

SPECIAL ST. PATRICK'S DAY ISSUE

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Steppin' Out

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Documentary Issue

A journey
to paradise

The
Parade

Do they
really
exist?

BLACK⁴⁷

Interview by
Chauncé Hayden

There are only two kinds of people in the world, the Irish and those who wish they were

STEPPIN' OUT

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America's favorite Irish Party Band

BLACK 47s LARRY KIRWAN

INTERVIEW BY
CHAUNCE HAYDEN

Taking their name from Ireland's 1847 potato famine, the band Black 47 (Larry Kirwan, Chris Byrne, Fred Parcells, Geoffrey Blythe, Andrew Goodsight and Thomas Hamlin) has survived ten years of highs and lows by staying true to their one original objective...to be the best damn party pub band the world has ever seen. Yet the truth be known, Black 47, fronted by singer and author Larry Kirwan have gone way beyond the limitations of a pub band. Still Kirwan could care less. As far as Kirwan is concerned, Black 47 isn't about million dollar contracts and fame—it's about having fun and in the process maybe even learning a thing or two.

Once an illegal immigrant from Ireland, Kirwan is considered to be one of the most prophetic writers in America. While his poetic stories turned into songs range from personal experiences ("Funky Ceili") to the more political ("Bobby Sands MP").

Blending rock with reggae rhythms, Irish jigs and hip hop, the band offers a unique sound that for the past decade attracted a mixed bag of celebrities, revolutionaries, cops, politicians, baby boomers and generation X'ers who have recently passed the torch to their younger siblings.

To date Black 47 have released four CDs, "Fire of Freedom," "C.D.," "Home Of The Brave," and most recently "Green Suede Shoes".

On March 17th Black 47 will be performing at Wetlands in New York City. You can also catch them live nearly every Saturday at Connolly's Pub and Restaurant located on 14 E 47th Street (NYC) on any given Saturday...but call ahead to confirm (212) 867-3767. You can also find out more about Black 47 at www.Black47.com

The following is a upclose and personal chat with the renowned Larry Kirwan.

Chátncé Hayden: For over a decade Black 47 has been one of the world's most popular Irish pub bands. You looked to get away from the pubs or is performing to intimate crowds something that Black 47 is best suited for?

Larry Kerwin: We started out as a band who played in pubs but without all the connotations of a pub band. From the start we were playing original music. Probably far more original than 99 percent of the so called legitimate acts out there. We played pubs for a reason. That's where the people were and that's where we got paid. If it came to playing barmitzvahs and we were allowed to play original music and get paid, we would do the same thing. We're after people, not property.

Is it true that the reason you formed Black 47 was to evoke social and political change?

It was definitely one of our motivations. There was a political idea behind it right from the start. In fact the first conversation Chris Byrne and I had was the lack of any political convictions in musicians. Also, from an Irish point of view, back in 1989 things weren't going so well in keeping Irish issues in the forefront of American life.

During the past ten years do you feel Black 47 has helped Americans understand more about Irish issues?

Well we helped with it anyway. It's like Bobby Sands once said, "Nobody can do everything but everyone can play a part." We more then played our part in it.

Why is music such a powerful tool when it comes to addressing political and social issues?

For one thing, politicians have to trim their sales to get elected. When you're a politician you have to go after different constituencies and try to stitch them all together. The politician has to compromise and that's just the nature of politics. However, the musician or writer isn't that way. You might get put down for being over political but at least you can say whatever the hell you like and to hell with the consequences. But the politician has to watch every step. That's why as a group we have always refused to endorse any politician.

Why not endorse someone you feel can help a cause you feel strongly about?

Because eventually the politician will sell out.

How ironic that Black 47 is a band that is known for singing about causes yet it was the party song, "Funky Celi" that put you on the map.

(Laughs) A good political song!

How has your life changed since "Funky Celi" became a hit?

It really hasn't changed except that we're more well known now. When the song first came out we had a huge media blitz for about a year and a half. We were the flavor of the moment. That was something that we just ran into. But when that went away we were the same as we were before. There was no particular change.

