

The Irish Experience

Rock band's songs

chronicle expatriates'

lives in America

By Ray Hogan

STAFF WRITER

Black 47's new CD, "Trouble In the Land," doesn't refer to persistent problems in Ireland but rather to conditions here in America.

Fueled by its ever-present political passion and a sense of humor to match, the six-piece rock band has chronicled the Irish-American experience in a wonderfully unique fashion that stokes controversial fires as much as it revels in spinning absurdly funny tales.

"Humor is key," says singer/guitarist Larry Kirwan. "I wouldn't be in a band otherwise. We don't have pensions or benefits."

The weeks surrounding St. Patrick's Day are busy ones for Black 47, which derives its name from the bleakest year of the Irish potato famine. The band will appear at the Playwright Pub and Restaurant in Stamford Thursday night. Despite incessant partying and not-so-subtle marketing of all things green, Kirwan believes the true meaning of the holiday isn't lost on those of Irish descent.

"Originally, it was a celebration that Irish-Americans had arrived in this country and had been accepted," Kirwan says. "I think it's still that... that we're adding

to the fabric of the country. But just as they were discriminated against as newcomers, it behooves all Irish people to watch after those that are coming in (to the United States) after them, from all countries."

Irish pride led to a living nightmare at the group's St. Patrick's Day gig in '96 when an off-duty New York City police officer shot off his gun, leading to death and injury. That and other trials, tribulations and victories of being in a rock 'n' roll band are chronicled on "Trouble In the Land" in the song "Those Saints."

"It's a more extreme life experience," Kirwan says of his profession. "But what we've always tried to do is break down the fourth wall between us and the audience. We're no different than the people out there. We have the same triumphs and heartaches."

Part of Black 47's appeal is that the band members don't seem much different from the cops, blue-collar workers, playwrights and other expatriates who attend their shows.

Things began inauspiciously enough in 1989 at a pub, where Kirwan met Chris Byrne, a New York City police officer who played uilleann pipes in a folk band, but whose tastes skewed

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TELLING IT LIKE IT IS: Black 47 — back row, from left: Thomas Hamlin, Andrew Goodlight, Fred Parcels, and front row, from left, Geoffrey Blythe, Larry Kirwan and Chris Byrne.

Contributed photo



Black 47

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more toward punk and rap.

"We got to talking about music and politics, and if you think back to that time, Sinn Fein and republicanism weren't the thing of the day," Kirwan says. "Our idea was to form a band that would reflect a lot of political ideals and get the Irish/British situation to the front burner of American consciousness. Both of us loved the Clash and were bemoaning the fact that nothing had come to take its place."

The lineup was rounded out by saxophonist Geoffrey Blythe (a founding member of Dexy's Midnight Runners of "Come On Eileen" fame), trombone player Fred Parcells, drummer Thomas Hamlin and bassist Kevin Jenkins (who quit in 1995 after the band's van crashed. He was replaced by Andrew Goodright).

The group's early and regular gigs at an East Side dive called Paddy Reilly's became legendary (attending Black 47's weekly Saturday night gig, which has moved Midtown to Connolly's Pub, is still a rite of passage for New Yorkers) and everyone from celebrities to record company presidents

began to seek out the Irish/rock/reggae/rap sound.

"Fire of Freedom," the 1993 major label debut that spawned the singles "Funky Céili" and "Maria's Wedding," made the group immediately recognizable. To no one's surprise, critical opinion has surged and receded in the years since. There have been record label musical chairs (the group is currently seated with independent Shanachie), the van wreck that made Jenkins decide to quit and the deaths of close friends including sound man Johnny Byrne. But with an ethic that focuses on playing live, Kirwan has never worried.

"We knew that in every career there's going to be times when you're not particularly in with the media and the record companies," Kirwan says. "So you have to come up with a way to survive. It makes no difference to us whether we have a record company or not. A lot of bands coming up now don't know that they have to come up with a way to circumvent the industry. When I formed Black 47 with Chris Byrne we said, 'We're going to decide when this is over.'"

Kirwan and crew still bring addictive enthusiasm to their music. "Trouble In the Land" deals with racism on the title track, 9-to-5 and suburban

ennui on "Delirious" and "Susan Falls Apart," and biography on "Bobby Kennedy." There's also hopeless romanticism ("Tramps Heartbreak" and "Fallin' Off the Edge of America") and outright hilarity ("Bodhráns on the Brain" and "I Got Laid On James Joyce's Grave").

"All around, it's been a good one," Kirwan says of the latest disc. "We've been doing a number of those songs for a couple of years, so it's harder to tell (which are becoming fan favorites) because some of the songs were accepted before the CD came out."

Kirwan hasn't seen the music industry change much since that night he and Byrne shared pints and longed for a group of the Clash's stature to emerge. But he remains proud that his band stands apart in the apathetic and saccharine world of rock 'n' roll. Of FM rock radio he says: "I don't understand it. It's so vacuous that I can't listen to it. I haven't listened to it for years. But turning on rock radio, it's like Chinese water torture with very loud noise."

Black 47 will play the Playwright Pub and Restaurant, 488 Summer St., Stamford, on Thursday at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$10 in advance, \$15 at the door. Call 353-1120.