

Larry Kirwan

Matt Mrowca

Art, at its best, effects those who experience it on every emotional level. Anger and joy, love and lust, longing and loss, are all the tools of an artist; these are the instruments of creation more so the ink and paper, oil and canvas, voice and melody.

Artists, regardless of the medium, don't just create for aesthetic purposes. They aren't interested in simply rushing off a still life to hang in the living room, or penning a hit song to sway along to at the next prom night. They have something to say, and often struggle to express themselves even in the medium in which they are most proficient. Those who can master several forms, while blessed in talent and skill, must bear the burden of being so creative, and the constant need to push forward.

In 1989, author and playwright Larry Kirwan, four years removed from chucking rock and roll forever, shared drinks and admiration for The Clash with fellow musician Chris Byrne at Paddy Reilly's in New York City. The two formed Black 47, a band steeped in the rich tradition of Irish music, with the soul of artists such as the Clash and Bob Marley.

This isn't to say that things went well. The band was far from a traditional Irish band, making their welcome at traditional pubs more confrontational than friendly. Finding a place in the New York music scene at the end of the pre-alternative era wasn't exactly a given. But, Paddy Reilly's eventually gave them a home, and the band began to gain members; Fred Parcells on trombone and tin whistle, Geoffrey Blythe on tenor and soprano saxophones, Thomas Hamlin on drums and percussion, Andrew Good sight on bass and vocals and, later, Joseph Mulvanerty on uilleann pipes and flute, when Byrne left the band to pursue other projects.

A debut album was released in 1989, followed-up by a self-titled release in 1991 and an EP on EMI/SBK Records in 1992. They began gigging 200 nights a year, and became dubbed "the house band for New York City." Their shows became notable for celebrity appearances in the audience, notably Joe Strummer. Another of those stars, Ric Ocasek, stepped up to produce the band's 1993 album, *Fire of Freedom* (EMI/SBK Records), giving Black 47 their own star turn, a video on MTV, and coverage in magazines from *Playgirl* to *Time*.

While the band never quite set MTV on fire, and the celebrity star may have faded, Black 47 hadn't yet recorded any of their best and most important material. Drawing on his own personal history, as well as the long political and economic history of Ireland - the band's name itself references 1847, a pivotal year in Irish history and the darkest period of the potato famine in that country - Kirwan's songs present the historical and the intensely personal with similar passion. They are modern protest songs, folksy and tinged with traditional movements, yet wild, uninhibited and even reckless. You'll hear "Danny Boy" one moment, a reference to James Joyce the next, and then enough alcohol, sex, violence and pain to make you wonder how they made it this far.

Six excellent albums have followed, notably *Green Suede Shoes* (Mercury Records) in 1996, and *Trouble in the Land* (Shanachie Records) in 2000 and a couple of live albums tracked at the late, lamented *Wetlands* in New York, *Live in New York City* (Gadfly Records), release in 1999, and their most recent record, *On Fire* (Gadfly), which came out in October 2001.

Kirwan's muse isn't limited to just music. Passionate about the theater, and a prolific playwright, a collection of his plays, *Mad Angels* (Forty Seven Books; January 1994), represents some of his ten published works, which have been performed in the United States, as well as Ireland and the United Kingdom. One of those, "Liverpool Fantasy", has just been published as a novel, representing Kirwan's first foray into a new genre.

Liverpool Fantasy (Thunder's Mouth Press), released in April, is the story of the Beatles, not as we know them, but a fictional re-telling of their story had the band not lasted beyond 1962. The lads have reunited in 1987, in a very different world, but with their personalities still very much evident. Kirwan's tale attempts to not only play with how the lives of these individuals would have evolved over the last part of the twentieth century, but how the world itself would have been very different. Kirwan's work pays tribute to the Fab Four by crediting them with bringing a sense of idealism to the world through their music.

As Kirwan embarks on a promotional tour for the book, Chorus and Verse spoke with him about the novel, and the early news about the new record from Black 47, which will hopefully be released by the end of the year. He's a busy man these days, working to get a new Irish music and cultural festival called American Fleadh off the ground, along with his many other endeavors.

For Interview go to: http://www.chorusandverse.com/content/200306/20030601_LarryKirwan.htm