

UE NEWS

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO & MACHINERYWORKERS OF AMERICA (UE)
AUGUST 2006 LXVIII NO.5 www.ranknfile-ue.org



70 YEARS of ACTION

Don't go messin' with their Green Suede Shoes

Black 47 brings politics and music together with Irish wit and wisdom

By Dave Saldana

Playwright Richard Sheridan described Ireland as "a land of happy wars and sad love songs." Playwright Oscar Wilde described America as "the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between." For a certain Irish-American band out of New York, weaving the truths contained in those quotes makes for a rich fabric of music, politics and fun.

The first time I saw Black 47, I was in grad school in New York City, broke and bored on a Saturday night. A friend suggested we head downtown to see a bar band that she'd heard great things about. The cover price of \$10 would put a dent in my threadbare wallet, but she assured me I'd like it and promised to buy me a beer.

Since then, I've become a great fan. They are far more than a bar band, and truly one of a kind. Combining traditional Irish music with hip hop, reggae and old-fashioned rock and roll, it's a rollicking good time. But like much of Irish culture, it is often bittersweet, politically charged, and incisive. With seven studio and two live albums to their credit since forming in 1989, Black 47 is known on both sides of the Atlantic, and has a fiercely loyal following.

"We do a long set, between 90 minutes and two hours," says Larry Kirwan, Black 47's frontman, songwriter and published author and playwright, explaining what keeps them coming back. "We have a lot of songs to play, so we have to keep the show moving, and I want to make sure that by the end, everybody's on their feet."

dence, is recalled as a man who fought "for the rights of the workin' man, the small farmer, too," against "the bosses and their screws." Michael Collins, the military leader whose guerrilla warfare tactics brought the British government to the negotiating table—resulting in the partitioning of Northern Ireland—is lamented for his assassination in the

the military based in Iraq, cobbled them together with some words of my own and put them to music."

The response was not always good. The band's fan-base

is split between those who like the Irish music and those who like the politics, but

the two halves don't always overlap. "When we first started playing it live, I almost dreaded doing it. There would be people yelling at us, calling us unpatriotic, and there were a few fistfights that broke out in the audience. But when people would challenge me about it, I'd say, 'These words were written by people fighting over there, so who are you to criticize them from your barstool?'"

The early negative response has since faded, though Kirwan can't point to any particular reason for it. "Some time around last August, we stopped getting as much hostility. I don't know if people are opening their eyes to what's happening in Iraq or what, but since then we're not getting the same kind of reaction."

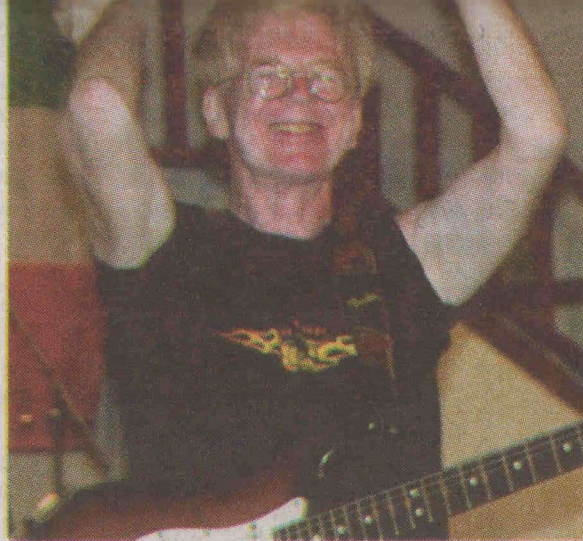
It could also be that hearing the song got some people thinking about the war in ways they hadn't before, something Kirwan hopes the band's songs will do. "Not everybody who

EIGHT HOURS FOR WORK,
EIGHT HOURS FOR REST
**EIGHT HOURS
FOR WHAT WE WILL**



...sure that by the end, everybody's on their feet."

Now comprised of Kirwan on guitar, Geoff Blythe on saxophone, Fred Parcels on trombone, drummer Thomas Hamlin, and Joe Mulvanerty on the hauntingly beautiful Irish uilleann bagpipes, the band tours almost non-stop, making the rounds of Irish festivals, highland games, and frequently pubs big and small, with an annual pilgrimage to Ireland. They've played in Shea Stadium, at Farm Aid in Iowa, giant halls and tiny bars from Hollywood to Dublin and everywhere in between.



