

For Irish bands, green comes in many shades

By Jim Sullivan
GLOBE STAFF

With St. Patrick's Day almost upon us, Irish music is in the air, and Irish bands are booked into pubs, clubs and concert halls.

The standard-bearing, Grammy-winning Chieftains are here, of course, at the sellout Symphony Hall

tomorrow night. Stockton's Wing, a veteran Irish traditional/rock band, makes its first Boston St. Patrick's Day run, playing six area concerts, including one for the mayor and the public at Boston City Hall on Friday. Black 47, America's best-known Irish-oriented band, is at the Paradise Tuesday. The Wolfe Tones, an anti-English, pro-reunification band, just put 1,000 folks into the IBEW

CELTIC, Page 26

For new Irish bands, green comes in many shades

■ CELTIC

Continued from Page 21
Hall in Dorchester.

What explains the appeal of Celtic music?

Let's first ask an English singer who has spent most of her recent life in America, living outside Boston for a couple of years during the mid-'80s and now in New York.

"It's soul music," says Marianne Faithfull, on the phone from New York. "And it's got a very charming, silly side to it, too, which I think people like as well. [The Irish] don't take themselves that seriously, therefore when they want to be incredibly serious they can."

Faithfull knows of what she speaks. She collaborates with her longtime pals the Chieftains on the best-selling "The Long Black Veil" album, and she'll be singing two songs with them tomorrow, including "Love Is Teasin'," the most wrenching song on the album. "Love is a treasure when first it's new," croons Faithfull in her trademark cracked voice. "But as love grows older, then love grows colder / And it fades away, like the morning dew."

"I have to say we did, really, find maybe the saddest song in the whole Irish traditional canon," says Faithfull, "the real heartbreaker." She says the other song she'll sing tomorrow, Mary O'Hara's "I Know My Love," is "a lot cheerier."

The success of "The Long Black Veil" – it recently went gold, signifying sales of 500,000 copies in the US; it is Top 20 in many countries – has shocked a lot of people, including the Chieftains, says their publicist Charles Comer. "They're an overnight success after 31 years," says Comer, with a laugh. "I don't think the Chieftains realize it yet." The Chieftains, led by Paddy Moloney, were featured on no fewer than seven national TV programs yesterday.

Morris Lennon, fiddler for Stockton's Wing, offers this take on the popularity of Celtic music: "I think the appeal comes from fact that it's dance music. It's in the rhythm. And of course, the melodies – Celtic melodies tend to be 'ear friendly.' [The emotional range] is full scale. A lot of the music we write is determined by your own frame of mind. If you're not feeling great, there's a

fair chance it will be melancholy; if you're up and about, you want to write reels and jigs."

Larry Kirwin – an Irish-born singer-songwriter who immigrated to the United States in the mid-'70s – fronts Black 47, a New York-based band that plays the Paradise Tuesday. Black 47 mixes the up and the down, and they've made inroads in both alternative rock and Irish music scenes. "We play two different circuits," says Kirwin. "The rock circuit and a circuit of our own, where we just take over an Irish bar and play for the door, circumventing the rock 'n' roll machine."

Kirwin pens character-based, story-driven songs. He explains Black 47's ethos as "coming from that [Irish] scene and articulating what Irish-Americans feel, both politically and socially. In no way do we feel ashamed of it; we feel proud we're representing, to some degree, 44 million Irish-Americans. I would sooner be influenced by Irish traditional music than R.E.M."

All that is Irish is not, of course, traditional. Van Morrison fans know this, as do punk fans of bands like

the Undertones, Boomtown Rats, Stiff Little Fingers and Virgin Prunes. Out of punk came the mainstream breakthrough of artists such as U2, Sinéad O'Connor and, most recently, the Cranberries.

Robert Young, a native Dubliner who relocated to the Boston area, has assembled a trio of Irish bands – Blink, Frames DC and the Pale – that will frequently share a bill at area clubs in the upcoming days. The timing is certainly right if you're talking about people's thoughts turning toward Ireland around St. Patrick's Day, but these bands aren't cut from traditional cloth.

"It never played a part in my life," says Blink singer Dermot Lambert. "There have been a few bands I like who used the music in a sort of modern, pop-culture format, but I personally didn't like what [many] did with it. I was brought up on punk rock. When you're a kid you want to listen to something loud.

"We're fundamentally a rock band, but we derive a lot of influences from the dance culture as well. We use a guitar-bass-keyboard sound; we also use loops and sam-



Black 47, a New York outpost of new Irish music.

ples. We're from Ireland, and that kind of stuff, but somebody says a band is from Ireland, the first thing I think of is traditional Irish music and we're very far from that."

Lambert was awed to work with producer John O'Neill, a hero from the Undertones. "I was 7 when they were doing their business," he says, "but I remember it well. [Meeting him] was like bumping into a legend."

Lambert says he was initially hesitant about joining up with the other two Irish groups – "sort of like flying the Irish flag, waving the Paddy shamrock," he says – but became convinced that exposure to US audiences and record companies would be beneficial.

Glen Hansard, singer for Frames DC, concurs: "There's this whole Irish circuit thing going on and what we're trying to do is keep away from going straight to our own people. The Irish are great; they turn up for you – our gig in New York was packed – but we want to reach oth-

ers, too."

Frames DC were slated to open for former Pogues lead singer Shane MacGowan at Avalon before he canceled after a close friend's death. "If there's a word for our songs," says Hansard, "I'd say 'redemption' songs – about not giving up. It's been a tough few years and you sink or swim. Our music goes from hard to soft, a whole spectrum. If you had to compare, [it might be] a Grant Lee Buffalo or R.E.M. sort of thing."

Black 47 sees itself as a New York answer to the Pogues, who in the mid-'80s brought an influx of young listeners to Celtic music. "The great thing about the Pogues," says Kirwin, "was they took Irish music and put it through the filter of street life in London. We took Irish music and put it through the street life of New York. The links go back to Ireland, but they come through New York with the reggae, hip-hop and punk."