

*This year marks the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 'Fairytale of New York' by The Pogues. The bittersweet ballad, widely considered one of the greatest Christmas songs of all time, infuses elements of Irishness and law enforcement with its stirring chorus: "The boys of the NYPD Choir were singing Galway Bay and the bells were ringing out for Christmas Day...." but no such carolling cops exist, writes Christopher Warner.*

**M**ore than likely, the lyrics refer to an old nickname given to Irishmen waxing nostalgic while in the drunk tank. So how did this not-so-merry Yuletide ditty about broken dreams turn into such a beloved classic?

As the story goes, it began as a simple gentleman's bet. Singer/producer Elvis Costello wagered that a Celtic punk band like The Pogues could not write a hit Christmas song, a challenge, frontman Shane MacGowan and banjoist Jem Finer readily accepted.

Fittingly, MacGowan was born Christmas Day in 1957, to Irish parents in Pembury, Kent in the UK. He spent his formative years with his mother's family in rural Carney Commons in Tipperary, absorbing the natural beauty and culture while developing a passion for music and literature. After diving headlong into London's punk scene in the mid-1970's, MacGowan later teamed up with a group of musicians that became The Pogues. The raw but ambitious band managed to craft a unique sound, blending elements of folk, punk, and traditional Irish music — a turbo-charged vehicle they would ride to international stardom.

By the summer of 1987, the band was working on their third album, *If I Should Fall from Grace with God*, at London's RAK Studios. The record eventually featured 15 tracks, including Fairytale of New York, its title borrowed from a JP Donleavy novel about a bereaved Irish-American's adventure to The Big Apple.

The subject meshed with a similar theme MacGowan wanted to infuse, drawing upon the harrowing tales of Irish emigrants crossing the Atlantic in search of a better life. Nonetheless, the song writing process often takes a

series of unpredictable twists and turns before completing its journey. 'Fairytale' would be no different.

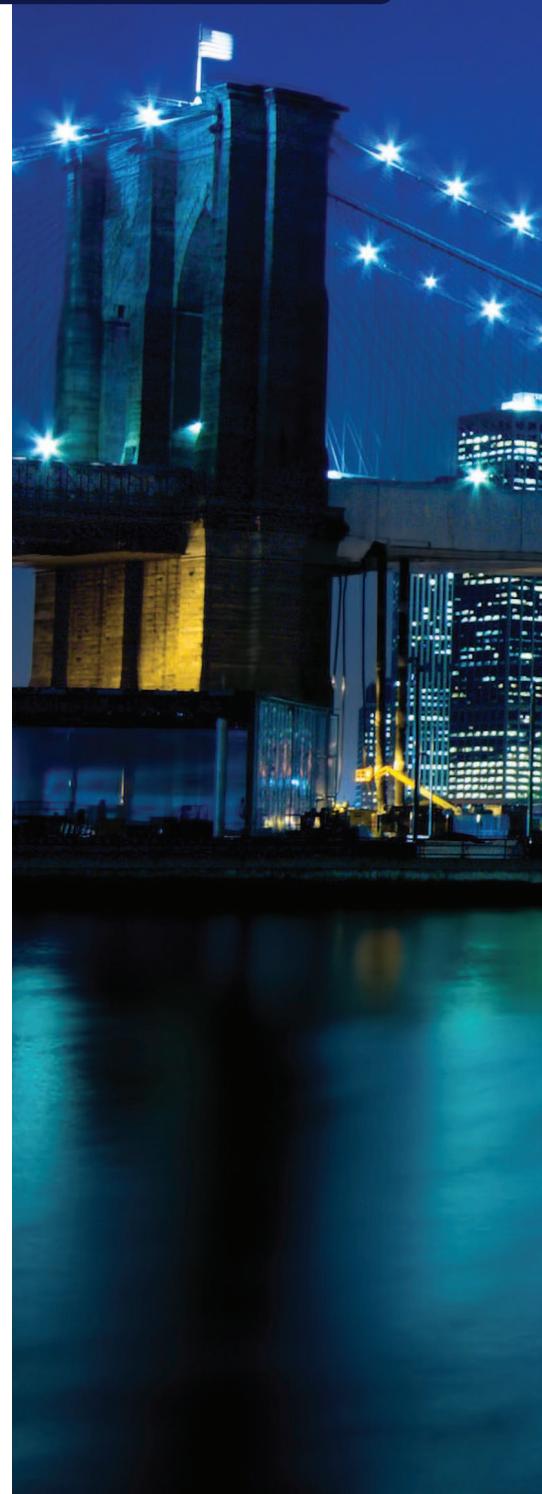
#### KIRSTY MacCOLL'S OWN FAIRY TALE

In a 2018 interview, MacGowan shed light on the song's genesis and its serpentine route. "It had to still be a Pogues' record," MacGowan recalls. "I had a tune and Jem had a tune. I wrote the lyrics; it actually took me quite a while. Cait (O'Riordan), who was our bass player, sang on the demo and then we got Kirsty MacColl in which really made it, she was amazing, brilliant at it."

