

It's Celtic rock with an edge

Black 47 is provocative, political

By **JIM BECKERMAN**
STAFF WRITER

It's not by accident that one of the songs on Black 47's new album, "New York Town," is called "I Won't Take You Home Again, Kathleen."

Jigs and shamrocks, green beer, and colleens named Kathleen are just some of the things that Black 47 is *not* about.

No matter. Irish is Irish, and these fiercely political Irish-American rockers always find themselves booked solid around St. Patrick's Day.

"When the mainstream wants a bit of Irish, they'll come to us," says Larry Kirwan, the lead singer, songwriter, and guiding spirit of this 19-year-old cult band.

They may not always get what they came for.

Last St. Patrick's Day season, for instance, the band caused an uproar at Manhattan's Knitting Factory when news came, in the middle of a performance, of Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

"I said something from the stage, it was intemperate, and a number of people walked out," Kirwan says. "I'm pretty left wing, but the band's following has a strong right-wing side to it. Which is good, it balances things out."

Nor is "New York Town" —

their first studio CD in four years — likely to calm the waters (see review, Page 16).

There's a song hinting at U.S. government complicity in 9/11. There's a tribute song about Father Mychal Judge (the gay chaplain who was killed in the Twin Towers collapse). There's a sympathetic song about the 500 Irish U.S. Army deserters who fought in the San Patricio Brigade on the Mexican side of the 1846 Mexican-American war — a source of embarrassment to some Irish-Americans today.

"For 100 years, this was totally swept under the carpet in Irish life," Kirwan says. "It was perceived as total treachery on the Irish part."

And the album is musically as well as politically incorrect. This isn't the unadulterated Irish folk of the Chieftains, much less the weepy Irish-American pop music of the "Too Ra Loo Ra Loo Ral" kind. This is hard-driving Celtic rock mixed with blend-in items that range from swing to hip-hop. And the album's guest stars — among them Suzzy Roche, David Johansen, and Rosanne Cash — are hardly a Celtic who's-who.

"I'm often not sure myself how to describe the music," Kirwan says. "There's definitely an Irish element there that's strong, musically and lyrically, but there are



Black 47, the group of Irish-American rockers, has been around for 19 years.

WHO: Black 47.

WHAT: Irish rock.

WHEN: 7 and 10 p.m. Wednesday.

WHERE: B.B. King Blues Club and Grill, 273 W. 42nd St., Manhattan, (212) 997-4144.

HOW MUCH: Tuesday \$37.50, Wednesday \$23.

also many different styles, and the guys in the band wouldn't see themselves as Irish musicians in the least. They're basically musicians who are trying to do their best with the songs."

The provocative aspect of the band starts with the name: Black 47, a reference to the darkest year of the 1840s Irish potato famine. And it came to the fore with the band's first gigs in 1985.

Kirwan, a sometime novelist and playwright, had joined forces with uilleann pipe player Chris

Byrne to form a band that could play the Irish pub circuit (the current lineup includes Kirwan, piper Joseph Mulvanerty, trombonist Fred Parcells, sax man Geoff Blythe, percussionist Thomas Hamlin, and bassist Andrew Goodright).

But Black 47 wasn't cut out to be an ambient music for men lifting pints and watching television.

"We were going into these Irish bars where bands are used to being perceived as background music," Kirwan says. "And we said no. TVs off. And I used to bring in two lights and shine them on us. And we were saying, 'You listen to us, because we're going to be so loud that you won't be able to talk anyway.' Now they gotta react to you. They can hate you, that's fine."

Many did — although many also liked Black 47's edgy, punky brand of Celtic rock. Many simply didn't get it, like the rowdy at

one early gig who shouted "play some Irish music!" Kirwan's response: "I'm from Ireland, I wrote the song, that makes it Irish. So shut the [expletive] up!"

Given the band's mixture of Celtic soul and New York attitude, it wasn't much of a stretch for Black 47 to contemplate a theme album about the fraught relationship the Irish have had with the city to which so many immigrated over the last 300 years.

"I think 9/11 kind of knocked everybody out of whack a bit," Kirwan says. "Afterwards, we happened to be thinking, and I thought that since we were so closely associated with New York, we should do something that's totally dedicated to the city, both the city as we knew it before 9/11 and the city afterwards. That's how it came about."

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