

“The measure of my dreams”: Shane MacGowan (1957-2023)

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7 December 2023

The Pogues were one of the finest bands of the 1980s, infusing Irish traditional music with punk to give new voice to a young Irish diaspora. This owed very much to the poetic songwriting of Shane MacGowan, who has died aged 65.

MacGowan was sacked after five albums. The band carried on without him, later regrouping for selective gigs, but were never as creative a force. MacGowan too continued to write and record. His talent could still be seen, but it rarely stood comparison with that pioneering and often moving earlier work.

He was born in England, as his Dubliner father Maurice was working in a London office. His mother Therese was from rural Tipperary.

The couple never fully settled in England, which influenced their decision to send young Shane to his grandparents' farm in Tipperary. He stayed there until school age.

MacGowan called it “basic but beautiful,” with electricity but no running water and no television. He imbibed Irish history and culture, which shaped his opposition and resistance to injustice. He also encountered traditional singing and dancing. Therese said this had “a tremendous influence on him... and his desire, really, to do something for Irish music.”

Rural Ireland became an ideal that the young Shane could counterpose to England, as he and sister Siobhan returned each summer. He recognised that some of what he idealised was an Ireland that was changing. “It was the end of an era that I just happened to catch. And I'm glad I caught it.”

Being also brought up in England added to his romanticisation, while sparing him the worst backwardness of a rural Irish life: “Someone who's brought up in Ireland 'til they're 20 or something, you know, is always cursing, like, the Church and the Christian Brothers and the small-mindedness and the gossiping and the sadism and the brutality and all the bad things you can say about our society... All I ever had was sort of happy times.”

More than half a million people left Ireland between 1945 and 1960, many moving to Britain for work. If Britain offered different cultural and economic conditions, it also dished out discrimination and racism. Some lodgings still carried “No Irish No Blacks No Dogs” signs. MacGowan spoke with an English accent, saying the Irish one had been beaten out of him.

Tensions in British-ruled Northern Ireland sharpened during the 1960s, with mounting opposition to anti-Catholic and anti-nationalist discrimination. In 1969, the Labour government deployed British troops on the pretext of defending Catholic communities against Loyalist violence. Instead, the occupation forces rapidly built up an apparatus of state repression targeting nationalists, introducing

internment without trial and banning demonstrations. In Britain, the hostile treatment of Irish migrants increased.

MacGowan was awarded a scholarship to the prestigious Westminster School in 1972. That year, on “Bloody Sunday,” British paratroopers shot dead 26 unarmed civilians during a protest march in Derry. The official inquiry exonerated the killers and smeared the victims.

MacGowan's instinctual identification with the oppressed was always shaped by Ireland, for better or worse. Reading Marx and Trotsky broke his Catholicism, he said, but he rejected communism because of its atheism.

He developed an interest in music, and the drug scene, which provided an escape from Westminster's orthodoxy. In 1974, fined for possession of drugs, he was expelled from school.

The drugs were having an effect, and he had a nervous breakdown in 1975. Incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital for six months, he began writing songs.

He emerged as punk erupted. Leaving hospital angry, he said, he saw an angry band, the Sex Pistols, which changed his life. Punk unleashed his creativity, and he joined the band the Nipple Erectors (later, The Nips).

Punk ebbed, and MacGowan condemned how “boring” he felt music had become again. Seeing a rising interest in world music, pitched at middle-class audiences, he told Julien Temple's *Crock of Gold: A Few Rounds with Shane MacGowan* (2020), “I might as well be my own ethnic.”

With whistle player Spider Stacy and English banjo player Jem Finer, he formed Pogue Mahone (Irish for “kiss my arse”), later shortened to The Pogues. They recruited Cait O'Riordan on bass, and former Nips keyboard player James Fearnley took up the accordion. Drummer Andrew Ranken joined the following year.

Their early repertoire was a fusion of punk sensibility and tempo with traditional Irish music and songs, as MacGowan and Finer worked on new material. The ambition, said MacGowan, was to go for the balls and get the right feel. It was a frenetic attempt to bring Irish traditional music into the 20th century in London, the heart of a diaspora that was expanding rapidly again as the Irish economy tanked.

Their songs on *Red Roses For Me* (1984) spoke to marginalised life in the capital: “This town has done us dirty, this town has bled us dry, We've been here for a long time and we'll be here 'till we die.”

With manic energy they defiantly turned stereotypes on their head: “You want Paddy? I'll give you fucking Paddy,” MacGowan said.

His songs are visceral, literary, dramatic vignettes. The album title came from Sean O'Casey, while his idol Brendan Behan recurs in

MacGowan's songs ("Streams of Whiskey") and Behan's own ("The Auld Triangle").

