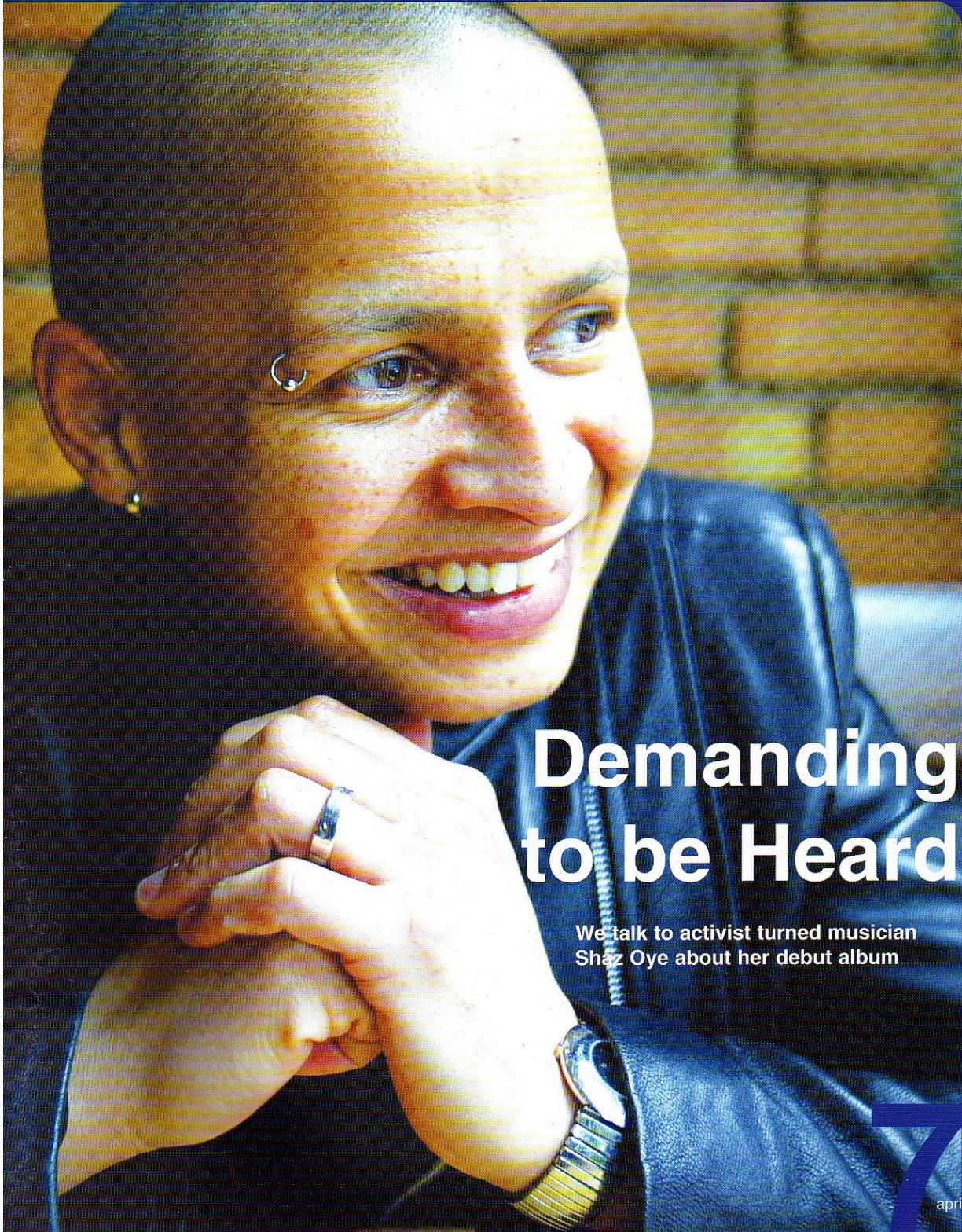


The semesterly review magazine for DCU and St Pat's

# flashback

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## Demanding to be Heard

We talk to activist turned musician  
Shaz Oye about her debut album

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april 06



shaz oye

# Lighting up the Dirty Old Town

Clare O'Reilly talks to AIDS activist turned musician Shaz Oye about music, independence, and radical faeries.

