

## BLACK

47  
 stokes  
 the fire  
 of  
 freedom

BY JYM FAHEY

**P**icture this: You are sitting in one of the many bars in the greater New York metropolitan area. You have a penchant for the kind of traditional Irish music that the bar generally features: tin whistle, uilleann pipes, acoustic guitar, and songs about the old country that can squeeze tears into the beers of the most hardened stool denizen. The band hauls in their equipment, sets up, and begins to play. Something isn't quite right. The pipes are there all right, but they are weaving inside and around a drum machine and electric guitar. You and your fellow patrons scream out, "You suck!" or worse. The duet escapes with their lives to gig again... somewhere else, of course. That scenario gives you a good feel for the first six months of Black 47. Chris Byrne, one of the founding pair says, "The beauty of it was, there were so many bars around the Bronx and Queens that you could get fired and still pick up a gig the next week."

In 1989, Byrne was mourning the breakup of his traditional Irish band. Larry Kirwan showed up at their last gig, and a few pints and a few hours later, he and Byrne found themselves in an after hours club. Byrne says, "It sounds like bullshit, but it's the absolute truth. The sun was out now and we're standing outside the bar, and we came up with this idea to start a band. I thought it was your typical whiskey world. 'Great idea!' and then you wake up the next day and it's business as usual. It was actually the one idea spawned from a drunken stupor that I followed through on."

Byrne and his uilleann pipes (a kind of bagpipe) have been working the traditional Irish scene in New York for almost fifteen years so he had a full quota of bars he knew he could count on for a gig. He also found that once he played a bar with his new partner, Kirwan, his list of potential gigs was shorter by one. The traditional Irish bars and the majority of their patrons just didn't get it. Black 47 needed a friendly home base and needed it pretty quickly. In the midst of their darkest hour, they became the house band at Paddy Reilly's in Manhattan. Byrne recalls, "We were running out of pubs at



the time, so I started scouting Reilly's 'cause I knew the place. I scouted it for three Saturdays in a row, and this is no exaggeration, the bartender was playing cards with the two or three patrons who were at the bar. This was a Saturday night at 10:00. It was a disaster. So I presented them with the idea, 'Listen, we're not gonna run anybody out of the place 'cause there's no one here in the first place.'" The logic of Byrne's argument was obvious. When their first gig at Paddy Reilly's, packed with fans who followed them from debacle to debacle around New York, sold more beer and drinks than the place had done in some time, Black 47 had a home. They continue to play there on Wednesday and Saturday nights, but since their exposure on MTV and WNEW, a major rock radio station in New York, the pub is filled to overflowing. The house rocks to the current lineup that includes Byrne on pipes, tin whistle, and vocals; co-founder Kirwan on lead vocals and electric guitar; Fred Parcells on trombone, tin whistle, and vocals; Geoff Blythe (once of Dexy's Midnight Runners) on saxophones; Thomas Hamlin on percussion; and David Conrad on bass.

Black 47's first release on a major label comes from SBK Records and is called Fire Of Freedom. The record takes on a number of subjects, many of them extremely political. As Byrne points out, "If you don't address political issues, and you are in a band that's getting exposure, you are quite political because you are accepting the status quo." There are also plenty of very (dark) funny narratives about life in the United States. The best known is perhaps "Funky Ceil (Kaylee)/Bridle's Song," but "Maria's Song," "Rockin' The Bronx" (a hip-hop-flavored Irish reel or visa versa), and "40 Shades Of Blue" will all bring a smile on as your foot taps

to a beat founded on reel, jig, reggae, or rock.

The songs on Fire are all written by Kirwan, although his unique delivery and sense of drama are more muted on the record than the live shows. The band aspires to capture that "live" feel in the studio, but they realize that they are probably a couple of recordings away from achieving that. Even so, co-producer Ric Ocasek has done a good job with this record. The music flows well, moving from one mood to another and from one theme to the next. The listener is swept along by the stories and the emotion and the rhythms. It works, but is it Irish?

When the band was exhorted to "play something Irish" after the first tune of their debut gig (a reggae song, as it happens) Kirwan responded, "I am Irish. I wrote the song. That makes it Irish so, shut the %#@ up!" Byrne approaches the subject a little less passionately. "To me it's the logical Irish band to come out of New York. I could never see this band coming out of Ireland. I thought the Pogues were the logical Irish band to come out of London, with their style. Get a bunch of Irish guys in London and you come up with the Pogues. Get a bunch of Irish guys together in New York and you come up with Black 47. Neither band could have come out of Ireland. We're a New York band with an Irish influence."

To really get the essence of Black 47, catch them live. Having already outgrown Reilly's, their days there are numbered, although that is truly the place to see them. Don't worry though, their road show vibrates as their recent appearance at Farm Aid in Ames, Iowa proved. Byrne swears that after 600 gigs as a band, they take a bit of Reilly's with them wherever they go, so catch Black 47 when they come to your town, and have a pint at Reilly's for me. ■