

The Sylvania Review

English & World Languages

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Welcome to our second edition of *The Sylvania Review*. For those of you who didn't have the opportunity to read our first edition, allow a second introduction. *The Sylvania Review* is the English & World Languages' new literary newsletter. We publish short reviews of books, music, drama, and film. Beginning with this issue, we are also featuring articles on our professional activities here within the division. As with our fall issue, this edition showcases our division's literary skills, unique perspectives, and interests. I am currently seeking pieces for our spring issue. If you think you might be interested in submitting something—either a critical review or professional article—please do not hesitate to call or email me your suggestion. I especially look forward to hearing from adjunct faculty within EWL. Happy reading!

Scott Dionne
503.977.8003/ sdionne@pcc.edu

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Gumdrops and Red Rabbits, Or How to Learn to Stop Worrying and Love The Shins

By Tom Huminski

In the 2004 Sundance film "Garden State," a character played by Natalie Portman passes her headphones to one of her fellow disaffected peers and says, "You gotta hear this one song - it'll change your life."

That life-changing song was "New Slang" by Portland band The Shins. And the

lives changed most were, perhaps, those of the Shins. Their career soared. Sales of *Oh, Inverted World*, the band's first album (and the one on which "New Slang" appears), skyrocketed after the movie was released. Demand for live appearances followed, and the band toured almost non-stop for two years.

The Shins' second record, *Chutes Too Narrow*, was released in October 2003 to almost universal praise. One of the gatekeepers of indie music cool, Pitchfork, called *Chutes* "Not simply an excellent album, [but] also a powerful

testament to pop music's capacity for depth, beauty and expressiveness." And the album *was* excellent. Shins' singer and songwriter, James Mercer, had benefited from better recording equipment on the new record, and he developed the familiar pop melodies and smart lyrics of *Inverted* into full-blown pop masterpieces. And the album *did* show the band's depth, beauty, and expressiveness. In many ways, *Chutes* would help define The Shins by the depth and beauty of their songs.

But that was 2003. Going into 2007, The Shins faced what must have been some knee-buckling pressure: how does a young band follow up a flawless indie pop record, especially after a three-year break?

That, of course, was the question everyone (well, at least indie music fans and critics) was asking during the lead-up to *Wincing the Night Away*, the band's new release. Certainly, I wanted to know if The Shins could reach the bar they had set for themselves with their first two albums. And the critics' expectations were high, as well. Music writers reached for superlatives like "one of the most anticipated indie-rock records of the year" (!). Music blogs buzzed with anticipation (!). The band was booked on Letterman, they were booked on Saturday Night Live (!). The record was finally released!

And the reviews were. . . good. Not necessarily glowing. Not really breathless. And not exactly life changing. An NPR reviewer called the album's ambitions "fairly modest." Pitchfork bestowed a firmly-within-this-universe 7 out of 10 on the record. No reviewer used any form of the word "triumph."

Which brings us back to expectations. Along with the near-universal expectations for a great album, most critics expected more of what they'd come to expect from The Shins: indie rock. The Shins are torchbearers of indie rock, the musical genre that gets stamped with descriptors like plaintive, overly earnest, and having no fun. The fans of indie rock get a similar label—you've probably seen them wearing the uniform: tight, thrift-store t-shirts; mesh ball caps with a John Deere logo; anything else that drips with irony.

After all, The Shins do write smart indie pop songs; they're deep, expressive. And

they're not generic. Most of James Mercer's songs don't follow the tired verse-chorus-verse-chorus pop routine. They twist and turn. And they are distinctively Mercer's.

But they're also fun. And that's what I think is most easily missed in The Shins. Because The Shins help carry the torch for indie rock, they also carry the burden of genre expectations. Indie rock isn't supposed to be fun. It's the too-serious side of pop music. It's not the disposable song du jour of commercial radio. It's earnest. Maybe a little depressed. The perfect music for the soundtrack of Garden State.

But with *Wincing the Night Away*, The Shins show us again that they have fun making music, and they want their audience to have fun. *Chutes Too Narrow* was packed with smart, fun pop songs and harnessed influences from Beach Boy melodies to rockabilly jaunts and bright, 80s synth rock. On *Wincing*, the band rediscovers much of the fun they perfected on *Chutes Too Narrow*, and they find new, often psychedelic influences, as well.

The first track, "Sleeping Lessons," begins in a watery dreamscape. Mercer drowsily sings from within a fog, "if the old guard still offend, they've got nothing left on which you depend, so enlist every ounce of your bright blood and off with their heads." Not exactly the feel good lyrics of the year, but Mercer then reminds us that "you're not obliged to swallow anything you despise," a phrase that echoes, then fades, and then hovers over the rest of the record.

Now that we're prepared for the new, though, the second track reminds us of where we've been in the last two albums. "Australia" is the Shins at their sunny pop best. The track begins with keyboard player Marty Crandall off in the background, announcing in a pseudo-German accent "it's time to put zee earphones on you!" followed promptly with overlapping, shiny la, la, la's. It's hard *not* to move when hearing this song. And while "Australia's" lyrics hardly form a coherent narrative, when Mercer sings playfully at the end "give me your hand and let's jump out the window!" you trust him because you're having so much fun. And if you weren't convinced of the fun of jumping out the window, the closing sequence of la, la, la's

should confirm that the music is bright, especially with Marty Crandall's silly, shouty la la's from the background.

With the exception of the background yelps and Dr. Strangelove comments, Crandall is all but vocally invisible on Shins' records. But in the band's live shows, he occupies center stage; he is the focal point and the band leader. He dances, cracks jokes, laughs, plays the crowd. The band knows that Crandall is the best member to channel energy to the crowd, to entertain, to make sure people are having fun above all else. And "Australia" is the first Shins song, on any of their records, to capture the playfulness of their live performances and of Crandall's antics, in particular. When you see The Shins in concert, you see how the fans react to the music. They go crazy for these guys; people dance, sing along. It's not a mope fest.

Case in point: Sasquatch Festival, Gorge Amphitheater, 2004. The band is rollicking through "Kissing the Lipless" when onto the stage dances a completely naked young man, twirling between bass and keyboard, then around Mercer on lead guitar, back to the drummer. And the band plays on, Mercer singing, grinning wide. The crowd roars—the naked hippie on stage is one of them, blissed out.

And it seems that the band has found a good dose of fun, psychedelic bliss on the new record. "Sleeping Lessons" introduces us to it, but the trip really kicks in with "Sea Legs" and its wobbly, extended psych jam which pushes the song beyond five minutes and into place as the longest Shins song. The Shins had always paraded plenty of the '60s and '70s structured pop melodies through their songs, but on *Wincing*, they experiment with the kaleidoscopic side of those two decades. The psychedelia continues into "Red Rabbits," which begins with sonic gumdrops and lollipops and, lyrically, explores a world in the center of the earth, including "sprites" who have been "pissed on" and are "all standing up for their rights." Huh?