They more than made good on the promise of that first album with *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash* (1985). There were still traditional pieces and songs from other writers—their takes on Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town" and Eric Bogle's "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" have become definitive—but the music now encompasses the full range of MacGowan's writing without any loss of energy. The album remains a classic.

The opening "Sick Bed of Cuchulainn" (an Irish mythological hero) raises a deathbed "song of liberty for blacks and Paks and jocks" with echoes of Irish resistance to fascism: [Irish International Brigader] "Frank Ryan bought you whiskey in a brothel in Madrid, And you decked some fucking blackshirt who was cursing all the yids."

MacGowan's poetic streak was also flourishing, with the extraordinary "A Pair of Brown Eyes" and "A Rainy Night in Soho." These are beautiful songs.

Seizing on the band's raw and chaotic performances, the press often derided The Pogues as poor musicians, to MacGowan's disgust. Some traditional musicians were also dismissive, but the breadth of arrangements disproves this. One of the finest syntheses came on the traditional "Irish Rover" with the Dubliners, a joyously spirited performance.

MacGowan did not want to lose the ferocious drunken celebration of a Pogues gig, but his own artistry was pushing them further. Their manager recruited legendary Irish traditional singer and multi-instrumentalist Terry Woods, for whom MacGowan had nothing but praise.

Also drafted in, initially as paternity cover for Finer, was Philip Chevron (1957-2013), who took over rhythm guitar. In a 2002 biography, MacGowan was less enthusiastic about Chevron's arrival. He felt threatened at losing his central position by handing over the guitar duties, although he also said playing guitar was distracting him from his singing.

But *If I Should Fall from Grace with God* (1988), another unqualified classic, showed what this collaboration could achieve. There were lovely songs about parting ("Broad Majestic Shannon"). The magnificent "Lullaby of London" was written in the voice of an ordinary working man trying to reassure his child that things were going to be all right, even if they were not.

The pinnacle of that broken diaspora romanticism came with MacGowan and Finer's "Fairytale of New York." Sung as a duet with Kirsty MacColl (Ewan's daughter), its cinematically rueful narrative of clinging to hope in the face of dysfunction has become a Christmas staple, embraced by many as a genuinely moving alternative to the saccharine deluge.

There were also songs about political concerns. The mid-1970s had seen numerous travesties of justice, with Irish people framed and convicted of terrorist offences after having confessions beaten out of them. The Birmingham Six and Guildford Four were still in prison, and Woods began the rather abstract "Streets of Sorrow" about the stress of being Irish on English streets. It was paired with MacGowan's blunter "Birmingham Six": "They're still doing time For being Irish in the wrong place and at the wrong time."

The Independent Broadcasting Authority banned it, and Channel 4 pulled the plug on a live performance.

Chevron's "Thousands Are Sailing," meanwhile, is a moving emigration ballad. Chevron, a pioneer of the Irish punk scene, was a courageous man, openly gay in an Ireland where homosexuality was

still illegal. In "Thousands Are Sailing" he attacked the romantic guilt imposed on emigrants:

"Where're we go, we celebrate
The land that makes us refugees
From fear of priests with empty plates
From guilt and weeping effigies."

That the band collectively were producing material as powerful as this was testament to what MacGowan, Stacy and Finer had put together. MacGowan saw things as falling apart after that third album.

In part this was because of a relentless touring schedule that was unsustainable, given what MacGowan was putting into each show, and his substance intake. In 1988, they had only three weeks off, giving 363 performances in one year. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a bus," he said, and he felt The Pogues were becoming being just another rock band.

MacGowan said he began screwing up when he started hating what they were doing. Siobhan thought he "went away and didn't come back" from that 1988 tour and had him committed on his return.

Animosities and pressures were building up throughout the band. Fearnley wrote, "A stable perception was never reachable as to whether Shane was a genius or a fucking idiot."

Their last two albums show the strain, with steadily diminishing high points. By *Hell's Ditch* (1990), MacGowan seemed to have lost interest. Things came to a head in 1991, and the band sacked him mid-tour. "What took you so long?" he asked, with his customary wheezing laugh.

Struggling with his health, his post-Pogues output showed nowhere near the same intensity or quality. Albums with The Popes, who seemed to offer more of the manageable traditional/punk mix he wanted to continue, have interesting moments, but point chiefly to what The Pogues had achieved.

His lyrical talent was still evident, as on "The Dunes," which the Dubliners' Ronnie Drew recorded, but intermittent. While professing to have no regrets, MacGowan told Temple, "I'd like to start prolifically writing songs again."

There is tragedy in his frequently self-destructive behaviour, but this should not diminish MacGowan's accomplishments. Despite his contradictions, his best was achieved by a genuine commitment to artistic endeavour: "A good musician has to put music above everything and that's what I've always done when I've made good music." And his best will endure.



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