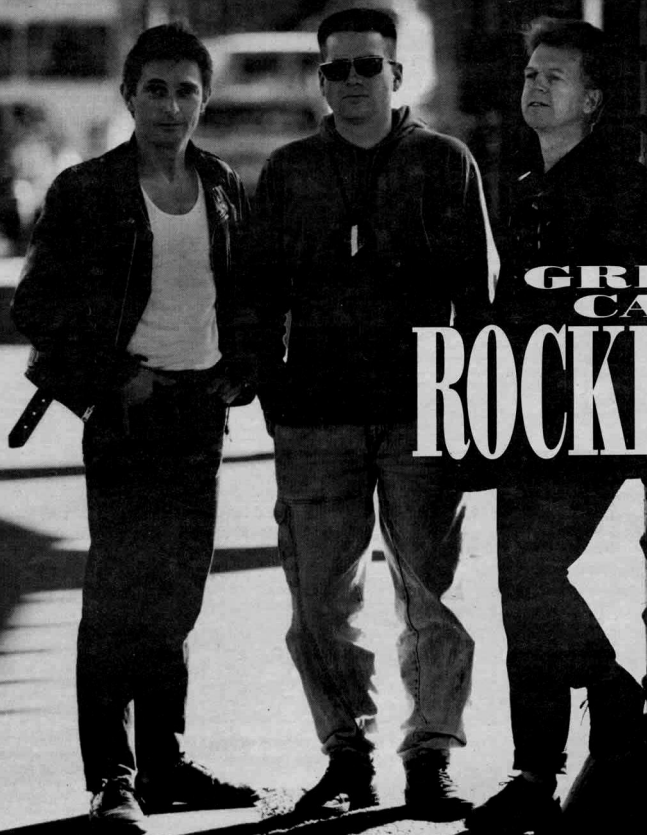


PART III



**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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THEATER: Shining Performance From the Other 'Miss Saigon' / Page 43

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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.'

BY JOHN ANDERSON

STAFF WRITER

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

AMAN 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.

Bride 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 Gell" (Gell 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 Black 47, 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 Correctional 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 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 cacophony 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 Peola, 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.

Photo by BLACK on Page 81

Photo by BLACK on Page 81



Newbury Photos / John Keating

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 band 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.

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 26, 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 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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