

Interview: *Black 47*

There's something about that time of day just an hour or so before the sun rises, when the city is still quiet and the streets empty, that makes all dreams seem possible and all thoughts fantastically philosophical. This is the time when one often stumbles out into the early morning air from inside a smoky after hours pub, mind reeling with all sorts of vibrant ideas and decisions, fueled by the warmth of the porter running through one's veins. It was under such conducive circumstances that Black 47 was originally formed. Little did Larry Kirwan, who had been drawn to Paddy Reilly's [29th Street & 2nd Avenue) that evening out of a need to "hear an Irish accent" or Chris Byrne, whose band was playing there that night, know that what would transpire that evening would change the course of their lives forever.

It's an easy thing to sit in a pub, pint in hand, and dream aloud. It is also an easy thing to make elaborate plans for the future in this setting. However, most of these resolutions are left behind the moment one pushes open that heavy pub door and breathes in the chilly morning air. That's not the way things worked out for these two men. What they discussed that night, their plans for a new band, actually came to pass. "I didn't realize the sound that Larry

was going for until the first rehearsal," says Chris Byrne, "I thought it was going to be an acoustic kind of thing. I could see acoustic was going to get big, and I was shocked when I saw him plug the Fender in." Earlier that evening, Byrne's band had broken up and, as



Members of Black 47.

Kirwan puts it, the two "went off drinking and formed the band."

The sound that came from this melding of two different, yet ethnically related, cultures was something the music world had never heard before. And it wasn't easily accepted either. The band's early gigs in the Bainbridge section of the Bronx are notorious for the

crowd's negative reaction to Black 47's music. It was an experience not easily forgotten by the band. Remarks Byrne, "I knew half of them as well, so it was even worse. I think it drove the music though, because that's how it got kind of an aggressive tip to it. You can go two routes when you're getting that kind of a reaction: you can just throw your hands up in the air and say 'fuck it,' or you can just dig in and say 'fuck youse.' I think that's what we did, and I think it worked. And I think it gave an energy to it as well, and a drive to it, that I don't think would've been there if it hadn't of been for the bad vibe that was there in the first place."

Kirwan agrees, but still remembers the sting of early rejections, "It was the *subservience* they wanted that totally angered me. They wanted you to be nothing. It was like this *morass* of conservatism and, actually, *hatred* coming at you. It was this reaction to anything that was new. It brought out the worst in me in certain ways, so that it was confrontational the whole time. It brought out a certain anger

because I just couldn't figure out, 'Why do these people *hate* me so much? They don't even *know* me. Why is this music so hateful to them?'" It was this intolerance that drove the band back to Paddy Reilly's, where they've been playing twice weekly for the past five years.

Kirwan's original vision was one in which he and Byrne were "the

ocus of the band" and other musicians would drift in and out nightly. This concept was born from his early improv background with such East Village luminaries as the poet Copernicus (where he originally met future Black 47 trombonist Fred Parcells and drummer Tom Hamlin). Reminisces Kirwan, "It was a real wild band- we used to just go on stage and do a lot of drugs and drink. Totally avant garde. Every night, depending on the drugs you were doing, *that* was the music." Both Parcells and Hamlin played in other bands with Kirwan, among them Chill Faction and The Major Thinkers. So when he and Byrne were laying down the groundwork for Black 47, it was almost natural for Parcells and Hamlin to join. Says Byrne, "Fred just started turning up and so we said, 'Why not play the trombone?' So he started getting up and jamming and it worked, so we kept him on." Geoff Blythe, of Dexy's Midnight Runners fame, joined after Hamlin. Kirwan, who had always been a fan of his work with Dexy's, met Blythe's wife Sharon, a writer for *Circus* magazine, in a playground. "They started chatting and she said," says Blythe, "that I was looking around for things [gigs] and Larry said, 'Oh, tell him to come down and sit in.' So I did and we just went from there."

The band played for years without a label, putting out their indie album, *Black 47*, in 1990. However, the strain of self-promotion and management was too much to handle. It was then that the band signed to EMI because "it got to the stage," says Kirwan, "where it was going really well for us as independent's, but I had stopped writing to run the thing." At that moment, the group realized that they either had to sign with a label, or risk

losing all that they had worked so hard to develop.

They released their self-titled EP, *Black 47*, in 1992, with *Fire of Freedom* following the next year. Already having developed a large and loyal following, the band went out on the road to promote the album, touring both in the United States and Europe. Dubbed "the hottest band in New York City," attending a Black 47 gig is almost a requirement of any New Yorker. However, it is the music that draws the crowds every Wednesday and Saturday night. "The songs are good," remarks Parcells, "and the musicians are good. It's good stuff and it has depth as far as the things he [Kirwan] talks about." Agrees Byrne, "There's a certain honesty to it and a certain realness to it." However, "Kirwan believes that it is the band's ability to allow its fans to release themselves that attracts so many people. "When we have a gig," says Kirwan, "it's not just a musical thing- it's not about the band, *fuck* the band. If we can be the catalyst for losin' it on yourself, the person next to you, that's what's important. The band is not really the thing, it's like the atmosphere that the band creates and that the crowd creates when the electricity hits together. *That's* the thing I'm proud of."

