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The World According to Gaz



Images of Shane MacGowan in Boston on June 23:  
• Scrawling "cunt" over a photo of his father in the liner notes of a Popes CD when a fan asks for an autograph, then cackling in a wheeze that passes for laughter.

• Screaming over and over, "You're all a bunch of racists!" after an obnoxious fan derogates some cops who were making a valiant effort to keep the crowd from getting crushed as they rush the tiny stage at the Harp bar.

• Post-show, being assisted like an invalid across the street so he can head to another bar and drink some more; barely able to hold up his head, he tries to get through a locked door while his guitarist, with a mix of humor and sarcasm, says "Why don't you try the open one?"

In a recent BBC documentary on Shane MacGowan, Christy Moore voiced the opinion that MacGowan is one of the few geniuses in the rock world. One hundred years from now, Moore said, MacGowan is the only artist whose music people will still be listening to.

Others share this view of MacGowan as the modern embodiment of the Irish literary tradition in all its glory and tragedy; inheritor of the thorny but dazzling crown that has passed through the ink-stained hands of Joyce and Yeats (though MacGowan, of course, shares his words in a vastly wilder and louder medium).

The opportunity to see MacGowan play live in Boston, then, is like having the chance circa 1935 to witness Fitzgerald read a chapter from his latest work-in-progress.

All too similar, in fact. For, like Fitzgerald and Faulkner and so many genius artists, MacGowan's life is soaked in alcohol and beset with an accompanying chaos that's almost killed him countless times. (His toothless grin, it's said, results not from poor hygiene but a fall from a speeding car.) The fact he's still alive is a puzzle to many.

MacGowan, as anyone who knows of him is fully aware, is so drunk most of the time that he's almost incoherent. You know you've got a problem when Sinead O'Connor is calling you troubled, as she recently said of MacGowan. In the BBC documentary, "The Great Hunger," as MacGowan sits at a bar, it's difficult to decipher what he's saying, save for one segment when he wanders into a building searching for a drink and shouts, bleary-eyed but desperate, "WHERE'S THE PUB? WHERE IS IT?"

Ahh, but we forgive this of our artists, when they are true artists, as is MacGowan: a man whose raw lyrics expose the pain and beauty of human existence; a bona fide Romantic who won't play some of his best songs because it hurts him to relive the emotions that produced them; a maverick who in mid-'70s London created a new genre of music that mixed the energy and anger of punk with the melodic flow of traditional Irish music. Single-handedly, MacGowan turned the word "Paddy" from a pejorative for a poor expatriate Irishman into a badge of honor for the millions forced by lack of economic opportunity to leave the land they love.

No wonder he's viewed as a saint by his fans. Or, more accurately, as a martyr for the cause of music and love and freedom, who opens his veins and bleeds so that we can better understand - and perhaps bear - who we are.

Because he goes so far to connect us to ourselves - and

BACKSTAGE  
PASS

Shane MacGowan & the Popes  
The Harp, Boston  
By Elaine McArdle

to truth - his fans are extremely patient and tolerant of MacGowan's self-destructive behavior. (Of course, some revel in it as humorous. But MacGowan's no longer a debauched teen punker; he's a middle-aged man whose gray, waxy skin betrays the heavy burden his body bears to sustain his soul).

At the Harp bar this Friday night in June, rumors swirled that Shane wasn't going to show up.

That's always a strong possibility. He almost missed last year's Guinness Fleadh in Boston because someone was found dead in his London apartment, and the authorities were loath to give him a visa to leave the U.K. You never know if he'll make it to a particular gig. But it's always worth the gamble.

And it's worth the effort to try to interview him, as convoluted a process as that turned out to be:

• A Monday morning in June, about 11 a.m. - a call is made to one of MacGowan's entourage in New York City, where the group is playing a couple of shows in addition to the lone Boston show.

Would it be possible to interview Shane? A groggy voice asks politely, "Could you call back? I'm nursing a bit of a hangover. Call back anytime except the next hour." I suggest Advil and caffeine.

• A few hours pass, another call is made. Sure, you can talk to Shane when we get to Boston. But we're not sure when we're coming. The show's Friday, so we'll probably come Thursday. Probably. You can probably talk to him Friday. Shouldn't be a problem. Count on it.

• A few days later, another call to one of the group who suggests: Why don't you call him at his hotel room? He's either there or in a bar. Just don't tell him we told you how to find him.

• Several calls to the hotel room. No answer. Until around 5 p.m. A thick voice answers the phone.



Photo: Bill McCormack

"Hello?" Yes, it's Shane MacGowan. No, he'd doesn't mind talking at all. "Hang on," he says, making rattling sounds as he grabs an ashtray and cigarette.

