

PART III

GREEN CARD ROCKERS

Black 47
amps up
traditional
Irish music
with
immigrant
anthems and
rude
electric
guitars.
'Danny Boy' it
ain't.

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black

Joe Doherty called from jail once to hear these Irish New Yorkers rock. They're so good, says another fan, 'they'll make you forget your girlfriend hates you.'

47

BY JOHN ANDERSON
STAFF WRITER



*Oh Mammy dear, we're all mad over here
Livin' in America . . .*

A MAN WITH a face like yesterday's muffin stands on the Second Avenue sidewalk, staring at Chris Byrne through the window of Paddy Reilly's bar. The eyes seem to recognize the instrument Byrne is playing, but the dropped jaw poses a question: What, by all that's holy, is the rest of that heathen noise?

Inside, guitarist-singer Larry Kirwan slashes at his Fender, making rude chords that mate in the air with the sound of Byrne's Uilleann pipes — and Fred Parcells' trombone, and Geoff Blythe's sax — and

produce the odd offspring that is the music of Black 47. It's a Wednesday night in America, and they're off into another song about immigration and drinking, and immigration and America.

Bridie broke down and started to bawl

When I told her about me divorce from the bank

She said I've got news of me own I'm two months late and it's not with the rent

She said I'd have to be tellin' her Da

So we drove the Morris Minor to Cork

The ould fella said you've got two choices:

Castration

Or a one-way ticket to New York!

"Funky Ceili" (Ceili is an Irish music/dance form) isn't a true story. Exactly. But it's true enough to make it a favorite of the crowd that comes to Reilly's twice a week. Black 47, named for the worst year of the 19th-Century potato famine that forced an earlier exodus from Ireland, plays songs about a new group of immigrants — many illegal — who make up one of the major subcultures in New York City. Not that this band's audience is limited to that group, though, especially tonight: There are record company people at the bar. And it's not the first time.

"Free! . . . Joe!! . . . Now!!!" Kirwan and Byrne sing, demanding the release of Joe Doherty, now held 10 years without bail downtown in the Metropolitan Correc-

tional Center on a charge of killing a British officer. ("Doherty called the bar once to hear the band," Kirwan says later. "He liked the sound.")

Parcells' trombone punctuates the "Now!" every time it comes around, giving the song a defiant punch. But there's a crushing melancholy about it, too, and a resignation in the refrain, where the sax and pipes keen together. It's no weepy Paddy music; it rocks. But it also retains a haunting Celtic air, with all the accompanying echoes of tragedy.

Which also means it doesn't work for everyone. "I had a fight with a bar owner out in Queens," Kirwan says. "A real blowout. He said, 'Can't you play some modern stuff?' I said, 'It can't get more modern than this, I wrote it this morning!'"

What few songs the band borrows are of the revolutionary genre — "Biko" by Peter Gabriel, Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up," and some Bob Dylan — played with all the edge of a rusty razor. But Kirwan's lyrics are just as highly politicized, and reflect the circumstances in which many young immigrants find themselves when they reach New York. "Home of the Brave," for instance, is about one of the thousands of undocumented Irish who leave home hungry for work and end up hungry for home.

The very next day I went downtown

And I got a job knockin' big walls down

Ten bucks an hour sounded good to me

And I'm payin' some dead man's Social Security

Got a space on a floor in a room in the Bronx

Oh man, I got everything I want With ten more bodies for company

And you'll never be lonely in the land of the free

The band's music reflects the cul-

tural cacaphony that is the city itself: The drum machine puts out hard, insistent rap beats; reggae numbers come more frequently as the night grows older. The horns, improvising together, at times suggest Dixieland, at times Big Band jazz, and sometimes just melt with the pipes into one large reedy drone. Blythe makes forays into free jazz with his sax solos and Kirwan's guitar is as anarchic as any thrash master around. That the sound works at all is surprising. That it works so well is miraculous.

"They're so good they'll make you forget your girlfriend hates you," said Ben Feola, a teacher at the Center for English Studies in Manhattan who's become a regular at Reilly's (on Black 47 nights, Wednesdays and Saturdays). Kathleen Price of Queens, a devotee of things Irish, noted between songs how the band lifts from the traditional repertoire; the melody of "Down by the Sally Garden," for instance, was worked into a Black 47 song called "40 Shades of Blue."

A LOT OF THOSE songs I heard when I was young," said Kirwan, who grew up in Wexford, Ireland; the family business was carving headstones.

"They became very hackneyed and had these awful arrangements," Kirwan said of the old songs. "Sloppy sentimental Irish things, which I abhor. But I found if you strip all that stuff away the melodies are great and they're hundreds of years old. One thing I wanted to do with Black 47 was to get away from this whole tears-in-the-beer thing,



Officer / musician
Byrne leaps off stage
during a performance
at Paddy Reilly's.

