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## BLACK 47

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by Al Pereira

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# URBAN FURY AND TRADITIONAL ETHICS

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**B**lack History Month, 1993, will be sharing time with Black 47, a no-nonsense New York City band who gets their overdue shot at letting the Celtic cat out of the bag. The release of their major label debut, **Fire Of Freedom** (SBK/EMI), closes the book on their previous nomenclature, "the city's best unsigned band," though many of their considerable legion of followers have simply been wondering "When?" After two years of "wowin' 'em" over at Paddy Reilly's on Second Avenue and 28th Street, Black 47 moves into the big leagues and listeners everywhere will now be treated to their aural derring-do. Not a moment too soon.

A sometimes jagged quintet mixing garage-rock fury with traditional Irish instrumentation and lyric themes, Black 47 is closer to a thinking man's Bobby Fuller Four than the lazier comparison, U2. ("I'm U3", jokes 47's carrot-topped leader, Larry Kirwan.) The group takes their name from the depths of the Potato Famine, and their ongoing residency at Reilly's quaint watering hole has brought about an awareness of Irish-American culture that is a welcome relief from those face-painted doofuses who line the City's parade route every March 17. The allure of seeing a dynamic rock band amid the cultural oasis which has nurtured them is a rare opportunity, but you'd better hurry. The SRO crowd is already spilling into the streets outside Reilly's and their rugged debut will only attract others.

The group consists of Kirwan on vocals and electric guitar; Chris Byrne (who's also an En-Why-Si cop) on vocals, uilleann pipes and the tin whistle; Fred Pareels on trombone, tin whistle and vocals; Geoff Blythe on sax; and Thomas Hamlin on percussion, and their rock side is pure New York. The turning point for the group came this last summer when Ric Ocasek took an interest and helped get them signed to SBK/EMI. He and Kirwan co-produced **Fire Of Freedom** and, with a little luck, February might also write its own subtitle: Black 47 History Month. If it sounds like a lot's going on here, you are correct, sir! (With apologies to Ed McMahon and Phil Hartman.)

**THE MUSICIAN'S EXCHANGE:** So what's up, Lar?

**LARRY KIRWAN:** Ah, I'm fucked, flustered and far from home! [Laughs]

**TME:** Okay, where was home?

**KIRWAN:** I come from Wexford, in the southeast corner of Ireland. Fifteen years ago I hopped on a plane one day and landed here! I wanted to get money for college after leaving high school, but I liked it too much [to leave].

**TME:** So then how much of "Funky Ceili (Bridie's Song)" is your resume?

**KIRWAN:** Well, elements are true. Realism, magic. . . things that you write sometimes are more true. You can't verbalize. After a while, when you do a song, the characters seem so authentic, it's really a curveball.

**TME:** Alright, I guess the characters also take on a new life after a while as well. Did you find that when you reworked the songs for EMI?

**KIRWAN:** Sure. It was as fun to do then with a little time and touch 'em up as when you get 500 bucks together and head into the studio with no room for experimentation. That helps capture our manic edge, but there are certain things you don't feel are finished that way. So we were able to "improve" a few little things in our approach.

**TME:** Did Ric Ocasek influence the record a lot? Were The Cars one of "your" groups?

**KIRWAN:** Six months, a year down the line, the songs are already pretty well-developed. As for Ric, not really. I mean, I liked The Cars, but I wouldn't say they really influenced me. Maybe a bit of menace to a song. As for Ric as our producer, I was surprised — he can take a pop song and put a hard tab on it. It might not seem like that to people, but he's song-oriented. He doesn't tend to produce the life out of the song, which is good.

**TME:** I kind of figured the Beatles would be a common ground lurking under the surface for both your band and his.

**KIRWAN:** [Pleased] Yeah, that's a really good point! I never thought of it like that, but that's probably true. I knew he was a strong songwriter, and I suppose that might be at the bottom of it.

**TME:** How did Ric lend his hand to your album?

**KIRWAN:** He just came down and, since it was all done beforehand, he knew what I liked. It was really intense — less than three weeks. It was a lot of teamwork — factory line 'em to each other, work like a demon on 'em. It was good. But when we were done, I didn't want to listen to 'em anymore. In fact, the group went to a festival in West Belfast.

**TME:** Now the group has what I call a "floating populace" . . .

**KIRWAN:** Yeah, when we play outside of Reilly's, we add Dave Conrad on bass and. . .

**TME:** That must have to do with the cramped setting at Reilly's.

**KIRWAN:** Exactly!

**TME:** That must make you change back and forth between a more rhythm-oriented lead style on guitar. . .



PHOTO: KURT MUNDAHL

Lead singer/guitarist Larry Kirwan seems to be taking his band's new-found success pretty much in stride. As long as they have an audience to perform for, they'll do just fine.

**KIRWAN:** It makes it interesting! [Laughs] It's really weird. . . I'm never sure how we're going to sound together!

**TME:** Do you find a difference in playing in New York?

**KIRWAN:** Sure. New York is a warm city, has a buzz like no other. I love the beat of the city. I don't listen to the radio — the buzz is enough.

**TME:** Alright, let's talk about "James Conolly." That song is reminiscent of "Eve Of Destruction" to me.

**KIRWAN:** It could be. I've always loved that song!

**TME:** What was the idea behind doing a song like that about the Marxist union leader, a key player in the 1916 Easter Uprising?

**KIRWAN:** I'm political. It's an analogy. A story, really. Conolly was actually a failure. He couldn't take any more, and a lot of people feel that they can't take any more. He stood for a really strong ideal: people who will lay down their life for an ideology in politics. I think it's strong because it's a contrast to that scum of the last 12 years. People get into it, tell me things about Conolly I didn't know. It gives people a bit to raise a fist over. People also come up to me and ask, "Where can I find out about this stuff?" which I think is good. Every song should raise that kind of thought!

**TME:** Do you still live in The Bronx? A lot of your lyrics take hold there.

**KIRWAN:** Now I'm in the "alphabets" and it was a dream to live where "Positively 4th Street" became a song. But I've moved around a bit. I was always in The Bronx because there was always a gig of some kind there.

**TME:** Was there a difference between opening for Tracy Chapman at the Beacon and doing a pub show?

**KIRWAN:** There's no difference for us; we're always in a daze! If we have any kind of an audience, we just go for it!

**TME:** With things rollin', will you go out on the road? What about Officer Chris [Byrne]?

**KIRWAN:** We'll continue to play Paddy's as we can; Chris took a year off to concentrate. I think there's a huge audience for Black 47, we just have to find 'em. That Beacon show. . . We were playing "Our Lady Of The Bronx" and they cut us off after 20 minutes because that was our time. We knew it would go over big and we were just starting to roll. So there are some adjustments we're going to have to make. But most of all, I'm excited that people will get to hear what Black 47 is all about!