

When I first saw **Sinead O'Connor**, I took her for a lesbian. Lots of folks did. She was impossibly small, almost delicate, but utterly imposing: dressed in a T-shirt, ripped jeans, and steel-toed Doc Martens, she had an Auschwitz haircut and the most frighteningly beautiful, unrelenting eyes I'd ever seen. I thought, *Only a dyke could be that rad stylish and self-assured.*

In fact, she was a 21-year-old Irish-expatriate unwed mother, pushing a self-produced debut LP, *The Lion and the Cobra* (Chrysalis), at a San Francisco press conference. She spoke in a soft, woodsy brogue until her voice rose with cold rage at a question about the Thatcher government's homophobic Section 28 legislation.

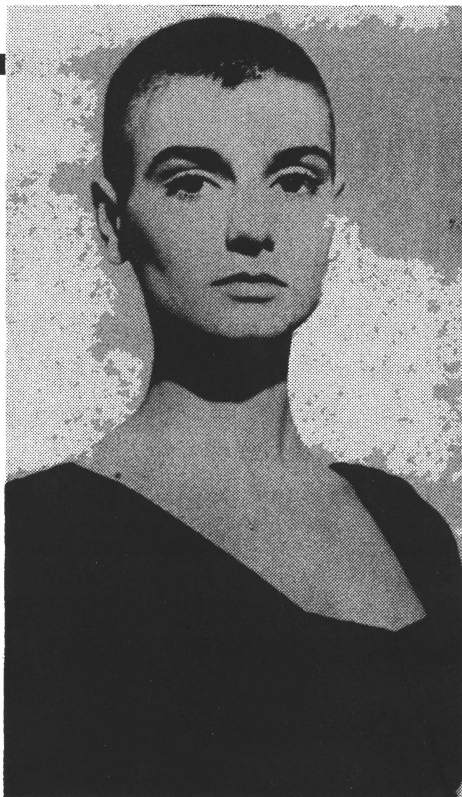
Her disgust was palpable as she let out a rant peppered with tales of fag bashers back in Ireland. Looking the way she had chosen to, Sinead had encountered such creeps head-on. If her LP had already made a fan of me, the press conference left me entranced.

O'Connor continued to battle bigotry and stereotypes on the road to fame. She insisted that rap acts (preferably women) open for her in the United States. She cut 12-inch singles with rapper **MC Lyte** and provocative performance artist **Karen Finley**. She played London's lesbian and gay pride rally, along with **Andy Bell**, who remembers, "*I'd presumed she was a dyke until she gave me her kid to hold at rehearsal.*" Invited to the Grammys, she performed with Public Enemy's target logo etched on the side of her head—and her son's jumper hanging out of her jeans.

During the past year O'Connor has married the father of her son, let her hair grow a tad, and found a measure of the peace and contentment that had eluded the stunning spitfire I met back in '88. Her new album, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Chrysalis), is a luminous, elegiac chronicle of the journey she has made. It ranks as the first great album of the 1990s.

The LP's first single, a shattering, bottomless rendition of Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U," has already scaled the British, European, and Australian charts and deserves to do the same here. But it's the haunting, slow waltz "Black Boys on Mopeds" that takes me back to that press conference. With more sorrow than savagery, O'Connor sings, "I remember what I told you/If they hate me they will hate you too." Scary camaraderie.

Her crafted chorus then answers a curse: "England's not the mythical land of Madame George and roses/It's the home of policemen who kill black boys on mopeds/



CHRYSLIS/KATE GARNER

O'Connor: doing battle with bigots

Faux Lesbian Heroines Flirts, Fake and Otherwise

And I love my boy, and that's why I'm leaving/I don't want him to be aware that there's any such thing as grieving."

The fact is that O'Connor *hasn't* left London any more than we've moved out from under the shadow of AIDS. Her tough lullaby remains less a vow to flee than a challenge to change the conditions that compel the thought. This is an album that struggles to make peace with grief and anger, fury and faith. It's about the fact that the struggle for tolerance begins with self-acceptance—but it doesn't end there.

Madonna knows that and seems, in a way, almost O'Connor's opposite. Whereas O'Connor shunned girl drag and glamour, inventing herself as a punk pinup for all genders, Madonna has tried on every trashy femme drag she could inflate and subvert, becoming every gay boy's dream diva and lipstick lesbian's wet dream. She took her cues about camping up glamour from gay clubs, and she shows no signs of stopping.

Her video production company, Slutco (I swear), has been crafting clips for her upcoming *Dick Tracy* sound track LP, *I'm Breathless* (Sire). She promises a probondage stunner called "Hanky-panky," but the first out of the gate is "Vogue," which Sire premiered at Los Angeles's boy-barn disco, Studio One.

Black drag queens in New York (with more flash than cash) invented voguing, a mock celebration of runway-model attitude and haute-couture threats. **Malcolm McLaren** tried to exploit the phenomenon last summer with his tune "In Deep Vogue"—and was about as successful as

he'd been in getting people to square dance to "Buffalo Gals" in 1983. But count on Madonna to take gay club land out to the malls.

The lambada, with its dry-humping hetero-histrionics, looks stodgy and staged next to the cuckoo camp and knowing salaciousness Madonna finds in voguing. She's brought drag celebs from this gay dance phenomenon with her onto MTV, blasting into Middle America with wiggy delight. The *somewhat* more staid LP is due in May.

I know some dykes were disturbed to learn that Madonna's flirtation with **Sandra Bernhard** was only a fake, but I wasn't. Madonna told *Vanity Fair*, "I think I'm a sexual threat. . . . I frighten people, poke at their insides, and make them think about their own sexuality."

Anyone who saw the two ladies successfully unnerving unctuous David Letterman can attest to that, and I reckon that the spirit of playfulness the two brought to the dread subject—and the fact that so many people assumed that it could be true—ranks it as delightfully subversive good work. However much Madonna has taken from the gay community, she has never turned her back on us or treated those friendships as an embarrassment.

I'd love to see O'Connor and Madonna collaborate, but I reckon it would take an outside force—a gay man—to inspire it. How about Pedro Almodovar directing them in a musical remake of *All About Eve*? Not bad. Readers' suggestions are welcome. We'll pass them on.

—Adam Block