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Shamrock

The fiery Irish band Black 47 brings down the house with its radical mix of rhythm and views.

By Deborah Kirk

'N' Roll



Clockwise from top left: Jeff Blythe, Larry Kirwan, Thomas Hamlin, Fred Parcells, and Chris Byrne.

Larry Kirwan, the Irish-born force behind Black 47, likes to "what if." He reels off some examples. "What if the Beatles broke up in 1962?" (The '60s, as we know them, would never have happened, Kirwan says decisively, and Paul would have become a Vegas lounge act.) "What if John F. Kennedy were still alive?" (He'd never be able to adjust to the '90s.) "And what if James Joyce could whisper advice in your ear, acting more or less as your conscience?" (This one, mercifully, has no answer.)

It may seem odd, at first, for the leader of a rowdy, roof-raising Manhattan bar band to be so pensive. But not if you know Black 47, the politically minded Celtic rap-reggae-rock group whose songs are as thoughtful as they are electrifying. For the last two years, Black 47 has been the unofficial house band at Paddy Reilly's, a small, sweaty Irish alehouse on New York's East Side. There, Kirwan and his four bandmates have developed an almost fanatical following of mostly left-wing Irish-Americans who found in Black 47's lyrics a certain like-mindedness. Kirwan's songwriting, which captures the thrills, the horrors, and, above all, the grind of the immigrant experience, clearly hit a nerve with his countrymen. But while Kirwan's empathy for the immigrant community may have brought the band its first measure of success, it is, probably more than anything else, his affection for eerie dissonances and strange juxtapositions—his tendency to think in terms of what ifs—that accounts for Black 47's growing appeal to a much wider audience. For, these days, besides playing to nothing but full houses, the band has just released its first major-label EP, *Black 47*, on SBK Records (a full-length album, *Fire of Freedom*, is due out in March) and will appear as featured musicians in the new Matt Dillon film, *The Saint of Fort Washington*.

"I don't mean to be a braggart," says Kirwan, "but I've always known we were special. The minute we hit the stage, people started freaking out. Instantly, I formed the band because I wanted to make some kind of social change—and even though what we do may sometimes seem like agitprop, it's a whole lot better than singing about the moon in June."

Thankfully, Black 47 never comes across as sanctimonious. Its performances are loose and uproarious, with the band's political stance couched in a danceable mishmash of musical genres: reggae rhythms, Irish jigs, melancholy dirges, hip-hop, Dixieland-flavored jazz, and classic punk rock. This > 132

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stylistic hybrid, says Kirwan, keeps the band grounded in its roots as a New York City outfit: "We want to be thought of as synonymous with New York, the way a band like the Neville Brothers is with New Orleans, because you just couldn't come up with music like ours in any other city. Everyone thinks of us as Irish, but we're all New Yorkers now. And like all New Yorkers, I came from somewhere else. That somewhere else just happens to be Ireland.

"You see, I try to write my songs in an allegorical way," Kirwan explains. "Even though most people don't get, say, all our specific references to Irish history—even our name refers to the Irish potato famine of 1847—they connect with the general idea that we're challenging the system. They can hear in our music a genuine, human expression of freedom."

Coming from this crew of wild-hearted lads who can whip an audience into a frenzy in a matter of moments, such earnestness is, well, typically incongruous. Kirwan, who is also an accomplished playwright and has more than a touch of the poet in him, claims that this is just the sort of contradiction that gives Black 47 its energy. "I love to clash," he says. "Hard with soft, sentiment with bitterness. Funk with Celtic. Yeats, who's been a great influence on me, once said that poetry should be as cold and passionate as the dawn. That's how I feel about our music, because if it doesn't clash, then it's not dangerous. And if it's not dangerous, it's not worth doing." ■