

# Black 47 gives Irish music a hip twist

By Regis Behe  
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Sometimes, the best new ideas are merely echoes of the past.

When Larry Kirwan and Chris Byrne formed Black 47 12 years ago in Brooklyn, N.Y., they sought to combine traditional Irish music with the then-fresh rhythms of hip hop.

It sounds like a radical fusion, but combining Irish and African-American music really isn't anything new.

"That came from different areas, and one of them is theoretical," says Kirwan, who will appear with Black 47 tonight at the Grand Hall at the Priory in the North Side. "I knew that black people and Irish people had intermingled a lot in the mid-1800s here in the Five Points, the slum area (in Brooklyn). You can see black people playing to Irish people in the drawings, with sheep and barns in the background."

From the beginning, the grand musical experiment Black 47 tested made a joyful noise. The very first day they started to play together, Byrne brought in Uilleann pipes as Kirwan was programming hip hop beats on a drum machine. Like a Reese's Cup, it was an immediate, blissful wedding of tastes.

"You had to play right on the beat; you didn't slow things down coming into the beat," he says. "There was a way that Irish traditional music had to behave to fit in with that. And we were entranced with that."

As were many Irish-Americans,



Kevin Noble

The Irish band Black 47 comes to the Grand Hall at the Priory tonight.

Irish expatriates and lovers of Irish culture who found the strange new musical brew suitably danceable. Yet there was something else going on beneath the music, and if anyone paid attention to Kirwan's lyrics, they found a biting political commentary on "the Troubles" of Ireland in songs such as "Bobby Sands MP," "Fire of Freedom" and "The Big Fella."

"From the beginning, both Chris and I were political, and there was no way we were not going to be that," Kirwan says.

The musical fables, however, never got in the way of a good time, even among band members. And that blissful ignorance of politics has enhanced the relationship among band members.

"For instance, Fred (Parcells), I don't even think he knows the names of the songs," Kirwan says, laughing. "He knows the way they go, but I think some of the guys think in purely musical terms. And I think the biggest factor is that you don't have to play the same thing every night. You can figure things out for yourself, and if you hear an opening for something, you can play it, or you can hear what another member is playing and play a counterpoint or a harmony to that without someone saying that's not the way it is on the record."

The idea of improvisation has become so much a part of Black 47 that sometimes when Kirwan hears a song on a jukebox or the

## Black 47

- ▶ With The Karl Mullen Band.
- ▶ 7:30 p.m. today.
- ▶ \$15 in advance; \$17 at door.
- ▶ The Grand Hall at the Priory, Nash and Lockhart streets, North Side.
- ▶ (412) 323-1919 for tickets; (412) 323-9394 for information.

radio, he'll stop and say to himself, "Oh, that's the way the song's supposed to go."

But the lyrical content remains important, to Kirwan at least. A playwright and an author (his first novel, based on his play, "Liverpool Fantasy," should be released later this year), he finds that some Black 47 songs have an added import since the events of Sept. 11. "My Love is in New York," for example, was written about a Vietnam veteran who returns to the city and finds himself homeless and abandoned.

Eerily, the band decided to add the song to their set list just a few days before the terrorist attacks.

"We didn't even have to say anything," Kirwan says. "The song said it all. But that often happens with Black 47 songs."

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## Grand plans

The Grand Hall at the Priory is one of Pittsburgh's most elegant spots for weddings and corporate events. Tonight, it's taking a step into unknown territory, with a concert by the Irish band Black 47. And it's all because John Graf wanted to see one of his favorite groups again.

To some extent, it's a case of the tail wagging the dog," he says. "I've been a fan of this band for quite a number of years, and wondered when they were going to come back to town."

When he found the Grand Hall was his parents' own the Priory admits this is a tentative step into new waters for his family. January is typically a slow month for business, he notes, and once the wedding season picks up, there will be less open dates.

So far, however, everything has been easier than expected. Graf contacted the band via its Web site, and was "astounded" to hear back from lead singer Larry Kirwan the next day. A short while later, he booked the band.

Graf insists the North Side venue will stay more popular with brides than rockers, but he thinks the Grand Hall could be an occasional player in the local music scene. All the necessities for a show — security, parking, a liquor license and an acoustically sound hall — are in place.

— Regis Behe