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Audience builds for the Celtic-influenced rock 'n' roll of Black 47

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BLACK 47
At: *The Kells, Sunday*

Here's the plan:

Black 47 tours steadily until its debut album, "Fire of Freedom," is released in early March. Live performances build upon the buzz created by the band's MTV video and first single. Before long, if all goes well, the band is playing to bigger audiences in larger venues and, a la the Spin Doctors, becomes the next bar band to hit the big time.

Black 47 is accustomed to the heavy touring; it's the fame and fortune part that the band is still working on. Despite the tour bus of New York fans that pulled up outside The Kells on Sunday, despite the crowd packed shoulder to shoulder on what is usually the slowest night of the week, there were some unconvinced souls amid this flock.

Few stayed that way for long after the band delivered a dose of

Celtic-influenced rock 'n' roll with a hip-hop beat – a bizarre combination, but one that works. Black 47 has played to packed pubs in New York for the past few years, and has built a loyal following in Boston. Cars founder Ric Ocasek helped with production chores on the band's five-song abbreviated CD.

More than 600 tickets for the Kells show sold out in advance, and a few unlucky souls were turned away from this Brighton watering hole into a chilly drizzle. They had to be content with listening to the band's

first single, "Funky Ceili," already in the local Top 20. Those numbers can hold a record company's interest; the songs take care of themselves.

At full throttle, Black 47's unique stylistic mix is as fun as anything on the charts. A cover medley of "Gloria" and "I Fought The Law" rocked the crowd home as an encore. "Living In America" – the escapades of a nanny and a construction worker – drew chuckles.

"Maria's Wedding" was the band at its best, with punchy pop hooks given extra oomph by a meaty horn

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section and tragicomic lyrics. It was also a cautionary tale: friends don't let friends sip whisky all afternoon, then crash the nuptials of a former fiancée whose father holds grudges. As lead singer Larry Kirwan said to introduce the song, "I went to Maria's wedding. I wrote this in the hospital."

The humor and emotional content of Kirwan's songs register far stronger in live performance than on CD, which is always a treat in these days of digitally-enhanced perfection. "Black 47" was the painful story of two young men journeying to the Irish west coast to catch a ship to the United States in 1847, the darkest of the famine years.

On disc, "James Connolly" is a tedious dirge to a union leader. Live, the song is the rousing anthem it was designed to be, carried by Kirwan's distinctive tenor. (It doesn't hurt that he bears a strong vocal resemblance to Robert Smith of the Cure.)

The mix of Celtic melodies and funky rhythms has been done before, most notably in some early Van

Morrison and a few overlooked cuts by Sinead O'Connor, so Black 47 is not exploring uncharted waters. What's new is the level of tradition; the incorporation of tin whistle and uilleann pipes into the structure of modern pop – and the reliance upon electronic drums tracks as a rhythmic base, even during a medley of ancient reels.

And since saxophones appear to be the hot instrument for the next four years, a nod goes to Geoff Blythe's sparkling work on soprano sax, especially during the reels. Blythe, and trombonist Fred Parcells, were the salvation of the band's mercifully brief foray into reggae. Black 47 attempted one stylistic hurdle too many and stumbled. The muscular horns would have sounded better tooting across ska, the brass-heavy predecessor of reggae.

There's time for the band to work out the few kinks in the live act. The days of playing for gas money and bar tabs are over. The following is growing, the buzz is spreading and the plan appears to be in full gear.