

The Last Day of Our Acquaintance - on Shuhada' Sadaqat/Sinéad O'Connor

Sunday 13 August 2023, by [VALLE Camila](#) (Date first published: 11 August 2023).

[Sinéad in a Malcolm X shirt](#). Sinéad pregnant and bald and screaming on the cover of *The Lion and the Cobra* (belly cut off). [Sinéad at a pro-abortion rally](#). [Sinéad with the Public Enemy logo painted on the side of her head](#). [Sinéad walking down St. Mark's Place](#), her "favorite place in the universe." Sinéad during the Gulf War refusing to play concerts following any rendition of the National Anthem. Sinéad explaining [English colonialism and the Irish Potato Famine](#). [Sinéad with MC Lyte](#). Sinéad hanging a Palestinian flag on her microphone stand. [Sinéad ripping up a picture of Pope John Paul II on Saturday Night Live](#).

It would be easy to begin a piece on Sinéad O'Connor with her suffering and vilification. There was certainly no shortage of it. Sinéad stood for something. She became a symbol. And like many people who become symbols, she was often reviled. On July 26, Sinéad died without ever getting [the apologies](#) she was owed. We are seeing, again, how easy it is to love someone when they're dead and how much harder it is when they're alive. Even in death, she teaches us. If only she could have felt how much she meant to us while she was still here.

Shuhada' Sadaqat—the name she took after converting to Islam in 2018, while still performing and recording music under her birth name—was born in Dublin in 1966. She described her childhood as emotionally and physically scarring, and her mother, with whom she lived after her parents separated, as violent and abusive. In an interview for the documentary *Nothing Compares* (2022), she makes two remarks about her early life that I find particularly striking.

First:

I spent my entire childhood being beaten up because of the social conditions under which my mother grew up, and under which her mother grew up, and under which her mother and her mother grew up.

And second:

My father is the type of man that didn't want anyone talking about what happened, and that's what was wrong with me.

It's a one-two punch. The first blow roots her own trauma in the structure of society—Irish colonization, the Catholic Church, and their historical and interpersonal effects. The second, how this very structure sets the terms for addressing that kind of violence—that is, not at all. Trying to break a cycle by talking about what happened, despite a taboo against doing so, is a recurrent theme throughout Sadaqat's life.

When she was 15, Sadaqat was caught shoplifting and sent to a residential training center run by

Roman Catholic nuns. As punishment, Sadaqat would sometimes be sent to spend the night in the hospice part of the attached Magdalene Laundry (an asylum-type institution for “fallen women”)—“to remind me that if I didn’t behave myself, I was going to end up like these women,” she remembered. Some of the women had been locked away since the 1920s, and there they were, calling out for nurses that never came. They were often sex workers, or had gotten pregnant, or been raped by a doctor or a father or a local priest, and always deemed in need of penitence by society and the courts. The first song Sadaqat wrote, “Take My Hand,” was about her nights in the laundry hospice wing.

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In 1992, Sadaqat performed an a cappella version of Bob Marley’s “War” on *Saturday Night Live*, famously destroying her mother’s photograph of Pope John Paul II on stage to protest the Catholic Church’s child sex abuse. Staring straight into the camera, she held the haunting note of the song’s final lyric: *evil*. It was Sadaqat’s methodology encapsulated: the destruction of the picture (“the photo itself had been on my mother’s bedroom wall since the day the fucker was enthroned in 1978”) as cathartic, symbolic reclamation of her own childhood, and socio-political denunciation of something bigger than herself, all at once. Working out our pasts, our traumas, is hard enough in private, but to do it in public, in front of millions of people, and somehow also at the service of others, is almost impossibly brave. As Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna put it, “we were all...like ‘feminist performance art on TV, when does that ever happen?’”

