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Film captures a singer's slide

By David Bauder

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NEW YORK — Before catching himself, an interview subject briefly slips into the past tense when talking about Irish singer-songwriter Shane MacGowan.

"He had a brilliant brain — still has — a few million brain cells later," he said.

And that's his father speaking.

Yet it's a perfect one-sentence encapsulation of the majesty, and sad mystery, of MacGowan. He's profiled in the film "If I Should Fall From Grace: The Shane MacGowan Story," which premieres on the Sundance Channel on St. Patrick's Day, Monday, at 9 p.m.

MacGowan's band, the Pogues, combined punk energy and traditional Irish instrumentation and were a brief sensation in the 1980s, particularly in their base of London. He was — and is — a drunken shambles who could startle you with lyrics of poetic beauty.

The 1988 song "Fairytale of New York" alone earns him a place in music history. Simply the best Christmas song written in the past 25 years, the duet with MacGowan and the late Kirsty MacColl portraying down-on-their-luck lovers opens with the memorable line, "It was Christmas Eve, babe, in the drunk tank."

No one can make that line sound more convincing than MacGowan.

Long since fired by the Pogues but outlasting them, MacGowan is a walking stereotype of the drunken Irish romantic. Go to one of his concerts now and you'll often see him cheered more for his antics, every stumble and slur, than his songs.

"The worse Shane became, the more the audience adored him," Australian singer Nick Cave, a big fan of MacGowan's writing, says in the film. He found it sickening to watch.

This hardly qualifies as a shock, but the film never would

have been made if it weren't for something MacGowan did while drunk that he later regretted.

He and his new band had agreed to perform at a television station one day in western Ireland. They piled in a car to make the trip but stopped at a pub midway. That's where the trip ended. The no-show became a big story in the Galway area, where filmmaker Sarah Share lived, and MacGowan was embarrassed.

She had contacts at the TV station and was an old friend of MacGowan's manager, so Share was called upon to broker some sort of makeup plan. The station wanted her to make a documentary on MacGowan, and it grew into this film.

Even though she lived in London during the Pogues' peak, Share wasn't a big fan. But once she started talking about him and going back over his music, she said, "I started to appreciate the power of the music and the power of the lyrics. Shane's songwriting is outstanding."

His life, though, is something else.

Share grew used to people staring at MacGowan when in public. It was less his fame than his rotted teeth and besotted appearance. He's so often unintelligible that Sundance is offering viewers the option to watch "If I Should Fall From Grace" with subtitles.

Share's film ultimately never answers the question of why MacGowan is how he is. It's not for lack of trying. He talks of a childhood with a mother so heavily medicated that sometimes he'd wake up in the morning and kick her to see if she was still alive.

He suffered a breakdown at age 15. He's since become so deeply suspicious of psychiatry that his periodic attempts to go into clinics to dry out would inevitably end when somebody tried to get into his head, Share said.

"I find him sad to be around, but these are my values," she said. "He doesn't see himself as a tragic figure at all.

"He thinks he's achieved a lot, he's written some great songs and that's all he ever wanted to do.

He's 45 now. If he dies before he's 50, he doesn't really regard that as a big deal. He enjoys life. The fact that he's dependent on drink — he just thinks that's rock 'n' roll and it's the price you pay for being in that business."

Share's film (named after a Pogues's song, "If I Should Fall From Grace With God") doesn't romanticize his life. She suspects most people will be saddened by the end.

"My agenda was only to capture him, because you do get the feeling being around him that he could drop dead at any minute, and he's never been captured on film before," she said.