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Last call for Black 47

Mike Farragher | @brainonshamrox | November 20, 2014 | 11:06 PM

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Larry Kirwan and Black 47 take a bow.

This was a show I was dreading.

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I had gotten the hits on Facebook that last week was it for **Black 47** and I was glad I had legitimate plans on Saturday, when the band played their last show.

It seemed too painful to say goodbye to a band that has meant so much. Yes, it is well established that they single-handedly invented **Irish American** rock. But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about Mike Farragher here.

As a kid who had Irish trad jammed down his throat, rebelling against your parents in your teens naturally meant playing punk rock because it grated on their nerves. When the intersection of punk and Irish music came through the music of the Pogues and Black 47, it made me re-evaluate my rebelliousness and eventually come to love the Irish melodies.

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So, it's not really a stretch to say that there would be no Irish music writer without **Larry Kirwan** and the boys.

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Any lingering dread or sadness was wiped away the minute I walked into World Café Live in Philadelphia last Thursday. Kyf Brewer and the mighty Barleyjuice were holding court onstage as soon as I walked in, peeling off a blistering read through the Rolling Stones' chestnut "Paint It Black."

Fiddler Alice O'Quirke was coaxing some old black magic out of her instrument, her body convulsing wildly with each note. They ended their set with the playful "Weekend Irish," a sing-song that pokes fun at some of the "plastic paddies" in their audience who claim to love their Irish roots yet couldn't name one county on the auld sod.

What can I write about a Black 47 show that I haven't already written about over the last 18 years? The band's shambolic, greasy, funky vibe never sounded better, and you find yourself shaking your fist not only because the music sounds so defiant, but because you're angry at Kirwan's decision to fold such a vital force of nature.

They acknowledged the Philly fans for their support during the last 25 years once onstage, but other than that they let the music do the reminiscing. They played rare tracks like "Carlita's Revenge" and "Blood Wedding" from 1994's Home of the Brave.

The old punk was a bit cranky onstage, asking the World Café staff not to release any of the stifling heat from the room. "Air conditioning has no place in rock," Kirwan chided before confronting the crowd with news that "Pittsburgh was much louder than this" after a lackluster response to a song.

I watched people say their goodbyes afterwards at the merchandise table. Kirwan says he was unprepared for the emotion that came to him along the way after the gigs.

"There's such an intense feeling between the Black 47 band and fans," Kirwan said after the show. "There have been intense interactions with fans. You knew this might be the last time you'll see some people.

"I'm sure I'll be back in some cities, but never as the band. People had a story - 'I met my wife at the gig, this song got me through a tough time,' that kind of thing. You're doing your job, you don't follow the songs once they go out into the public. You just record songs and then you're onto the next project.

"It was great to see how the records moved people, very moving for me. I don't think I've entirely processed it yet."

For bassist Joe Burcaw, the emotions coming at him were just as raw.

"I've been thinking how I might never see these people again. That is very emotional," he says.

"We always played each gig like it was the last but over the last year, it was really true. I had multiple people crying and not wanting to let me go. They told me about what our band meant to them and how they had taught their kids about live music through the band.

"If we can play for 120 minutes and put a smile on everyone's faces, we've succeed. I think we have done that at every gig throughout the years."

The New York Times did an exhaustive profile of Black 47 farewell shows last Sunday. They speculated how the band was destined to be bigger than they were in the nineties, but it never really happened. I ask Kirwan if there are any regrets about that.

"We did exactly what we wanted to do," he says, shaking his head. "We never took advice, we never backed down on civil rights like seeking justice in the North, even at the expense of the band.

"We never were huge in Ireland and England because of our outspokenness. Festival organizers sometimes didn't book us because we were too political on things like Iraq, but in the end it was the right thing to do to stick to our guns."

I spoke to Kirwan again on Sunday afternoon, after the last show in New York. He seemed

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exhausted, meditative, relieved and proud, all at once.

"I've never seen BB King that filled...it was jammed," he recalls. "It was emotional at times. It was an American wake – rip roaring. I would say they sold more booze there than you can imagine.

"It was a good way to do it – to say we could play one final year. There was a wild scene on the streets with people trying to get in and scalpers jacking up ticket prices."

The guests that joined the lads onstage held special meaning for Kirwan. His son Rory, an aspiring rapper, joined in on "Fire of Freedom" and left a mark on his dad.

"I was watching them and thinking wow, he has talent! He has a sense of himself onstage. There's a persona there," Kirwan says proudly.

"He has a great facility for words. I was always impressed with the word play of rappers and really loved the 'toasting' he did on the song. He brought this playfulness.

"It was interesting to hear him playing with a band. He was floored by the power of Black 47. It was one thing to listen to the CD and it's another to be in the center of it onstage. It's like being in the center of the cyclone.

"We are so locked together as a band. As a rapper to react to that – there's a lot of power coming your way from the lock of the rhythm section."

Kirwan is grateful for the opportunity that the Last Call tour provided him to play once again with the mighty Chris Byrne, co-founder of the band who left in 2000 to start Seanchai and the Unity Squad.

"It brought so much to have him there," Kirwan says. "My favorite times would be when Chris would be rapping. I'd be able to sit back and enjoy the band. The pressure would be off to deliver everything. It was amazing.

"When we were onstage this past Saturday we just cracked ourselves up laughing. It's a cosmic joke to have two guys from the Bronx persevere, hated everywhere we went when we first started out, now ruling 42nd Street one last time. He and I have this special relationship from being there with one another from the very beginning."

"It was a great show and all, but it was an emotional show for me," adds Burcaw. "Half of me was there, but half of me was broken up that I'd never play with these guys again.

"Saying goodbye to Larry was tough. I had to catch a train back up to Boston so I caught him at the merchandise table. He wouldn't let go of me. It was a hug of complete love and endearment. I could feel it in his grip."

With that, the band is going their separate ways. Burcaw recently moved to Boston to be "Dean of Bass" at Boston's School of Rock. He also landed a gig in the house band for the "Steve Katsos Show," a local program. In 2015, he will tour in a Jimi Hendrix tribute band around military bases throughout New England.

He is a bass player without peer who can sing and you can reach out to him (joeburcaw@yahoo.com) if you'd like to put the man to good use!

As for Kirwan, he has jetted off to Ireland this week to take 60 fans of his Celtic Crush program on Sirius on a tour of his homeland and watch him play a rock and read gig in his beloved Wexford. He says he will be back playing solo but not until the spring and even then, he is unsure of the form it will take.

"I have been experimenting with rediscovering my songs on the acoustic guitar. What happens is that you go back to the soul of the song, what you wanted to say originally," he said.

"The other day I did 'Black 47' the song acoustically. It is a really arranged song acoustically. I never had a chance to listen to most of the songs the minute we mastered them so I am going to go back and do that for a while."

As a fan of the band since the very beginning, I tip my hat to Black 47 for helping a whole generation of Irish Americans discover their cultural roots. A job well done these last 25 years – rest in pieces, lads!

To keep track of the individual members' next steps, keep your eyes glued to Black47.com.

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