

In Camden Town, just a stagger away from the Electric Ballroom, Dingwalls and the Town and Country Club, the Devonshire is the kind of local that's hard on the health and the finances.

English pubs close everyday at 3pm and reopen at 5.30, and it's 6pm that the meet with Pogues singer/songwriter/face Shane McGowan has been set:

"Are you a journalist?" says Andrew as he waits for the Guinness to trickle from the tap. "From New Zealand? And you're talkin' to Shane MacGowan? He's not here yet, but he's comin'. That's their manager over there ..."

Leaning over the pool table is Frank, the manager, a dapper ex-rocker of uncertain vintage, in check shirt, string tie and narrow jeans. A friendly type. The Pogues are looking at getting down to Australia and New Zealand in early '87, he says, pre-empting one question. "I understand we sell a few records there."

A trip to the East Coast of America was the last foreign tour before Shane was put out for two months after being hit by a taxi. He tore ligaments in his left knee and broke his right arm. Doctors predicted at least two weeks in hospital and 10 in plaster, but with the drinking man's capacity for recovery (that's you, Dave) he discharged himself after six days and hasn't needed physiotherapy.

The next tour is a welcome trip away from this English non-summer; a few dates in France. Frank's been round at Shane's flat finding his "lost" passport, unseen since the US trip.

"Look at that," he chuckles, flipping open the red Irish passport, to reveal a B&W picture of Shane looking the wrong side of a considerable number of alcoholic beverages. "Whenever we go through Germany or wherever, they see it and just laugh!"

After an hour or so of pool and Guinness there's still no sign of Shane, and Frank surmises that the group must have sheltered from the rain at a hostelry or two along the way. "You'll want to get pissed yourself," he says. "Cos they will be by the time they get here!"

But pipes player Spider and accordionist Terry arrive, and it turns out they've been finishing off the demo for a song Shane has written for the long-standing Irish duo the Clancey Brothers, Tommy Makem and Liam Clancey. Shane's still finishing off his bit and he'll be along presently.

Shane, Spider and banjo player Jem got the group going nearly four years ago. The original name was Pogue Mahone, which they didn't think anybody would suss was Gaelic for "Kiss my arse". But a DJ picked up on it, and to save any fuss they shortened it to the much cuddlier Pogues.

Spider hails from Sussex, while Terry is Irish born and bred (he still lives in County Cavern, "up the country"), as is guitarist Philip. Shane and bassist Cait (say it "Cot") are London Irish, brought up in London but Irish nationals, while Jem and drummer Andrew are British.

"But they're from Manchester," Spider ponders. "Does that count as being British?"

"Not really ..." Terry shakes his head.

"Okay — we've got one Briton and two Mancunians ..."

"And I used to live in *Lybia*," he adds, defiantly.

When the band began playing traditional Irish songs (and the odd country tune), the forms and ideas they used weren't new, but the way they used them was.

"We all liked Irish music and no one had ever done anything with it like we started to do," Spider explains. "But there weren't any big light bulbs going on over our heads — we just more or less fell into it."

When Irish Eyes are Smiling

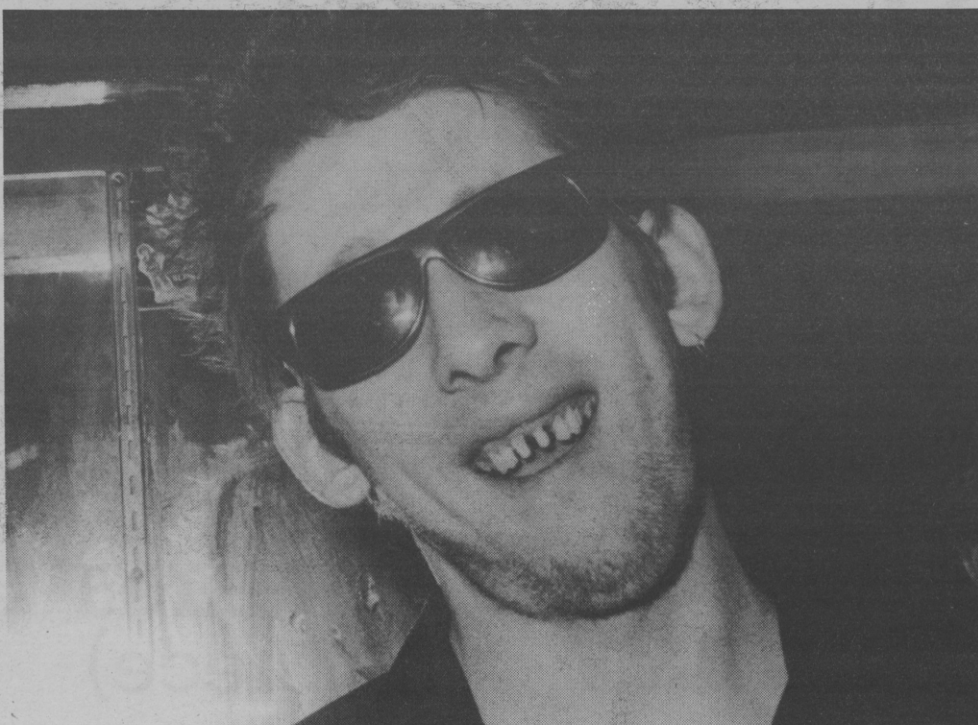
A Session with the Pogue's Shane MacGowan

