

Rest in Power, Sinéad O'Connor

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Sinéad O'Connor was more than just a musician. She was a symbol of a changing society in Ireland that made defenders of the status quo incredibly uncomfortable.

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Apostles of freedom are ever idolised when dead, but crucified when alive.

— James Connolly

The words of James Connolly, socialist and Irish revolutionary, cropped up again and again under pictures of Sinéad O'Connor the night of her death on July 26. His quote, referring to the attitude toward the revolutionaries of the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion, holds as true to the legendary singer today as it did to Wolfe Tone and Connolly himself.

The grief was palpable on Irish social media the night Sinéad died as the nation collectively mourned the death of the music giant. Within minutes of the news breaking, timelines were flooded with tributes to Sinéad: stories of her talent, stories of her often anonymous kindness, stories of her activism against injustice of all kinds. Tune into any national radio station and it wouldn't be long until you'd hear "[Mandinka](#)." Vigils were organized to send her off with tearful goodbyes.

For myself and many others, Sinéad O'Connor held a strange position in the Irish zeitgeist. Relentlessly principled and profoundly before her time, Sinéad used her superstar platform to lift the voices of the vulnerable and admonish those in power from the very start of her career. For that, she was vilified and cast aside by a body politic that was neither willing nor ready to listen. But those who loved and believed her thought it would only be a matter of time before she would be vindicated and embraced as the national treasure that she was. Her vindication would come too late.

Sinéad O'Connor was more than just a musician. She was a symbol of a changing society in Ireland that made defenders of the status quo incredibly uncomfortable, both nationally and internationally. Things were shifting rapidly in Ireland amid her rise to stardom in the '80s and '90s, particularly for women.

Sinéad, Women, and the Catholic Church

John Charles McQuaid, the archbishop of Dublin and "one of the great architects of the (Irish) Constitution," sought to ensure the "special position" of the Catholic Church in the young state. He was successful, and there were few aspects of Irish life left untouched by the tendrils of the church. The church controlled what media could be consumed, controlled access to contraceptives, had huge influence over the state with weekly meetings between clergy and government, and to this day the

church controls many of our hospitals and most of our schools. It is difficult to overstate the grip that the Catholic Church once had over Irish society.

The shadow of the Catholic Church loomed over the lives of women. Not only did it control our bodies but it also worked hand in glove with the state to control every facet of a woman's personhood. Our constitution still states that "the state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved," an article accurately described at the time by suffragette Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington as a "fascist model in which women would be relegated to permanent inferiority."

This gender-based caste system led to many state- and church-sponsored acts of misogyny. The marriage bar, which forced women from civil-service jobs once married and disqualified them from taking up new work, remained in place until 1973; access to contraception was illegal until 1979; abortion was only [legalized](#) in 2019; and the practice of symphysiotomies during childbirth continued long after every other European country phased it out. But perhaps the most atrocious was the [Magdalene Laundries](#) and [Mother and Baby Homes](#) — "homes" for women who were pregnant out of wedlock, or even just "wayward," to work off their sins through unpaid labor. These institutions were run by the Catholic Church and funded and upheld by the state, with Gardaí (Irish Police) regularly returning women and girls who had managed to escape to their captors.

The laundries were rife with physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Children born to Mother and Baby Homes were often sold to America or became test subjects for vaccine trials, and many would die from neglect and be disposed of, the most infamous example being the bodies of nearly eight hundred babies found in a septic tank in Tuam, Galway. The last of these homes closed in 1996. Sinéad O'Connor would find herself in one such home at age fourteen for being a "problem child," where she would spend eighteen months.

Sinéad encapsulated the claustrophobic, constricting, uneasy relationship between women in Ireland and the Catholic Church: rejecting the institution, refusing to participate in the lie of a benevolent church working for the good of the people and not to line their pockets and maintain control over a population, refusing to apologize or be shamed for her womanhood, and rejecting outright the pressure to conform to her gender. With her unladylike shaved head, vulgar language, and penchant for paganism in her music, she was a symbol of resistance to an unfair system and the poster child of a changing society. She was the sound of rebellion. No longer was being chaste and obedient to our papal masters the only option for women. We could be cool.

The Backlash

Sinéad was long a household name by October 1992. Her debut album, *The Lion and the Cobra*, was nominated for Best Female Rock Vocal Performance at the Grammys, she won a Best Alternative Music Performance Grammy for *I Do Not Want What I Have Not Got*, and her cover of "[Nothing Compares 2 U](#)" would sweep at the award shows. She could have very easily rested on her laurels, lapped up the praise, and become an international darling. That was the path she deliberately chose not to go down.

Looking back from 2023, it's hard to imagine the scale of the backlash she faced after the 1992 SNL performance where she tore up a photo of then pope John Paul II. While these days many cry that they are the victims of "cancel culture" after being confronted with the consequences of their actions or speech, Sinéad is one of the few examples of an *actual* cancellation.