Were you dissappointed when you were no longer the flavor of the month and the "media blitz" cooled down?

No. We knew that was going to happen. I mean unless you're a real idiot you know you get 15 minutes and that's all. Actually, in our case we actually got a lot more than 15 minutes. So we were grateful for it. But unless you're prepared for that to go away you're finished.

Black 47 is ten years old. The 90's came and went very quickly. When you think back on the past ten years what thoughts come to mind?

I think the people who initially loved the band still love it. You'll never see a Black 47 record in the second hand bin at the store. People still love the songs and have even passed them onto their familys'. In fact we now have the youngest audience that we ever had. We just played Lamoine University last night and we played to about 1,000 under 21 kids. They had to be around 11 years old when we started! They know about us because their brothers and sisters play our songs.

It's got to be a great feeling to see a new generation getting turned on to your music.

Yeah. And what's even better is that the older brothers and sisters are still coming to see us as well.

I'll tell you one of the things that really makes me feel good is that we've gotten letters from kids who say that they've had problems getting along with their parents, or we get parents telling us that they haven't been able to relate to their children, but that the one thing they say that brings them both together, is playing Black 47 together. I'd say that is one of the best things I've gotten out of this.

Because your fans are so loyal do you also find that they're your toughest critics?

Yeah. They're watching. We have a discussion site on our website [Black47.com]. And it's always brimming with opinions about the band or comments if we didn't play a particular song that night. But we always play 110 percent on stage so we never



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get a complaint that we didn't play our hearts out.

In the early 90's Black 47 had a huge celebrity following. People like Brooke Shields, Matt Dillon, Joe Strummer and a few super models were always coming to your shows. Do you still find those people in the audience?

Again, back then we were the flavor of the month. We still get people like Matt and also Norm from "Cheers" to the shows.

Why do you think you attract so many celebrities?

I think they came because people were too busy focusing on the band rather than on them. Matt [Dillon] could belly up to the bar and except for the girls coming after him, which never bothered Matt too much, he could just be part of the crowd. Celebrities could always let their guard down at our shows and just have a good time.

Who's your biggest celebrity fan?

(Laughs) I don't know? We get a weird mix of celebrities. We were never really into the whole celebrity thing anyway. I mean I really never even spoke to many of the celebrities that came to see us play. In fact, to tell ya the truth, I would usually talk to the fan who came out to see us every night before I would talk to a celebrity. Because the celebrity may not be there the next week but the fan will be.

What inspires you in terms of your song writing?

It's just what is within myself. I'm always changing and seeing things differently. My background is in theatre so I look at song writing like I do writing a play. When you're writing a play it's something that's going to be with you for two or three years so it has to be something that really turns you on. So I think that way of thinking is transferred into my song writing. A song has to really excite me (laughs) because I may be stuck with that song for the next ten years.

Your song writing is similar to that of Bob Dylan in that it tells a real life story in a very poetic way.

That's a compliment because he's probably one of my favorite songwriters. That last album of his made me have to go back and rethink my abilities. He just got so deep within himself I felt I had to go deeper into myself as well. His last album made me feel like I had to do more than just write stories. I had to go deeper.

Besides Dylan do you also consider Bruce Springsteen an inspiration to your method of song writing?

Yeah, for me, especially in the earlier albums like "Wild and the Innocent" and songs like "The E Street Shuffle" were a huge influence on me. Because coming from Ireland and living on the streets of the east village that album was just so real for me. It was the life I was living at the time. I thought to myself, "Jesus, how does this guy write like that?"



You've been living in the United States for many years. However, do you still feel a connection to the political and social struggles of Northern Ireland?