by Russell Brown

Spider from the Pogues swears it's the best pub in London, the Devonshire Arms.

It's a good Irish pub — Andrew the barman traces a shamrock in the head of each and every pint of Guinness he pours. Two small bar mirrors are to be found on the walls — one celebrates the black stuff, Guinness Extra Stout, while at the opposite end of the bar, by the gents' toilets, the other recommends the Pogues' *Red Roses For Me*; "Brewed in Dublin and London".

A Pogue in a pub — Shane MacGowan.



And they don't encounter any snobbery?

"Not really. Possibly a couple of people have got hold of the wrong end of the stick as regards what the band's actually about. There are probably people who think we're trying to be a traditional Irish band, which we're not, but people who think that would probably think we can't really cut it, because barring Terry we're not really good enough musicians."

Although the group was begun with no particular ambition, they progressed fairly quickly out of the small venues, particularly after a national tour with Elvis Costello. Just as well, really, pub gigs in London seem by and large to be fairly depressing spectacles; small bars, small crowds and useless PAs.

"Well the whole pub circuit in London suffered a blow when the Hope and Anchor closed down. It wasn't a big place by any standards, it held 200 if that, but if you got a full crowd at the Hope and Anchor it was always a really good buzz. And also another thing is, a lot of bands playing on the pub circuit aren't really that good, so they don't have a following. There are good bands on the pub circuit — more so than good venues."

"But we were never really just a pub circuit band, from the start. We'd played in the club circuit, which is slightly different from the pub circuit, trendy sort of nightclubs. From the start we

had a sort of broad appeal, having articles written about us in *The Face* for example. Something that wouldn't happen to 99 percent of pub bands because people who write in *The Face* don't generally hang about watching bands in pubs."

Terry has retired to the bar, to refill what was apparently a tomato juice. Has too much been made of the Pogues as a drinking band?

"That could well have been a bloody mary ... yeah, well, people have tended to go on about how we're a bunch of soaks or whatever and have overlooked the fact that we've got a very powerful songwriter for a start. Anyway, we don't drink particularly more than most other groups for a start. But we've never concealed the fact that we like a drink — maybe it's just that we don't pretend we're not drunks."

Hours, pints and pool pass and still there's no sign of Shane. The pub has filled up and amid the hubbub Spider periodically assures me that he'll be along soon. As songwriter, Shane naturally occupies a special position within the group, not least because copyright royalties make him a bigger earner from record sales than the others, and the best touch for a loan.

The Clancey Brothers song is the first he's written for anyone else, but his compositions stretch over two albums and the recent EP, *Poguetry in*

Motion, all on Camden-based Stiff Records, who picked up their first indie single. The four-track EP has no traditional ditties on it — it's the most sophisticated Pogues yet, especially in the glorious, aching arrangement of the ballad 'The Body of an American'. Mmmm ...

Mmmm ... and ... Shane's arrived. He peers round the bar, looking like he does in the photos, those discoloured, gappy dental formations, the happy, slightly shickered expression. He settles down with — wait for it — a Campari and dry white wine, a half of Guinness to follow. Promoter and recording artist "Champion" Doug Veitch wanders up, asks if Shane wants his name on the door at Dingwalls later on. A Zimbabwean group, the Bhundu Boys are playing: "Peel's comin' along."

"Are they good?"

"Brilliant, they are like. They're frightenin'."

