepted their winning Pina Coladas.

In hindsight all that felt like an innocent beginning. Over the following years life became very difficult at times. There were more short-lived marriages, two more children, Shane and Yeshua, and an album – *How About I Be Me (And You Be You?)*, which was hailed as a throwback to the brilliance of her earlier career.



Sinéad O'Connor plays the Oxegen music festival at Punchestown racecourse in 2007. Picture by Niall Carson

In the years after that things seemed to fall apart. She stopped touring with John Reynolds – her best friend and the father of her eldest son, Jake – and parted ways with her band, many of whom had been there since the 1990s. Her mental health deteriorated, she frequently spoke of taking her own life, and she was often hospitalised. I once arrived to visit her in one of these hospitals and found her sitting on the bed, with the walls and ceiling all around her covered in writing. ‘I just want to be heard’ she had written over and over and she looked mischievously sheepish about the cleaning job it would take.

When she left abruptly for America I packed all her belongings – the hijabs, Hindu wall hangings and clothes – and sent them on to her. It seemed so cruel and so lonely that her once huge life had been reduced to a few boxes. And the vultures were already swarming.

Dr Phil impertinently asking our Sinéad if she ever thinks she'll get her career back has to be one of the most nauseating pieces of [Privacy](#).

television ever produced.

In those years I sometimes thought back to that first piece I'd written and the comparison with Nina Simone. In a documentary about her, Simone's daughter said "people thought that my mother was Nina Simone on stage, but she was Nina Simone 24/7 – and that's where the problems started."

With Sinéad the very things that had forged the great artist – her tremendous sensitivity, her dreadful personal pain – ground her down over time. For all the modern conversation about mental health, there was a certain public squeamishness around her. She often said she felt "invisible" and each new appreciation of her as a musical icon seemed to glissade over the carnage of the present day.

When she appeared on the *Late Late*, just months after that infamous video in the New Jersey motel room, there was not a single question about what she had gone through.



Sinéad O'Connor with her son Shane

Both the *New York Times* interview last year, and the retrospective naming of her as 'person of the year for 1992' in *TIME* magazine zoomed in on the ripping up of the picture of the Pope on *Saturday Night Live*. The recent documentary on her, *Nothing Compares*, focused on the early years too and presented her as a sort of activist avatar of all of the social progress Ireland had made.

In the midst of it all you were left wondering: but what about Sinéad?

Perhaps people wondered too, how, with all the resources she had, could nothing be done to really help her.

The answer, really, is that, just as with her music, Sinéad always retained total control of her life. She often said that fame had exacerbated all of the terrible problems that were a legacy of her childhood, and that was true, but, worse than that, it prevented her from ever really dealing with them. Just as managers came and went, so too did doctors, hospitals and treatment programmes. If she wasn't going to be told by her daddy or the patriarchy, she wasn't going to be told by no doc.

Through it all, a dreadful but necessary agency kept the cycles repeating. Her great cross was that her illnesses made the most intimate relationships the most difficult. She was always searching, trying, and fighting to stay alive, each new reinvention and religion representing a quest to renew the old broken self.

The cruellest blow of all was the death of Shane. In the last years of his life Sinéad brought me into meetings where his care was discussed. She was very concerned he would take his own life.



Portrait of an artist - a man looks at a mural depicting Sinéad O'Connor in Dublin. Picture by Damien Storan

When the dreadful news came through in January of last year I thought back to the old mural in Temple Bar with the painting of her and the caption: 'Sinead you were right along, we were wrong. So sorry.'

I somehow felt that, with everything she had already gone through, she would survive even that desperate blow. The last time I saw her encouraged me in this outlook: she was in good form, telling me about the new album she'd worked on with David Holmes. She described the cover art as being "kind of like a humorous Pietà". That was Sinéad all over, taking something well known and brilliantly reimagining it with her own artistry. She knew she could make us cry, but she wanted to make us laugh too, and she didn't want your pity.

She used to tell me that at her gigs she particularly enjoyed the response of men, who, maybe more used to keeping their emotions in check, would sob like lost children at the sound of her gorgeous voice. At times of grief in the past I would play her music in the hopes of unblocking my own dams, but since she died the shock and numbness are not for moving.

I take some consolation from the fact that she is now, at least, released from the pain she suffered for so long.



Dónal Lynch and Sinéad O'Connor in Carlow in May 2021

Memories crowd in: I'll think of when I first saw her onstage, still young, her voice soaring like a weather system, her eyes blazing with what BP Fallon called "shipwreck and heartbreak"; of her bathing baby Shane in the sink in Monkstown and looking down on him with great love; of her little bald head, hugging into me. She was the exception to the rule 'never meet your heroes' and it's hard to believe she's really gone.

The music will ring out of my window tonight. The dam will burst, the tears will flow, and I will take to the boats.

Goodbye old friend. And wherever you are, I hope you're at peace.

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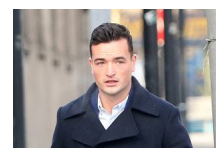
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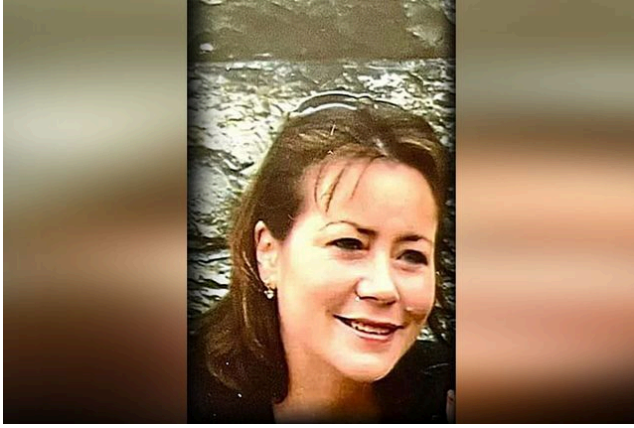
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