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Black 47, at Asylum Thursday, capping a high-level career

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Black 47, at Asylum Thursday, capping a high-level career

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Black 47, the "House Band of New York City," will play at the Asylum Thursday, Oct. 23, in one of the final shows of their 25-year career. After 15 albums and around 2,500 concerts, members of the Irish punk rock band are retiring from the stage and moving on to new pursuits.

Larry Kirwan, lead singer and songwriter, is also an author and playwright, and plans to use the upcoming free time to devote to his books.

The band has played in Maine before, at Brian Boru and at the Saltwater Celtic Music Festival. They named themselves after the worst year of the Irish potato famine. Formed in 1989 by Chris Byrne, an NYPD detective, and Kirwan, the band mixes thrashing sounds with political lyrics. Geoff Blythe (saxophones), Fred Parcels (trombone/whistle) and Thomas Hamlin (drums) are the other three original members. Joseph Mulvanerty (uilleann pipes/bodhran) joined when Byrne left in 2000, and Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcaw (bass) came aboard in 2007.

Speaking about his musical beginnings, Kirwan said, "We were radio

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people in Ireland back in those days — Radio Luxemburg, the BBC, Radio Erin, and if you were lucky AFN (American Forces Network) from Germany, soul songs on certain nights if the weather was right. On the BBC in those days, there wasn't a breakdown in programming. You'd get the Beatles next to Beethoven next to Miles Davis, a real musical education. If you got (to play) in a show band, you had to learn everything in the top twenty."

His father, Jim, was a sailor. "His music was tango and calypso. He sailed to South America; that's the music he brought back," Kirwan said. His mother, Ita, was into opera.

He contrasted his writing of plays with lyrics.

"A song is like a shard of thought coming out, like a fist coming out," he said. "A play has development. That's the difference with a play: everything has to work. Before I started writing plays, I wrote different songs. When I came to writing songs for Black 47, I had been out of music for some point. I had no idea I was writing songs in the same form as a playwright. Then I realized I was writing about characters."

His literary antecedents are William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Patrick Kavanagh.

"I read Joyce every year in New York City on Bloomsday," he said.

His published writings include "Liverpool Fantasy (a play about an imagined Beatles reunion if things had been different), "Green Suede Shoes" (biography and rock n roll memoir), and "Rockin' the Bronx" (a 2010 novel).

The show at Asylum will feature songs from their final album, "Last Call" and "Rise Up," a new collection of 15 political and historical songs, something of a bookend to "A Funky Ceili."

"It was hard to do," Kirwan said of selecting 15 songs from their 50 or so that delved into politics and history. "I couldn't get it right. I decided to just go with the music side of the songs and forget about the politics, and there's a great swing to that album."

Kirwan reminisced a bit about hanging out with Joe Strummer, the lead singer for The Clash, who called Black 47 "the only band that matters."

"He was a very measured guy, deeply knowledgeable of music. He probably knew more about music than anyone I'd ever met. He was continually examining music. He'd come to Black 47 gigs. He loved to be there when we were doing new songs. He'd tell me where I got the insults from. I'd say, 'No, Joe. I've never heard of that guy.' He'd say, 'Yes, but you have heard of this guy who listened to that guy.'"

Kirwan's sound was formed long before he met Strummer.

"That's what he liked about Black 47. There were so many Clash instrument bands in New York City. He liked that we weren't into imitating The Clash. We were doing our own thing. Bands who dressed like him drove him nuts," Kirwan said. "He used to come into a bar, Sophie's, near Avenue A and 5th street. He used to come in there, and everyone was pretending not to know it was him. He went over to the jukebox and played The Clash, yet when you talked to him he wasn't into The Clash. He was very deep, intelligent, wise, sharp in a lot of

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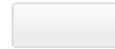
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ways."

Kirwan said his band's final album, "Last Call," tried to feature the band as much as possible — "a little more musical, less lyrical — such a great band so I wanted to show that side of it." Also, as a fan of Bert Berns, he was trying to capture that sound on songs like "Salsa O'Keefe" and "Queen of Coney Island." Fans of Black 47 will get one last chance to see them rip it up, this Thursday at the Asylum.

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