Culture



A lifelong Catholic, Shane MacGowan was also devoted to the teachings of the Buddha and had a deep love for the Madonna. He is pictured here in a 2006 photo. (Wikimedia Commons/David McMahon)



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The great Irish poet and novelist Oscar Wilde once wrote, "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."

I can think of no more fitting words to describe the life and legacy of Shane MacGowan, the lead singer for the well-known Irish punk band The Pogues. His memorable lyrics led him to become one of Ireland's most beloved sons, fusing punk rock with traditional Irish music to remember Irish history, nationalism and the experiences of everyday people.

MacGowan, who died on Nov. 30, was known for his exceptional songwriting ability, as well as his many struggles with alcohol and drug abuse. A complex and passionate man, he was described by The New York Times as "a titanically destructive personality and a master songsmith whose lyrics painted vivid portraits of the underbelly of the Irish immigrant life and experience."

Wilde's iconic words speak to the life MacGowan lived as a man haunted by the inner demons of addiction; yet he inspired millions with the eloquence of which he spoke to the human experience — and especially the Irish experience. Yes, MacGowan lived a hard life, but there was also deep faith, grit, creativity and the unwavering pride of being Irish. He used words to resonate with people's lived experiences. Through his messy life, MacGowan's lyrics have something to say to each of us about beauty, hope, strength and peace.

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Born in Kent, England, to Irish parents on Christmas Day in 1957, MacGowan spent his early childhood in Tipperary, Ireland, (where his mother was from) and moved to England at six and a half. As a young boy, Shane was noted for his voracious appetite for literature, including Fyodor Dostoevsky and James Joyce.

In 1982, MacGowan co-founded The Pogues in King's Cross, London. The band was originally known as Pogue Mahone, the English version of the Gaelic phrase *póg mo thóin*, meaning "kiss my arse." The band fused punk music influence with traditional Irish music, introducing millions of people to Irish music who might never have experienced it otherwise.

Some of MacGowan's greatest songwriting triumphs include the albums "Rum Sodomy and the Lash" (1985) and the critically acclaimed "If I Should Fall from Grace with God" (1988). He co-wrote the Christmas hit single "Fairytale of New York" (1987) with bandmate Jem Finer. To this day it is one of the most beloved Christmas songs in the UK and Ireland, and was played at his funeral by his former band members, to the great joy of his dancing family members.

MacGowan's struggles with drug use began in his early teen years, including a six-month stay in a psychiatric ward around his 18th birthday. For many years, he battled drug and alcohol addiction. He suffered physically from binge drinking and using both heroin and LSD during his time with The Pogues.

During a 1991 tour, he was dismissed from The Pogues due to his chemical dependencies' effect on the band’s live shows. After his dismissal, MacGowan formed a new band, Shane MacGowan and The Popes. The band recorded two live albums and also toured internationally.



Shane MacGowan performs at the Analog Festival Dublin in 2008. (Wikimedia Commons/Marcus Lynam)

In time, MacGowan found sobriety and love. On Nov. 26, 2018, he married Irish journalist Victoria Mary Clarke in Copenhagen. They lived together in Dublin until his death on Nov. 30 when, after receiving Viaticum (last rites), MacGowan peacefully passed away from pneumonia complications with his wife by his side. He was 65-years-old. His legacy in music and Irish culture runs deeper than the River Shannon and will continue to speak to future generations.

A lifelong Catholic, MacGowan was also devoted to the teachings of the Buddha and had a deep love for the Madonna. In fact, at his funeral, his widow mentioned that

his favorite statue of Mary sat prominently on his hospital tray in his final days. He identified as a "free-thinking religious fanatic" and as an adolescent, he considered the priesthood for a brief time.

If every saint has a past and each sinner has a future, that is good news for all of us: Shane MacGowan, Dorothy Day, Dr. Martin Luther King, St. Augustine, Mary of Magdala, Servant of God Matt Talbot, the stranger who bags your groceries, the person who has hurt you most. You and I. No matter the complexities that we walk through this earthly life, there is such love and mercy waiting for each of us.

In Gaelic, when someone dies, you might say: *Suaimhneas Síoraí Air*, which means "Eternal rest be upon him." May eternal rest be upon Shane MacGowan. May he rest in the arms of love itself.

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