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## This weekend I'll also be listening to... Black 47

October 19, 2013

Posted by [WorldbyStorm](#) in [Culture](#), [This Weekend I'll Mostly Be Listening to...](#)  
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*A very welcome guest post from Joe Mooney which complements IEL's [This Weekend I'll Mostly Be Listening to also from today...](#)*



“Fueled by its ever-present political passion and a sense of humour to match, Black 47 has chronicled the Irish-American experience in a wonderfully unique fashion that stokes controversial fires as much as it revels in spinning absurdly funny tales.”

As one 2000 reviewer declared “They’ve raised consciousness, hell and the roof over the last decade” so it was a safe bet that I’d be liking them . As a Socialist , republican and music fan there were so many ways I could have come across the band , but it was not what you’d expect.

Circa 1992 I was flicking through a magazine called (as far as I remember) ‘Prison Times’, a mass market periodical aimed at Americas incarcerated population. Produced by Larry Flynt publications I think, amidst the many ad’s for body building supplements, etc, I spotted a short review of a Black 47 EP (Remember them?). The record sleeve caught my eye , and the review referred to James Connolly as a former prisoner and hunger striker. Pre iTunes era I never did manage to get that EP, despite at one stage asking a friend in New York to find it for me . Black 47 would soon after release the ‘Fire of Freedom’ CD , which reworked some of their earlier tunes and I did get this. This included ‘James Connolly’ which lived up to expectations – musically and lyrically ! And here it is, live and complete with raised fist salutes (which actor Danny Glover allegedly partook in once at a show).

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How could you not like a song that not only includes the lyrics...



“...Protect the proletariat from the bosses and their screws  
So hold on to your rifles, boys, and don't give up your dream  
Of a Republic for the workin' class, economic liberty”

...But manages to make them flow seamlessly along. Black 47 vocalist Larry Kirwan recalls the power of the song when originally performed:



“The good songs would take care of themselves, the others would just fade away. But somewhere in the middle of Connolly the audience stopped dead – even drinks were left untouched. It was a strange moment. When we finally finished, there was a hush. Oftentimes, I still hear that hush during Connolly and I remember that first wonderful night.”

While singing about long martyred rebels was one thing, supporting still living versions would prove much more troublesome for the band. The band, headed up by Kirwan and NYPD officer Chris Byrne were setting the New York Irish scene on fire, gaining huge support at live shows and requests for radio play, but their political stance didn't please everybody. They literally put their money where their mouth was, recording 'Free Joe Now' about maze escaper Joe Doherty, locked up awaiting extradition at that time. Black 47 refers to the worse year of the famine, so even the name was an insult in certain quarters. It is widely suspected that the band's potential success in the European market was sabotaged by this, and they never received the proper recognition they deserved.

Of course, the band was not exclusively political in subject matter – they were once described as 'the house band of New York' and their bar room residencies were legendary. Their catalogue of tunes would range from a capturing of the emigrant experience, the downright comical and even some underworld tales that were like Martin Scorsese 'Mean Streets' with bodhrans. Musically they are generally seen as Celtic rock, but incorporate everything from reggae, punk, ska and all manner of ethnic flavourings. This was their breakthrough track, and is mostly a true story.

The band would continue to record songs of a political/historical nature, and Irish figures as diverse as Father Murphy of Boolavogue, Countess Markievicz, Bobby Sands and Rosemary Nelson would all feature in songs over the years. Often presented dramatically in the voice of the subject character or those around them they offered a more political and balanced view than usual in such songs. This

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Both tracks appeared, appropriately, on 'The Home of the Brave' album, along with 'Time to go' an unambiguous message about the continued British military presence in Ireland. It was shortly after this release that Chris Byrne left and continued his musical career with Seanchai and the Unity squad. Larry Kirwan remained with the band, but also undertook some solo projects. One of these was 'Keltic Kids' a collection of great, unpatronising children's songs. Like some of the historical/political songs, many are written 'in-character' and include titles like 'I won't play with my brother' (to the tune of 'The Wild Rover') and 'I wanna be five for the rest of my life'. I found this CD by accident in a box marked "Various" in a record store. My daughter became a big fan of it, particularly 'The pirate boy', sang to the tune of 'Whiskey in the jar'. I consider musical education an important part of parenting, and while she may be a big Miley Cyrus fan I know when she joins the 1,000s of teenage girls wearing Ramones tee-shirts she at least is a fan, and can name all the original members! Mission accomplished.

