

Black 47 bids farewell in Yonkers this weekend

Steven P. Marsh, Special to the Journal News; 12:11 a.m. EDT March 13, 2014

After 2500 shows over 25 years, the band Black 47 is calling it quits — but not quietly.



(Photo: Courtesy)

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Anyone who's ever heard a Black 47 song knows the New York rock band has deep musical roots in Ireland.

But founder Larry Kirwan reveals it was an Englishman's writings about New York City's most notorious slum that gave him the idea for updating a Celtic musical base with hip-hop beats.

"I had read Charles Dickens' account of visiting the Five Points and seeing the amalgamationists," says Kirwan, describing the African-American men and the Irish women who married and lived in the slum in the mid-19th century, Kirwan says.

Dickens included spirited descriptions of the music and dancing the cultural collision created.

"That's what gave me the idea for Black 47: What if you mixed African-American beats with jigs and reels?" Kirwan said.

Following that guiding principle, Kirwan and co-founder Chris Byrne, a Brooklyn-born New York cop, debuted Black 47 in November 1989. Now, after Byrne's amicable departure in 2000 and more than 2,500 shows over 25 years, Black 47 is calling it quits — but not quietly. "Why not go out with a bang, the way we came in with a bang, rather than let it drift off," Kirwan explains with a laugh.

The sextet is performing at a frenetic pace, says Kirwan, "playing maybe twice as many gigs as normally." Black 47 will bid farewell to Yonkers on Sunday, headlining an outdoor show at Empire City Casino that kicks off at 2 p.m.

"It's kinda interesting being back in Yonkers," Kirwan says during an interview at Empire City. "Some of our first gigs were in a place called Fibber McGee's on McLean Avenue. It's good to come back."

Rather than wrap up with "greatest hits" gigs, the band decided to record one more album, "Last Call," which came out earlier this month. It offers a slate of new songs like rap-rock farewell "US of A 2014" and Latin-flavored "Salsa O'Keefe" to balance longtime fan favorites like "Funky Ceili" and "Maria's Wedding."

The album also introduces a new singer on the reggae-tinged "Johnny Comes a' Courtin': 18-year-old Purchase College student Oona Roche, niece of folk music trio The Roches.

The new songs, like the old favorites, tend to tell stories with universal themes, often linked to social justice, embroidered with Irish detail.

Black 47 has built up such a loyal fan base over the last quarter century that it's easy to imagine the band trimming its mad touring schedule and coasting on a few high-profile shows a year.

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So why call it quits now?

"I wouldn't play for an extra minute if I wasn't enjoying it," says Kirwan, who looks more like a Celtic literary figure than a rocker — which is no misrepresentation, given that he's a novelist and playwright, too. He's a bit owlsh behind glasses and under a mop of curly red hair that he wears in an unruly tousle rather than the stylized bowl cut he sported years ago.

Kirwan says the time just seemed right. The idea came to him after a gig in Buffalo. "I thought, the band sounds great. This is a good time to leave. Not right now, but in a year and a half. Let's set a time, and everybody can go to see the band a couple of times if they want to. And we'll just call it a day."

Kirwan says he feels the band has accomplished what he and Byrne set out to do. "We did have a plan right from the start. This was 1989, nobody was making any political comment anymore. So we thought, mmm, there's an opening there, eh?"

It began with the name. Black 47 comes from the darkest year of "an Gorta Mór," *the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1852*. "It was a statement. It was very much the same as the Jewish statement, 'Never again.' We felt at that point that a million people had died and a million more had left the country, and nothing was being said about them. We felt that that roots of Irish-America came from that, so why not speak about it," Kirwan said.

The band "changed a lot of attitudes, and that was really important to us," he added.

Aside from working to help the Irish-American community see past its conservatism, Kirwan is proud of the band's efforts on behalf of the gay community, helping destroy stereotypes with its reworking of the traditional "Danny Boy," making its subject a gay construction worker.

Frontman Kirwan's unconventional voice — an Irish rasp displaying a touch of Ric Ocasek of The Cars and Bob Dylan's distinctive rising inflection — sets a distinctive tone for the band, which features Geoffrey Blythe on saxophones, Thomas Hamlin on drums, Fred Parcells on trombone and tin whistle, Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcaw on bass and Joseph Mulvanerty on uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes), flutes and bodhran.

Rockland County will get a chance to say goodbye on April 12 at Albertus Magnus High School in Bardonia. A Pearl River appearance also is in the works. Black 47 will wrap up its career on Nov. 15 at a venue to be named. Check the band's tour page <http://black47.com/tour/index.html> for updates.

New City-based journalist Steven P. Marsh blogs about music and other performing arts at www.willyoumissme.com.

IF YOU GO

What: Black 47

When: 2 p.m. March 16

Where: Empire City Casino, 810 Yonkers Ave., Yonkers.

Tickets: \$20, general admission standing room. www.empirecitycasino.com (\$15 for first responders with ID, sold in person only.)



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