



LARRY KIRWAN

INTERVIEW CHRISTINA RODEN

Irish-born and New York-based, Larry Kirwan has amassed a daunting list of accomplishments—among them composer, author, playwright, rock star, radio personality and all-round agent provocateur. Born in County Wexford, the skinny red-head emigrated to the U.S. when he was little more than a lad. He scratched out a living—nearly enough for rent, plus assorted controlled and uncontrolled substances—by performing as a solo act, as a duo (most notably with Irish singer-songwriter Pierce Turner) and, since 1989, as bandleader and chief songwriter with Black 47, “The House Band of New York City” named for the worst year of the Irish potato famine.

Wielding a party-hearty, sax-driven and guitar-flayed punch, Black 47’s radical political stance has attracted nearly as much attention as Kirwan’s infectious knack for storytelling. His characters hail from the Irish, Irish immigrant and Irish-American communities—three parallel and sometimes mutually antagonistic groups—as well as other populations. Whether relating tales of star-crossed lovers, a fed-up nanny, marital strife or dispatches from the streets, Kirwan’s lyrics are passionate, pissed-off, insightful, profanely funny and, not infrequently, surprisingly tender. Along with his 10 albums fronting Black 47, Kirwan has released two solo albums (Kilroy Was Here and Keltic Kids), published a collection of plays (Mad Angels), a memoir (Green Suede Shoes: An Irish-American Odyssey), and a novel (Liverpool Fantasy). Since 2005, he has hosted Sirius Radio’s “Celtic Crush”—a genre-crossing program that presents talent from the original six Celtic nations (Ireland, Scotland, Isle of Mann, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany), as well as any artist Kirwan deems to be “touched by the Celtic soul.”

How does it feel to have been officially dubbed an “icon”? That’s the worst thing you could have done to me! Now I’ll have to tear my own bloody self down.

Could you ever have imagined such a thing back when you were singing for pints at the Bells Of Hell on East 13th Street? To be honest, it still comes down to how is the last song I wrote. And how will the next one be? Can I get the business of running a professional band done quickly so that I can get back to music and finishing [my novel] *Rockin’ The Bronx*? And what ass do I have to kiss—and am I sure it’s the right one—to get my goddamn latest play onstage? If being an icon helps with any of that, then long live Larry the Icon!

The tale is often told how you and Chris Byrne, an Irish-American New York cop and uilleann piper, had a few Guinness one night and decided to start Black 47. How was your patented mix of Irish balladry and dance rhythms, Irish-American vaudeville, rock, R&B, hip-hop, New Orleans brass, Proustian/Dylan-esque story-songs, and up-yours politics achieved, and over how long? One aspect you don’t mention is the punk-garage band influence. That’s a common denominator to many musicians, and was a place where Chris and I could easily meet. Chris’s band Beyond The Pale had broken up the night we met, so we formed Black 47 to fill in for their gigs. I think we had one rehearsal! But it fell together pretty quickly, definitely in the

first year. There's nothing quite like being onstage frequently to get your act together. That breeds self-confidence, and occasional arrogance, and you need a lot of one and a hint of the other to survive in this ego-driven but ultimately deflating business.

What was the biggest hurdle you faced while you were first attempting to gain a following? Staying alive with my face intact whilst playing four sets a night in the tough Irish bars of the Bronx.

In 1995, the readers of New York's Daily News voted you as one of the "Top Fifty Most Interesting New Yorkers," several spots ahead of Madonna. Were you tempted to leave town? Nah, where the hell would I go? Who'd take me in? I actually was quite flattered and began taking lessons in "how to be even more interesting."

Let's talk about your upcoming album *Iraq*, which is hitting the streets about now. Black 47 has spoken out against the war since before there was one. Between 2003 and 2005 we took a lot of grief, physical threats, lost gigs and so on over our position—more than most, I would imagine, as we've never played to just the converted; we've always had both a strong left and right wing amongst our admirers. The songs from *Iraq* demonstrate that it's often more patriotic

to dissent than to be bullied into running with the herd. A number of the songs are the stories of fans of the band who served in the U.S. forces in Iraq. Black 47 has been seared by this war and hopefully this is reflected in the songs.

What are your proudest accomplishments as an artist? I think Black 47 is a beacon of hope to many people, both on a political and social level. As a songwriter, I think I broke new ground with Black 47 character songs like "James Connolly," "Paul Robeson," "Bobby Sands, MP," and so on.

What are your proudest accomplishments as a human being? Oh Jesus, surely that's a question for others. Of late, I guess I haven't been feeling that proud personally unless I have a couple of bottles of Sierra Pale Ale aboard. And even that experience can be fleeting.

What pisses you off? I guess the one thing that irks me a little is the way Black 47 is often described as a "great bar band." We are. But there's a negative connotation implied. We play bars because we can, and because that keeps the band going financially—no small task over the last 18 years. But name me the "concert" band that deals with more subjects, is more political, or is as lyrical? Just switch four of our rowdier songs to four of the more introspective, and look out Carnegie Hall! ✨

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