

## A State Of Grace

Stuart Cosgrove looks at the appeal of The Pogues who just missed it to No 1

You could almost hear the noise of the disaffected willing The Pogues to be the Christmas No 1. For the first time in living memory it seemed that the trite emotionalism of the typical British Christmas was about to be rudely usurped by *Fairy Tale Of New York*, The Pogues' hard-boiled ballad about a tragi-comic love affair amongst America's Irish community.

It didn't make it. But the chorus - 'You scumbag, you

beliefs. They have obvious republican sympathies but resolutely resist accusations that they are a sectarian group, preferring their emotionally nostalgic role as the migrant's choice. At Pogues' concerts throughout the world, the Irish and Scots flood to see them, to act out exaggerated gaelic rituals and celebrate the greatest pleasure of all: the art of not being English. There is no more stunning sight in contemporary pop than The Pogues in communion with their faithful, whether it's St Patrick's night in Brixton or at the altar of low-brow rock in Glasgow's Barrowlands Ballroom.

Like their Scottish compatriots The Proclaimers, The Pogues are increasingly identified with that nebulous pop category, the 'new authenticity'. Simply put, they have avoided the commercial artifice of pretty-boy pop sometimes to the point of parody. If the perfect pop fantasy lurks in Rick Astley's boxer shorts then its rude awakening is Shane McGowan's teeth. Never in the field of creative conflict has such an unlikely superstar risen to fame. McGowan's origins in the punk scene, where he fronted a band called The Nipple Erectors, and his affinity with Irish rebel songs and 60s r&b has created an unlikely hybrid which few have dared to copy. But The Pogues are more than their vocalist. They are an eight-piece band, sometimes augmented with sympathetic guests, whose mixture of traditional instrumentation and power pop has taken the Celtic twilight into a brash new era.

Their two previous albums, *Red Roses For Me and Rum*, *Sodomy and The Lash* are studded with oblique references to James Joyce and Brendan Behan, forging immediate links with the ingrained imaginativeness of Irish literature. When they

appeared on a special edition of *The Gaye Byrne Show*, initially broadcast in Ireland and then shown in a depleted form on Channel 4, The Pogues stood alongside Bono of U2, Christy Moore and The Dubliners. Had the equivalent giants of English music appeared on the same stage, Channel 4 would probably have declared a national holiday.

The Pogues recently returned from Australia,

where they provided a welcome and robust edge to the bicentennial celebration. On their return, they discovered *If I Should Fall From Grace From God* was Britain's biggest-selling album and the Birmingham Six were still in jail for a crime they didn't commit. 'Nothing's changed', says Jem Finer, The Pogues' witty banjo player, 'We are still Radio 1's most loathsome pop group and being Irish is still a crime!' •



Political Pogues

maggot, you cheap lousy faggot' - stands as one of the most eloquently crafted tiffs of all time, and finally convinced British pop critics that a streak of creative genius lurked behind The Pogues' debauched public image.

The release of their third album, *If I Should Fall From Grace From God*, is possibly the most accessible milestone in The Pogues' career. It combines the familiar emotions of shambling Catholicism, unapologetic revelry and migrant self-doubt and adds a new-found pan-European lyricism in songs like the hispanic *Fiesta* and the self-explanatory *Turkish Song Of The Damned*.

*If I Should Fall From Grace* includes a timely homage to the Birmingham Six and the injustices visited on them by the British legal system, in what for The Pogues is a rare statement of their political