

# Shane MacGowan smiles in death's face

*"I am going to live to a very old age"*



By John Moore,  
The Denver Post

A grieving Irishman needs to talk like he needs to breathe. Perhaps that's why Shane MacGowan decided to pick up the ringing phone at 11 a.m. on St. Patrick's Day, just eight hours after arriving at a New York hotel from his

home in Tipperary, Ireland.

Perhaps it was easier for him to express to a stranger from Denver feelings of loss and mortality that those closest to him say he hasn't even shared with loved ones.

MacGowan, the 43-year-old former frontman of The Pogues, has been tossed by the accidental death in December of beloved British singer Kirsty MacColl, with whom he immortalized the 1987 classic, "Fairytale of New York."

"Her death, that was a complete and utter shock," MacGowan said. "That really blew my head."

The words may alarm anyone who is aware MacGowan's head has been blown plenty through the years. He is known as much for his voracious appetite for alcohol and drugs as he is for being the mastermind behind the Pogues, a seminal band that immersed punk within traditional Irish music. His excesses made it not only predictable but expected that Shane would one day, as they say in Ireland, pop his clogs.

Ask anyone the one question they would ask MacGowan. They wonder whether the rot-tooth rocker has heard about advances in dental care. Or they take on the concerned look of someone with a relative no one

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*- Shane MacGowan, ex-Pogues frontman*

would be all that surprised to learn has passed away.

"Is he still alive?" "Is he OK?" "Is he taking care of himself?"

The answers are, for the most part, yes.

MacGowan was born on Christmas Day 1957 and was expelled from school at 14 for drug possession. He became obsessed with The Sex Pistols and formed his own punk band, The Nipple Erectors, with the help of The Jam's Paul Weller. In 1981, MacGowan and Spider Stacy formed Pogues Mahone, Gaelic for "Kiss my arse."

But in 1991, MacGowan was in the throes of drug and alcohol addiction, and he was sacked from his own band, shortened to The Pogues.

He has spent much of his life justifying his lifestyle to both critics and loved ones who continue to worry for his health and safety. But a funny thing happened on the way to the graveyard. The hearse is running late.

Shane MacGowan is the Sid Vicious who never died. He is going to live forever, or die trying.

"Tell everyone I am fine," said MacGowan, who sounds like a piece of sandpaper with a brogue. His reputation for giving short-tempered and even paranoid interviews gives way at once to a 40-minute contemplation on life, death, betrayal and music. His slurred speech is alternately brilliant and incoherent, but he finishes most every thought with, "Right?" as if it is important not only that he be heard but understood. And when you do admit that you don't quite understand, he repeats his thought more slowly.

"I know that I'm going to live to a very old age, right?" he said. "I've always known that. Call it a superstition or call it ... something else. My whole family thinks that. Of course, I could be wrong, but I believe strongly that I am going to be here for a long time. When I'm actually dead, you'll have to convince me otherwise."

Like many an Irishman, MacGowan is as happy and sad as it is possible to be, all at once. Happy because his latest band, The Popes, is starting an international tour that emphasizes his traditional Irish roots. MacGowan and The Popes play two shows in Colorado next week, Wednesday at the Gothic in Englewood and Thursday at The Boulder Theater.

"I'm as happy as I've ever been," he said. "I'm as happy as I was in the early days of the Pogues. I'm as happy as I was when I was a little kid. When you least expect it, life keeps coming up with lots of good things."

But MacColl's death has fundamentally changed MacGowan, though not in the way you might expect. MacGowan said his friend's sad demise only proves that "nobody can ever know when it's their turn to die, so there's no sense worrying about it or fearing it, right? I don't think it would be any fun to know in advance when you're going to die anyway."

MacColl died Dec. 18 in Cozumel, Mexico, when she was struck by a speedboat in an area reserved for swimmers as her two sons watched. She was 41.

MacColl, daughter of British folk legend Ewan MacColl, sang with the Smiths, the Talking Heads, the Rolling Stones, Simple Minds and Billy Bragg. Tracy Ullman took her song, "They Don't Know About Us," to No. 2 on the charts, and her last CD, "Tropical Brainstorm," will be released April 24.

But MacColl will be remembered most for her collaboration with The Pogues on "Fairytale of New York."

Written by MacGowan, it opens as a sad, traditional song of a man spending Christmas Eve in a drunk tank. But it switches to hilarious insults traded between lovers.

"You're a bum, you're a punk. You scum bag, you maggot, you cheap lousy faggot," MacColl berates him.

"Happy Christmas your arse, I pray God it's our last."

But MacGowan's deep and abiding feelings for her are more accurately reflected in his haunting words to her: "Happy Christmas. I love you baby. I can see a better time, when all our dreams come true."

MacGowan remembers meeting a frightened-looking red-haired girl with classic Gaelic beauty who grew into a passionate singer with guts. MacColl would lecture him endlessly about his excessive drinking while keeping him up all night slugging Champagne.

"She had a great laugh and a great sense of humor," he said. "She was tough but she had a heart of gold."

MacGowan sings "Fairytale of New York" on his current tour with Rachel Fitzgerald of the funky Irish hip hop band Seanchai and the Unity Squad. The tour opened on St. Patrick's Day at Webster Hall, and the show was recorded for an upcoming live CD.

It has been quite a multimedia month for MacGowan. His 1987 film, "Straight to Hell," was released on DVD, but he says he has no further plans to act because, he said, "I'm already acting all the time."

He collaborates with the Boston punk band The Dropkick Murphys on their new CD, "Sing Loud, Sing Proud," but he admits, "They're great dogs with a lot of enthusiasm, but I'll be blunt ... I did it for the money."

MacGowan prefers old-time rockers such as Tom Waits, Nick Cave, Jackson Browne and The Clash.

MacGowan was caught by surprise by the March 5 release of "The Very Best of The Pogues," which he blames on Warner Music.

"I didn't even know that existed until you said so, and I don't think any of the Pogues do, either," he said.

MacGowan has a lot more to say about the regrettable new biography "A Drink with Shane," which he considers a betrayal by former wife Victoria Clarke and publisher Sidgwick & Jackson.

"I wish I hadn't done it. They really stitched me up," said MacGowan, who is listed as a co-author. "I rambled drunk into a tape recorder on and off for five years to my girlfriend, well, my missus, really. It was meant to be like 'The Way We Were,' and she made it all Frank

McCourt-like sad.”

The book contains anecdotes MacGowan said will infuriate his parents, friends, families of dead people and members of the Pogues. “Some people I know haven’t got a sense of humor,” he said.

MacGowan’s relationship with The Pogues is solid, he said, and he takes full responsibility for their need to fire him.

“There’s no hard feelings,” he said. “Bands break up all the time, and for a long time everybody hates each other. Then, after a couple of years, you kind of wonder, ‘What was all that about?’ “ But I’m still the Pogues, right? I mean, The Pogues don’t go without me. Without me they bug out most of the time.”

MacGowan blames The Pogues’ problems on instant stardom.

“We were friendly for a long time before we were a group, so we never made provisions for success,” he said. “We never thought we might become these big (bleep)head rock stars that we turned into. When we had it, it was a horrible situation. We were all bastards, and I was the worst of all. We all just completely lost touch with reality.

“I mean after all, we are just human beings, are we not?”