Rolling Stone has called such cryptic tendencies "the indie habit of poetic obscurantism." And the critics have a point; much indie rock employs puzzling lyrics. But Mercer explains his lyrical habits (and perhaps other indie song writers') by saying that, if he

were too straightforward, "there's always that risk [he would] take of being a little too earnest or passionate and it being uncomfortable to listen to." In trying to resist the indie stereotypes, he pens obscure lyrics. Of course, in some ways, The Shins have helped create the new stereotype that Rolling Stone points out. So what's an indie songwriter to do?

If you're James Mercer, you continue to write indirect lyrics about red rabbits, and girl sailors, and phantom limbs, and sprites. And you continue to wander through different sonic influences from the '60s and '70s. And you hope people have fun listening, even if it doesn't change their lives.



Convergence: the point at which ideas begin to come together.

By Linda Warwick

Item: PCC news reports the Governor's budget recommendation for community colleges is \$483 million dollars, \$46 million less than OCCA recommended. The state appropriation for community colleges in 2005-2007 was actually lower than the appropriation for 2001. PCC reports having responded to this financial crisis by reducing instructional and support services, deferring maintenance, and increasing tuition and fees. Tuition is currently \$73/credit or \$3,285 in tuition and fees for a full-time student. According to PCC, "Oregon's community colleges have some of the highest tuitions in the 15 western states."

Item: enrollment at PCC has dropped 10%, approximately 17,000 students.

Item: according to the Motley Fool, since 1971, the cost of college has gone up 7.7%/year. The fool advises planning on a 6%/year increase in college costs over the next decade. In the last six years, the US government records show overall inflation rates varying from 1.14% to 4.35%. This is nearly a 50% increase in 10 years. Assuming fees stayed at their 2006 level, tuition and fees for a full-time student at PCC would be \$4937.41 in 2017.

Item: In 2003, 10.5% of the enlisted military had not graduated from high school. Only 3.8% of enlisted personnel had graduated from college.

Item: President Bush has requested a military budget of \$462.7 billion for fiscal 2007.

Item: incoming Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates will ask Congress to approve increasing the armed forces by 92,000 over the next five years — 65,000 to the Army and 27,000 to the Marines. In addition, the Army wants “full access” to the 346,000 Army National Guard troops and to 196,000 Army Reserves.

A few months ago, beginning to prepare myself to look at the state of education in our country with my WR 122 students, I read an article by John Raines in *CrossCurrents*. Raines admits to being a social liberal, not necessarily a bad thing, but certainly something that causes him to come at the issue of higher education from a distinct angle; he refers to teaching as our “calling [as] emissaries of the promise.” In community colleges more than any other educational institution, faculty are likely to agree with Raines in this. We are here holding the promise of equality through education, of upward mobility, of the American Dream. Our students are often first-generation college students; sometimes they are survivors of childhoods most of us can scarcely imagine. And we say to them, tacitly, “work hard, get an education and you have as much opportunity as anyone in this country.”

Then we introduce them to a system where there are built-in hierarchies. We may

line them up in rows so they can better see us at the front of room. We grade their work; inevitably, we grade them. While we hold out the promise of equality, we exist in a culture of winners and losers. And, increasingly, many may be denied even the opportunity to enter the race. So what do we “emissaries of the promise” do with this “profound contradiction”? Do we admit or call attention to the failure of the very existence of the American Dream? If we do, we must admit to heresy. If we don’t, I fear we are guilty of dishonesty. Thomas Friedman tells us *The World is Flat* and, in his opinion, that is a good thing properly examined. Perhaps for some. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the after-tax income for the richest 1% in our country rose 157% between 1979 and 1997. In the same time period, the middle class gained 10%; the poorest 20% of our population had more debt in 1997 than assets. In this American version of a flat world, the average CEO was compensated 40 times the wage of the average worker in 1980; by 2000, the same CEO’s compensation was 400 times the wage of an average worker. At least part of this improvement in CEO compensation derives from the ability of companies to outsource labor into countries where people work for much less. Of course, this means the loss of jobs in America. This job loss is compounded by fluctuations in the economy. During the recession of 2001-2003, 3 million jobs were lost; those who found new jobs took an average pay cut of 21%.

So what is this imagined “average” worker to do? Why, get an education, of course. And here’s the rub. Not just our students, all students except those from the wealthiest families are caught in a dreadful bind. Tuition is going up faster than the rate of inflation. Pell Grants, which in 1975-76 covered 84% of the cost of college, in 2000, covered only 39% of those costs. And, jobs pay less; thus, working students have to work more hours. As a result, community college students are much more likely than ever before to be living on the edge of disaster.

According to PCC’s *Quick Facts 2005-2006*, 66% of PCC’s 91,031 students (something over 60,000) work either full- or part-time. Only 22% of our students are enrolled full-time.

Raines notes that nearly half of all students who attend college part-time drop out. 30% of students who work more than 15 hours a week drop out before graduating. This results in an increasing likelihood that the race for higher education and the better-paying jobs that education leads to will fall to the wealthy. In 1979, students from the wealthiest families in the United States were 4 times more likely to graduate from college than their poorer classmates; by 1997 they were 10 times likelier to graduate. Rather than being the leveler, higher education is becoming the reinforcer of class differences. “Success in our society replicates social class, and education does not so much modify that fact as disguise it by hiding it behind the myth of meritocracy” (Raines).

Now,

at the same time I was reading Raines, I was reading Bob Woodward’s new book *State of Denial*. I won’t bore you with the details, but Woodward made me focus more solidly on “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and “Operation Enduring Freedom.” Aside from noting how much better we should all feel by living in a nation that commits deeds with such honorable names, I came away from the book with a sinking sense that I knew another part of the puzzle that is the relationship of education to social class. As we become more and more entangled in the Middle East, the size of our military force increases. The Department of Defense reports an active-duty military force of 1.2 million in all services; of these 1,145,100 are enlisted men (below the rank of Warrant Officer). The incoming Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates is proposing a modest increase in this force of 92,000 enlisted soldiers and marines. And who makes up our military? *Newsweek* estimated that in 2003, only 3.8% of the enlisted armed forces had



graduated from college. All of us can tell anecdotally about students in our classes who were either in the military or going to the military as a way of funding their college education. Those on active duty are offered up to \$4500 a year in money for tuition. The GI Bill will pay approximately the cost of 3 years of college after leaving the military. It would seem that military service fills — at least partially — the financial gap left by rising costs and falling resources. Of course, as we see on MacNeil-Lehrer’s roll call of the dead each night on OPB, military service is not without its risks even if it is, for some students, the best chance for an education,

Raines is, I believe, dead right. “Our students need...a better ‘best chance’.” We need a new tax structure. Surely in the richest nation in the world we can find a way to provide a quality education to all young people without asking them to risk their lives. We need teachers who will teach the social realities of our class system without flinching. We can work toward a time when “the American Dream [will work for] everyone in our country if it is to work for anyone.” We can expand need-based scholarships. According to the *New York Times*, Harvard, MIT, and Princeton receive 15-20 times more Pell Grant money than the median college even though 80% of all college graduates take their degrees in public universities. “The issue is money, and the money needs to come from better-off families to help the kids who, through the arbitrariness of birth, start out life disadvantaged” (Raines). We need more well-paying jobs so that children don’t start out their educational life living in families whose every breath is precarious.

