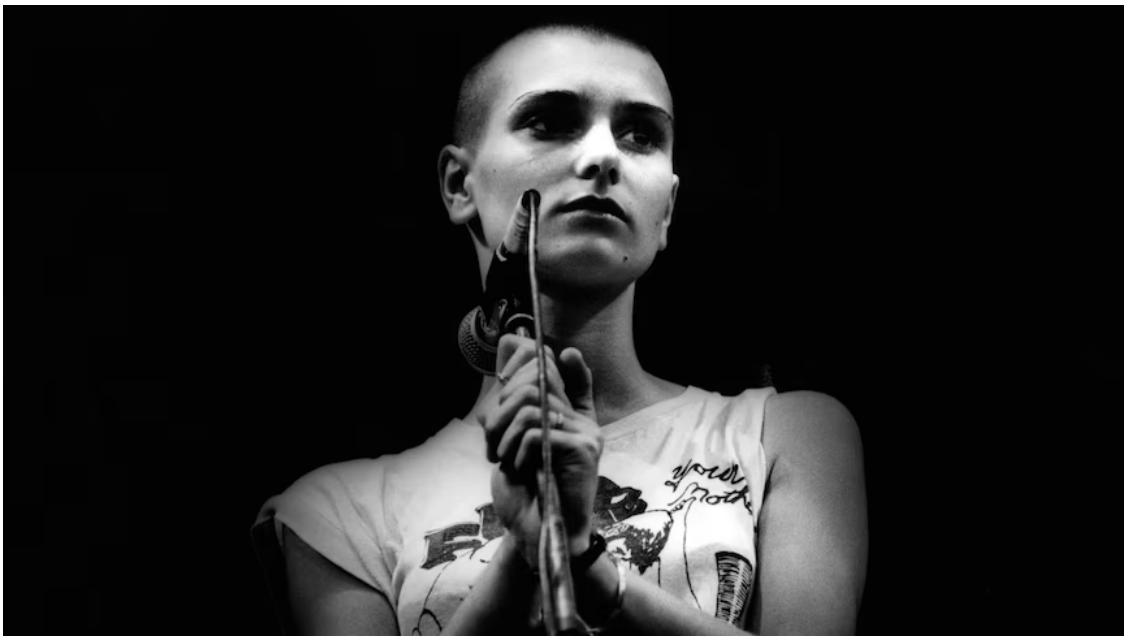
OPINION

“I only want to be my own woman”: The glorious rage of Sinéad O’Connor

Rebecca Sheehan

Posted Thu 27 Jul 2023 at 8:01pm, updated Thu 27 Jul 2023 at 9:10pm



The death of Sinéad O’Connor (1966–2023) will not have been in vain if we can start to shift the way we think and talk about women artists. (Photo by Michel Linssen / Redferns)

I was 14 in 1987 when Sinéad O'Connor burst onto music television with her second single "Mandinka". It's hard to communicate to younger people what it felt like, what it meant, to see her for the first time. The singular frisson of witnessing a beautiful woman with a shaved head playing an electric guitar, gazing directly at the viewer, containing her wild energy in a light-on-her-toes bounce, like a boxer at the start of a fight, releasing it into the howling close-eyed chorus lines "I don't know no shame / I feel no pain / I can't …"

In a decade of male gender benders, power suits, and the rise of the supermodel, Annie Lennox and Sinéad were outliers. Both bent gender. But where Lennox was a shape shifter, a drag king and queen, Sinéad was not here to play the gender game. Not only did she refuse to adorn herself with beauty, but she shaved off one of its most luscious markers. The ironic result of her stark and unapologetic self-presentation was that her spectacular beauty was all the more vibrant — a standout in a decade of visual excess, just as her voice was unique in the audioscape.

Her voice had incredible range from a whisper to a choral peak, from tender to blistering, and she could travel this distance in a single phrase or a few verses — like in her debut single "Troy", which begins barely audible and rises to the scream "I'd kill a dragon for you / Oh I'd die."

The wonderful American writer and music critic Ann Powers wrote of this song and hearing it for the first time that:

> Its title was a slap at the beautiful paternalism of William Butler Yeats' poem "No Second Troy." The dragon-killing line reclaimed the chivalric tradition of St. George, handing that spear to a woman. The sound combined punk's fury with pop melodiousness. I rushed out that day and got the album; that night I discovered all the other ways O'Connor spoke my truth.

That's what Sinéad did. She ventriloquised, as my dear friend Ruth shared by text, our big, unarticulated emotions. She gave shape and voice and power to the wild rages and intense, vast ranges of many girls and women. Even though she styled herself as a protest rather than pop singer, she took her punk style into the mainstream and became a commercial and critical smash hit.