Since her inception as a musical performer in 2002, Shaz Oye has made her presence felt. Her debut album *Truth According to Shaz Oye* has made a noticeable impact since its release on 10 March this year, with Hotpress memorably immortalising the singer as 'a promising light in this dirty old town'.

She has attracted the praise and support of many critics in the Irish music industry, including Theo Dorgan, Miles Duncan and Eamon Carr.

Born and reared in the heart of the Dublin docklands, Oye is at once of this 'dirty old town' and yet universes removed from it. Her soulful, brooding and soaring voice is as perfectly controlled as her lyrics and themes are uncompromising.

'Easy Off the Trigger Now', a track from her debut album, was inspired by the fatal shooting of John Carthy in Abbeylara in 2000 and contains the confrontational lines:

"Years of pain and rage  
discharge in 30 shots / Scrawled  
in blood across my grave another  
'Suicide by Cop.'"

Clearly Shaz Oye is a force to be reckoned with. In a national music industry seemingly consumed with churning out bland pop acts, this artist is not afraid of tackling controversial issues. If Oye does not become the voice of a disaffected Irish youth then at least she will inspire debate. And after all, isn't that what music is supposed to be about?

In the flesh, Shaz Oye's small frame belies her powerful singing voice. Although quietly spoken, her air of poised self-possession suggests a strength

and purpose. Articulate and passionate, Oye's dissenting voice stems from her previous life as a feminist and AIDS activist on the streets of Dublin.

She left her job as a director of the Dublin AIDS Alliance in 2001 and made the decision to embark upon a music career. Although she acknowledges that her experiences as an activist have undoubtedly influenced her music, Oye is clear to stress that she has

moved on from what she regards as her 'past life'.

"I see myself now as primarily a recording artist. I don't feel that music is a way for me to be an activist. You know, I've done that. I've spent ten years doing that and I've served my time. It is

a brief dalliance as a trumpet player in the Post Office Workers Union Marching Band.

Today, singing live is where her passion lies. "Gigging is the payback for yourself – for nobody else,

**"Now that I've started it, I know I'm doing the right thing, that I was always meant to do. I had a detour along the way. But in a way, I'm ending up where I started."**

up to other people now to do that if they want to."

Oye traces her initial break into the Irish music scene back to 2002, when she appeared as part of a line-up in Liberty Hall for a charity gig. Theo Dorgan, a guest presenter on RTE's *Rattlebag* at the time, overheard the singer warming up during a sound-check and invited her to perform on the radio show.

Although music has only recently taken centre stage in Oye's life, it has always played a supporting role.

In her youth she remembers being encouraged to sing at family gatherings – an opportunity in the spotlight that she readily embraced, and as a very young child she was directed down the 'girly route' and persuaded to take piano lessons.

"Stamping of feet, gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair went on – and in the end the piano teacher wouldn't take me back!" Oye laughs, "Wild horses wouldn't have dragged me there."

Her teenage years saw

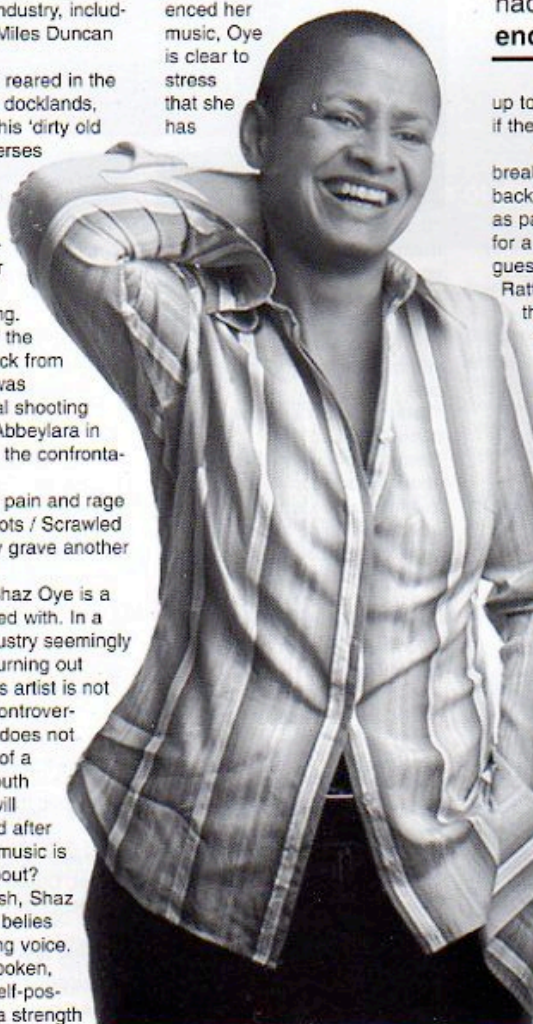
just for you. Like to be able to stand up and have a bit of fun on stage and enjoy yourself, enjoy the craic and enjoy the admiration that you get, you do a good job."

