

New England

TALLAGHT SONG WRITER'S POLITICALLY-CHARGED SINGLE

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Britain's colonial past and the political and social issues surrounding the Grenfell Tower disaster, where 72 people lost their lives in 2017, served as the key influences for Tallaght folk musician Shane Ó Fearghail's politically-charged new single, 'New England'.

Now based in Vienna, Shane's music pays homage to Irish traditions and, pre-pandemic, he was a mainstay at Celtic festivals around Europe and set up his own Celtic festival, called Schottenfest, in recent years, bringing together the strong Celtic links between Ireland, Scotland and Austria.

The Balrothery man took some time out to tell *The Echo* about his decision to write a politically-motivated song, why he decided to write it in a traditional Irish ballad style, and the impact that he hopes it will have on listeners.

'New England' takes a searing look at Britain's history of colonial imperialism, what motivated you to broach this topic through song?

Where do you start? It was a huge topic to take on with so many moving parts. The easy answer would be to say that I cannot abide greed, in any shape or form. In a nutshell, that is what the history of British colonial imperialism represents to me – greed of the highest order. The more complicated answer would be to address the facts of our history and how British colonial imperialism has left an indelible mark on Ireland, on me, and the world over. Even now, with everything that has been going on on our islands, with Brexit and Europe, not to mention race inequality, those old ghosts seem to be rearing their ugly heads.

The song also references the Grenfell Tower fire, where 72 people lost their lives. What was it about the fire that was such a strong motivator for you to put pen to paper and include it in 'New England'?

The Grenfell Tower disaster was in fact the catalyst and the point where I realised I had to take this on. Because of the whole Brexit debacle, I had started to put pen to paper. What happened at Grenfell Tower resonated with me and I felt a strong sense of solidarity with those who had died, and those who had lost loved ones. It felt all too familiar. That feeling where once again it was the common people who suffered because of greed, who continue to suffer in search of justice, and constantly have to fight for their rights in an arena where British politicians continue to posture in their avoidance of accountability. It was something I felt I had to speak out about.

What was it like for you to write a political song?

Necessary, important – even therapeutic. As a songwriter, if you are socially conscious and politically-minded, you should speak out about injustice and use your songs to raise awareness. Sing your truth, so to speak. With 'New England', I got to address a lot of those big old issues that plagued me and haunt us: the Irish Famine, Gaelic cultural decimation, British colonialism – even slavery. It helped me understand these issues better this time round and in context; especially when animating British symbols, locations and flags for the video. That process opened many old scars. But the words and the song came quite easy, if I'm honest. What I



**Folk musician
Shane Ó Fearghail**

Photo by Sabine Mann
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did find difficult however, was performing such a hardcore political song in public. That is something I have had to work on.

The song references England past and present, and is written in a traditional ballad style. Why was it important for you to combine these two components in 'New England'?

To paint the right picture, I suppose. I used the style to sell that 'old world' idea. The choice of instruments also had a role to play. Harmonica, banjo, violin, guitar...even those haunting Gregorian voices you hear. All these elements helped to colour that colonial landscape, or seascape (as in the video), making the song more believable as a ballad set in a specific time period. A folk format made sense.

What has the response to the song been like so far?

The response has been good so far, which is surprising, if I'm honest. After all, it is a six-minute song and has a very heavy topic. It's not your typical radio play, so when you hear it is being played on small international radio stations, whether they be local, national or web radio, it makes you think. In reality, though, it's early days for a song like this. But it is resonating with

people. I am happy for that.

What impact do you hope the song will have on listeners?

It's hard to say. Maybe it gets people thinking and starts the conversation, that conversation might well depend on which side of the water you're from though. 'New England' is a hard song to grapple with. Yes, it is highly political and it has harsh truths, but it has a definite message and tone. With this song my intention was never to point a finger. Yes, I was angry when I wrote it, but I tried to come at this song from a place of empathy rather than anger, to address past hurts and grievances with maybe a means to understanding them.

Where can people go to find out more about your work?

You can find all you need to know on my website www.shaneofearghail.com. And if you want to know more about the background behind the song, its politics, and the history, you will find that in the 'Blog' section of my website. Click 'New England - The Lyrics' and dive in. But grab a cup of tea, it's a long read. Might I also add – regards to all at home and *The Echo* for the continued support.