

Abroad

'As I lay dazed, looking up at the rain in front of 50,000 at Croke Park, I wondered if this was what I wanted to do with my life'

Going to Glastonbury changed Paul O'Connor's life and brought him back to Ireland to protest in Wicklow's Glen of the Downs



Paul O'Connor filming in the UK

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For the last 10 years, my mobile picture house, the [Sol Cinema](#) has entertained tens of thousands of people at festivals across the UK.

Video-making has been an integral part of my life for 30 years now. During the 1980s I worked as a photographer in north Dublin in my teens, photographing Bohemian FC matches and All-Ireland finals for sports magazines. Until I had enough of sitting by goals in the freezing rain for very little money.

The final straw was hitting myself in the face with my heavy metal Nikon. Taking up my camera too fast, I had knocked myself flat on to my back in front of 50,000 people at [Croke Park](#). As I lay dazed, looking up at the rain I wondered if this was really what I wanted to do with my life.

I moved to England and began cycle racing in the yellow and red of the Leicestershire Road Club. I learned to slow down my Dublin brogue to be understood. Evenings were spent photographing life in Irish clubs in Birmingham and Nottingham for a community newspaper.

The sweaty boxing and drinking in the smoke-filled centres reminded me of the Ireland I had left behind. So I headed to the continent and discovered a thriving counter culture where people lived and thought differently.

I hitchhiked and inter-railed across countries, planted trees in Turkey and grew vegetables in Spain. I followed my Irish cycling heroes Sean Kelly and Stephen Roche up the French Alps, albeit at a much slower pace. My English girlfriend preferred it when Europeans mistakenly identified her as Irish, as she said people reacted differently to her.

In Germany, I photographed Irish pubs for an exhibition and discovered the vibrant underground scene of Berlin. I fell in love with the squatted community cafes established in former East Berlin buildings. I discovered new bands, including British punk anarchists [Chumbawamba](#), among the live music that was on every night and was amazed at the wild metal sculptures being made by leather-clad women with big boots and Mohicans.



Paul O'Connor at Sol Cinema

I considered settling in Berlin, but on a whim I accepted a ride to England for a festival. In June, 1993, awakened from my slumber in the back of a hippy bus, I peered out the misted-up window to see Stonehenge appearing out of the sunrise. I was headed to my first Glastonbury festival, little knowing that it would launch a new chapter in my life.

The festival was a huge melting pot of music, politics, arts and ecological living. As a direct result, I found myself living in east London using my photography skills to support people trying to stop a motorway ripping its way through their community.

As well as building the largest road network “since the Romans”, the British government was also trying to introduce new laws to make occupying abandoned buildings, living in vehicles and listening to rave music into criminal offences.

Since I had done all those things during the previous three years, I figured I had to help raise the alarm as the proposed draconian laws were not being discussed in the media. Finding other people disillusioned with the mainstream media, we launched our own alternative news service.

In a time before the internet, we distributed a compilation of our short video reports on VHS cassettes. Thousands of people subscribed, indicating there was a demand for views outside BBC and ITN.

Undercurrents, as we called it, became a sensation and I toured all over the world training environmental activists to use camcorders to tell their own stories.

I returned to Ireland to support activists trying to stop the [N11 motorway](#) destroying the ancient oak forest of Glen of the Downs in Wicklow.

Governments and corporations constantly placing the economy over the environment has led to the climate crisis we are all in today. But I found in Co Tipperary, when I made films, the superb [Ecovillage of Cloughjordan](#). It was the closest I have come to considering a move back to Ireland.

My trips back to Dublin are always a shock. The city I once knew so well now has brilliant tram networks and futuristic buildings, but also a housing crisis with insane rental prices.

During the St Patrick’s Day celebrations in Dublin in 2010 I launched my mobile picture house. Powered entirely by solar energy, the Sol Cinema has since toured all over the UK, Serbia and Croatia.

The unique and glamorous tiny cinema was hired by the iconic band Madness to premiere their new film. Having Suggs as our cinema usher was a highlight.

I am still touring today with the Sol Cinema, with invitations ranging from a billionaire’s birthday party to a top Hollywood director’s shindig.

It is 34 years since I left Ireland and I look back at all the film festivals I have organised, the people I have inspired and all the friends I have made across the world. I can safely say it has been a life worth living.

- *Paul O’Connor left Ireland 34 years ago. He now runs a bijou mobile cinema that he takes to music festivals all over Britain and some in Europe. In his spare time he is an eco-warrior*
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