His band is already in Boston, playing a show tonight by themselves. Why isn't Shane there too?

"It's boring," he says. "I like the people." But the city? "There's noth-



ing happening. It's not open, not all night. Not like New York."

Why only one show in Boston, the center of Irish life in the U.S.?

"Because that's up to Barry [Barry O'Reilly, who's promoting this tour]. Barry is a successful Irish friend of ours, and a substantial landlord in Queens, in Astoria. That's a big borough. He does a hulking business."

Hulking? Did I hear that right?

Who knows? Throughout our conversation, Shane proved to be the patient one. I had to ask him to repeat everything he said. Everything. Sometimes three or four times. I don't know whether it was his brogue, lack of teeth or apparent drunkenness, but I had a hard time determining exactly what he was saying. And he was incredibly sweet about it. He'd just calmly restate himself, over and over, 'til I could pick out his words.

I push him to stay over in Boston for another show. "I'll suggest it to Barry," he says politely.

Somehow, instead of music, we get onto politics. Right now, he's reading the most recent edition of "The IRA: A History," by Tim Pat Coogan.

"I read it every few years, because I'm interested in Irish politics," he says. "I'm from an IRA family. It's very well-written, the pace is good. It's an interesting history."

Things are changing in Ireland, he believes, although currently the peace process is at a standstill. "It won't keep going forward unless the English government does what it has to do."

Which is?

"Get the fuck out."

Will it happen?

"I bloody hope so," he says.

And if not?

"It'll be a bloodshed - in England. They'll blow it off the map," he says.

Well, it's been over 30 years since the Troubles began, and that hasn't happened yet.

"They'll do it now, because they got pissed around" (by this near miss of peace), he says. "They're a proud people. We're all proud."

Is Gerry Adams, president of the Sinn Fein party, the political arm of the IRA, skilled enough to negotiate this peace?

Yes, Shane says. "He's great, him in particular. Adams is the man who can do it. Massive intelligence, a lack of bitterness over crying over spilt milk, realism."

Did he say realism or religion? I can't tell.

"Realism," Shane emphasizes. "He doesn't bring religion into it, because it's irrelevant." The fight in Ireland, he says, "It's about freedom and slavery."

And Adams can bring this long-sought freedom?

"Yes, as long as some idiot doesn't take him out," he says, quick to add that he does not believe Adams will be assassinated. "I think he's a very special person. I don't think he was born for crucifixion. I think he was born for a kingdom, the old Irish kingdom in Irish history. He's the High King, the man who will unite the nation."

MacGowan, who moved to London with his parents as a teen and never lost his yearning for his homeland, immerses himself in not only the politics but also the literature of Ireland. Right now, he says, he's re-reading "The Poor Mouth," by Flann O'Brien, a satirical examination of abject poverty in a fictitious Irish village.

"He's one of the most important Irish writers of the 20th century," Shane says. "One of the greatest writers of English literature in the 20th century." He's also reading a biography of De Valera, the Irish patriot, which he calls the "best-ever" book on Irish history. And he's reading "Dog Eat Dog," by Eddie Bunker, because it's easy to read although it's "not pap," he says.

"He's an ex-armed robber. It's pretty autobiographical, and it's very well-written. It emphasizes the robbers, not the cops. It's about freedom and slavery. The cops are for slavery. The robbers are free."

Speaking of freedom, does he like the U.S.?

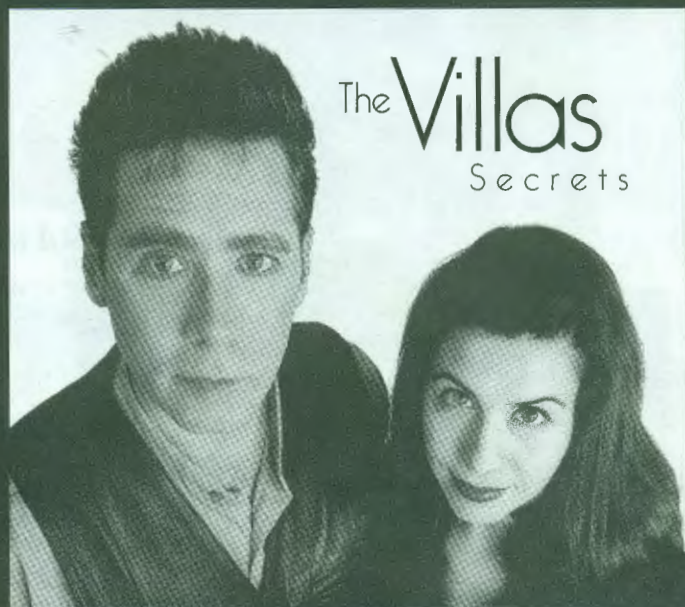
"Yeah, I love it. I love New York. I don't like the Deep South, because I don't like the racism. Seeing a black man walking around with his head bowed, seeing cops outside a station with KKK hats on," the latter a scene he says he witnessed in Atlanta.

