

# Oye Keeps Swinging

**Shaz Oye** has been described as having the most extraordinary voice ever to come out of Ireland. On the eve of the release of her much-awaited debut album, she talks to **Jackie Hayden** about her Irish upbringing, and its highs and lows.

**In Martin Scorsese's *Dylandoc No Direction Home*, gospel legend Mavis Staples describes Bob Dylan's songs as inspirational. "He was writing truth," she says. Shaz Oye is another artist "writing truth". But her debut album *Truth According to Shaz Oye* contains truths many of us might prefer not to hear, touching as it does on redemption, love, injustice, obsession, grief and loss. All filtered through her experience as a black, Irish lesbian.**

Oye was born in the North Strand, Dublin to an Irish mother and a since-departed Nigerian father. One of the truths many people can't handle is the fact that this dark-skinned woman is 100% Irish.

"It's natural that people looking at me might wonder where I came from, but it angers me that when I tell them I was born and raised here, and that I identify myself as totally Irish, they still can't accept it. That level of racism is unacceptable," she explains.

She recalls a gig in Ireland during which a woman constantly interrupted her performance. They spoke afterwards. "She told me that I was missing out on my true musical culture and that I shouldn't be singing a song, which she assumed was a cover version of an old Irish song but was actually one of my own! Even when I explained my background, she was incapable of understanding that I am Irish, that my culture is Irish and my home is Ireland." Her critic, it transpired, was German!

Honesty fuels Oye's art: the songs on her album, the sequel to her magnificent *Child Of Original Sin* EP, burn with it, earning her a special feature on RTE's *Rattle Bag* and live performances on our better local radio stations. However, she believes that racism in Ireland now is more confrontational than ever.

"I've gone up to buy drinks at a sparsely crowded bar in Dublin and the barman stared right past me as if I wasn't there. But the Irish music community is generally devoid of this and I've found it a great forum for the open exchange of views. I've been given enormous help and encouragement by lots of people," she says.

She met her father again in her mid-teens, and they got on well despite the missing years, but her

identity as an Irishwoman was tested by a trip to her father's homeland.

Despite being treated with great respect during the year she spent in Lagos, she felt no cultural affinity. "I spent a lot of time travelling all over Nigeria," she says, "but it still felt like a foreign country and there was nothing that resonated with me at all, much as I enjoyed my time there and loved the people I met."

Her entertainment career started when she played the part of Robert Emmet in a school play, but she refuses to see her music as any kind of therapy – either for herself or her listeners.

"I don't write that way," she says. "My music allows me to express my thoughts on issues that matter, and when you do that, it isn't likely to bring comfort to anybody. Nor should it. It's not meant as escapism." In fact, one of the tracks on the album contains the unequivocal proclamation: "*Truth hurts, she said, truth hurts.*"

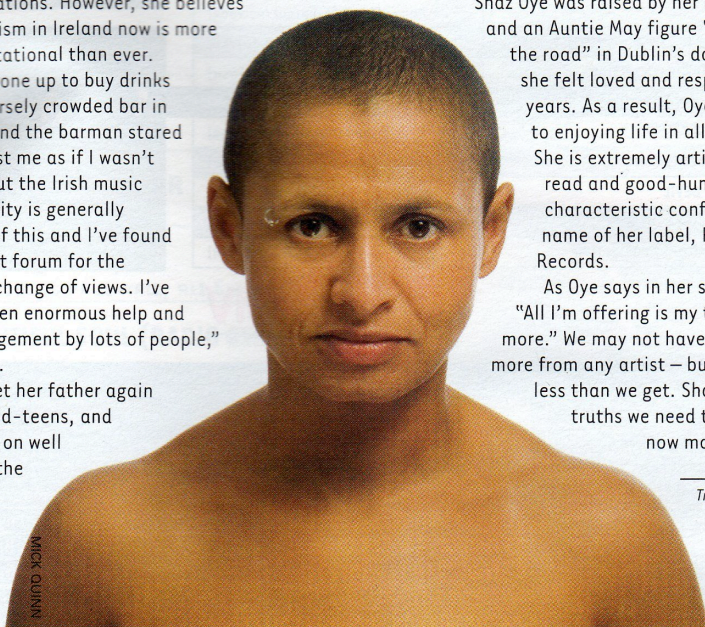
The opening number 'Blood On The Bone' is a chilling reflection on the murder, by a Ku Klux Klan mob in Mississippi, of three freedom workers. "The conviction of one of the murderers inspired me to write the song," says Oye. "Since I was born, prejudice on both racial and gender terms have been a constant part of my life. As a child growing up in Dublin I had to armour-plate myself against this. If anything it made me more determined to establish my own identity as an Irish person."

Her concerns aren't confined to distant lands or personal matters. 'Easy Off The Trigger' was inspired by notorious shooting of John Carthy at Abbeylara in 2000 by the Gardai. 'Dance With Me' is a delicious love song that will appeal to those of either gender orientation or none.

Shaz Oye was raised by her natural mother and an Auntie May figure "from down the road" in Dublin's dockland – and she felt loved and respected in those years. As a result, Oye is not immune to enjoying life in all its complexities. She is extremely articulate, well-read and good-humoured – a characteristic confirmed by the name of her label, Radical Faeries Records.

As Oye says in her sleeve notes, "All I'm offering is my truth, nothing more." We may not have a right to expect more from any artist – but it's usually far less than we get. Shaz Oye brings us truths we need to hear – perhaps now more than ever. 🔥

*Truth According to Shaz Oye* is on Radical Faeries Records



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