And, just maybe, we need to look at our own practice, the practice that triggers that hierarchy in the classroom. Perhaps we need to review Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. If we treat our students as vessels that need to be filled with the knowledge we worked so hard to amass, we may be contributing to the problem by reinforcing in them the mentality that doesn’t question the social forces impacting them. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the praxis, the classroom as a tool for liberation. We don’t just need to tell our students the ugly truths of social

injustice; we need to learn those truths with our students. This kind of education "...affirms [students] as beings who transcend themselves...for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build a future.... They must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging" (Freire).

*Notes on Me or, What I Like and Why You
Should Care*

By Patrick Walters

Our passions are, finally, always private. While we swap book titles, pepper the day with spirited exchanges regarding television, film, music and literature, these moments are brief, and fleeting. Even the intimate bonding of friends and lovers over cherished artifacts like *Seinfeld*, *Marquee Moon* or *Rules of the Game* can never really accomplish a radical melding of minds. We urge each other to read, see, listen to what we love. We write reviews as a way to connect, and a way to break out of that private realm. They arrive as a plea to experience, and to share, but in the end they just might be a way to tell everyone who we are.

Perhaps the last time we really ever experience art together with anyone is while doing laps in the deep end of our teenage years. In the rafters of garages and under disreputable bridges my friends and I would parse the lyrics of the latest Yes or King Crimson albums like hoary rabbinical scholars. It is, of course, difficult not to be of the same mind as someone with whom you have just shared an egregiously large joint. Now, in our golden years, we have less to bind us.

Any argument with someone about whether her shirt is blue or purple attests to the subjective nature of even the most basic perception. Taste, then, is far more particular. Even someone who has an equally deep and abiding affection for Preston Sturges' masterpiece, *Sullivan's Travels*, loves it in a different way and for individually determined reasons. Taste, in this sense, is a word suggesting one of the senses in such a way to propose that all of the senses can be likened to taste. How we hear *Sketches of Spain* or see a Caravaggio has a certain flavor, just as macaroni and cheese does, to each person.

My musical predispositions came to me via the cheapest of transistor radios, in the wee hours of childhood when I was supposed to be asleep. When not listening to baseball or hockey games, I'd nibble on what used to be the glories of AM radio: The Beatles and The Turtles, The Left Banke and Bob Dylan, bubblegum hits side by side with voices of a generation.

I tend to lean more in the direction of the transcendent pop, songs that dangle on the edges of the ephemeral. I can and do appreciate all kinds of music--jazz or classical or even the occasional feral punk--but nothing speaks to me more than a sweet, jangly, three minute pop song. I'm more moved now when I hear "Sugar, Sugar" by the Archies than anything in the Crosby, Stills and Nash oeuvre. That has never really changed. Wham or The Spice Girls have a much better chance of taking root in my subconscious than the most earnest, humorless "indie" bands of now or any time. That's just how I'm wired.

Chamber pop: while I don't know who coined this term, it has a very particular definition in my mind. The coiner meant, I expect, to suggest that certain pop songs aspire to, or at least feature, the qualities of chamber music. A typical guitar, bass, drums combo with some piano, strings,

perhaps a little woodwinds or brass. If you're lucky, maybe a little harpsichord or clavinet. Think of "As Tears Go By" or "Eleanor Rigby." The 1960s were a time when the string section textures of more staid, even square, genres seeped into current, hip music. Chamber pop, though, is at its best when the strings aren't that overpowering. Less Burt Bacharach and more The Left Banke. The closer a pop song comes to the innocent beauty of the latter's "Walk Away Renee," the more it means to me and sticks to the ribs. [The Left Banke's complete recordings, 1966-69: *There's Gonna Be a Storm*]



(The Left Banke)

Odessey and Oracle by The Zombies is far and away the greatest whole record in this territory, an album whose haunting warmth and melancholy places it deservedly beside the most memorable music of that era. The Zombies began as part of the British invasion, rose and fell precipitously, but before they faded they made one indelible contribution. The songs are both ambitious and modest, a quality much of this sort of music has. It could be pretentious, but it rarely is. The strings, or in this case mellotron, seem naïve, the soundtrack to lovelorn dreams. Music that can sound both dated and timeless is worth our attention.

The foremost modern purveyors of this admittedly passé subgenre are Belle and Sebastian, a clever, wistfully evocative band from Glasgow. In a grim climate of

Brittanys, Beyonces and other unmentionables, Belle and Sebastian have perversely, even heroically, carved out their own quaint niche. Any pop band that features trumpet and French horn on a regular basis deserves some credit. I would start with *Tigermilk*, their debut, a near perfect pop record, or *If You're Feeling Sinister*, widely considered their quintessential work. Like all the best pop, they evoke other bands, other times, but in the end are entirely original. You'll hear Donovan, Nick Drake, The Smiths, but the voice, the environment, is all their own, a safe place.

[Other Pop Pleasures: The Chills, *Submarine Bells*; The Bats, *Silverbeet*; The Lemonheads, *It's a Shame about Ray*; The La's, *The La's*; Camera Obscura, *Biggest Bluest Hi-Fi*; Of Montreal, *Satanic Panic in the Attic*]

In books, too, I have the safe places to go for a sure thing, where I know what to expect, how I'll feel about it, how it will change me. Most consistently I visit Conan Doyle's London or the supremely silly world that Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster inhabit. This is very much about going somewhere, literary setting as a tactile, wholly manifest incarnation. When you read the Holmes stories you not only go to late Victorian London, but to a densely imagined world of Watson's storytelling. Bertie Wooster is, it seems hardly necessary to add, one of the great narrative voices in the English language. We all know those narrators, and people in life, who are not as smart as they think. Bertie, on the other hand, is not as dumb as others believe him to be. But he still needs Jeeves, his admirably dignified, inscrutable butler, to rescue him from increasingly elaborate scrapes. These are on the surface rather silly, insubstantial genre pieces, tales where, as Maria Caruso

would say, you're bound to find a vicar in the rose bushes. But then, when your guard is down, as you're howling through a ridiculous succession of farcical improbabilities, you find yourself moved. I don't make my way through any Jeeves and Wooster without a tear threatening to make an appearance. Read and find out why. [*The Code of the Woosters* is the apotheosis of this brilliant cycle, although any book or story by Wodehouse will do]

