

irish music

TROUBLE WITH A CAPITAL **B**

Black 47 the band named after Ireland's Famine, played its first gig in the Bronx in 1989. N.Y.P.D. cop Chris Byrne and Wexford man Larry Kirwan blew up a storm with a fury inspired by fear of failure. "We were aggressive and loud but from the raised eyebrows, mutters and taunts, I knew we had the seeds of something special!" Kirwan tells John O'Regan.

musicals - I've written a number of musicals. My latest *Teddyboy* has an original rockabilly score; it got its first workshop performance in December 1999. I did a children's CD and I am working on an "adult" solo CD. Fred Parcells arranges the string sections for Pierce Turner and others. Chris Byrne leads the rap group *Shanachie*; Andrew Goodsight leads *Babyhead* and does a lot of re-mixes; Geoff Blythe has a sax quartet. Thomas Hamlin has a percussion ensemble and

For the last decade, **Black 47** has been "Rocking the Bronx" and beyond. They have played in excess of 1,500 gigs taking their music, message and attitude across the U.S. They have played to audiences from 80 to 80,000, released six CDs including their latest album *Trouble in the Land*, appeared on National television and been featured in every publication from *Mrs. Murphy's Diary* to *Time Magazine*. **Black 47's** progress hasn't been without a price: they have been shot at, blacklisted, lied to, and robbed. A highway crash on I-95 totalled their van and equipment. Surviving unscathed, **Black 47** started again.

Larry Kirwan's sidelong glances at the Irish American experience and a solid narrative punch mark **Black 47's** lyrical stance, his own explanation of the songs hints at the darker side of the Irish American experience. "Each **Black 47** song has a different theme. On *Trouble in the Land*, most of the songs are character based, some are autobiographical, and some are about historical figures like Bobby Kennedy and Countess Markievicz. There is a certain Elizabethan/Restoration like earthiness to some of the songs about sexuality. There is a bit more of a brooding character but there are also the underlying **Black 47** themes of exuberance and getting on with it. An interesting aspect is that **Black 47's** songs are used by hundreds of schools from primary to college in their history, social and political science courses."

One of the most original Irish American outfits, **Black 47** music inhabits an edgy modern Industrial Celtic twilight zone.



"Musically we always introduce new elements and combine them with others we have already used. This is not something we do self-consciously but, merely, how we serve the song." On *Trouble in the Land* there are the usual reggae, funk, rock and noise influences with slivers of ska, gospel and whatever came to mind on that particular day."

Black 47's line up comprises of Larry and Chris with Berkley College of Music, graduate Fred Parcells (trombone/vocals), Geoff Blythe (saxes) from Birmingham, a founding member of Dexy's Midnight Runners, ex Major Thinker's drummer Thomas Hamlin and Andrew Goodsight (bass/vocals). "Everyone in the band has different commitments - I write plays and

writes music for modern dance.

Larry Kirwan's career commenced with Pierce Turner in a folk rock duo *Aftermath* and later Turner & Kirwan of *Wexford* and *The Major Thinkers*. "On *St. Patrick's Day*, 1985, I chucked in rock and roll forever. I returned to the theatre and, for the next four years, wrote, and directed or produced five plays (published under the title *MAD ANGELS*). In summer 1989 Larry toured Central Europe with the poet Copernicus. "We played an unauthorised concert in Prague for Vaclav Havel's dissidents. Over 12,000 people showed up to defy the authorities. It was a small victory but it made me realise that rock music could still effect social and political change."

Back in New York, Larry met Chris Byrne

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playing uilleann pipes with *Beyond the Pale*. "I sat in for a few numbers and afterwards we got to talking about the lack of content in contemporary music. Six hours and some gallons later, we formed Black 47. Chris supplied a legion of jigs, reels, slides and hornpipes which I barbarised with feedback and boom box beats. I was playing electric guitar, programming a drum machine and Chris was wailing on the pipes, various whistles and bodhrán."

Black 47's legendary seven-year residency at "Paddy Reilly's" in Manhattan sealed their reputation as NY's most explosive and confrontational roots band. Joe Strummer, Neil Young, Liam Neeson, Brooke Shields and Matt Dillon mixed with revolutionaries, cops, barmaids, politicians, gay activists, bookies and a dizzying kaleidoscope of music hungry New Yorkers. "Finally, we had a central location; our small followings from the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens arrived en masse and we turned the joint on its ear. When we are in NYC we play Connolly's on 14 E. 47th St. on Saturdays." Black 47's live shows are highly improvisational "The arrangements are porous, the songs are constantly reinterpreted - each player has the freedom to 'take it away' should the spirit move him."

Black 47 so far has released a self financed CD, their EMI America debut *Fire of Freedom* produced by Ric Ocasek (*The Cars*). Home of the Brave Black 47's second album, featured *Blood Wedding*, *Black Rose*, and *Danny Boy*, based on local characters Larry knew from New York's East Village. *Green Suede Shoes* released by Mercury in October 1995 was a return, to their roots. "I produced it and did my level best to capture the live sound of Black 47. I think, this is the closest to that sweaty, claustrophobic, passionate, live ideal." *Gadfly* a Boston based independent released the live album *Black 47 Live in NYC*, which captures the live sound of the band - warts and all! When Michael Hill who used to be in A&R at Warners and Randall Grass at Shanachie heard Black 47 were unattached, they offered the band a deal. Black 47's first Shanachie release *Trouble in the Land* produced by Larry Kirwan and Stewart Lerman was recorded in NYC at Baby Monster and Righteous Studio on 14th Street.

Black 47 is still a very much a "people's band". "Every pundit in the music industry said we should stop playing at "Paddy Reilly's" in Manhattan for fear we'd be known as a bar band. But we had other things on our mind, like feeding our families by playing regularly, staying close to our roots and keeping independence because: in the long run it's the songs that count. We tour the U.S. constantly". As regards Europe? "We've received an offer but it has to make sense economically. We are hoping to play London, Glasgow, Belfast and Dublin in April and broadcast the shows on the Internet."

Larry Kirwan prefers not to analyse Black 47's ethos too much "It's very hard for me to comment on the Black 47 music. As much as possible, I try not to be too self-analytical. People are saying that *Trouble In the Land* is our strongest album. I would just hope that it is up to the standard of the others. We've never released a mediocre song. They all stand up and in the end, that's what keeps Black 47 going - a great live band doing very strong material in a different way - and set - every night."

The things have kept Black 47 going he admits are: "The music, the ability to support ourselves, our families and the support we've received from the people who come to our gigs and buy our albums. I think I can honestly say that we would not be together if the songs and the band did not mean so much to so many people." Perhaps the most politically aware band since early *Moving Hearts*, Black 47 is proud of its roots, and its heritage.

Trouble in the Land is the latest fiery instalment from a band whose music was made to afflict the comfortable.