

Black 47's Greatest Hit

The band that never breaks up

At 6 o'clock on Monday morning, the six musicians of Black 47 pile into a white van outside Larry Kirwan's apartment in midtown Manhattan. Tours always start and end at Larry's place. It's day one of their record release tour, and the band is on course to crisscross the Midwest. The Celtic rock band calls the van their pirate ship.

It's hardly a ship; it's not even a tour bus. But in it the band will drive 535 miles nonstop to Ohio, a nine-hour trip. They'll stop at service stations to fill up with gas and smoke cigarettes. Lunch along the way consists of mini-mart fare—Combos crackers and beef jerky washed down with Red Bull. It's a routine. The road manager, P2 Dreher, drives the van. Most of the guys doze off. Excessive chatter is prohibited in such close quarters. It's an unspoken rule. But some of the witty musicians bounce jokes off one another anyway. Van space shrinks after a few hours on the road.

Larry, the band leader, sits in the corner of the back seat of the van, watching the familiar banter between the guys. They mimic famous people and random characters who have crossed their paths at one point or another. Larry chuckles but abstains from joining in. He has to preserve his voice for the evening show.

Fifty-six-year-old Larry has held Black 47

BY DENISE CARSON

together for 15 years. For a brief period in the 1990s, the band was riding high, traveling in style on EMI Records' dollar. Those days are long gone, but the band found a formula for growing old while continuing to play rock 'n' roll. Or, rather, Larry did.

In the early 1990s, throngs of New Yorkers flocked to Paddy Reilly's pub in Lower Manhattan to hear Black 47. A line would snake around the dive bar most Friday and Saturday nights. It was not uncommon to spot Brooke Shields or Matt Dillon in an audience of young urban dwellers mixing with working-class Irish. Larry, an Irish immigrant, derived the name Black 47 from the blackest year of the Irish potato famine, 1847. The band was known for playing an emotionally charged live show at Paddy Reilly's, where they earned the nickname "New York's house band," which attracted EMI Records.

Larry was never the typical MTV leader of a rock band. His wavy reddish hair frames a boyish face etched with deep laugh lines. He wears wire-framed glasses and stands just 5-foot-8. But he has a presence on stage.



He still writes and produces original songs, fusing Celtic music played on Uilleann pipes with rock, reggae, hip-hop and jazz harmonies. The effect is a high-energy, eclectic sound that makes people dance. It's sort of a cross between Dixieland jazz and Bruce Springsteen with a twist of Irish jigs. Larry plays the Stratocaster backed up by a rhythm section consisting of bass and drums. His horns section includes Uilleann pipes, saxophone and trombone.

Black 47 ascended the charts with their hit song "Funky Céilí" in 1993, at the high point of alternative music. They played on "Late Show with David Letterman" in 1993 and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" in 1994. Black 47 sold out shows across America and Ireland.

But when alternative evolved into grunge, the band ceased to fit comfortably into a genre. Without a niche, they dropped off the charts and failed to get radio play, in part because of the explicit political lyrics detailing the injustices of the Northern Ireland conflict. Black 47 slipped from the spotlight after producing their third album with EMI. Larry remembered the day in 1994 when an executive of EMI Records said, "You're out."

"We're out but we're not breaking up," Larry told him. "We still have a living to make." He swore the gigs would go on. He didn't need a record label to make music. In the fast, ephemeral business of broken dreams, Larry grounded the band. He balanced its economics and fine-tuned the individual dynamics of the band.

"When the lights blur, you have to figure out a way to make a career as a rock musician," Larry says in a gravelly, thick, Irish brogue. "Most bands are in it for the glamour, to indulge themselves in being rock stars or start-up rock stars. But you have to understand the absurdity of the music business to survive in it."

Black 47 is now on its 12th record release. The band has driven this route to Ohio dozens of times. Not one day of the tour is spared for rest. It's called "guerilla touring" in the music industry.

Photograph by Lisa Bramen



Larry Kirwan, left, and his band

play at The Knitting Factory

on St. Patrick's Day

Roughing it. The band travels by day and plays shows by night. Touring on the cheap is just one of the many ways Larry has kept the band together. Most marriages don't even last this long.