Anyone really in the know will not be surprised to hear me say that among the best, most literate narratives around can be found on television. At their best, certain shows of our times rival the most important novels. There, I said it. For those of you who proudly eschew this disreputable form, sport a "Kill Your Television" bumper sticker on your gas guzzler, crack a book after dinner rather than scramble for the remote, you are in fact missing something. The advent of DVDs allows one the chance to feel as if one is not giving in to the big, bad television, so rent away: *Rome*, *The Sopranos*, *24*, *Deadwood*, *The Shield*, *The Wire*, *The Office and Extras*, *Prime Suspect*, *Battlestar Galactica*. Yes, that's right. You heard me. *Battlestar Galactica*. These shows, like the movies and music I love, create a world, simple as that. Isn't that what we always hope for?

My film interests are eclectic. I'm just as likely to recommend a bloody, viscera-strewn zombie flick as I am a modest domestic drama. In the end, though, the ones I have the most affection for are the quiet ones—yes, the chamber pieces, self-contained. Five I tend to gush about when given the chance:

Diary of a Country Priest (Robert Bresson 1951): penetrates my secular armor and makes me believe in moments of grace. A dying cleric, aching to be helpful to his parish, battling his own doubts and pain.

Non-actors, exquisitely composed, sad and moving in a way that few films reach.

The Spirit of the Beehive (Victor Erice 1973): one of the most difficult accomplishments to pull off in a film or novel is conveying the point of view of a child. This admirably unsentimental film, set during the Spanish Civil War, captures the strangeness and dangerous fragility of being a child. Luminescent.

Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsay 1999): also about a child, even more unflinchingly unsentimental, which is not to say unsympathetic. Set during a 1970s garbage strike in Glasgow, a young boy accidentally kills another boy. Uncompromisingly subjective, mysteriously ambiguous. Not immoral or amoral; just not moralistic.

Primer (Shane Carruth 2004): a spare, lean science fiction movie, about innovation, ideas, the attraction and peril of breaking new ground. Directed by someone who decided to teach himself how to write, direct and act in film, and then did it for less than the latte bill on a big Hollywood production. Will prompt long, sweaty conversations about what happened and what it all means.

Half Nelson (Ryan Fleck 2006): this current film also faces a challenge, to offer something new in a hackneyed sub-genre: white teacher in the "inner city" school trying to get through to his students. It does so by making him a crack-addicted, emotionally cracked man, more in need of saving than capable of saving. All the virtues of the great early 1970s era, intimate and painful, honest without being exploitative.

The salient theme, I suppose, is that I admire films and stories and songs that defy expectation even while offering me

something comforting, familiar. Original expression within sometimes (even often) predictable forms. What does this all say about me? Probably nothing surprising. And if you watch, read or listen to these treasures of mine will they make you a believer? Perhaps. And then these passions will become your own, private and impenetrable.

The Film That Will Not Go Away

By Vytautas Zdanys

Gillo Pontecorvo, director of the film that will not go away, committed Communist and much maligned, much venerated artist, died on October 12, 2006. But the film that will not go away, the one and only of his more than dozen that was not tampered with by studios and accountants and producers, shows, some 42 years after its original release, no signs of following him into the grave. A landmark in the history of cinema, it is, in spite of invariably insufficient subtitles and a deadly grim, cerebral content, still available on video and DVD and is still shown in independent theaters to crowds of people lining up for tickets. In the 70's it was used by insurgencies around the world to train recruits; in the much more recent past it was studied at the Pentagon as part of the U.S. military's preparation for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, for a great many of those who have seen it, it remains, years and even decades later, an intensely vivid memory.

Little of its power has faded. At the end of the summer, at a dinner party on a street in Laurelhurst, I met a woman speaking English in a cool, refined French accent. She could have been Simone de Beauvoir come back in the flesh, and the sentiments that she expressed in her exquisitely precise English – the horrors of capitalism, of sexism, of racism, of imperialism – were also de Beauvoir. All but one: she'd grown up in Algiers, and when asked about her view of the *Battle of Algiers*, all of her elegance, all of her self-possession vanished. The calm refined posture became a pained rigidity as she hissed the word “lies,” and then slowly, with a

painful effort at self control, told us that Pontecorvo should have been shot and his film destroyed down to the last copy.

Her accusations were not entirely without merit. Pontecorvo's selectivity, if it refines the historical event down to its essence, also inevitably distorts it. He never tells us that the FLN – Front de Liberation Nationale – was not the only revolutionary group operating in Algeria or that it became the only group by violently eliminating the others; he does not tell us that the FLN deliberately and repeatedly set out to provoke French administrators into almost genocidal reprisals against the Muslim population so that survivors would become radicalized and fall into its camp; he says nothing about the random slaughter of ethnic French that accompanied and sometimes preceded random slaughters of local Muslims. And he gives throughout the tacit impression that the struggle in Algeria to expel the French was a Marxist exercise informed by the principles of worldwide Communism, never hinting at the facts that the FLN did not distinguish between capitalist and Communist regimes in its constant quest for the moral and material aid that the Communist countries, until the very end, gave no more of than did the capitalist, that the Communist Party in France itself was, until the very end, solidly for putting down the insurrection and maintaining the colonial status quo. He ignores entirely the astonishing complexities of the situation – the divisiveness and sometimes lethal feuding among rebel leaders, the predicament of an equally divided French military embroiled in plots and counterplots to hold on to Algeria by overthrowing the de Gaulle government in Paris, the development among the *pieds-noirs* of an ultra-right wing paramilitary that soon had the organization and equipment to make the rebellion a three-way war. In Pontecorvo's mental and artistic world, the situation was as simple as in history it was complex: the colonizers villainous, the colonized innocent, nothing but love and harmony in the self-sublimating leadership of a unified rebellion.

And yet, for all of the distortion, all of the editorializing casually passed off as reporting, the *Battle of*



Algiers keeps resonating with the conviction of a truth beyond the truths of sheer historical fact. Its impact is conventionally attributed to various stylistic factors and directorial innovations – the grainy black and white, the perfectly-sustained illusion of a documentary reality, the use of non-actors and participants in the actual event (most remarkably Saadi Yacef who play himself in the role of Djaffar, leader of the entire Algiers insurgency) as characters and extras. It is true that the sense of immediacy, of sheer reality, is overwhelming from the very first frames. But it is overwhelming, too, from the very start of *Raging Bull*. What is so wonderful in *Raging Bull* is just precisely that illusion of reality; in the *Battle of Algiers* it is something that seems infinitely bigger.