Kids tunes aside, controversy was never far away. The 9/11 attacks impacted on all New Yorkers, and the band were no exception, having to cope with the shock and loss like thousands more. Larry Kirwan describes the atmosphere for the band afterwards –

“In the tri-state area it wasn't unusual for someone to approach with a photo of a fan and ask that we play his or her favourite song in memory. It was hard when you knew the deceased, even harder when you didn't – to think that someone was so invested in you and you didn't even know their name.”

As the American administration used the tragedy to justify and launch military action in the middle east the band were quick to nail their colours to the mast, and would lose many fans in the process.

“I can still see the fingers in the air as people walked out; still remember the threats, phone calls, emails, letters, and all the other instances of anger and disgust, and for what?... We lost many gigs and supporters in the first years of the war but that's as it should be. At least we made a public stand and provided cover for others who shared our views. The saddest part was when people would write saying, "thank you for making this stand, I can't do so because..." They'd lose their jobs, friends, even families; and this in the home of the brave, land of the free?”

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The 2008 album 'Iraq' addresses the conflict from a number of angles, including "The ballad of Cindy Sheehan", and was described as 'an important historical work that also happened to have some good tunes.' This is a live in Dublin recording of 'Stars and stripes', a soldiers plea to be sent home (to a rocking 'Sloop John B').

The title of the bands 2010 album 'Bankers and Gangsters' is evidence that their political outlook hasn't changed and is still to the fore. They have recently announced that next year, after 25 years a-rockin' the band will be disbanding. They will shortly be recording a final album 'Last Call' and embarking on a final tour, so hopefully they'll be coming your way soon.

And heres a few final selections, covering the different aspects of the band across the years- history, politics, the emigrant experience and pure comedy.

Here's the story of the Irish in the U.S. army who decided they didn't appreciate going to war with Mexico and changed sides, and were of course punished accordingly but are remembered as heroes to this day.

And here's the tall tales, bizarre characters and humour that made up so many great tunes. This one features the lustful 'Citizen Gertie – a communist was she!', intercontinental sham marriages and a bad timing misfortune brought out by the attempt to assassinate the pope. Apparently it's a mostly true story too, and video is random dancing on a bar.

- The Labour Party
- The Workers' Party
- United Left Alliance
- Workers Solidarity Movement

### Polling Resources

- Irish Polling Report

### Resources

- Arguments for a Workers' Republic
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- What Next? Marxist Discussion Journal

### Where are they?

- A Simple Spark
- adam maguire
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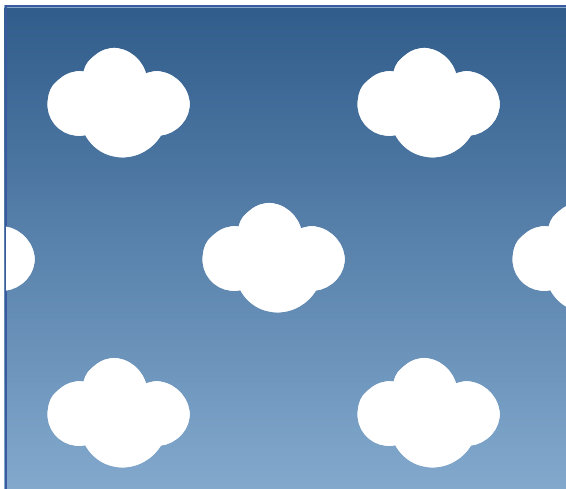
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For the year that's in it, heres 'The Day they set Jim Larkin free'. Video is a selection of photos from recent commemoration event, with lyrics from the song appearing on a mural depicting the 1913 lockout evictions in East Wall. During the design stage quotes from Patrick Kavanagh and Sean O'Casey were under consideration but the Black 47 lyrics were deemed most fitting.

And finally this one, originally recorded in the early 1990's. Black 47 were a band that were born in the Irish emigrant culture of New York city, almost a quarter century ago. This week we saw a budget passed which guarantees that the Irish emigrant experience has not come to an end as we see measures designed to drive another generation of young Irish abroad. The more things change...




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### 1. 6to5against - October 19, 2013

This is a great post, and I hope I'm taking nothing from it to stress that as well as being a band with something to say and an interesting way to say it, they were also a lot of fun, and when the mood took them, they could be really funny.

check out 'the day I wrecked your wedding' and 'funky ceili'

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