Known as a "political" band, Black 47 has been labeled "left wing" by many critics, due their outspoken social beliefs. If one could call civil, political and human rights "left wing," then I suppose the label would be appropriate. Music with a social or political message receives a lot of flack from the press and Byrne believes that "people have been numbed by the last twenty years. Most band's aren't politicized because most people aren't - they could tell you who Joey Buttafuccho

is but they couldn't tell you who Aristide is. That's the way it's going and I don't see it turning back, to tell you the truth. I don't think the music industry is too interested in anyone raising too many questions, either."

Music has always been the catalyst for change- the sixties and seventies brought us such socially conscious songs as "Eve of Destruction" or "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall." Recent rock critics have stated that music today is dead, that it has lost its danger and its edge. They also repeatedly claim that songs today are totally devoid of any meaning. Byrne agrees for the most part, "Most things I see that are perceived as 'dangerous' are usually just cheap publicity stunts. Whereas bands that really are dangerous tend to be ignored because if it's dangerous, it could fuck the industry up."

Kirwan agrees, "I couldn't see myself being in a band that didn't have some kind of political message. The problem is that a lot of the music is second and third generational- why not be original if you're going to play music?" However, he doesn't believe that rock n' roll is *completely* dead. "It'll revive or it should go out of business. If rock music can't keep the danger and the edge, then it should go out. It's pretty dead as it is now, it's third generational people posing a certain way. Everything is so *self-conscious* in the world. Everyone is worried about the next review...we're all so *aware* of everything. The great stuff comes from when you're not self-conscious. That's what I wanted to do with Black 47."

"What I was trying to do," he continues, "is to keep the band really away from outside influences so that when we would go mainstream we would have this tremendous *aura* or

(continued on p. 26)

(continued from p. 27)

this tremendous crowd following." It was this mixture of different band members' influences that created the unnamable sound of Black 47. From Parcells' interest in "church music, Hendrix, Charlie Parker, Irish jigs and reels" to Byrne's fascination with the Clash, the Who, Christy Moore, KRS-One and Public Enemy to Blythe's background in soul music finally combined with Kirwan's childhood exposure (through his merchant marine father) to calypso, tango and opera, and the Beatles and Paul Robeson, we have a veritable stew of influences and sounds. All brought together, this combination creates one of the most interesting and entrancing sounds today.

The new album, *Home of the Brave*, was released on October 18 to much critical acclaim. The main complaint about *Fire of Freedom* was

that it didn't capture the energy and power of Black 47 live. However, the new album has somehow managed to recreate the smoky attractiveness of Paddy Reilly's during a Black 47 gig. The songs refer to experiences and struggles of a New Yorker, as opposed to those of a recent immigrant trying to adapt to his new environment, a theme which defined *Fire of Freedom*. However, though subject matter has changed somewhat, the response of the audience is as supportive as ever. "It's the thrill," says Kirwan, "that the drunken, rowdy fans are here to see me, because many's the time I've been playing when there were two people in the place. We have this rapport with the audience- it's like it's almost a sacred thing."

The cover of *Home of the Brave* features the Statue of Liberty against the New York City skyline, her right fist breaking free from

shackles. This symbol of Black 47, a clenched fist (symbolizing unity and revolution) breaking free from its chains of oppression, has run consistently through all of the band's albums. But can a band like Black 47 inspire social or political change? "If music can do that," says Parcells, "then this will definitely be right in there." Their vision of a more aware following, open to such issues as Northern Ireland and social injustice, has led to an increased awareness among other bands. "Not to put feathers in our own cap," remarks Byrne, "but we've opened the way up for a lot of other bands on the scene because there was nobody doing anything *remotely* like us five years." Kirwan would be the first to agree, and the first to put it quite simply, "It seems like Black 47 is the only thing that espouses anything."

Paula Vayas is a Barnard first-year and a Bulletin Staff Writer.

Review: Certain Distant Suns

"Happy on the Inside"

by Geoff Saavedra

When I read the press for Certain Distant Suns I saw Midwest and began to panic, "No! Not country!" Boy, was I right. Country music is as close to Certain Distant Suns as the Earth is to Pluto. You'll find Certain Distant Suns somewhere in between Jesus Jones and the Soup Dragons. Apparently out in the midwest these guys are a big thing.

I don't think they're really *Happy on the Inside* as their album title would lead one to believe. I mean with song titles like



Certain Distant Suns

"Bitter," "Mine, All Mine," and "Whatever" one might pigeon hole these guys as a rather melancholic band. Surprisingly enough, their music is upbeat in an 80's depressing kind of way. It definitely brings back memories of Roxy Music, Yaz, the Police, and the Cure - minor guitar chords played over happy sounding bass lines. You know, the type of stuff that could have depressing lyrics and happy-go-lucky music, or vice-versa.

Then there are the