



Black 47 to appear on Jimmy Fallon's "Tonight Show" on St. Patrick's Day

Kate Hickey | @irishcentral | March 07, 2014 | 01:10 PM

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Black 47 will do their final show in New York exactly 25 years after their first gig in the Bronx in November 1989.

Breaking News!

Black 47 to appear on The Tonight Show on March 17th with Jimmy Fallon. They will also perform the same night at BB King's on 42nd Street where their show will be broadcast live by SiriusXM. It's been quite a year so far for the band who will do their final show in New York exactly 25 years after their first gig in the Bronx in November 1989.

The band will also appear on VHI's Morning Buzz with Nick Lachey. They have also just received the good news that two of their most influential albums, Home of the Brave and Green Suede Shoes will be re-released by Universal Records later this month.

Black 47's Pulls Out All Stops on Last Call

This is an article I don't want to write.

In fact, I've been dreading the notion of putting thoughts on the end of Black 47 ever since Larry Kirwan announced that this would be the final year for the band. What a relief it is, then, to have the band end on a high note. On the aptly named Last Call, Black 47 serves a 200 proof cocktail made with a shot of funk and two fingers of Irish malarkey thrown in for good measure. Larry Kirwan saves the best for last, using roots, rock, and reggae to bring the final curtain down on the most influential Irish American band in history.

Geoffrey Blythe (tenor and soprano sax), Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcaw (bass), Joseph

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Mulvanerty (Uilleann pipes and flutes), Fred Parcells (trombone, tin whistle) make up a band that shifts effortlessly from rock to punk to waltz and over to reggae throughout Last Call.



"I know all these players really well but they still manage to surprise me," enthuses Larry Kirwan during an extensive interview with The Irish Voice. "Everyone was interested in this album in an acute way because it was the last album of the band and they wanted to make this statement.

What a statement! They rev up the caffeinated power punk on the rapid fire "St. Patrick's Day" like a band begging the record label to sign them for a first record.

On Last Call, Kirwan was committed to honor the New York music scene as well in his choice of collaborators. "Christine Ohlman has been on our records for years and is an important voice on Black 47," Kirwan says. "Mike Fazio playing the atmospheric has really added an element of the band over the years as well. Oona Roche, a niece of the Roches, did some great work as well and it was important that these folks be part of the last call, particularly Christine. We always had this big support among New York musicians and it's great to have them in there."

In recent years, Kirwan has been more known for his work outside the band that includes a string of successful musicals that have had their debut in places like the Irish Repertory Theater and The Cell here in Manhattan. Kirwan's approach to songs have always been from the perspective of a playwright, with many colorful characters dancing in the melodies over the years. On Last Call, we are introduced to a nice Catholic girl-turned stripper on "Queen of Coney Island" and a fiery Puerto Rican lass with Irish in her blood. "She got long red hair - stretches down to her thighs/Walk just like a senorita - oh those eyes/Blaze like the sun on Puerto Rican Day/But when she get her Irish up, get out of the way," he sings on the Latin cha-cha of "Salsa O'Keefe," an early fan favorite at the gigs.

On "Johnny Comes A Courtin'," the band plays a lazy reggae tune while Kirwan eavesdrops on the letters written between a heartbroken father in Ireland and a daughter who has been taken to Jamaica to work as a slave on the sugar cane farms under the harsh eye of Oliver Cromwell. A romance is brewing with one of the natives and the lost daughter doesn't know what to do.

"Oh father, dear father, the sun has braised my skin/My poor hands are cut to shreds by the sugarcane/Johnny shows me kindness, his smile has warmed my soul/Oh I need your advice and good counsel." The lines are sung beautifully by Oona Roche as Kirwan plays the role of the father back home.