Chris Byrne sings and plays the bagpipes in a St. Patrick's Day performance at a Manhattan club.

Below, from left, Fred Parcells, Larry Kirwan, Geoff Blythe and Byrne at Paddy Reilly's.

shudder when he thinks about it. "There were some rough nights," he said. "It was nasty. And the thing was, I'm a product of that same scene, so I'd be a lot more uptight about it. I couldn't see myself going up and giving a hand the finger, but I was cringing too, 'cause I didn't like the way it sounded at first either.

"There was no doubt in my mind that Larry could write," he said. "But the thing was to hang in 'til the sound developed. Then Fred started coming down to the gigs."

PARCELLS, THE trombonist and tin whistle player, is now touring in Europe with Kirwan's onetime bandmate Pierce Turner, who has a recording deal with RCA. Kirwan and Turner's old group, Major Thinkers — which had a club hit with "Avenue B Is the Place to Be" — also included Tom Hamlin, the sometime percussionist for Black 47.

Terry George, former rock columnist for the Irish Voice, was the first journalist to write about Black 47.

Newsday Photos / John Keating

and show how things are."

The membership of the group is as diverse as the sound. Kirwan, for example, the only member from Ireland, is both a songwriter and a playwright; his "Liverpool Fantasy," which supposes what the world would be like if the Beatles had never made it (Spiro Agnew, for instance, becomes president), has been staged here and in Dublin. He performed in Czechoslovakia during the fall of the Communist regime. And he spent three years in New York as an illegal immigrant himself.

"I had a lawyer who was gonna do the whole thing for nothing," he said one morning in his large studio near Canal Street; his wife, June Anderson (they have two boys), is a dancer and dance instructor. Kirwan, now 38, said that after hearing nothing for a year he called the lawyer back. "He said 'Kirwan? Oh yeah. You won't believe this, but the papers just fell out of the back of the desk.' A year later and nothing had been done."

One gathers that the time spent waiting wasn't particularly tense. "Nah," he said. "I was playing, doing gigs. No one really gives that much of a damn . . . They don't really care about the Irish. I mean, if you shoot someone, they're gonna arrest you, but a New York City cop isn't gonna arrest you for being an illegal immigrant. His father probably was one."

Or his wife. Police Officer Chris Byrne, 28, plays pipes with Black 47 at night, and patrols on foot during the day, in what used to be Hell's Kitchen. He said his wife, Carmel, was illegal for a time, but it was straightened out long ago.

As have his problems with the department over the band. Originally

his superiors were apprehensive, but "they're very supportive of me now," Byrne said. "I'm allowed to play in the band, and I work steady days."

Byrne's sister lives in the house in Brooklyn's Windsor Terrace where he was born; he and his wife live next door with their two daughters. As a kid, his parents sent him to Ireland every summer, "to keep me out of trouble."

"I'd stayed with my aunt and uncle there, and that's where I learned my music." He said many of the best traditional Irish musicians are from New York, where there are Irish music schools that operate year round and are geared toward competition. "What makes me different," he said, "is that two months out of the year I'd be in the middle of Ireland, a really remote spot, cycling for tin-whistle lessons. And then I'd get back here in September and listen to the Clash for ten months.

"Gradually," he continued, "I began playing more during those ten months. But I wouldn't be in the cliques of the traditional players, 'cause I didn't go to the schools and competitions."

Byrne and Kirwan, their respective bands collapsing, met and formed Black 47 a little over a year ago. At first it was just the two of them, on pipes and electric guitar, playing working-class bars in Queens. "That was one of the ideas I had for it," said the red-haired Kirwan. "To take a body of original work and instead of going to CBGB or someplace where people'd expect you to go, take it into a working-class bar and see what that ambience and environment would do to the music."



They were met with more closed fists than open arms. "Throw us out? They wanted to kill us," Kirwan said. "It was amazing, the amount of uproar. Usually in these bars you get guys doing Christy Moore songs, and here we were yelling about immigration. I didn't realize what it would do to us either; it makes you much more aggressive. From the minute we got up there, it was stare-down thing. They'd sit there giving you the finger through a whole song."

Consequently, the less aggressive songs were dropped ("You had to nail 'em every time," Kirwan said.) and Black 47 evolved in an atmosphere of confrontation. Even now, Byrne seems to

"They were pretty raw at first, but the songwriting was great and Chris' combination of rock, rap and Celtic traditional was very exciting," George said. "And if you combine that with the politics of the lyrics, the Irish emigre stuff, well, it was very good."

