IT BEGAN as a simple gentleman's bet. Singer/ producer Elvis Costello wagered that the Celtic punk band, The Pogues, couldn't write a hit Christmas song — a challenge frontman Shane MacGowan and banjoist Jem Finer readily accepted. Now, 35 years after its release, *Fairytale of New York* stands as one of the most beloved holiday ballads of all time. Let's just say the odds on this long shot were greater than 18 to 1.

Fittingly, MacGowan was born Christmas Day, 1957, to Irish parents in Pembury, Kent. 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. At an age when most children prefer comic books, MacGowan tackled the likes of Joyce, Dostoyovesky, and Sartre.

These early influences provided solid footing, setting him on a path to explore his creative horizons.

After diving headlong into London's punk scene in the mid-1970s, MacGowan later teamed up with a group of musicians that became The Pogues. The raw but ambitious band managed to craft

Fairytale of New York – the making of the video

Christopher Warner goes behind the scenes of a Christmas classic which he describes as a "masterclass in storytelling"

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, they were working on their third LP 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*, a non-commercial Yuletime ditty about a bickering down-and-out couple with broken dreams. The less-than-cheery narrative, however, aligned perfectly with The Pogues' unfiltered credo, embracing life's joy and pain regardless of the season.

The songwriting process often takes a series of unpredictable twists and turns before completing its journey. 'Fairytale' would be no different. In a 2018 cover story for *Ireland's Own*, 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. Cáit (O'Riordan),

Matt Dillon

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 fairytale of her own. As the daughter of renowned folk singer/songwriter Ewan MacColl, she 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 as O'Riordan's departure after marrying Costello. Various replacements were considered (including The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde), but Lillywhite had only one person in mind. He recorded MacColl'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.

The song's title was 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.

FOR THE Pogues' music video, director Peter Dougherty sought to create a nostalgic look by shooting in black and white and showcasing Manhattan's iconic skyline. Several key scenes were filmed just south of Times Square at the former 23rd police precinct, a castle-like fortress dating back to the turn of the 20th century. It was later designated a national landmark.

Production commenced during a frigid week in late November 1987 and featured Matt Dillon (*The Outsiders*, *Rumblefish*) as the police officer who escorts MacGowan's inebriated character through the station. Dillon, who hails from Irish ancestry, attended The Pogues' first U.S. show in February 1986. The electric performance enraptured the 80s heartthrob, who later befriended MacGowan backstage.

The video opens with a gentle snowfall superimposed on a man playing the piano. Although MacGowan appears to play the instrument, it's the band's pianist, James Fearnley, 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-oiled during the shoot. The

NYPD officers on set became livid at seeing their 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. The actor's reluctance led to more delays, exacerbating the already heightened behind-the-scenes drama. Using language not allowed in these pages, the culprit eventually persuaded the copper to apply more force. Problem solved.

In another lively scene, the chorus blares:

"The boys of the NYPD choir were singing Galway Bay,
And the bells were ringing out for Christmas Day."

However, no such carolling cops exist. More than likely, the lyrics refer to an old nickname for boisterous Irishmen locked up in the drunk tank. But Dougherty still managed to capture a singing 'choir' by substituting the NYPD pipe band, with the Empire State Building perfectly framed in the background. 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 and the video's soundtrack leave the viewer none the wiser.

For many people, the song's bittersweet ending packs the biggest punch as the two weary combatants hint at possible reconciliation:

I could have been someone
Well, so could anyone
You took my dreams from me
When I first found you
I kept them with me, babe
I put them with my own
Can't make it all alone
I've built my dreams around you.

IN SHORT, it's a masterclass in storytelling. 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 U.K. 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.

Just as a high tide lifts all boats, the song helped buoy all those involved. MacColl joined The Pogues on their successful global tour, earning a well-deserved spotlight that provided the confidence she needed to relaunch her headlining career. *If I Should Fall from Grace with God* garnered worldwide critical acclaim and became the band's best-selling album.

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

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 – covers that range from full orchestras to Saoirse Ronan and Jimmy Farrell serenading the audience on *The Tonight Show*. Go have a listen, Happy Christmas. ∎