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Offstage with Black 47

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PITTSFIELD

When it came time to record Black 47's latest album, "Green Suede Shoes" (Mercury), which was just released last week, the group's lead singer, songwriter and guitarist, Larry Kirwan, had a couple of specific hopes for it.

"People would say to me as much as they liked our records, they preferred the band live," said Kirwan in a recent phone interview from his New York City apartment. "It's difficult to capture the live sound of Black 47 on a recording because there's usually a lot going on with it which people can expect live, but when you take that into the studio you usually have to focus on one thing or the other."

Up until now, that has been the dilemma for Black 47 — the New York City-based, Irish-American rock band that will inaugurate this city's brand new concert club, The Studio, at the former England Brothers building on North Street, tomorrow night at 8. Pittsfield singer/songwriter Carl Bowlby is the scheduled opening act.

Black 47 has always won instant converts among those who came to its incendiary live shows — including two in the past year at the Night Shift Cafe in North Adams — but the infectious energy of Kirwan and company has not always translated well on its recordings, which were produced by Ric Ocasek of The Cars and Jerry Harrison of Talking Heads.

With "Green Suede Shoes," produced by Kirwan himself, Black 47 has come perhaps as close as is possible to replicating the sound of Black 47 in concert without actually being there.

Kirwan attributes this success to a number of different factors. For one, the group played the songs live for months before setting them down on tape. Secondly, said Kirwan, "I did a lot of pre-production work to make sure we could basically go into the studio and kind of get it down quickly live with as much of a live feel as possible."

In addition to being a rock musician, Kirwan enjoys a whole other career as a playwright, and he was able to draw

on his experience in the theater while producing his own record.

"I sat down and thought about it conceptually right from the start — what do I want to achieve with it? — and because I'm used to doing that with plays I think that carried over," he said.

"When I write a play and it's going into production, whether I'm producing or directing it myself or giving it over to a director, I sit down and try and feel what is it I want the play to look like and sound like on the stage, and I transferred that over to the record this time, at least in theory."

"Green Suede Shoes," Black 47's third, full-length CD, is full of the sort of the politically engaged and dramatic narratives for which the 7-year-old band is most noted. Past songs have immortalized historical figures such as Irish revolutionary Michael Collins, civil rights activist Paul Robeson and

Irish nationalist James Connolly, as well as introducing such memorable fictional characters as Bridie of "Funky Ceili" fame and Maria of "Maria's Wedding," figures that stand alongside Bruce Springsteen's Rosalita and Crazy Janey as icons of rock drama.

The new album includes "Bobby Sands MP," a modern-rock ballad about the Irish patriot who died while on a hunger strike in a British prison, and "My Love Is In New York," about a homeless, hallucinating Vietnam veteran. (Collins and Sands are also the subjects of new feature films.)

"The band always was political and still is, and I think politics is coming back," said Kirwan. "I'm always struck when I look at the audience. The T-shirt I see the most among the young people who come to see us is the Rage Against the Machine one. Maybe we're just attracting a lot more young, focused, political people at this point."

"So much music nowadays is solipsistic and looking inward, and there's so much to be done politically. It's good that we're doing it anyway, since we come from political roots, and if we're not doing it then how can you expect other people to make political statements when they don't come from any political roots in particular?"

The music on "Green Suede Shoes" is Black 47's typical blend of rock, R&B, punk and traditional Irish music, laced with ample doses of rap and reggae, making for a unique fusion all its own. Ironically, it is Kirwan, the band's one true Irishman, who is responsible for the group's hard-rocking guitar sound, and Chris Byrne, a native New Yorker and former police officer, who plays an array of traditional Irish instruments, including uilleann pipes, tin whistle and bodhran. Filling out the group are ace drummer Thomas Hamlin, bassist Andrew Goodsight, and the two-man horn section of Geoffrey Blythe and Fred Parcels.

In the midst of the tour launching the group's new album, Kirwan is also preparing for the premiere of his newest play, "Rockin' the Bronx," which will open on Jan. 24, 1997, in New York. The play takes characters from a number of Black 47's early songs about Irish immigrants in New York and puts them all together in a room, also making use of the songs.

Kirwan has also just finished writing the screenplay based on his play "Liverpool Fantasy," which imagines what would have happened to the Beatles if they had broken up after having just one hit.

"Paul changes his name to Paul Montana, moves to Las Vegas, there's no '60s or anything," said Kirwan. "Twenty-five years later when Paul is on tour of England, which is in political turmoil, he decides to go visit his buddies in Liverpool who never made it. John is an unemployed docker, George is a Jesuit priest, Ringo plays with Gerry and the Pacemakers, a bar band in Liverpool. John occasionally steps in for Gerry when he has a hernia. It's a black comedy."

Other projects include a musical,

"Against the Grain," about affirmative action, and a musical he will be writing with Thomas Keneally, the author of "Schindler's List," based on the story of Keneally's wife's grandmother, who was deported from Ireland to Australia as a criminal.

Kirwan enjoys the dual life of playwright and rock musician. "When I'm up on stage myself I'm so much in the center of the cyclone," he said. "When you're the playwright and you're not involved in it, it's nice to sit back and see other people doing it."