George tagged the group's sound "green-card rock" and they started gigging around town — at Paddy Reilly's, at bars in the Bronx and opening for the Pogues at the Palladium on St. Patrick's Day, 1990. "They had picked up Fred on the trombone, which was a really interesting combination," George said. "But what's really taken them even beyond the

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consistently good stuff they were doing was the addition of Geoff Blythe on the sax."

Blythe, an easy-going, raw-boned Briton from the Midlands of England, was a member of Dexys Midnight Runners, a band from his hometown of Birmingham that had a No. 1 hit with 1983's "Come on Eileen"; he toured with Elvis Costello for more than a year and appears on Costello's "Punch the Clock" album. Kirwan said he had his kids in the park one day while his wife was teaching, and ran into Blythe's wife, Sharon, who had their children there, too. "She said, 'My husband's going nuts around the house, is there any work?' Fred couldn't make it one night so I said, 'Why don't you come down and play?'" One thing, as they say, led to another.

"When I first sat in I said, 'What am I gonna do with this?'" Blythe laughs. "But it works so well — the soprano [sax] and the pipes around so similar it's really strange. They sort of double each other."

As the lone Englishman in an Irish-oriented rock band, Blythe might be expected to get his share of harassment. But he said it's never happened. "Not," he said, "unless there's a soccer match on."

"Recently, somebody said to me 'I thought the English and Irish were like Jews and Arabs.' It's actually not like that," he said. "The two people get on really well together. The main problem's the governments."

While the band doesn't play the Bronx too much anymore ("The bartenders are such straight-laced — up here," George said.), the band, minus Parcells, went uptown to play the Bronx River Yacht Club — a cinderblock building on a dubious block that's frequented by Fordham University students. The audience, uniformed in baseball caps, baggy shorts and T-shirts, wasn't the band's usual crowd, certainly not its old usual Bronx crowd.

"When we first got together," Kirwan tells the crowd, "we played in all the bars up along Bainbridge Avenue. And got thrown out of every one. So here's a song we wrote for all the scumbag bar owners. A little revenge goes a long way."

Oh, we got a gig in the Village Pub

But the regulars there all said that we sucked

So our friend, John Flynn, said "Oh no, no

You'll be causin' a riot If I don't let you go

Then a Flintstone from the Phoenix gave us a call

But when he heard the beat, he was quite appalled

"D'yez not know nothin' by Christy Moore?"

The next thing you'll be wantin' is "Danny Boy"!!

(Imagine the word "boy" pronounced a la Flavor Flav.)

It took the group a while to get the sound straight. "We're not used to the room," Blythe said, after a few soundchecks followed by feedback and amplifier snorts.

"At Reilly's we just set up and go." The band did take a while to warm up, but by the time Blythe stepped up to take his solo — an adventure in saxophonizing on "Desperate," one of their reggae numbers — the crowd was getting wild over Black 47.

"I think the audiences like more original stuff," Blythe said. "You've got to have an original sound to make it worth recording. Blues bands make records, some even sell a few, I guess. But it must be a tiny, tiny number. There's only one Black 47. There's only one band that sounds anything like it."

The crowd that packed the yacht club agreed. "Oh, Maria," Kirwan sang, to hoots and cheers, "I'm so sorry I wrecked your wedding . . .

*But just the thought of you taking your clothes off for that jerk
Oh, I got me drinkin' and suddenly I'm staggering into church*

And I'm dancin' like Baryshnikov across the high altar

Oh, I bet you're still mortified

But just think, girl

No one's ever gonna be forgettin'

The day I wrecked your wedding

The crowd loves the band, and where college crowds go, record companies follow. "It would make a difference economically, of course," Kirwan said of a record deal, "and make things easier, but the music is the important thing. The other stuff is peripheral. We've set up the band so we can work no matter what, regardless of what else happens."

What's happening at the moment is a growing audience and more important jobs: On June 2, they'll play at Fleadh '91 [Gaelic for party], the outdoor London concert that will feature such top Irish acts as Van Morrison, the Chieftains and the Pogues; 100,000 are expected to attend. It will give the band crucial exposure. Meanwhile, it plays Reilly's twice a week and build its New York audience.

"I think there's more Irish-Americans getting into it now than Irish," Kirwan said. "The Irish who've seen us and know us and like that type of thing are all into it; the ones who don't like it know better than to come when we're playing. There's a certain fixed audience in the Bronx and Queens, but the Irish-American thing is really growing."

"Maybe it's because we're saying it's kind of cool to be Irish-American," he continued. "Like Chris being in the band and being a cop. We don't condescend to the Irish-American like a lot of bands do, saying 'We're Irish, you're Irish-American, we're closer to the roots,' that type of thing. We're writing about Irish and Irish-Americans in New York, and about New York itself, so I think they feel more at home with us than they would with a band that was here from Ireland and had an Ireland mentality. We've definitely got a New York mentality." / III