



FAHRENHEIT

SAN DIEGO - INDEPENDENT WEEKLY

FREE

DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME

• I Come, Old Friend, From Hell Tonight, Across The Rotting Sea •

by Adam Gnade



WHO'S THIS TOOTHLESS OLD FUCK and what the hell's he saying, anyway? Why does this drunken dirtbag deserve a documentary, of all things?

None of us knew what was going on—or who Shane MacGowan was—but we were bored and we had a copy of a DVD documentary about his life, and some solid time to kill.

The Shane MacGowan Story—If I Should Fall From Grace has an awful front cover. It shows Shane, lead singer of The Pogues, holding a cigarette in the air with a wheezing toothless look of dull-minded horror in his eyes, bug-eyed, heroin-sick and sunk-cheek sallow. On the back it reads "This unflinching, music-driven documentary provides the first real insight into the background and career of this legendary Irish artist who, as lead singer and songwriter for The Pogues, became a worldwide punk icon."

"Unflinching," we decided, awesome. Might be good for a late-afternoon rock drama thrill. None of us had given much thought to The Pogues. I'd heard a few songs, but didn't have any real opinions or ideas of what they were all about. (I write about music but I've never been much of a music historian—archiving and archeology ain't my suit.) So with nothing but negative first impressions, we slipped the DVD in the player, sat back on the couch and stared boredly—five stupid kids with no idea of what was about to hit us.

Our grumpiness lasted just five minutes into the film. With the music, the first thunderclap of serious song, he had us.

Shane MacGowan grew up piss-poor and stymied at every turn. Born in England but raised in his family's native Ireland, he lived a rough, short childhood before moving back to England with his parents at the age of six. Money was a problem, and there were more jobs in England. So they moved. Shane found music. Rest is history.

Shane's first notable band was The Nips, a punk group based in London.

In 1982 he formed The Pogues—gluing punk to traditional Irish music. And it worked. Two decades later, he's Ireland's Bruce Springsteen—and fuck you if you're smirking about that.

The Shane MacGowan Story shows a very intelligent, goodhearted, talented man destroying himself. Throughout the course of the DVD, he drinks, smokes and drugs himself further towards the grave—his eyes red and puffy, his speech slurred, rugged and pained. He shuffles, stutters, and stares sad at the circus



around him—the various hangers-on, fuckwits, fellow drunks and fair-weather friends. There's good people there too, but they're harder to find. Shane's wife, Victoria Clarke, in particular, loves him and takes care of him, but you can see the strain on her—loving someone so much, while they slowly kill themselves. She is sad and pretty and probably the only thing keeping him on earth.

From what I can glean off the DVD interviews and from his lyrics, Shane was a man destined for fame, someone too talented to stay an underground sensation, but just the same, he is someone inherently ill suited for the lifestyle. He is a self-medicator, a brainy recluse, shoved into the limelight; drugging and drinking to numb his raw nerves.

I talked to Sarah Share, the director of this video, a while ago—a good year before seeing the film—and she says Shane claims he can't make art without his vices, that he thinks the drugs and drink got him where he is, and helped him find, articulate, and hone his artistic voice. She told me he was on heroin during much of the documentary shoot, about how she'd try to get him out of bed or out of his house to no avail. She called him an invalid and a junkie, but almost lovingly so.

And that's how it goes with Shane: People can't help but love him. His character—however racked with bold, crushing depression, excess and faults—bleeds pathos. You relate to him and you

relate to his lyrics—it's hard not to—and feel the discomfort he seems constantly in. It's hard to see someone so good-hearted and gifted debased so low. The video shows his potential, and shows the great art he's made, so the downhill slide is even harder to watch.

I'm mainly Slovenian but I'm also a quarter-Irish. I've always held a soft spot for traditional Irish music. It is verbal oral narrative in the truest sense of the word. The stories are packed solid with concrete specific details of life and love and death—three things intrinsically linked in Irish folklore. The music is held up by tin whistles, banjos, tambourines and a whole array of ethnic sounds that make it so celebratory and alive—even in its saddest, most hard line moments.

In the video, Shane calls The Pogues' sound "dance music." When I heard that, I laughed. "Dance music," what? Moby? House? Not at all—the shots of The Pogues in concert tell it all—huge, sweaty, drunken Irish crowds singing along, stomping—it really is *stomping*



music—clapping, pogoing all over the place because it feels so good, and because it's *theirs*. Shane MacGowan made himself an icon by pairing punk with Irish music, and gave modern Ireland a vibrant substantial voice. In their heyday, The Pogues were talkin' working class struggles and about immigration and poverty and the dizziness of love, while new wave was all the rage in the States—a coked-up escapist's dream. The US was wasting time; The Pogues were saying something.

And that, I think, is the biggest deal for me. I love the music, and I relate to Shane, but I feel a commonality of art—"writer's envy" maybe. Shane MacGowan, above all, is a writer. Had he not discovered rock 'n' roll, he would've become the next James Joyce. (His father, in an interview, says just that. He was surprised Shane took to songwriting, figuring his compass was pointed towards print literature.) Indeed, his word play is filled with those "why didn't I think of

that?" moments. His narrative is elegant, thuggish and real—almost cinematically epic at times.

When he growls "*bury me at sea where no murdered ghost can haunt me*," he means it. He wants to be left alone and have salvation and to be, as Jack Kerouac said, "free of this slaving meatwheel, and safe in heaven, dead." Shane's beat-browed existential woes come through in his lyrics, as does his hope, when on songs like "Fairy Tale of New York" he tells his girl that the coming new year will be the one for them, the one where they pull out of their lifelong nosedive and make their dreams come true: "*I've got a feeling/ this year's for me and you*."

These are all common themes, the honest struggles of being human. If you can't relate to that, you're a stone or worse, emotionally deadpan.

I love Shane MacGowan for all this, but I hate him just as much. I hate the fact that it won't be surprising when he dies. I hate him for not being able to deal with the devils of fame. I hate that my girl saw too much of me in him and that it scared her. Happy—or at least *satisfied*—famous people are a rare breed. Shane is not one of them. He never will be. It's too late for him. His fame has brought him nothing but hard days, and it will one day—probably sooner than later—end his life. I hate that. I hate that because I know I have some of that same faulty wiring in me. The day Shane MacGowan goes will be a dark one for me—along with so many other people from all walks of life, not just the Irish that he sang to.



Knowing that he lost the fight—an inevitable, unbeatable, soul-crushing fight—will be tough to take, but maybe we can learn from his example—however morbid that sounds. Don't hold the famous so high above you. Don't buy into the myth that artists have to suffer to create. Don't romanticize self-destruction. Dying is not glamorous. ☹

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