The name of the band derives from 1847, the darkest year of the Irish Famine, which killed as many as a million Irish between 1845 and 1851. Caused as much by Britain's economic policies that favored British landowners over Irish peasants as a potato blight that destroyed crops, it triggered an exodus of two million refugees to Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Kirwan, who emigrated to New York from County Wexford in the early 1970s, and Chris Byrne, an Irish-American former NYPD cop, decided that the name captured the political spirit they wanted to put forth in their music. For Kirwan, it also reached into his family's history.

"When my grandfather was very old, he was becoming senile, and he started talking to his father," a Famine survivor who had passed many years before, Kirwan said. "He would talk about Black '47, and the people with grass stains on their mouths because there was nothing else to eat. It was never spoken about in Ireland at the time— it was pretty much expunged from the collective memory— and that stuck in my mind. How could something like that be allowed to happen? I thought it was important that there should be something to memorialize the people who suffered."

Since the band's founding, the politics of Ireland, America, and Irish-Americans have been key in many of the band's songs. Many iconic figures are feted in songs that are notably devoid of harps-and-shamrocks imagery or mawkish sentimentality.

James Connolly, a socialist leader executed for his role in the 1916 Easter Uprising that paved the way for Irish indepen-

BLACK '47

civil war that followed independence, when "Ireland lost her greatest son of all."

Bobby Sands, the IRA member voted into parliament while in a British prison, speaks in his song about the excruciating decision to go on his fatal hunger strike for political prisoner status. Bobby Kennedy is re-

membered as the younger brother whose will to help those less fortunate made him a grand, lasting inspiration to Irish-American progressives.

An unexpected hero in this pantheon is Paul Robeson, the African-American performer whose uncompromising fight for equality made him a target for McCarthyism and J. Edgar Hoover's G-men, and a victim for one of the most vicious personal smear campaigns in American history. "He has been ignored by history," Kirwan says. "Very few people remember who he is. I've read reviews where critics have said it's a song about 'a great Irish activist.' I wanted to remind people of the things that he did, that they should celebrate him. When you're talking about struggle and fight in American history, especially African-American, he's the man."

The little guy is not ignored in Black 47's music. A re-imagining of "Danny Boy" finds the totemic Irish lad living as an openly gay construction worker dying of AIDS. "Five Points" tells of an Irish immigrant in the draft riots of 1863, when the rich could buy their way out of the Civil War, where the poor rebelled against the conscription laws in their slum community (Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* deals with this subject also). A homeless Vietnam vet scarred by his wartime experience and alienation upon returning struggles to find his way back to normalcy in "My Love is in New York."

A similar tale is told in the soldiers' own words in a recent song, "Downtown Baghdad Blues."

"I noticed that there weren't any songs about what was going on in Iraq," Kirwan says. "I knew it was going to be dangerous to write about, so I used a lot of lines from e-mails I was getting from fans in

just want them to start thinking about things differently and challenge their way of thinking."

That approach has netted some good results. Kirwan makes a point of spending time with the fans after a show, sharing a pint and talking about music, politics, and often both. "There are a lot of people who tell me it got them interested in their Irish heritage, or they looked into the political stuff we sing about, and it got them thinking in a more liberal or progressive way. And sometimes there are people who tell me we're not far enough to the left for them anymore."

There are songs about madness and merriment, as well. Getting drunk and ruining the ex-girlfriend's wedding, tickling New York's seedy underbelly, and the pursuit of a rock-and-roll fantasy are memorialized in song with what Kirwan describes as a "gleeful" exaltation of good, clean, dirty fun. "We've always approached sexuality and such with honesty," he says, acknowledging that a large part of Irish culture is bound to Catholic notions of piety and chastity, while another part celebrates the exact opposite with a wink and a smile.

Though the past has seen significant changes within the band— Byrne left in 2000 to focus on his hip hop group Seanchai and the Unity Squad, and several bass players have come and gone— the ride has been colorful. The stories are plentiful, and like many songwriters, Kirwan prefers them set to music, as in the song "Rockin' the Bronx":

Now everywhere we go we cause a fuss
'Cause we play what we like and our sound is us.
It's got a whole lot of hell and a little bit of heaven.
That's the story so far of Black 47.

For tour information, political chats, and merchandise, check out black47.com. For more on Seanchai and the Unity Squad, check out seanchai.com.