Pop Talk: The Pogues' MacGowan cheerfully lives on the edge

by George_Varga

Step aside, Amy Winehouse! Move over, Pete Doherty!

Yes, you are leading contenders to become the latest drug-and-drink-fueled rock 'n' roll casualties in the United Kingdom. But compared to Shane MacGowan of The Pogues, you're both lightweights.

THE POGUES - The Pogues' chronically disheveled frontman Shane MacGowan, reclining on left, may be one of life's less-than-beautiful losers, but he's also responsible for some luminous songs. CNS Photo courtesy of The Pogues. In his musical prime, back in the 1980s, MacGowan was as gifted at fusing punk and Celtic music as he was prone to potentially deadly excesses on and off stage. His best songs - such as "Sally MacLennane," "The Ghost of a Smile," "A Pair of Brown Eyes" and "A Rainy Night in Soho" - offered compelling proof he could rank alongside Van Morrison and Bono at their most inspired. But MacGowan's perpetually dissipated lifestyle has too often overshadowed his music, diluting his once-vital artistic vision and leading him to the brink of death more times than anyone can recall. The success of his band only made things worse, much worse, as MacGowan acknowledged in a Boston Globe interview last year.

"Egos exploded, so I started to implode mine by shattering it with drugs and drink," he said. "I had plenty of money so I could expand my excesses beyond my wildest dreams."

Now 50 or 51 (depending on the source), and with very few of his original teeth left, MacGowan almost makes Keith Richards seem like a vital picture of good health.

But, the Rolling Stones' legendary guitarist cleaned up his act years ago. MacGowan, who at 17 was hospitalized to kick his Valium habit and in 1981 was informed he had six weeks to live, has been less inclined to leave his body- and soul-depleting lifestyle behind.

"I took my first (LSD) trip at 14. I've never stopped taking acid," he defiantly told an interviewer in 2004.

In 1999, MacGowan's friendship with Irish singer Sinead O'Connor ended after she reported him to the police for snorting heroin. In an article this summer in the London newspaper The Mail On Sunday, MacGowan's fiance, Victoria Mary Clarke, recalled how his ingestion of "a huge amount of LSD" caused him to miss an entire Pogues concert tour with Bob Dylan.

"When I found him in his flat, he was covered in blood, having eaten a Beach Boys record, and was convinced World War III had started and he was having a summit with world leaders," wrote Clarke, who has been MacGowan's almost constant companion since 1982. "When we eventually got him to the airport, they wouldn't let Shane on the plane."

MacGowan is on board during the Pogues current tour, along with guitarist-accordionist James Fearnley, tin whistle player Spider Stacy, drummer Andrew Ranken, bassist Darryl Hunt and multiinstrumentalists Jem Finer and Terry Woods (the latter a former member of Celtic-rock pioneers Steeleye Span).

At least three of the band's once hard-drinking members are now teetotallers. Their frontman - who savaged his fellow Pogues in the 2001 book "A Drink With Shane MacGowan" - is not one of them.

"Even when he's not drunk he looks drunk," former Pogues' member Philip Chevron observed of MacGowan in a recent Irish Voice interview.

Blessed with a poet's heart, MacGowan is also cursed with a debilitating appetite for destruction that apparently has yet to be quenched. This may explain why even some of his bandmates seem amazed he is still alive, let alone capable of touring again with The Pogues.

Or as Fearnley told an interviewer last year: "I didn't hold out much hope. It can be very touch-and-go working with someone like Shane."

MacGowan is more succinct.

"I'm Irish!" is his usual explanation-cum-excuse for his harrowing lifestyle.

That lifestyle has been mirrored in The Pogues' discography, as evidenced by such songs as 1984's "Streams of Whiskey" and 1985's "Whiskey You're the Devil," and in the titles of its two best albums, 1985's "Rum, Sodomy and the Lash" and 1988's "If I Should Fall From Grace With God."

MacGowan was talented enough that traditional Irish music icons like Christy Moore and Ronnie Drew performed with him and recorded his songs. He was also able to perform weathered gems, such as Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town," in a way that made them appeal to a new generation of listeners by injecting them with punk-fueled fervor.

"We played faster and took more speed," is how MacGowan once explained The Pogues' high-octane approach.

His own songs, such as "Birmingham Six," "Fairytale of New York" and "The Old Main Drag," skillfully reflected the modern-day reality of Irish immigrants. But his creative fire was frequently dampened by drink and drugs, and it wasn't uncommon for MacGowan to forget the words to his songs, if not the city he was in.

"I'm just following the Irish tradition of songwriting, the Irish way of life, the human way of life,"

MacGowan, who was actually born in England, told the Los Angeles Daily News last year.

"Cram as much pleasure into life, and rail against the pain you have to suffer as a result. Or scream and rant with the pain, and wait for it to be taken away with beautiful pleasure."

MacGowan was fired from The Pogues in 1991, following a sake-fueled Japanese tour that saw him exit at least one taxi horizontally. MacGowan doesn't deny his extreme behavior - or the toll it has taken on him and others close to him. But he maintains tales of his excesses have been exaggerated over the years and that his myth outweighs his reality.

The truth, as is often the case in matters like this, is probably somewhere in the middle.

The Pogues' chronically disheveled frontman may be one of life's less-than-beautiful losers. But he's also responsible for some luminous songs that spotlight the earthy beauty that can be found beneath even the most tormented psyches and haggard exteriors. His ultimate legacy is yet to be written.

All Shane, all the time

The lowdown on The Pogues' Shane MacGowan:

Full name: Shane Patrick Lysaght MacGowan

Born: Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England

Grew up in: Tipperary, Ireland

First band of note: The Nipple Erectors, later shortened to The Nips

Stage name at the time: Shane O'Hooligan

Second band of note: Pogue Mahone, which is Gaelic for "Kiss my (behind)." The name was later shortened to The Pogues.

First Pogues single: "The Dark Streets of London," 1984

First Pogues album: "Red Roses for Me," 1984

First U.S. tour: 1986

Fired from The Pogues: 1991. His first replacement was former Clash leader Joe Strummer

First post-Pogues album: "The Snake" by Shane MacGowan & The Popes, 1995

Rejoined The Pogues: 2001

First book: "A Drink With Shane MacGowan," 2001

First film documentary: "If I Should Fall From Grace: The Shane MacGowan Story," 2001, featuring MacGowan, The Pogues, Nick Cave and Sinead O'Connor

Nonmusical achievement No. 1: In 1998 MacGowan was voted the 70th "most influential Irish person of all time" by the readers of The Irish Post newspaper

Nonmusical achievement No. 2: In 2005, Spin magazine ranked MacGowan's few remaining teeth as the fifth "most incredible rock star body part." The dentally challenged Irish singer beat out Elvis Presley's pelvis (6), Tina Turner's legs (10), Patti Smith's armpit (11) and Gene Simmons' tongue (21).

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