He emits his wheeze-laugh, then adds, "I don't like dry counties." New Orleans is great, though, "because it's different," and he'll be there in September to play.

He admires a number of American writers, he says: Damon Runyon, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Salinger.

## "Catchy As Flypaper."

— Kate Riess, WDIY



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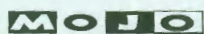
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As for American music, he says, "A lot of the music I like hasn't been recorded. I see bands that are fucking brilliant playing in pubs.

"I love jazz. Love Tom Waits, Springsteen. I've seen him in Ireland a couple of times. Love Hank Williams, Gram Parson, and Chicago blues. All the classic stuff. Love Robert Johnson and Leadbelly, and Woody Guthrie."

But Johnson and Leadbelly are from the South, I note, getting back to our earlier topic.

"They're Southerners but they're black Southerners," he says. "Woody Guthrie's a Southerner, too. [Ed. Note: Guthrie's from Oklahoma]. I'm not saying all Southerners are bastards. But the South is mean and nasty. For a supposedly civilized country, it's barbaric."

He's taking the train to Boston the next day, he says, and we decide to meet and talk some more. He gives me several phone numbers at which to reach him. Later, we arrange to talk before his Friday night show in Boston, as he'll be driving up earlier that day.

I talk to his manager, Joey, and mention that Shane doesn't seem to like Boston much. Joey laughs. "He gets an idea in his head - he has a good time in a bar and then he determines a city is brilliant," Joey says.

At about 5 p.m. the day of the show, I call Joey on his cell phone to see where we're meeting before the show. "That'll be impossible," he says. "We're stuck in traffic in Manhattan. We'll have to do it after the show."

After the show? It'll take them at least five or six hours to get up here, given the traffic. It's looking like there won't be a show.

I call O'Reilly, the promotor, who's fuming. "They're fucking sick!" he shouts. "The driver was waiting for them since one o'clock. We tried to get them to fly, but Shane won't fly."

"There's an opening band," Barry continues. "Lancaster Country Prison. They're brilliant. I'm putting them on at 8 or 8:30, for an hour. Then we can get Shane right from the car and onto the stage."

The bar is packed, and the crowd - mainly young and mainly Irish - sings along to many of the songs played by Lancaster Country Prison, who are, indeed, excellent. But when the music stops even briefly, they begin to shout: "Shane! Shane!"

Amazingly, he shows, having ended up flying to Boston after all. Suddenly, through the crowd, a man looking remarkably healthy albeit drunk, dressed all in black, works his way to the stage, stands up and launches into, "If I Should Fall From Grace with God," just one of the raucous but piercing songs he shares this night with a rowdy group that hangs on his every word.

Bathed in red light on the stage that Friday night, MacGowan looked otherworldly as he breathed his soul out to the crowd; chaos ensues as people rush the stage and security and Boston police shove them back. MacGowan laughs through it all, thriving on the energy. When the cops stop the music to calm the crowd, MacGowan shouts, "Bugger me!"

For the next three hours, he and the Popes, strong musicians and songwriters in their own right, create an energy and excitement that few bands can match. From "Donegal Express" to "Sick Bed of Cuchulainn" to "The Broad Majestic Shannon," they're loud, alive, lyrical, wild and real. The high point of the set is "Dirty Old Town," or perhaps "Pair of Brown Eyes," or maybe the crowd favorite, "Sally MacLennane."

Finally, the show ends. I'm asked to wait for MacGowan, who'll be going after the show to a bar across the street, McGann's, where we can talk some more.

I wait outside the Harp. The crowd disperses, and finally MacGowan comes out the back way, a friend holding him up. Up close, he doesn't look healthy at all. His skin is gray, like someone who literally hasn't seen the sun in years, or whose liver had long ago reached its limit.

A few fans wait for autographs. He signs "Fuk U2!" and laughs his wheeze-laugh. He's got that punk attitude, all right, but it's clear it's just his way of dealing with a world that's otherwise unbearable for someone this sensitive. He is a martyr, dying in front of us, whether or not his death is imminent. It's too painful to watch.

Maybe I'm a rotten journalist, but I suddenly realize I don't want to bother him anymore. He's given me enough, has given us all enough. I wish him the best, and walk away, "Dirty Old Town" looping in my head.