At around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the band arrives in Columbus and books into a Days Inn hotel. It's certainly not as luxurious as the four-star accommodations they once enjoyed. They all share rooms, except for Larry, who gets a room of his own. When they arrive, he follows up on leads for upcoming gigs and answers e-mail from fans.

"Larry is always working; he never stops," says Andrew Goodsight, who has played the bass in Black 47 for the past 11 years. "He's really good at self-promotion."

Most bands hire people to do promotions, bookings and publicity. But Larry does most of this work himself, Goodsight says. It helps save money. Larry had to streamline the band's spending to increase the musicians' paychecks. None of the members have day jobs; they make their living playing music. They see Larry as their chief executive officer. He makes the decisions on the road. They follow his cue on stage. Each one has had to find his role in what Larry calls the "incestuous world of Black 47."

Still, Larry thinks fondly of the time when he could afford to write songs by day, then carouse and jam till dawn. It was easy when rents were cheap in New York City. In the '70s and '80s, rock musicians could play two gigs a week and make a decent wage. Of course, he and the others didn't worry about health insurance back then. But these days, the maturing musicians of Black 47 need a monthly salary to support families, cars and homes. Most of the musicians are married and have children; Larry is now the father of two sons. Some of the musicians quit drinking to keep up.

Black 47 plays 120 gigs a year, which leaves time for the band members to work on other music projects. They waste no time rehearsing. They're paid to perform, and the group never plays for less than \$2,500 a night. Larry's only expectations are punctuality, stellar stage performance and a keen sense of camaraderie—each

man looking out for the others.

"It's all about backing up Larry," explains Goodsight. "Larry's a lucky guy to have guys like us looking after him. It's tough to find musicians, well ... ones you get along with."

Goodsight speaks from experience; he is also a front man for his own band, Musichead. Black 47's dynamic is rare, he says; Goodsight has seen

musicians sabotage gigs because they had no stake in the band or the music. But in Black 47, Fred Parcells, the trombone player, will pick up a pack of Ricola candies to soothe Larry's vocal cords before the show. "It's like being on a creative team," Larry says. "Or you might equate it to being in a boys gang, us against the world."

This attitude dates back to the early days of Black 47, when the band played in rough neighborhood pubs in Irish enclaves across the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn. Many a night, they were booed and hissed to get off stage. Larry was singing about the plight of working-class immigrants, who complained that he was distorting traditional Irish music. But when they heard the calls of "you suck," the band just turned up the volume to drown them out.

Before the show at Byrne's Pub in Columbus, Ohio, each of the band members unwinds alone at different spots around the pub. Fans pour in for a pre-St. Patrick's Day celebration.

Larry wears black jeans with a tucked-in black T-shirt and his trademark green suede shoes. He has combined the record release tour with the release of his latest book, his memoir, "Green Suede Shoes: An Irish-American Odyssey." It tells his story of immigrating to America from Wexford, Ireland, in the mid-1970s. Fans gather around, asking him to autograph their copies. Larry drinks his usual pint of Guinness and mingles with his fans.

Thomas Hamlin, the drummer, drinks his usual too, a non-alcoholic O'Doul's. He's in his late 40s and his long, graying locks cascade down the back of his black muscle shirt. Known in the band as "Hammy," Hamlin was the percussionist of Larry's former rock band, Major Thinkers, in the 1980s. They toured with Cyndi Lauper's band at the height of her career.

Fred Parcells, the 50-year-old trombonist, who quit drinking nine years ago, sips a cup of coffee while meandering around the stage. Parcells' wire-frame glasses and slicked-back hair give him the appearance of an orchestra instrumentalist rather than a rock musician. He snipped off his ponytail after his daughter was born a few years ago.

At show time, P2 will introduce the band. P2, the 31-year-old road manager, was a fan for 10 years before joining Black 47 in 2002. He listened to their music while growing up in Michigan. On cue, the band members will unite on stage, coming from their posts throughout the bar.

After the show, they return to their hotel to crash. In the past, Larry invited fans back to close down the hotel bar. But they have another early start tomorrow morning. No time for a drunken

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IN FLUX:

Wherein the bond gets knotted, growing up or going awry

801

fest till sunrise. The band members have learned they'll just regret it on the tedious 360-mile road trip to Chicago.