MacColl's involvement came about thanks to a stroke of well-timed luck that ultimately led to a fairy tale of her own. Daughter of renowned folk singer/songwriter Ewan MacColl, Kirsty followed him into a music career, determined to make a name for herself. But after a stalled solo career, hampered by crippling bouts of stage fright, she had become relegated to working as a backing vocalist. Although more setbacks followed, her saint-like patience would soon be rewarded.

Her husband, Steve Lillywhite, a veteran music producer whose credits include the first three U2 albums, signed on to work with The Pogues around the same time O'Riordan left the band. In need of a female singer, Lillywhite recorded his wife's vocals at their home studio, confident she'd fit the duet perfectly.

"I made sure every single word had exactly the right nuance," Lillywhite recalled. "I remember taking it in on Monday morning and playing it to the band, and they were just dumbfounded." The soul-grabbing rendition prompted MacGowan to re-record his parts, realising he had to step up his game.



# FAIRYTALE OF NEW YORK



For the music video, director Peter Dougherty sought to create a vintage look by shooting in black and white and showcasing Manhattan's iconic skyline.



Several key scenes were filmed at the former 23rd Police Precinct Station House – the castle-like building which had serviced one of the city's most crime-ridden areas – which now serves the Traffic Control Division.

For the music video, director Peter Dougherty sought to create a vintage look by shooting in black and white and showcasing Manhattan's iconic skyline. Several key scenes were filmed south of Times Square at the former 23rd Police Precinct Station House.

Built at the turn of the 20th century, the castle-like building, replete with a crenelated roof parapet, had serviced the notorious Tenderloin District, one of the city's most crime-ridden areas and home to several bordellos. The '2-3' fortress was later designated a national landmark and now serves the Traffic Control Division.

#### METHOD ACTING BY 'THE POGUES'!

Filming commenced during a frigid week in late November 1987 and featured A-lister Matt Dillon (*The Outsiders*, *Rumblefish*) as the police officer who escorts MacGowan's pickled character through the station. Dillon, who hails from Irish ancestry, had attended The Pogues' first US show in February 1986, and later befriended MacGowan backstage.

In the video's opening scene, gentle snow falls on a man playing the piano. Although MacGowan appears to play the instrument, it is the band's pianist, James Fearnley,



'Fairytale of New York' video still featuring Kirsty MacColl and Shane McGowan.

wearing the crooner's rings for the close-up hand shots. We then see the placid backdrop dissolve into a harsh jail setting, where even Santa Claus gets booked on Christmas Eve. Things then quickly turn for the worse, both on-screen and off.

Whether intentional

or not, MacGowan and his bandmates employed method acting by getting well-lubricated during the shoot. Let us just say the NYPD officers on set were none too pleased with seeing their hallowed sanctuary desecrated, requiring Dillon to intervene before any actual arrests were made.

When filming resumed, Dillon balked at the stage directions, which called for him to roughly manhandle his friend. His reluctance led to more delays, exacerbating the already heightened behind-the-scenes drama. Using language that would make a sailor blush, MacGowan eventually persuaded the actor to apply more force. Problem solved.

#### A DOSE OF MOVIE MAGIC

The scene involving the chorus would also require some last-minute adjustments and a dose of movie magic. Instead of a singing 'choir', Dougherty substituted the NYPD Pipe Band, with the Empire State Building perfectly framed in the background.

The instrumental unit first formed in 1960 (an era when at least half of the force was of Irish descent) as part of the Emerald Society, an Irish American fraternal organisation and draws from active and retired NYPD police officers.

However, since none of the members knew the words to *Galway Bay*, a song popularised by Bing Crosby in the 1940s, the men belted out the only song they all knew: the anthem from Mickey Mouse Club. Clever editing with the video's soundtrack leaving the viewer none the wiser.

The Pogues released *Fairytale of New York* as a single on 23 November 1987. It soon reached No. 1 in the Irish charts and No. 2 in the UK charts, narrowly losing the top slot to the Pet Shop Boys' *Always on My Mind*.

According to figures released by the British music licensing body PPL, '*Fairytale*' is the most-played Christmas song of the 21st century. Since MacColl's tragic death in 2000, her part has been performed by singers such as Sinéad O'Connor, Jem Finer's daughter Ella, and MacGowan's long-term partner and wife, Victoria Mary Clark. Countless artists have also paid tribute with covers that range from full orchestras to Saoirse Ronan and Jimmy Farrell serenading the audience on 'The Tonight Show'.

Incidentally, MacGowan later penned another holiday tune with his band *Shane MacGowan & The Pogues*. True to form and despite its benign title, *Christmas Lullaby* is darker than a pint of Guinness!

**About the Author:** Christopher Warner is an Irish-American actor and freelance writer. He's a frequent contributor to Síocháin and has written for several magazines and websites across multiple genres, including Military History Matters, WWII Quarterly, Aviation History, Ireland's Own, and Irish America. He currently resides in Co. Kerry with his wife, Maureen and their brood of cats.