Pontecorvo, who disclaimed being an activist of any kind, created the greatest, most convincing and inspiring propaganda film in history; Pontecorvo, the Communist, created the film that is most simply and convincingly messianic. Just as the historical Messiah seems to have been a political figure agitating the indigenous population against the colonizing Romans, so Pontecorvo's anti-colonial film is all about redemption. It is about redemption on the grand scale but still redemption of individuals, about a transformation from the ordinary life of compromise and accommodation to lives of an integrity rarely attained by human beings, lives of a courage that, in time, becomes perfect in its commitment to a new, sustaining truth. The issue, in the *Battle of Algiers*, is not an issue of "morality" in any common sense of the word – the "morality" of the acts depicted is never beyond question – but one of an awakening out of the half life, the spiritual murk, that is all that most of us ever know.

And so we see Ali La Pointe, illiterate street thug enmeshed in all of the vices, Ali La Pointe whose life was one of survival at all costs and whose ambitions never went beyond the search for instant seedy pleasures, leave that life and all of its associations to help clean the Casbah of drugs and alcohol and prostitution. And we see him go on to live for that new commitment, that new integrity, and choose death – choose without fear or hesitation – to avoid compromising his new self. We see three women, one with a small child held by the hand,

risk everything to plant bombs that will, in the bleak hopeless days when all seemed lost, keep the organization and the hope that it brought to so many thousands alive. We see one after another of Djaffur's co-revolutionaries die as Ali La Pointe will die – without fear, without regret – and for the same reason. We see, by the end, an entire population committed at all costs to the struggle, the most ordinary women, men and children risking sometimes prison, sometimes torture, sometimes death for the sake not only of the political struggle, but for the sake as well of the redemption within. The final scene – the mists of an Algerian winter breaking to reveal, while tanks roll up the streets, the whole Casbah erupting irrepressibly in protest, in defiance, and in celebration – women dancing with homemade flags, men running up to soldiers daring them to shoot – is about something about more even than a war won and an independence gained. It is about something even more than history, something even more than politics. It is about how all of these things can transform the psyche and how this transformation is the real goal, the forgotten goal, of all of them.

The course of Pontecorvo's career after the *Battle of Algiers* was something like the course of the revolution itself: compromises, dilutions, diminishments, a subjection to the business minded heads of studios for whom courage and integrity were at best secondary values. Never, after the *Battle of Algiers*, did he appear to be happy with any of his productions, never again, in spite of the multi-faceted success of that one stupendous effort, was he given a free hand. And so his career, like the career of Algeria itself after independence, became an anti-climax of often petty, often maddening frustrations.

But there could be no anti-climax had there never been a climax. Pontecorvo, like Algeria and the Algerians, had what few among us do: the moment of perfection, the one untainted work, the job that goes so infinitely far beyond the normal definitions of success, the one that shines a brilliant light on that gloomy corner where potential lies forever locked away. It is a redemption that all of us could use and one that some of us might one day wake up to crave. In the *Battle of Algiers* we can all of us acquire a little piece of it, a little piece that fades so

infinitely slowly, staying with us for a long, long time.

James Howard Kunstler. *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Grove Press, 2006.

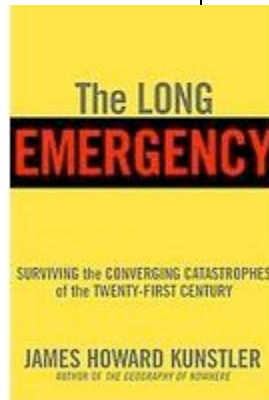
By Michael McDowell

Every once in a while a book comes along that illuminates the daily news, makes sense of otherwise disconnected current events, and makes what we see every day take on new meaning and importance. Kunstler's *The Long Emergency* is a such a book. It's changed my world view more than any book in the past several years.

Kunstler's thesis is straight-forward: The world's supply of oil that has supported the past century of unparalleled civilized comfort will sometime in the next few decades become too expensive to extract, and no technology will substitute for what oil has provided us.

Even those who have most strenuously criticized the book generally agree with Kunstler's thesis—our lives and society will change severely when oil is no longer in bountiful supply. But Kunstler's guesses about what will happen to our cities, our daily lives, our economy, our social relationships, are all debatable. Imagining how different areas of lives would be affected by subtracting the benefits of oil is part of the intellectual entertainment of reading the book.

The book provides a brief history lesson in how we came to allow oil, a finite resource, to underpin almost every facet of our daily lives (our food, televisions, the Internet, computers, phones, pharmaceuticals, plastics, fabrics, and asphalt roads, among other things).

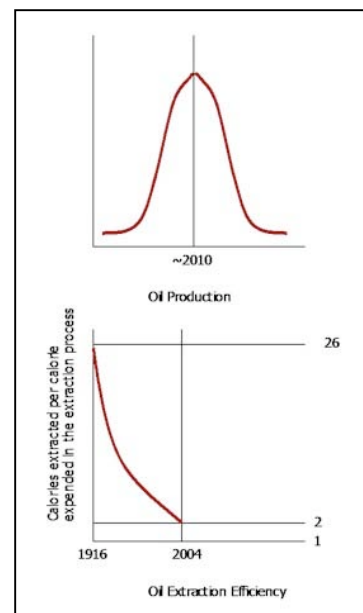


For those not familiar with environmental issues, Kunstler lays out often-cited basic facts, as well as less familiar ones: Since 1859, humans have consumed roughly half of the earth's liquid oil. Most of that half has been consumed in the past fifty years. The remaining half is for the most part deeper down, harder to get, in remote and often harsh parts of the world, and is likely to be fought over. More than sixty percent of the remaining oil is under Middle Eastern countries. The US uses twenty-five percent of the world's daily oil production.

Even if all the remaining oil were able to be extracted, and all countries continued to consume only at today's rates, the remaining oil would still be gone in about thirty-seven years. Much of the remaining oil is in shale or other environments where the energy needed to extract it is greater than the energy of the oil extracted.

Of the two parts of the book that most interested me, the section on alternative fuels was most surprising. Kunstler methodically takes every proposed solution to the decline of oil, and lays out the problems of physical reality that prevent it from being a serious possibility. The explanations are compelling. The effect, finally, is to convince a reader that yes, we are in denial about the inevitability of a change in how we consume energy. We all want to believe the "techno-optimists" who are reassuring us that we can keep our cars and large houses and long commutes because scientists will inevitably find a way. As Kunstler enumerates the problems with each techno-solution, such reassurances ring hollow.