Things are settled on "Shane plus three", just in case, and Shane turns back.

"I don't know if I'll be able to say much for you ..." he says, and laughs his ubiquitous laugh, *kikikscshcsch*, a epiglottal rattle that makes him sound like he's tuned slightly off the station. Against his blustering singing voice, he sounds kind of shy and sweet.

At 28, the Pogues aren't his first band; the best-known lineup of his past is the punky Nips (formerly the Nipple Erectors); but it's certainly the most populous. Any advantage to a songwriter being in an eight-piece combo?

"Yeah, I think so — it's probably easier to get on with people if there's more of you. I've been in rock bands with four people in them, and you can get real hate goin' on there ... *hikhisckkkk* ..."

It's probably not unconnected with the Pogues that Shane, a face in London's early punk scene, has been turning up in a lot of the "10 Years On" punk retrospectives, pictured in the *NME* with peroxided crop at a Pistols' gig.

"Yeah — I was just part of that thing when it started in London. Yer just sort of got used to it — everyone was takin' photos of everything anyway, all that sorta shit ... *kchisckkikik* ..."

Did that background of experience help make the Pogues a success?

"Well I didn't expect the Pogues to be a success — I didn't expect them not to be successful either, I didn't really think about it. But the experience doesn't help really ... *kichkhikihik* ..."

The songs you wrote back then were obviously different than now.

"Yeah, they were more typical sorta rock songs. About teenage sex 'n' violence 'n' stuff ... *chkchckik* ... teenage songs."

So what caused the change to the songs the Pogues play? Was it being London Irish?

"Yeah, that was how ... I mean loike there was lotsa bands playin' basically the sorta stuff we play anyway, all we did was give it a bit of a kick, whatever — it's got lotsa bollocks anywa, but just make it a bit faster, a bit more urban, y'know. And to play it to ordinary pub audiences as opposed to normal Irish pub audiences."

The Devonshire is, as Terry said, "a good Oirish pub". Does growing up Irish in London make much difference?

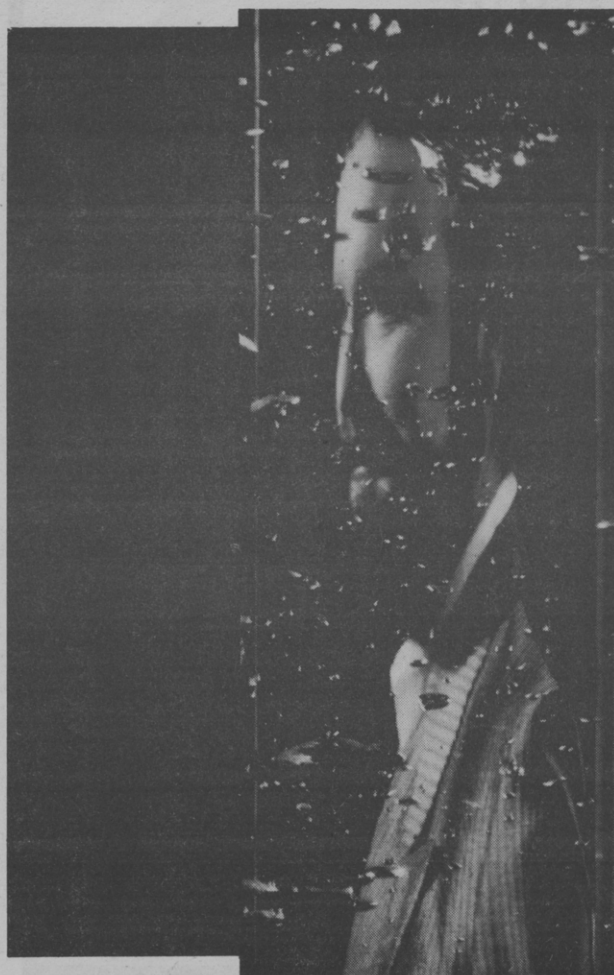
"Yeah, I think you feel you have two cultures — one which is London and one which is a place that you aren't in very often. But the music and all sorts of things, horse racing at Herne ... *chisck-sickh* ..."

London's the sort of city where a lot of cultures can get on with their business at once ...

"Yeah, it's good, it's cosmopolitan — I like that."

Does going overseas change your view of London?

"Well, New York's the same sorta thing really, **CONTINUED ON PAGE 16**



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