Yeah, I try to follow it daily. I go in and out of it. I mean being in this band I would get it one way or another. There's a lot of Irish American's who have been involved in Northern Ireland politics for over 30 years. You really have to hand it to them. We travel the country and there they are, the same faces protesting, and who are at all our gigs. You really have to hand it to them for that idealism that they have. That need to cause change in the north of Ireland. I know with me it got to a point where I just got burned out. I remember thinking for a couple of weeks, what a relief that there's finally peace over there. People there for the most part are happy. But then here we are again, the British have screwed up one more time and desolved the government that's there. So I realized that I had to get back into it again.

The plight of Northern Ireland seems to have been going on for so long you have to wonder if there will ever be an acceptable settlement between the Irish and the British.

It's been going on for 900 years and the modern part of it has been going on for 300 years or 100 years depending on which cycle of history you're looking at. So it was never going to be

something that was just going to be wrapped up and put in a box and put away. That was too much to hope for. All you can hope for is progress. But it has to be built on a just peace. If you're sweeping things under the carpet it just poisons things and the next generation has to pay for it. Sooner or later you have to ask yourself what is right and how can we make everyone happy to some degree. And the British have to initiate that and then step aside and let the Northern Irish work things out on their own. It's the only way it will work.

I'm certainly not an expert on the topic but it seems from what I've read that as long as the IRA refuses to give up their guns there will never be peace. Do you think the IRA will ever give up their arms?

I doubt it. That way of thinking is a British way of looking at things. Right now the IRA has been at peace for three years. But to be candid and honest if the IRA gave away their guns tomorrow morning the British and the Unionist could

a 32 country republic as far as we could see. And they were accepting of the idea of a government within Northern Ireland overseen by the British. And that wasn't what a lot of people here were fighting for. But by the same token, everyone here figured well that's what the people over in Ireland want so that's good by us. Everyone is happy. But it hasn't worked out like that. And the reason why it hasn't worked out is because you have to break the unionist veto. Which means the unionist just can't say we're not satisfied with this we're walking out of Government. The British at some point have to stand up to the unionist and that is a fact of history that has been going on for 100 years. And until the British do that there will be no peace. So yes, you're right, there will be no peace until the British give up their guns, but at the same time the unionist has to give up their veto. And when the two of these things happen at the same time, then you'll find peace.

While we're talking about controversial issues. What about

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say well now we don't have to reform the police and now we don't have to return habeas corpus. So the IRA are keeping their guns for a reason. They're not using them. They're just there on the side to guarantee that there will be further progress. My feeling is that if the IRA gives up their arms the British will walk all over them again. And that's definitely the IRA's feeling.

Recently Sein Finn leader Jerry Adams said that Sein Finn and the IRA have nothing to do with one another. Do you agree that the IRA and Sein Finn have nothing to do with one another?

My family is involved in Nationalist politics and I've been around it a lot and I can tell you that just when you think you know what's going on, you don't know what's going on. Jerry Adams has a very strong influence in Northern Ireland. How strong? To tell you the truth I don't know. Sometimes I think he has a 90 percent influence there and other times I think his influence is around 60 percent. But obviously he can't call all the shots so there has to be a correlation there. (Laughs) That's just my opinion but of course I could be totally wrong! And to put it truthfully I have to tell you that a lot of Irish American's have felt that over the last few years Sein Finn has settled for too little. There wasn't going to be

the issue of Gays not being allowed to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. In your opinion is it right or wrong?

Well the Gays are allowed to march in Ireland and different cities throughout the US. But as far as the New York parade goes....(Pause) This thing could have been handled so well at the start and now people are dug in. However, I firmly believe that Gays should be allowed to march in the parade. But at the same time if you're not allowed to march then go find your own parade! Make a better parade! But then again, I'm not gay and I'm not being put down through the communities throughout the year so that when some Irish guy says to me I can't march I get my hackles up. All I can say is, yes, the gays should be allowed to March.

Finally, I'm going to put you on the spot. If there was just one bar you could recommend as the best place to get hammered on St. Pats day what bar would it be?

(Laughs) Any bar is a good bar to get hammered in on St. Pats day... and that's all I'm going to say!

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You can e-mail comments to Chaunce Hayden at Chaunce100@aol.com