Each potential replacement of cheap oil receives a clearly presented analysis, inadequately documented and supported, leaving me with unanswered questions. All the same, the explanations are convincing, in part because Kunstler concedes that each alternative source will provide some energy and some relief from



the problems of less or no oil. No alternative source, however, has the characteristics of oil that enable our world as we know it—portability, storability, safety when handled “with a modest amount of care by people with double-digit IQs,” and the ability to be made into many kinds of fuel—gasoline, diesel, kerosene, aviation fuel, heating oil.

Natural gas won’t replace oil; natural gas production peaked in the US in 1973; thanks to improved technology and ever-increasing demand, most of the fields being discovered now are rapidly depleted, often within a year or so. Hydrogen as an alternative energy source is questionable because it takes more energy to manufacture usable hydrogen than the hydrogen itself produces; it’s a net energy loser. Some other abundant source of energy, such as nuclear power, would have to be available to produce adequate amounts hydrogen. Even with a vast increase in nuclear power plants to manufacture hydrogen, it has its own problems—corrosiveness, a tendency to leak, difficulty in transportation. After detailed explanations to undercut political claims for the future of hydrogen, Kunstler concedes that “miraculous technological breakthroughs” could make a “hydrogen economy” possible if the breakthroughs can “alter the known laws of thermodynamics.”

Again and again, we face the issue: the supply of oil is diminishing, and the proposed replacements are largely wishful thinking. Kunstler takes on coal, hydroelectric power, solar power, wind power, synthetic oil, thermal depolymerization, biomass, methane hydrates, zero-point energy, and finally, nuclear energy, and shows the limits of each. Even though these methods generally could produce some electricity, the quantities (except for nuclear power) would likely be small, and besides, “most of America’s energy needs are for things that electricity can’t do well,” such as flying planes, or running the trucking industry. Kunstler says that “only about thirty-six percent” of the energy consumed in the US is in the form of generated electricity. Changes are inevitable.

The “converging catastrophes” of Kunstler’s subtitle are generally a gathering together of what we hear in the news about

global climate change, world-wide scarcity of drinkable water, the melting of the polar ice masses and the likely inundation of coastal regions where most of the world’s populations live, environmental degradation, epidemics of infectious diseases and so on. Put them all together and subtract the influence of abundant petroleum, and it’s a world of the sort we’ve only read about in studies of the Middle Ages.

At any rate, Kunstler’s exaggerations aside, the future the book points to is unlike what futurists have usually posited. The lack of our grounding in the facts of human existence familiar to any human being in the nineteenth century or earlier has encouraged our denial. That all our food—grains, animals, fowl, fruit, vegetables—comes from plants, and that plants require undeveloped land with healthy topsoil to grow well, that it’s costly to move food from where it’s grown to where it’s consumed, that without refrigeration food deteriorates rapidly when it’s transported any distance—all these realities will return intensely if oil disappears. Kunstler states early in the book that as civilized Euro-Americans we’ve had a 150-year dispensation from many of the less pleasant aspects of nature with which humans have always lived. “The fossil fuel bonanza was a one-time deal,” though, which has given each person in industrialized countries the equivalent of hundreds of slaves at our disposal. We’re in the position of antebellum slaveholders who refuse to consider a life without the privileges which we feel is our entitlement. Dick Cheney stated our unwavering stance well: “The American way of life is not negotiable.”

Not all that Kunstler foresees would be negative. He says succinctly that “Life will get much more real”—the physical world will no longer be endlessly mediated for us. We will be doing more hands-on food-growing, clothes-making, and other domestic activities the human race has always engaged in. (A hundred years ago, thirty percent of Americans worked on farms. Today, oil-driven industrial agriculture enables only 1.6 percent of the American population to feed 300 million Americans.) Our entertainment will be more homegrown, too—Kunstler suggests that we will be happier learning to sing and play musical instruments for ourselves, because no entertainment will be

technologically delivered from afar. “Life will be more intensely and increasingly local,” he says. We will grow food closer to home, work closer to home, and center our social lives in our local community.

Kunstler’s language is endlessly entertaining. His tendency toward hyperbole is matched by his analogies and concreteness, as in his assertion that “Some cornucopians believe that oil is not fossilized, liquefied organic matter but rather a naturally occurring mineral substance that exists in endless abundance at the earth’s deep interior like the creamy nougat center of a bonbon.” He presents a few bits of interesting terminology as well, such as “consensus trance” (our tendency to remain unperturbed by a future without oil, since no one in powerful positions seems to be thinking of it), “the psychology of previous investment” (we have too much invested in the status quo to change anything voluntarily), and EROEI (energy returned over energy invested—why we won’t be able to get all the oil out of the earth). Some sentences he’s obviously playing with: “An LNG terminal is classic “LULU” (locally undesirable land use) certain to provoke a NIMBY response.”

Near the end of the book Kunstler suggests the likely fates of different parts of the country without oil. He notes that even minor disruptions in power grids and freight deliveries have quickly caused enormous problems in high-rise, densely-populated cities. The Great Plains states and Rocky Mountain states without oil would not be able to support most of the populations they now have—who are dependent upon air conditioning, long commutes, and pumped water for irrigation and drinking. Not surprisingly, he believes that New England and the Pacific Northwest will fare the best, since both have the possibility of local hydroelectric power, fresh water, still-intact local “civic infrastructures,” and arable land where the soil hasn’t been sterilized by decades of petrochemical farming. The Northwest may not have such a rosy future, however, with the arrival of millions of people fleeing California and Arizona and Asian piracy along the coast.

Judging from online reviews, the book seems to be accomplishing its mission of rattling its readers out of complacency about the likely

course of events with climate change, epidemics, and continual “resource wars” such as we’re fighting in the Middle East now. The book could be a lot more convincing and useful if it had notes leading to sources and documenting its assertions. Too often the book jumps to the worst-case outcomes. For instance, while small communities of people living sustainable lives seems attractive, the death knoll Kunstler sounds for big cities and suburbia might be premature—cities have arisen where rivers and other geographic features have made life most attractive, and while the lack of affordable energy may mean they can support fewer people, their locations will most likely continue to be well populated. And suburbia with its many large back yards could be able to support a modern-day equivalent of “victory gardens.”

I finished the book with more questions than certainties. How long do we have before such a “long emergency” gets underway (or is it already underway)? How many people might die if we can no longer maintain 3,000-mile long food supply lines? How intense an economic crash will occur if the price of oil goes to, say, \$200 or \$500 a barrel? If factories start closing down with energy too expensive to operate, what will people do all day? Can our social fabric stay intact under the strain of millions of penniless, poorly-fed unemployed? The answers for the most part are “It depends”—mostly on how those with money and power act in the next few years: Will they insulate themselves from the immediate effects? Or will they act—for instance, by shifting money from highway construction and trucking subsidies to a railroad system which could be run electrically? Will they continue to build high-rises dependent upon elevators and ventilation and pumped water, or design more low-energy living structures? It’s these and dozens of other questions I’ve been asking myself that make the book so powerful.

