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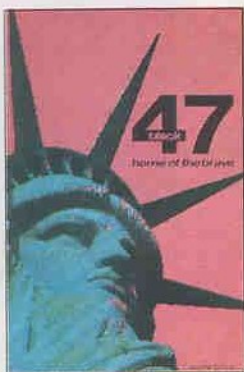
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FAST FORWARD

Black 47 was the worst year of the nineteenth-century Irish potato famine. Now it's the name of New York's most exciting unsigned band.



Sounds

By Vin Scelsa

There are those few lucky souls who saw the Beatles play the Cavern, Dylan at the Gaslight, or Springsteen rip the Stone Pony. Add to those ranks anyone who has spent a sweat-drenched Wednesday or Saturday night this past year jammed into Paddy Reilly's Pub, a watering-hole-in-the-wall on East 28th Street, popular with New York City's large Irish community. For it is here, on a tiny makeshift stage up against the front window abutting Second Avenue, that New York's most exciting new band, Black 47, has been creating an exuberantly unique musical hybrid that is already being referred to by enthusiastic members of the local press as "Gaelic rap" and "green-card rock."

Black 47 was how Larry Kirwan's grandfather referred to the worst year of the nineteenth-century potato famine that drove the first wave of Irish to America. It seemed an appropriate

name for a contemporary band that would focus much of its attention on the continuing immigrant experience—Irish and otherwise—what it's like to come to a new country in search of a better life. So thought Kirwan, who spent three "illegal" years in New York before finally getting his coveted green card, and Chris Byrne, a young New York City cop who played the uilleann pipes in traditional folk groups and whose Irish-born wife won her green card in a lottery.

They decided to form a band that would play a kind of poetic urban rock that would embrace the city's melting pot of ethnic diversity. Do not be misled by Kirwan's thick brogue or Byrne's eerie, melancholy pipes. Black 47 transcends its particular Irish roots to become—as they add unorthodox, junglelike percussion and a

jazz-influenced trombone-saxophone assault to Kirwan's frequently dissonant electric guitar and Byrne's otherworldly piping—a distinctly unique American band. With his



wild-eyed poet's passionate love for words and his humanistic sense of fair play, brotherhood, justice, and family, Kirwan leads Black 47 down the back alleys of New York (Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx and 42nd Street are frequent settings for his songs and raps), as well as down the back roads of history, to offer a bleak yet courageously combative picture of loneliness, exploitation, oppression, and humanity's constant revolutionary struggle for freedom.

Take equal measures of the

Clash, Bob Marley, Public Enemy, and the Chieftains, add a bawdy sense of humor, turn on a crunching hip-hop drum box, and dip in a wash of bleating horns that frequently sound like a New Orleans brass band, and you've got some idea of what Black 47 is all about. This is the real thing, friends: a raw, refreshing band, untainted and unafraid to play their hearts out for the sake of human rights and dignity, not to mention dancing and fucking—the sad and beautiful things that make life worth living all over the world. (A cassette titled *Home of the Brave* can be ordered for \$10 through Paddy Reilly's, 495 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.)

