

Sinéad O'Connor (1966-2023)

“Artists can be inspiring as long as we’re courageous enough to be ourselves and to be bullied, but not run away”

Paul Bond
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The death of Irish singer-songwriter Sinéad O'Connor at just 56 is a sad loss. Genuinely talented, she combined an acute musical and social sensibility to create some extremely moving music of real emotion and passion.

The broadly expressed grief at her passing has highlighted her strengths. Her life was marked by pain and suffering, with devastating effect on her mental health. She was unflinchingly honest about her own fragility and torment, but also about abuse and injustice wherever she saw it. She sought to turn this outwards in a wide-ranging musical exploration that took in pop, jazz, reggae, gospel and folk. It did not always work, but when it did it was beautiful.

“Artists can be inspiring,” she once said, “as long as we’re courageous enough to be ourselves and to be bullied, but not run away.” That bullying was real, and O'Connor was frequently pilloried and excluded. The music industry was actively hostile to such independence, and her remarkable talent often went unsupported.

She recognised these pressures, commenting, “The hugest misconception... of ‘Sinéad O'Connor’ is that she is Amazonian. I’m not. I’m a five-ft 4-in soft-hearted female who is actually very fragile.”

While no cause of death has yet been announced, sympathetic responses have stressed the trauma of her life and how many people identified with her. Charlatans singer Tim Burgess tweeted, “Hoping that she has found peace,” and comic Dara Ó Briain wrote, “I hope she realised how much love there was for her.”

Her upbringing was shaped by abuse. Born in 1966, Sinéad grew up in an affluent Dublin suburb, the third child of five. When her parents’ relationship broke up, eight-year-old Sinéad, against her wishes, stayed with her mother Marie, where she suffered extreme and violent physical and emotional abuse.

Marie, who died in a car accident when Sinéad was 18, would stamp and kick her daughter. Sinéad expressed this in songs like “Fire on Babylon” (1994), accusing Marie of taking her family away and “torturing my child.”

Her response was to act in a caring way as no one had acted towards her, as in, “This Is To Mother You.” She felt this as an artistic responsibility: “Our job as artists is to be ourselves. And, in doing so, to inspire other people to be themselves.”

“Even our mothers and fathers couldn’t stand us,” she wrote, “Because nobody ever gave a shit about the children of Ireland.” This was in part because of the pernicious role of the Catholic Church as Ireland’s state religion, which shaped a culture of violence and abuse towards the young. It is not a coincidence that another Irish singer

who died tragically young, Dolores O’Riordan of the Cranberries, had also suffered abuse.

Marie, like many others, piously displayed a photo of the Pope, a photo Sinéad said “represented lies and liars and abuse.” After Marie’s death, Sinéad took the photo, promising to destroy it “when the right moment came.”

“Christianity did nothing but rape the people of Ireland, metaphorically and literally,” she angrily declared. She was hostile to British imperialism and aware of all its crimes in its oldest colony as well as at home. Among the best songs on *I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got* is “Black Boys on Mopeds,” a searing condemnation of Thatcherism and its social inequality enforced with police brutality. O'Connor collaborated in memorable performances with Roger Waters on his song “Mother” in 1990 and with Ian Brown on his anti-war single “Illegal Attacks” (2007).

She supported a united Ireland but denounced the “disastrous” role of the church, “which took over” after independence. “Famine” (1994) pointed to the country’s “highest statistics of child abuse in the EEC [European Economic Community]. And we say we’re a Christian country.”

She nevertheless continued to seek solace in religion. In 1999, she was ordained in a breakaway Catholic sect, and five years ago converted to Islam. She embodied Marx’s observation that “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.”

Two years after moving in with her father in 1979, she was caught shoplifting and sent, aged 14, for 18 months to a Magdalene Asylum correctional facility, run by nuns. One nun, to encourage her to express herself, gave her a guitar.

Music became central to her life, and she went on to study at Dublin College of Music. Drawing music business attention, she signed to Ensign Records in 1985. She resisted executives’ attempts to shape her sound and make her more girly: “What they were describing was actually their mistresses. I pointed that out to them which they didn’t take terribly well.”

Rejecting their suggested producer, she self-produced her successful debut album *The Lion and the Cobra* (1987). Its production brought to the fore her remarkable voice, setting the template for her best work. She combined a high degree of technical virtuosity (she later studied bel canto singing) with a determination to tell the truth. It was irresistible, and the single “Mandinka” brought American success.

The Grammy-winning follow-up album, *I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got* (1990), marked her commercial peak. Her recording of

Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U" was an astonishing performance of pared-down power, aided by a striking video, much of it a tight close-up. Her tears during the video—singing the song reminded her of Marie—reinforced the raw honesty of her performance.

