

arts & culture

The Politics of Music

Black 47 redefines Irish music by playing *thinking* songs, not drinking songs.

by Ames Arnold



ROCK

Musicians who wave political flags often come off like heavy-handed blowhards unless they are blessed with the talent of a Bob Dylan or Woody Guthrie. Irish rock band Black 47 may take its politics with dead-on rowdy passion, but lead singer and songwriter Larry Kirwan says the group knows when to jump off the soapbox.

"We take the music seriously. We don't take ourselves seriously," the 42-year-old Irish-born Kirwan said recently from his flat in New York's Chinatown. "Who needs someone up there lecturing you all the time ... a red-headed guy on stage shouting at you, 'Do this, do that.'"

Thursday's *Jumpin'!* in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' Sculpture Garden is a chance to catch this band that's been on the music scene for more than a decade playing its in-your-face rock. Kirwan — a playwright and former CBGB's punk rocker — teamed with fellow Irishman Chris Byrne in 1989 after they discovered they had a political and musical affinity over a few late-night pints. The guys combined the unlikely sounds of "scratchy and noisy" guitar and the traditional uilleann pipes — a kind of bellows-driven flute — and started gigging the Irish bars of New York. They unsettled customers with their refusal to play typical Irish ballads in favor of Kirwan's socio-political songs torn by trouble and strife. Emerging at a time of musical improv and experimentation, the duo was soon joined by horn players including former Dexy's Midnight Runners founder Geoffrey Blythe.

Kirwan says that from the beginning, the group found an audience in the Irish communities of the "old line Democratic cities" across the country from San Francisco to Chicago to Buffalo. Every listener didn't always like their message, but Black 47 generated a buzz and crowds grew. The big break came when the band landed a steady Saturday night job in the early '90s at a Second Avenue joint in New York named Paddy Reilly's. Hard-drinking fans mingled with yuppie curiosity seekers in the lines that soon formed around the block and it wasn't

long before the national media came around. But the added attention during the next seven years didn't change the band's party-and-politics approach. Kirwan explains that political awareness runs in the blood if you grow up in Ireland. This awareness naturally becomes a part of one's musical fabric.

"Politics is something you take out every four years here (in U.S.)," he says. "In Ireland it's different. It's a part of your existence."

But Kirwan is also clear that he and his rock 'n' roll mates keep a party attitude. Often Black 47 — a reference to the Irish Potato Famine of 1847 — mixes its crash-and-burn songs of oppression with good-humored tunes about lust and sex in unlikely places. There's hot horn playing to go with Kirwan's shouted vocals as well as traditional Irish melodies and ska-flavored beats. Kirwan laughs as he puts a bottom line on the band's lively show and its affect on an audience.

"Let's put it this way. We'll get them going."

Black 47 plays the first event in the Jumpin'! series at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Sculpture Garden at from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 15. Tickets are \$10. \$