Five Irish Bastards & One Drunken Monster

The Pogues. *Rum Sodomy & the Lash*. Rhino. 2004.

By Scott Dionne

Irish rock and roll has a more organic history than its counterpart in England, where the music was essentially derived from an American import, the blues. Save for a brief period in the 1960s, when Irish bands could only find work as derivative showbands mimicking English blues and psychedelic rock, modern Irish popular music has a unique sense of cultural and aesthetic identity. While rock music was beginning to wane in England and the States in the mid 1970s, like lost, winded marathon runners, the music scene in Ireland began hitting its stride. The sudden emergence of such highly original bands as Thin Lizzy, Horslips, Them, Moving Hearts, Dexy's Midnight Riders, The Undertones, U2, Ash, The Pogues, Planxty, and The Cranberries, seemed to burst forth out of nowhere.

What perhaps accounts for this emergence—and what makes Irish rockers quite distinct from their rock and roll neighbors in England — is a favorable attitude towards folk traditions. British pop musicians, in the early days of rock, anyway, sought to distance themselves from the very culture that raised them. Whereas it has been customary for young British pop musicians to regard England's musical heritage as one of the three heads of the Hydra to slay—Daddy, Queen, and BBC Dance Hall music —, Irish rockers have tended to feel pride towards their Celtic roots. Good pop music seems to come naturally to Irish youth because they are not having to drown out with guitars and drums ambivalent feelings towards their own musical heritage.

Of the bands mentioned above, The Pogues seem the most “pro Irish.” Musically they are no match for such bands as The Cranberries or U2, but no other Irish band that I can think of has achieved the kind of critical attention The Pogues have nor made the kind of lasting imprint upon the U.K. music scene. U2 draws crowds on all five continents; The Pogues, nearly two decades after disbanding, continue to draw fire from the music press for their highly original interpretations of Irish folk music. Although The Pogues will occasionally get together to do an annual show for old time's

sake, the chatter on the internet might fool one into thinking the band is still alive and well. It isn't.

The band disbanded after producing only five albums, three of which included the lyrics and singing of their leader, Shane MacGowan, whose songwriting is some of the best work that has ever come out of the Irish pop music scene. His voice, too, is worth noting. What Yeats might've sounded like had he been around at the time to join The Sex Pistols.

Although several of The Pogues formally came from the punk music scene—which explains the genesis of the unfortunate label that has stuck to them like a bad tattoo, “punk folk” —their music is free of punk's diffused anger and social detachment. MacGowan, in fact, is a vocal Pro-Republican supporter and notorious sympathizer with some of the rougher element of the IRA, such as Mad Dog Dominic McGlinchy, and is not afraid to use what celebrity he has to help their cause.

Their unique genesis—six blokes from the punk/rock music scene in London deciding to get together to form an Irish folk band—suggests an unholy alliance, as though The Ramones had suddenly quit punk music and joined up with the Carter family. But a careful listen to their music can overcome anyone's skepticism. Infusing a punk attitude with traditional Irish folk music creates an unusually satisfying distillation. Yes, it does taste a little bit like aged brandy with a slight undertone of damnation.

Having spent two decades listening to their brazen rendition of folk music, I have come to believe that this is how folk music might have sounded in the distant past—hard-living people making hard-driving music. I've always suspected medieval music was much more raucous and hellbent than it tends to get depicted in history books and movies. There is that time-travel feel to The Pogues' music, as though I'm listening to what Patrick Pearce and his Republican cohorts might've been listening to in Dublin taverns as they stoked themselves into an insurrection against the British.

Recently the entire five-album catalog of The Pogues was reissued. The “reissue” is to CDs what the Greatest Hits album was to LPs—a marketing ploy to resurrect an aging artist or

band's career. With the advent of the iPod, I see little reason for purchasing any CD, let alone an older, reissued one, unless the buyer is a fanatic about fidelity (downloaded music suffers a slight compromise in sound quality as the data is transferred from one medium to another). As an aging hipster-dufus stereophile, I fall into this category (and, evidently, according to *Spin* magazine, right smack in the babyboomer demographics, which means I am one of those cave dwellers who still believe music is what you drive to a store to buy). So if you're like me and you like your stereo components handmade in Italy and England and not mass produced in China—and if you are slightly obsessive about fidelity—then the CD still makes sense as your first choice. Even if you have to drive somewhere to get it.

Rum Sodomy, & the Lash is The Pogues' second album and many think their best. The conventional view is that it represents a more mature version of The Pogues than their first album and a far less intoxicated MacGowan than their third album, *Hell's Ditch* (as an artist MacGowan disregards conventional wisdom regarding mixing alcohol and work). Much of the credit for this album should go the Elvis Costello, who produced it (and kept MacGowan & Co. on task, no small feat). This album came out in 1985, a year in which Wham! had three songs on the charts, two of them #1 hits. Costello understood that what made The Pogues such an intriguing phenomenon was how un-Wham! they were—that is, no pastel IZOD sweaters or feathered hairdos on the artists and no danceable me generation beats in the music. While the musical aesthetics of the mid-eighties leaned towards bouncy, layered, synthesizer-dominated music that sounded like a feelgood soundtrack to the Reagan/Thatcher era, in the hands of Costello, The Pogues sounded more like singing pirates laying siege to 10 Downing Street. As Tom Waits once said of them, "They're like Dead End Kids on a leaky boat. That Treasure Island kind of decadence... Their music is like brandy of the damned."

The songs on this album are mediations on death, alienation, and loneliness. MacGowan left Ireland early in his life, and his songs reflect a morbid fascination with fellow travelers whose wanderlust and reckless, bohemian ways come

at premium prices. *Rum* begins with "The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn," a farcical ballad performed in the frenzied 8/4 tempo of punk. The song is based on the Ulster folk hero Cuchulainn, who is doomed to spend his last days withering away on a sick bed. MacGowan's song turns him into a John Wilmot sort of rogue whose debaucheries have led him to an early date with a death bed. His friends have gathered to hold an improvised wake. In his final hour:

McCormick and Richard Tauber are
singing by the bed
There's a glass of punch below your feet
and an angel at your head
There's devils on each side of you with
bottles in their hands
You need one more drop of poison and
you'll dream of foreign lands
When you pissed yourself in Frankfurt
and got syph down in Cologne
And you heard the rattling death trains
as you lay there down alone
Frank Ryan bought you whiskey at a
brothel in Madrid
And you decked some fucking
blackshirt who was cursing all the Yids
At the sick bed of Cuchulainn we'll
kneel and say a prayer

This is a fairly typical stuff for MacGowan, who likes to freshen up native myths by superimposing his chums and their sordid shenanigans onto them. A MacGowan hero is a toothless, incontinent vagabond, a man in need of a shave and pocket change for a meal. He drinks too much, sleeps in back allies, whores his time away. He's lost touch with his family and friends. Maybe he is sorry he left home. For some of the choices he made or did not make. Is generally an allaround fruitless soul. Yet he does not succumb to despair. Indeed, to an inner cabal of fellow rogues, he is streetwisely heroic. While death is there to take him away, Cuchalainn still has time for one more drink and—we'll have to make this quick, dear fellow—a brief jig upon his coffin.