She was a great interpreter of other people's songs. Her version of "Nothing Compares 2 U" has deservedly become definitive, while she brought her phenomenal vocal capacity and musical imagination to songs by artists as diverse as Kurt Cobain, the Beatles, ABBA and Ralph McTell. Her touching fragility, musical strength and emotion could breathe new life into a standard like "Danny Boy." She made noteworthy albums of jazz and folk songs. Collaborations with musicians as diverse as Terry Hall, Shane MacGowan, The Chieftains and Kris Kristofferson show her at her engaging musical best.

Her refusal to compromise was unswerving. Nominated for four Grammys in 1990, she did not attend the ceremony, writing that the awards "acknowledge mostly the commercial side of art" and "respect mostly material gain." She boycotted the 1991 ceremony in protest at the Gulf War.

She also attracted establishment ire for refusing to play "The Star-Spangled Banner" before a US show. A Republican senator called for a boycott, while Frank Sinatra menacingly told his audience "For her sake, we'd better never meet."

She replied, "I have a policy of not having any national anthems played before my concerts in any country, including my own, because they have nothing to do with music in general."

She was more concerned at the arrest of other artists at their own concerts—2 Live Crew had just been arrested for alleged lyrical obscenity—and "a disturbing trend towards censorship of music and art in this country."

Popular success would not silence her if she saw an injustice, most notably about paedophilia within the Catholic Church. In February 1992, O'Connor spoke passionately at an abortion-rights rally in Dublin. In October 1992, she sang Bob Marley's "War" on *Saturday Night Live*. At its close, she inserted the words "child abuse" before looking to camera and tearing up Marie's photo of John Paul II.

Producer Lorne Michaels ordered the "Applause" sign turned off, and NBC barred her from the show for life. The following week's host Joe Pesci said thuggishly, "I would have gave her such a smack."

In a letter to the press discussing her actions, she pointed again to the history of British colonialism in Ireland and its perpetuation by the Catholic Church, which was by no means unique: "My story is the story of countless millions of children whose families and nations were torn apart for money in the name of Jesus Christ."

Weeks later she was booed so heavily at a Bob Dylan tribute concert she could not even begin her scheduled song. Instead, she again performed "War" in an angry, defiant cappella. Kris Kristofferson was sent to escort her from the stage but defended her, saying to her "Don't let the bastards grind you down." She told him "I'm not down."

Kristofferson said, "Her name has become synonymous with courage and integrity," and wrote "Sister Sinéad" in tribute: "she's never been partial to shackles or chains. She's too old for breaking and too young to tame."

"I didn't want to be a pop star, I wanted to be a protest singer," she said. She felt the incident got her "back on the right track" after her commercial success, and she was back following her musical instincts.

It had, however, an awful personal impact. She was hung out to dry

by the music industry. It marked not only the end of her commercial success—she never had another American hit—but also what she called "open season on treating me like a crazy bitch."

The fragility and its roots were ever more apparent, as was her artistic striving. A 1993 letter to the *Irish Times* asked people to "stop hurting" her. "If only I can fight off the voices of my parents," she wrote, "and gather a sense of self-esteem Then I'll be able to REALLY sing..."

She won support despite the witch-hunt, working with leading artists such as Peter Gabriel and Roger Daltrey, and film-makers Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan.

The pressure of being treated as mad compounded her fragility. In 2003, she revealed that she had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, later changed to post-traumatic stress disorder. She was in physical pain with the effects of fibromyalgia. Following a 2015 hysterectomy, she posted on Facebook that she was contemplating suicide, and was given medical help.

During interviews for her 2021 memoir *Rememberings* she announced her retirement after a BBC interviewer repeated a description of her as "the crazy woman in pop's attic." She rescinded the decision days later, but the exhaustion was clear.

Her musical striving continued, even under such terrible conditions. In 2021 she released a single of the Mahalia Jackson gospel number "Trouble of the World." The voice was lower with age, but touchingly emotive. It was the only release from a scheduled album temporarily postponed following her retirement announcement, and then cancelled completely on the suicide of her son Shane last year.

This was another devastating blow. Shortly before her death, O'Connor tweeted of "living as undead night creature" since Shane's death. Hers was a life marked by tragedy, but she sought always to try and respond with all the artistry available to her.

She was never content to rest on her laurels. Cancelling her retirement, she had tweeted, "I lied when I said I'm past my peak."

She leaves behind a musical legacy worthy of exploration and a sense of deep regret at how much more she might have achieved if she had been supported rather than pilloried by the music industry. She wrote, "Thank You for Hearing Me... Thank you for loving me ... Thank you for tearing me apart... Thank you for breaking my heart."



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