"I guess it came from writing plays at the same time as you we're writing songs," Kirwan says. "I don't think of it consciously like that but I do know critics like yourself have commented on the character element of the songs. When I got into theater I was working on stuff and I didn't know I was doing. I was writing theater and songs at the same time, just trying to survive in the Bronx. Plus, we wanted an earthy element of not writing about what on the radio. No chaste 'kiss on the cheek' here in the Bronx! We were writing about what was going on around us at the time. So, I guess the character development in the songs came from that background."

It wouldn't be a Black 47 album without an eye for the political and provocative and there's plenty of that on Last Call. "Let My People In" finds the band railing about the prejudice undertow that's behind stalled immigration reforms in Washington.

"There's always been a No Nothing Party that wishes to pull the ladder up behind its members," Kirwan says. "But immigration is the lifeblood of this country and its economic engine. Then again, I lived here illegally for three years, so I'm probably biased.

"Don't be afraid of difference/The color of our skin/We all bleed the same beneath/Let the people in," Kirwan pleads as the band serves up a viciously funky ruckus behind him. It is perhaps the band's finest recorded musical moment.

"With that particular song, Larry asked me to think of Neville Brothers to get this funky Cajun feel," Burcaw explains. "He would say, 'don't push int too much, just lay back.' It's cool because we throw in a reggae bridge section. I did some bass slapping, which was the first time you will hear that on a Black 47 album."

"We are blessed with a very greasy New York rhythm section and a lot of that has to do with Hammy," Kirwan says. He is a great funk drummer and Bearclaw is just this amazing

bassist. Joseph was a jazz drummer first and came to the pipes from a different place than any other pipe player I've ever encountered...he's like the Eddie Van Halen of the pipes!"

You didn't think this band would get all soft on the way out, did you? Kirwan is mad as hell, the tongue that's planted in his cheek being the only thing keeping the bile from coming out on "USA 2014."

"Hey kid, got a job for you, now you're finally out of graduate school/Here's your desk your computer, excel sheet, roto rooter/You be workin' 9 to seven, occasionally past eleven/But that's okay, me oh my, jobs these days so hard to find/What you talkin' about, cash in the hand, think this is a rock & roll band/You're my intern, get with the program, your Daddy pay for your health care & your/Futon," he raps over a funk strut.

"We always came out for gay rights on "Danny Boy" even though we lost gigs for making that stance and we have always come out on things without regard to consequences," Kirwan explains. "It blows my mind that American people are prepared to let their children go into the world without a secure job: they're letting Fox News and MSNBC dictate what's going on. This is the final warning of 2014 from us. What happened the last 5 years, this decimation of the middle class, it's major. I hope another band keeps the focus on things like this once we take our last bow."

Speaking of the last bow, Kirwan saves the last verse of the song for a little reflection. I'm out of here it was a blast, Black 47 soon a thing of the past/So many gigs, could go on but I might end up repeatin' this song/Thanks for the praise, love and all, especially the alcohol/Called it like we saw it so sorry, if we occasionally played out of key," he sings.

With the announcement that this is indeed the band's last call, Kirwan reports that the fans have been extremely gracious in acknowledging the impact that Black 47 has had on their lives. "The reaction has been very deep," he says. "For a certain amount of people, they don't want it to happen. You've been a soundtrack to their lives and they measure their lives through the years the band has been alive. People have been telling me what the music means to them, which is gratifying."

The fans aren't the only ones feeling reflective. Burcaw is particularly reflective on how being in Black 47 has changed his relationship with the bass. "Larry always says to me, 'less is more' and that has been a revelation," he says. "There are horns and everything else going on, so playing a lot of busy notes doesn't work. It works on jams like "Rockin' the Bronx" but otherwise, I hang back. My eyes are always on Larry's hands and Hammy's kick drum and snare. I didn't have that kind of high visual communication until I joined this band."

Talk of the last gig is brushed off with a terse response by Kirwan: "I've never been one for reflection but as I get to the end I'll be thinking about it."

When pressed on his future, Kirwan sees writing books, musicals, and plays in his future and knows there will be more music without knowing what that will look like.

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