The early '90s saw several criminal trials and governmental inquiries unearth what countless

already knew: hundreds of priests were sexually abusing children in the thousands in Ireland, and the Catholic Church did nothing and was hiding it. It was this that compelled Sinéad O'Connor to [perform](#) her chilling acapella rendition of Bob Marley's anti-racist protest song "War," replacing the words of the outro with "child abuse," ripping the photo, and challenging viewers at home, stating, "Fight the real enemy" directly to camera.

Those who adhere to the status quo acted predictably. She received a lifetime ban from SNL as well as protests and death threats. Joe Pesci, presenting SNL the following week, said, "She was very lucky it wasn't my show, because if it was my show, I would have gave her such a smack" to audience applause. Her peer, Madonna, disavowed her. She was boycotted and blacklisted and would never again return to the heights of her fame. But Sinéad knew she was right, that hard truths are hard-fought, and took her lashings in stride.

"Everyone wants a pop star, see? But I am a protest singer. I just had stuff to get off my chest. I had no desire for fame."

The Ryan report (detailing the scale of child sexual abuse happening within Catholic-run institutions funded and inspected by the Department of Education) wouldn't be released until 2009. The Vatican would not apologize for its role in the sexual abuse of children until 2010. While she was proven correct, her ban from SNL was never lifted.

Sinéad didn't begrudge the ordinary people caught up in the hysteria. She understood what decades of living under the thumb of an authoritarian theocratic regime does: "They have been controlled by the church, the very people who authorized what was done to them, who gave permission for what was done to them."

Apostle of Freedom

Decades before politicians of the ruling-class parties got on board with repealing the Eighth Amendment and allowing pregnant people to gain access to abortion, donning their trendy "REPEAL" jumpers only when it became clear that the right to abortion would be won, Sinéad O'Connor was on the front lines of that fight.

In an article in *Spin* in 1991, Sinéad spoke candidly of her decision to get an abortion: "I just believe that if a child is meant to be born, it will be born. It doesn't really matter whether you have an abortion or a miscarriage. The whole issue is pro-choice." She would go on to say, "I would lobby very strongly for the right of women to have control over their own bodies and make decisions for themselves. Nobody has the right to tell anyone else what to think or believe."

In 1992, the Irish High Court forbade a fourteen-year-old rape victim from traveling to the UK to access an abortion in what became known as the "X Case." A rally was called in protest, and Sinéad would address the thousands-strong crowd, speaking truth to power:

"The bad decision made by Judge Costello is an invasion of the civil rights of all Irish women. It's not just Judge Costello who is at fault here, by the way, because he could not have made his decision without being specifically asked to do so by the attorney general."

The Supreme Court would later overrule the High Court's decision, and the girl would be allowed to travel to terminate her pregnancy. Sinéad continued supporting protests calling for the end of the Eighth and joined the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment in 2015.

Sinéad consistently used her stardom to fight against systems of oppression, be it the state, the church, or the police. The most powerful tool she had in her arsenal, unsurprisingly, was her voice. While living in the UK and disgusted by the racist policing she saw, she penned "[Black Boys on Mopeds](#)," a song lambasting Margaret Thatcher for turning a blind eye to the UK's "law and order" racism that resulted in the death of Nicholas Bramble in 1989. Nicholas was chased to death on his moped by police, who assumed that because he was black, he must have stolen it. The song appears on her second album, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, which is dedicated to the memory of Colin Roach, a twenty-one-year-old black British man shot to death inside a police station. Despite contrary evidence, the coroner's jury would rule Roach's killing a suicide.

"Black Boys on Mopeds" is as relevant today as it was at the time of the song's release. March of this year saw Louise Carey's report on the Met find that the police are institutionally racist, misogynistic, and homophobic — a surprise to no one paying attention. The song's message is easily applied to all cases of racist police violence, be it that of Nicholas Bramble, George Floyd in the United States, or George Nkencho in Ireland. Unfortunately, her song is evergreen.

Her acts of solidarity knew no bounds and are too numerous to all mention here, but include wearing a T-shirt for the Dublin AIDS Alliance on Ireland's largest primetime talk show, *The Late Late Show*, during the height of the AIDS crisis while homosexuality was still illegal in Ireland, and refusing to violate the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement by playing in the apartheid state of Israel. And in her final onstage appearance, she dedicated her 2023 Choice Music Award "to each and every member of Ireland's refugee community, not just the Ukrainian ones. You're all very welcome in Ireland" — a dig at the Irish government's two-tier processing system that allows black and brown refugees to be left on the streets to fend for themselves.

While she is gone, the legacy she leaves behind is a rich tapestry of art and activism. In lieu of eulogies and words that should have been said while she was alive, those of us moved by her have a job to do. Protests songs are not written to be passively listened to. They are a call to action. We celebrate her by continuing the fight against injustice, the fight against all oppressors, and the fight for those who are vulnerable, no matter the repercussions, for we, too, will be vindicated in time.

Rest in power, apostle of freedom.

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P.S.

- JACOBIN. 08.04.2023:
<https://jacobin.com/2023/08/sinead-oconnor-obituary>
- Brigid Purcell is an Irish writer and activist.