By contrast then, Oye regards recording as a necessary but taut, dry process. "I'm there in a studio singing into a microphone and there's no audience, no energy and it's 'do another take, do another take,'" she remarks wearily.

Oye's debut album is distinctive in the variety and depth of the themes addressed. From a haunting melodic arrangement of the poem 'Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep' to the song 'The River Wild,' which deals with the violent existence of an 18th century prostitute, Oye clearly has a fertile imagination. She is at her most animated and passionate when speaking about the inspiration for her songs.

"I love writing as well. I love it if I'm writing a song. I find that I spend a lot of time researching a song before I sit down and write it."

Oye's stance as an independent voice is compounded by her role as





an independent musician. 'Truth according to Shaz Oye' is released on Oye's own label, Radical Faeries, which she set up with her life partner Patricia - an arrangement that tempts fate perhaps?

"We do try and keep our personal domestic affairs separate from our business affairs, but it is difficult," Oye admits.

Shaz Oye is well versed in the difficulties faced by Irish musicians like her, who do not have the financial backing of major music labels. "There are very few options for them because the market in Ireland is so small."

But Oye has not let her independent status become a hindrance to her career. Instead, she views it as a challenge. "When you are a small independent, you have to draw outside the box and you really have to step up to the mark....As an independent I don't have to follow the set or the standard."

When discussing the constraints put on artists who are represented by major music labels, Oye is philosophical about her relative freedom.

**"When you're a small independent you have to draw outside the box and you really have to step up to the mark."**

"We don't need to confine ourselves to those sorts of rules because they don't apply. They won't benefit us in any way. I can't compete with Sony or EMI or BMG or any of those, so why try?"

She attributes the success of Radical Faeries to

the trust fostered between her partner Patricia and herself. "It's been invaluable having her on board. We make a very good partnership." Although it has been a struggle, Oye is positive about

their successes so far. "We have managed to achieve what other people who are on major labels haven't even managed to achieve."

Shaz Oye is realistic about the challenges that lie ahead. Her main priority is to get radio play; something she feels

that for an independent artist is akin to "gold dust". Her purpose, drive and never-say-die attitude, nurtured from her time as an activist, will serve her well in an ultra-competitive Irish music business.

Nina Simone, Billie Holiday and Bruce Springsteen stand among Oye's eclectic tribe of musical influences but she describes the first time she heard Paul Weller's 'Town Called Malice' as a truly defining moment. "Working class youth finally had a voice. I understood what he was saying."

Oye's own voice soars above her peers and demands to be heard. Music will not be a transient phase in this musician's life - she is in it for the long haul.

"Now that I've started it, I know I'm doing the right thing, [the thing] that I was always meant to do. I had a detour along the way. But in a way, I'm ending up where I started." From the days of constantly singing as a toddler, Oye has come full circle and ended up where she belongs.

Evidently the former activist has found her true cause in music.

Shaz Oye is co-headlining a tour with Annette Buckley in the following venues:

Dolans, Limerick, Sunday 23 April at 8.00; Spirit Store, Dundalk, Thursday 27 April at 8.00pm; Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, Saturday 6 May at 8.00pm; De Barra's, Clonakilty, Cork, Sunday 7 May at 9.00pm; Bewley's Café Theatre, Grafton Street, Dublin 1, Saturday 13 May at 8.00pm.