Her undeniable talent was at the centre of her success. But it was always inextricable from her iconoclastic gender performance. Music journalist Amanda Petrusich recalled of seeing Sinéad's "Nothing Compares 2 U" film clip that:

> At ten, I didn't know anything at all about romantic love, but the idea of physical beauty was so elusive and intoxicating to me, the thought that a person might willfully subvert it — challenge its stronghold, deliberately reconfigure it, render it differently — seemed courageous, if not plainly revolutionary. I didn't understand how anybody could be so brazen and cavalier about her own prettiness, a characteristic I'd by then internalized as crucial.

Sinéad gave me cultural permission to cut my hair, to shave my head, to wear a buzz cut, and still be a straight girl, still dream that I might yet be beautiful. In a matter of years, because of her, the reaction to different feminine presentations changed. In 1987 a teacher used to harass my friend and me for our short hair, calling us lesbians and smearing us with his homophobia. By 1991, a nice boss I had called me her "little Sinéad". It was an expression of endearment, a compliment. We have gone backwards since then, such that now, as a 50-year-old woman with short, naturally grey hair, strangers assume I am queer and even people I know tell me I look "like a lesbian".

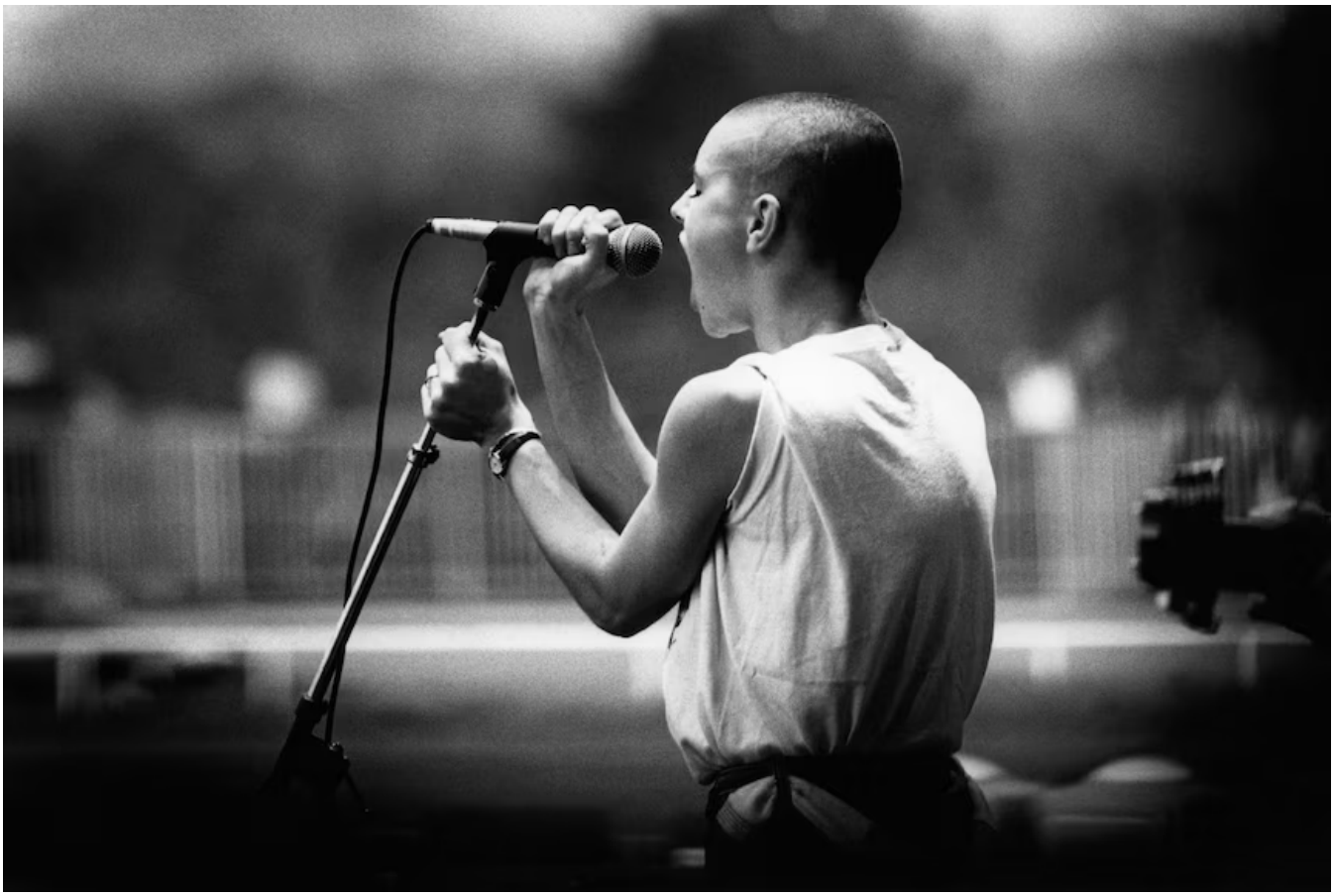


Photo by Michel Linssen / Redferns.