MacGowan is a night owl whose world view is illuminated by the moon and the stars. Few of his songs are set during the day. In the song "Dirty Old Town," spring is a "girl in the

street at night.” In the song “Jesse James,” the James gang rob a train “on a Saturday night/ The Stars were shining bright.” I’m not sure this is historically accurate, but it seems to work in the song. In “The Old Main Drag,” a song about a young boy who runs away to London, all kinds of sordid abuses happen in alleyways in the wee hours of the night. And in their only hit “A Pair of Brown Eyes” (# 72 with a bullet in the U.K), the speaker, a war veteran, “One summer evening drunk to hell/I sat there nearly lifeless” as a song on the jukebox unleashes a painful memory of war. So he stumbles out of the tavern:

Sometimes crawling, sometimes walking
A hungry sound came across the breeze
So I gave the walls a talking
And I heard the sounds of long ago from the old canal
And the birds were whistling in the trees
Where the wind was gently laughing

MacGowan the lonely night owl consoled by the song of nightingales.

While the lyrics are generally the strong suit of The Pogues’ music, their instrumentation, while perhaps not of the caliber of, say U2, is, well, ‘singular’ comes to mind. The six artists who make up the band are, after all, former punk rockers born again as folk musicians. They at the very least score high on the funk meter. Where else can you hear Uilleann pipes and tin whistle in a punk band? Which other band uses a beer tray beat against the head as a rhythm instrument? Critics who haven’t been impressed liken them to a bar band on a good night. I am a critic who is impressed, and I would liken them to a bar band that brings you back the next Saturday night, eager for more, instead of to the overpriced U2 concert at the Megadome.

Philip Chevron, the guitarist, was formally in The Radiators from Space. His punk background can be mostly felt on the three or four songs on *Rum* whose frenetic tempo exploit MacGowan’s genius at singing long lines of verse without needing to pause for breath. Indeed, the faster Chevron takes the song, the more MacGowan seems in his element. Cait O’Riordan, the bass player, and Andrew Ranken, the drummer—who plays like a one-

man drum corps leading an army of rogues against The Pogues’ bitterest enemy, Constipated People—work well together as a rhythmic governor on Chevron’s turbo-charged guitarwork. The organ playing of James Fearnley, which adds a hearth-like warmth to the melodies, makes one wonder why the instrument has lost favor with pop musicians.

The Pogues held a self-serving press conference in Dublin shortly after the debut of *Rum Sodomy & the Lash*. The PR event was meant, of course, to peddle the album to a roomful of music writers. What happened, though, was more like an insurgency against the band. Many at the conference had in fact attended the PR event mainly to voice their objections to the band for making a mockery of Irish folk music. As Philip Chevron remembers it, one writer said “What you are doing is bastardizing Irish music.”

From *Rum Sodomy, & the Lash* on, The Pogues were to remain a controversial band. For those who opposed them, and there were many, including the revered British folk artist Richard Thompson, The Pogues were not much more than a drunken circus act, making a mockery of Irish music. Ladies and gentlemen, for your amusement, the great drunken bastardizers of Irish music—The Pogues!

But there were those who loved the band, too, including The Clash’s Joe Strummer, who at one time considered producing one of their albums. Perhaps their strongest supporter was someone living Stateside, Tom Waits, whose

adaptation of the song “The Band Played Waltzing Matilda” helped to introduce a generation of American listeners to The Pogues



and their unique form of pop music. (This was how I came to learn about them.)

Shane MacGowan has complained in interviews recently of being dismissed as nothing more than a “drunken monster.” The

internet is full of photographs of MacGowan caught in various drunken monster poses. People post sightings of Shane as though they are documenting Yeti encounters. That MacGowan is at heart a gregarious public fellow—an anti-celeb, if you will—makes him vulnerable to this sort of webporn. Many of us who admire The Pogues' contribution to popular music find the lurid interest in MacGowan's private demons a distraction from the more important truth of this artist: that he was and continues to be an exceptional lyricist (check out his solo work with his band The Popes for proof of this), and that, while at the moment completely toothless and still battling the bottle, his singing possesses an endearing warmth and sincerity that are all too often missing in popular music today. When he sings "A Pair of Brown Eyes" it is not merely to showcase a syncopated dance routine on MTV or as a public forum to trash-talk a former celebrity lover. It is to break your heart. And he does.

There is an overall smartness to the band, too, a degree of sophistication we Americans do not usually expect in our young pop musicians. The title, for instance, is from a comment that Winston Churchill once made about the Royal Navy: "Don't talk to me about naval traditions. It's nothing but rum, sodomy, and the lash." This offcuffed remark, with a boozy hint of the two quarts per night of brandy that Churchill was alleged to have consumed as prime minister, all too well ties in with the album's punkish tendency to kick folk music pieties in the shins. And then there is the album cover, a reworking of Jean-Louis-Andre-Theodore Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, with the faces of The Pogues all superimposed onto the painting. How hyperreal to

superimpose faces onto a painting whose origin is in superimposition (Gericault used the faces of hospital cadavers and his friends, including the painter Eugene Delacroix, as models for his painting). The image on the cover seems prescient because The Pogues, huddled onto Gericault's small, makeshift raft, seem more adrift from each other than upon any sea.

MacGowan did one more album with The Pogues and then he was thrown off the raft, ostensibly for his heavy drinking on stage but I suspect just as likely for his insistence on taking the band in a more political, more pro-Republican direction. The Pogues wanted to make music as they had been making—modern renditions of tradition types of music; MacGowan wanted the band to go back to their punk roots, to use music as a Molotov cocktail against the British Establishment. The post-MacGowan Pogues managed to stay together long enough to make two more albums, both of them receiving thumbs down by music critics and fans who viewed Shane MacGowan as 90% of The Pogues, (I am in a very small minority as a fan of both albums). Shortly after disbanding, the surviving members floated off into a sunset of obscurity. Shane MacGowan, however, the man whom the press has been predicting for three decades a Cuchulainn-like demise due to his lifetime dalliance with the bottle, has managed to cheat death. He currently records and performs with his band The Popes. Check out his album *The Snake*. The title song is one of the most brilliant pop songs to come down the pike in many years.

The devils at his bedside will just have to wait.

Coming Spring Issue....

Does this guy deserve the next Nobel Prize in Literature?

