News

A white woman with a buzz cut holds a guitar and sings into a microphone while making a ha

Irish singer Sinéad O'Connor performs on stage during the Positivus music festival in Salacgriva, Latvia, July 18, 2009. The July 26, 2023, death of the acclaimed 56-year-old singer and songwriter has seen an outpouring of tributes from all walks of Irish life. (OSV News photo/Ints Kalnins, Reuters)



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The July 26 death of acclaimed Irish singer and songwriter Sinéad O'Connor, who was 56, has seen an outpouring of tributes from all walks of Irish life.

The singer's family announced the news "with great sadness," saying "her family and friends are devastated." The cause of death has not been made public.

In a statement, Irish President Michael D. Higgins described the musician as "one of our greatest and most gifted composers, songwriters and performers of recent

decades."

The acclaimed musician, whose career spanned 10 albums, was troubled by mental health issues. Speaking to Oprah Winfrey in 2007, she revealed she had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and struggled with thoughts of suicide.

In her last tweet July 17, she wrote that she had been living as an "undead night creature" since her 17-year-old son Shane took his own life in January 2022. "He was the love of my life, the lamp of my soul. I am lost in the bardo without him." Her account has since been deleted.

Dublin-born O'Connor released her first critically acclaimed album, "The Lion And The Cobra," in 1987. "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got" followed in 1990, which included "Nothing Compares 2 U" written by Prince -- a hit that reached No. 1 around the world.

Her interpretation earned her a Grammy for Best Alternative Music Performance, though she boycotted the ceremony in protest over what she said was the music industry's promotion of materialism and false values rather than artistic merit. O'Connor was named artist of the year by Rolling Stone magazine in 1991.

In 1992 she drew criticism when she tore up a photograph of St. John Paul II on NBC's "Saturday Night Live" in protest over the cover up of clerical child sexual abuse in the church. She told viewers, "Fight the real enemy" as she threw pieces of the torn photo at the camera.

As a result she was banned for life by NBC. Many were critical of her iconoclasm, including Madonna and Frank Sinatra. The National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations used a steamroller to crush copies of her albums, and protests against her erupted in the U.S.

But subsequent abuse revelations saw the singer praised as a truth teller. "I'm not sorry I did it," she later told The New York Times of her protest. "But it was very traumatizing," she added. It also helped end her career in the U.S.

She excoriated the Catholic Church on a number of occasions, including describing the Vatican as "a nest of devils" in one article for Sunday Independent, an Irish daily newspaper.

Tweeting in response to her death, BBC Northern Ireland presenter John Toal said, "Sinéad was our conscience, speaking out so many times when it was neither popular or profitable. And she wasn't 'mad' … she was right."

Austen Ivereigh, Pope Francis' biographer, tweeted on learning of her death: "Back in 2010 Sinead O'Connor and I had a vigorous disagreement on @BBCNewsnight but she was very charming (and called me 'darling'!) A great, vulnerable artist and passionate campaigner who will be much missed."

Born Dec. 8, 1966, in Dublin, Sinéad Marie Bernadette O'Connor was named in honor of St. Bernadette of Lourdes. She was the third of five talented creative children; her brother is the writer Joseph O'Connor. Earlier this year he published his ninth novel, "My Father's House," on Msgr. Hugh O'Flaherty, who saved thousands of Allied POWs and Jews, working from the Vatican in World War II.

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Sinéad's childhood was troubled. Her parents, John and Marie, separated. Physical abuse at the hands of her deeply religious mother caused deep scars. Her father later became chairman of the Divorce Action Group campaigning to end the ban on divorce in Ireland.

The U.S. organization Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said in a statement sent to OSV News July 26 that "it is with great sorrow that we have received news of the passing of Sinéad O'Connor."

"Despite the extensive knowledge about Sinéad O'Connor's life, her achievements extend beyond her musical contributions and vocal activism against social injustices," Mike McDonnell, SNAP'S interim executive director, said. "She played a significant role in providing valuable inspiration and a strong impetus for individuals engaged in advocating for the welfare of children."

"She was a pioneer in her day to expose the systemic cover-up of the abuse of children. Ultimately, she relieved the pain for tens of thousands of victims with rebellion," the SNAP official said, adding her journey was "characterized by solitude, obscurity, and challenges, a path that is often shunned by individuals but ultimately leads to the process of healing."

"Sinéad played a crucial role in tending to the injured, safeguarding the susceptible, and pursuing truth and justice," McDonnell said.

O'Connor told The Telegraph, a British newspaper, in 2014 that at the time of her rebellious performance on NBC, "there was no therapy and no talking about these things, that was the way it was at the time. I believe that myself and Roseanne Barr (an American actress and writer) were the first so-called victims of abuse to talk about it openly, without being in shadow, and that was quite uncomfortable for people."

"When you grow up with abuse you are voiceless, you feel you could die in that house and no one would ever know, so the voice becomes dreadfully important, it's about standing up for yourself," O'Connor told the Telegraph with a laugh, adding: "You can overdo that sometimes when you're an adult."

At 15 O'Connor was placed in a Magdalene Laundry run by the Our Lady of Charity Sisters for 18 months for shoplifting -- which her mother encouraged her to do -- and truancy. Despite chafing against the regimented life, it was there she began to develop as a singer.

In her 2014 Telegraph interview she said that what she has previously described as full of "panic, terror and agony," she also believed the sister had saved her from ending up in jail. "The nun that ran the place got me my first guitar, and a guitar teacher. I always say, if you live with the Devil, you find out there's a god," she told the paper.

As a small child, O'Connor told The Telegraph, she had experienced a revelatory sense of music as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit: "I was 4 years old, and from that day on, whenever I heard rhythm, whether it was a train clacking or women's thighs with tights rubbing together as they walked, I heard music. I still can't sleep with a ticking clock in the room because I will hear songs," O'Connor said.

In 1985, her mother died in a car crash and O'Connor subsequently left Ireland for London and the music world.

Married and divorced four times, she was the mother of four children. Faith and spirituality were central to O'Connor's journey. In 1999, she was "ordained" a priest by Bishop Michael Cox of the Irish Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church, a breakaway church not recognized by Rome that celebrates the Latin-language

Tridentine Mass. She donned a clerical collar and said she wanted to be known as Mother Bernadette Mary.

But by 2018, O'Connor had converted to Islam and changed her name to Shuhada' Sadaqat.

In his statement, Higgins expressed the nation's hope: "May her spirit find the peace she sought in so many different ways."