

hot new band

Black 47

It's not U2 and it certainly doesn't sound like "Danny Boy," but if you listen hard enough you can hear echoes of both of those in the music of Black 47. Theirs is the sound of Irishmen loose in the streets and bars of New York City, the heritage of their homeland mixed up with the clamor of their adopted country. It's a noisy, spirited, romantic mixture, a touch of folk and a shot of rock & roll, and for the past three years it's been drawing turnaway crowds to a small Irish pub in Manhattan.

And now it's everybody else's turn to hear a band as impassioned and articulate as any to come along in years. Black 47 are currently touring the country in support of their major-label debut, *Fire of Freedom*; they were a highlight of April's Farm Aid show; and at a recent outdoor concert in Hoboken, New Jersey, they drew so many fans that a nervous police chief instituted an impromptu curfew and closed down every bar in the city.

Singer/songwriter/guitarist Larry Kirwan certainly had rabble-rousing in mind when he formed Black 47, though not the kind that shuts down watering holes. A politically outspoken playwright and musician who'd moved to New York as a student in the late Seventies, he met Chris Byrne in a bar in 1989, and pitched his idea for a socially conscious band that would combine the purity of Irish folk music with the distortion and drive of Big Apple rock & roll. Byrne, a policeman who played the traditional uilleann pipes as a sideline, helped assemble a group of friends and acquaintances who played everything from tin whistles to saxophones.

"We wanted to reflect New York," says Kirwan. "The other bands who have done so, like the Ramones and the Talking Heads, have tended to reflect Manhattan. We wanted to incorporate the five boroughs and the whole New York area. So we took from the rap of the South Bronx, the Irish of the North Bronx, the dancehall of Brooklyn, the weird guitars of the Lower East Side, and incorporated them all to come up with a total New York mélange."

That mélange wasn't particularly well-received by the conservative audiences in New York's Irish pubs, but Black 47 were undeterred. "I went by the old Oscar Wilde dictum that unless a certain amount of people hate what you're doing, it's not original," says Kirwan. "And from the level of hate that we got right off, I knew we were on to something."

Eventually finding a club that didn't kick them out, they established residency and began drawing fans and winning raves. The band played constantly—more than 700 gigs in three years. Kirwan estimates—and stockpiled six hours of original material, some of which wound up on an independent album and then on their SBK Records debut, *Fire of Freedom*. Some of the songs are explicitly political, as befits a band who drew their name from the worst year of the potato famine; others, such as "Maria's Wedding," are wilder and more autobiographical. "Oh Maria, I'm so sorry I wrecked your wedding," begins the uproarious tune, which Kirwan admits is based in fact. "... But just the thought of you takin' your clothes off for that jerk/Oh, it got me drinkin' and then suddenly I'm staggerin' into church/And I'm dancing like Baryshnikov all across the high altar ..."

That song and the gonzo-traditional rave-up "Funky Céilí" got the band on MTV, while their blazing live shows even prompted Springsteen comparisons. But though Kirwan may be as committed and inexhaustible as the Boss, at heart he's also a true, classic Irishman: a romantic and a fatalist, a poet and a loudmouth, a drinker and a thinker. These days, one of his plays is being staged in New York, with another in the works for the fall; Chris Byrne, meanwhile, has about a month left in his paternity leave, after which he's got to choose between rock & roll and the NYPD. And the band still plays nearly every week at Paddy Reilly's, where by now they're so famous that you have to show up by eight or nine p.m. to have any hope of squeezing in for the eleven-thirty show. "That tends to make for a fairly liquid audience," says Kirwan, not unapprovingly.