They arrive at 3 p.m., striding into the Metro, a concert venue in Chicago, for their record release of "Elvis Murphy's Green Suede Shoes." It's a sold-out show. Black 47 is headlining two other bands, so they must perform the first sound check; the other bands then conform to Black 47's sound settings. For the next six hours, the band shares a small dressing room backstage. There is little heating in the dressing room and the band members are all freezing as the snow flurries blow outside.

Joseph Mulvanerty joined the band in 2000, replacing Chris Byrne, the former piper.

For a brief period in the 1990s, the band was riding high. Those days are long gone.

Mulvanerty, who is 27, had to learn a backlog of songs dating back to 1990. That was the easy part. Fitting in with a group of veterans proved to be the real challenge. On his first tour with Black 47, Mulvanerty quickly learned that the band members only gather on stage, in the dressing room or in the van. The guys don't eat or party together.

Life on the road with Black 47 wasn't the rock musician lifestyle he had dreamed of. As the youngest member, Mulvanerty respected the band's professional *modus operandi*. He was never formally accepted into the band; Larry simply invited Mulvanerty back, for a weeklong tour and then a month tour. Mulvanerty focused on playing well each night and remaining in favor with the band, or rather, with Larry. Eventually, he found his place.

"They're like my older brothers," he said.

As with any group of people who spend hours on end together in intimate spaces, there are blowups. Band members sometimes clash in the

van, or shouting matches erupt in the dressing room before the show.

Still, Larry is aware of the musicians' egos. Every band member has his moment in the spotlight and Larry encourages the musicians to test out new pieces of music in front of an audience.

The band retains a fervent following of fans from its days at Paddy Reilly's. But Larry continues to draw new, young groupies. He is accessible to his fans. On any given night at a show in Manhattan, he enjoys the company of a couple of sexy, twenty-something brunettes. He also has a dedicated following of young Irish-American men in their teens to early 20s. They bounce around the audience and sing every lyric along with Larry on stage.

Back in New York, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon on a chilly St. Patrick's Day, the band sits in a dingy dressing room backstage until the 7 p.m. show. Some sip shots of Jameson's Irish whiskey. Others catnap on the couches.

At dusk, the fans start pouring in. Some of the Irish girls have glittering green clovers painted on their faces. Others have green ribbons braided in their hair. The men wear green beads and dress in button-up shirts. They scream, "We love you, Larry," as the lights dim.

The band leaps onto the stage. Larry straps on his Stratocaster and raises his right fist under the red spotlights. The fans raise their fists too. Joseph Mulvanerty plays an Irish jig from the Uilleann pipes, a traditional sign of Irish celebration. Larry swivels on his toes and sings "Green Suede Shoes." The crowd pulses to the music. The show builds toward its climax, "Rockin' the Bronx." That's when each band member can finally break into a solo riff. Geoff Blythe, the saxophone player, wearing a red shirt and red snakeskin boots, rocks his brass horn in Larry's direction and the two turn back-to-back. They lean into one another and dance. Larry darts across the stage to Mulvanerty and they rub their foreheads together and dance a jig. Hamlin pounds on the drums. The crowd swarms.

Finally, as it so often happens, Larry sings the first line of "Funky Céilí." Goodnight strides up to the front of the stage. He throws his arm over Larry's shoulder and the two dance a chorus-line kick, while playing their guitars.

Graphic and illustrations by Lisa Brame

SIX PACK

BY JENNIFER MALONEY & RICHARD MORGAN



MUPPETS



G-8 LEADERS



GREEK GODS



FOUNDING FATHERS



RAT PACK



ROYALS



CNN ANCHORS

NERDY

Beaker

Schroeder

Athena

Benjamin Franklin

Joey Bishop

Charles

Aaron Brown

BOSSY

Kermit

Bush

Zeus

George Washington

Frank Sinatra

QE2

Wolf Blitzer

VAIN

Miss Piggy

Chirac

Aphrodite

Thomas Jefferson

Dean Martin

William

Anderson Cooper

WEIRD

Gonzo

Putin

Pan

John Adams

Sammy Davis Jr.

Philip

Larry King

DUMB

Fozzie

Berlusconi

Dionysus

Button Gwinnett

Peter Lawford

Harry

Paula Zahn

TAGALONG

Animal

Blair

Hephaestus

James Madison

JFK

Camilla

Bill Hemmer