Faith and courage

From the outset, Sinéad's refusal to play by traditional gender rules had consequences. Her record company was cautious about how to break her in the United States, a market understood to have conservative ideas about how gender should look. Just as the American release of Bowie's *The Man Who Sold the World* removed the British cover which featured Bowie in a dress and replaced it with artwork of a man holding a rifle, the 1987 American release of her debut album *The Lion and the Cobra* replaced the (British and Australian release) image of Sinéad screaming with one of her in a more demure pose, looking down, as though in prayer.

But she prevailed. O'Connor went on to become so big in the United States that she appeared on three *Rolling Stone* magazine covers across three years — 1990, 1991, and 1992. This was a woman who came out of Ireland, a nation riven by conflict between the Protestant British north and the Catholic, independent, south. A woman shaped by the collusion between a patriarchal state and patriarchal religion — Catholic and Protestant — which together established Magdalene laundries, asylums to discipline and control women whose behaviour fell outside expected norms. Sex workers, girls and women pregnant outside marriage, truants and thieves — including Sinéad O'Connor — were sent to Magdalene laundries where their labour was exploited, their children were taken, and they were subject to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.

The last laundry closed in 1996, just three years after a mass grave was exposed in one, and four years after O'Connor appeared on the supposedly progressive comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, where she sang a cover of "War" and tore up a picture of the pope while saying "fight the real enemy". The denunciations were swift, including from Madonna, who had herself been sanctioned by the Vatican for her "sacrilegious" portrayal of a desirable Black Jesus in her *Like a Prayer* film clip.

Even though she was brave and right, and the coming decades brought forth sickening and repeated revelations about the abuse of children by the Catholic church, O'Connor's career never recovered. The talk of her divine gifts disappeared. She was no fallen angel, only a fallen woman.

Photo by Judith Burrows / Getty Images.

“Breathe”

But Sinéad O’Connor kept making music. And she remained a touchstone for me. In 2000, after I’d left a marriage, I listened to her album *Faith and Courage* on repeat. The remote controls were entirely mine. I could listen to and watch whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Again, she sang for me, of her youthful appetite and its power, of her new self-knowledge from the confidence of having entered her prime: “wasn’t born for no marrying”, “I only want to be my own woman”.

I saw her live at the Opera House in 2015. In her typical way, she refused to sing any of her hits or the songs the audience most wanted to hear. I was angry she wouldn’t perform for me, even as I understood her resistance was entirely in keeping with what I loved about her. The saddest part was that from my seat at the rear side of the stage I could see that she had two notes she’d written to herself stuck to the floor at the feet of her microphone stand. One of them said “have fun” and the other said “breathe”. She needed these reminders just to get through the performance.

Sinéad has been pilloried and pitied in public, for her righteous protests, for her perceived failures to perform a particular version of sisterhood, for speaking out as an older woman, and for not being able to contain or control her pain and madness as she once could within the frame of a

music video or the phrasing of her musical expression. But she still kept trying, she kept turning up, she kept seeking.

Photo by David Corio / Redferns.

"The phoenix from the flame"

Which brings me to talk about madness, and pain, and what we expect of women, and women who are artists and public figures, and of how we present, represent, and remember them.

I was angry with her because she wouldn't perform for me. This woman who told us repeatedly that she felt sick. Who wrote a memoir about the layers of abuse she was subjected to from birth, and the ongoing battle she fought every day just to turn up. This woman who needed to remind herself to breathe. This ageing, post-hysterectomy and menopausal woman who was once so relevant but was no longer, who'd fought for years with terrible medical advice and whose hormonal fluctuations intensified the swings she already lived with. Whose son died by suicide a year ago.

We, as a culture, were angry with her, like we're angry with Madonna, because she wouldn't go quietly, or age "gracefully". Because she stayed a firebrand and paid the price. Which is what we first loved her for, but what so many came to disregard her for. We need to have a conversation about

women's lives, and the costs of being female and a star who is out of time and ahead of her time, and the potent results of mixing those factors with trauma and age.

Photo by Lindsey Best for the Washington Post.

Sinéad O'Connor's death is a massive deal. In their remembrances, we're going to see people move to resurrect her from a patriarchal and paternalistic master narrative that typically relegates women to the victim margins of pop, even as they struggle to find the words to talk about her in a language that has been reserved for tragic male artists. Even as they distance themselves from their role in her demise.

Her death won't be in vain if we can start to shift the way we think and talk about women artists. Perhaps in this way Sinéad will lead us prophetically back to "Troy", when she sang to us "I will rise, I will return, the phoenix from the flame".

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