Sadaqat was ahead of her time. And like most women ahead of their time, she was viciously scrutinized. “It was very traumatizing,” she recalled. “It was open season on treating me like a crazy bitch.” Headlines read: “SINEAD THE SHE DEVIL,” “SHUT UP SINEAD!,” “Shut Up? Me? NO WAY!” Crowds booed her. Joe Pesci and Frank Sinatra threatened to beat her. She was mocked relentlessly by the media. The *Washington Times* called her “the face of pure hatred.” The Anti-Defamation League condemned her. The National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations had a steamroller crush hundreds of her albums outside the headquarters of her record company. She was in her early 20s.

But Sadaqat was right and she knew it. In 1993, a year after her *SNL* appearance, the unmarked graves of 155 women were uncovered on the grounds of one of the laundries. Nearly a decade later, the pope publicly acknowledged the longstanding abuse within the church, including the sexual abuse of children by priests. The Irish state followed suit a couple of years later, issuing a formal apology for the laundries and establishing a £50 million compensation program for survivors, to which the responsible religious orders refused to contribute financially.

At the 1989 Grammys, Sadaqat stenciled the Public Enemy logo on her buzzcut in support of the group and other hip-hop artists boycotting the awards show for not taking hip-hop and rap as serious categories worthy of recognition. Today, August 11, we are rightly celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Cindy Campbell and DJ Kool Herc’s “Back to School Jam” in the Bronx—the official birth of hip-hop—to great acclaim.

Sadaqat was a product of her many antagonists: her family and their abuse, the Catholic Church, the Irish state, capitalism, sexism, English colonialism, men, the media, the music industry. (Her first record label, Ensign, infamously tried to both coerce her into having an abortion and to brand her as a classic long-haired, short-skirted, make up-clad female act, prompting Sadaqat to shave her head

and don her once-signature leather jackets and Doc Martens.) To be both *against* and *of* what hurts, what oppresses, was the fraught condition of her being, as it is everyone's. Her answer to the tension comes most clearly, I think, in an interview with Tony Lindo on the reggae TV show *Viddym's*, the day after she tore up the photo: "the only thing to do is for people to study their history." That was what she did, she studied her history and she sang. The same voice that had soothed her mother as a child ("my mother was a beast and I was able to soothe her with my voice. I was able to use my voice to make the devil fall asleep"), the voice that had gotten through the torturous residential center, was the voice that let her channel that history—her own and the world's.

"People say 'oh, you fucked up your career,'" remarked Sadaqat. "But they're talking about the career they had in mind for me.... I fucked up their career, not mine." She always admitted that she was a freedom singer more than she ever was a pop star. And yet, her impact on popular music, on what it means to be an artist, is indelible though underrated. [As Jason King wrote in a recent piece for NPR](#), she "was a pioneer in diarizing her life in mainstream pop, helping to open up space for future generations of my-life-is-my-art 'dark pop' stars to come like Amy Winehouse, Frank Ocean, SZA and Olivia Rodrigo." Her confessional storytelling, the fullness of her interiority, and her belief that artists are not simply passive entertainers but have the right to thought and provocation are on full display when [Billie Eilish strips down to make a point about those commenting on her body](#) and when [Megan Thee Stallion uses her SNL performance to call for us, as a society, to protect Black women](#).

"She wailed for the ghost of her abusive mother, for the ghosts of characters she made up in songs like 'Jackie,' for ghosts of real-life, young Black men killed senselessly by state forces, for Irish famine victims, and for so many others with whom she felt an empathetic connection," writes King. "Now that she is gone, who will sing for Sinéad?"

Sadaqat sang to her ghosts and was principled and intelligent and moody and beautiful and weird and punk and a style icon and had to be so many things that this world hates in front of millions of people conditioned by a society that feeds off punishment as spectacle. But she is also loved. And missed. And deserved better.

I hope she is, finally, at peace.

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P.S.

• Spectre. August 11, 2023:
<https://spectrejournal.com/the-last-day-of-our-acquaintance/>