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Black 47s in the early days.

A quarter century ago, Chris Byrne and Larry Kirwan changed the face of Irish American rock. No, scratch that--they single-handedly invented Irish American rock as we know it. Scratching the rich soil on both sides of the Atlantic, they cultivated this new sound in their band Black 47 with elements of reggae, Hip Hop, pipes n' fiddles, and hardscrabble street poetry.

Byrne decided to leave the band in 2000, right after their groundbreaking *Trouble in the Land* Tour. "It had been a wild tumultuous ride for both of us – from playing in front of 5 people in the Bronx to sharing the same stage with Johnny Cash, Neil Young and John Mellencamp at Farm Aid before 50,000," Kirwan writes on the band's website. "It often seemed amazing what we'd done – taken a band from the bars of Bainbridge Avenue to playing Leno, Letterman and O'Brien, while at the same time changing the way people listened to Irish music."

As Larry Kirwan winds down the band after 25 years, the two men will be coming together again one last time as Black 47 visits Rocky Sullivan's Red Hook (34 Van Dyke Street, Brooklyn 718-246-8050

718-246-8050). on Sunday, October 12. This will be a hooley of epic proportions: it can go no other way!

“Black 47 is exiting in a really class fashion,” Byrne says during an exclusive interview. “They really did it right. The band is relevant. It is easily one of the best bands going around still and they are calling it quits at their very peak. Very few people can say that. We are the last gig they do in Brooklyn and I am thrilled. I am fairly confident I will do some songs with them. I am very proud of the work I did with them and proud of the work they did after I left.

“Some of the happiest times I had in the band was when Chris Byrne played with us,” Kirwan tells me during a long chat we had over the weekend. “With a second lead singer, I would get a break from being the frontman and just hang back and play with the rhythm. I miss that. We made some great albums while he was in the band and it will be good to have us joining in with us again as we wind things up.”

There is still life in the old band yet: Black 47 have just released *Rise Up*, a collection of their political songs that earned them their rebellious reputation. This political side was sometimes too much for the white-haired conservatives that run some of the largest Irish festivals but Kirwan stuck to his punk rock roots by never bending to authority or popular tastes. All the auld lads show up on *Rise Up*: “James Connolly,” “Joe Hill’s Last Will,” “Bobby Kennedy,” and “Bobby Sands MP” are polished with some studio remastering to become as relevant as ever.

“There is the DNA of something unique on ‘The Patriot Game’ that struck me as I stacked it against ‘USA 2014’ on this collection. You can see how the band was part of the social and political conversations of the times during the last 25 years--from the war in Iraq to the anger leftover from Bobby Sand’s passing--it’s all there.”

The band is busier than ever with fans desperate to see the boys one last time before they pack it in for good in November (see www.black47.com for a full list of shows). The full impact of life without the band is starting to sink in with everyone, including Kirwan.

“The gigs have been great. People really like *Last Call* and are scratching their heads a bit on why we are choosing to call it quits now, right after such a strong album. But that’s the point--leave while you’re at the top of your game. The shows have been just fantastic. I must say the conversations with fans after the gigs have been surprisingly emotional and a bit intense. For some folks, this will likely be the last time I see them after so many years on the road, so that makes it emotional.”

Kirwan laughs when I suggest that this final tour is like going to your own wake and hearing firsthand what you have meant to people. Yet he gets the truth in the humor.

“I must say, it surprises me how some songs and entire albums resonate with people more than others,” he says. “You’ll hear things like, ‘that song really got me through a tough time,’ and that is obviously gratifying. I’m also amazed at how many married couples first met at a Black 47 gig! There are a lot of girls named ‘Ceili’ produced by those unions and they come backstage to have their CDs signed, which is a gas.

For Chris Byrne, welcoming Black 47 through the door is not just about nostalgia: it’s about reviving Rocky Sullivan’s after the ravages of Hurricane Sandy.

“We’re still not back on our feet after Sandy--things are coming back but we haven’t trued up,” Byrne admits. Whether we make it back or not is another story but we’re still here after two years and that says

something.”

Byrne has a small but loyal following on his own at the pub, which plays host to his new musical adventure. The Lost Tribe of Donegal. In their relentless bid to make Brooklyn another county of Ireland, the group has created a ‘Newyawk’ trad sound. Rachel Fitzgerald, the beautiful soul singer from Byrne’s Seanchai and the Unity Squad Days, joins former Prodigals Andrew Harkin and Brian Tracey on the excellent new EP One of Them Days. The title track is an acoustic ditty that has a blue collar “Springsteen-esque” feel to it. “I’ve been waiting for weeks for this throwin’ to arrive/hell for leather/man, it’s one for all time/wide open play beneath the Dublin sky,” Byrne barks. The track is a natural for stadium play and has gotten the attention of the GAA: there is a great video of footage of the lads of the GAA and Croke Park scoring goals as the band sings about “waving flags.” Their string of reels at the end of the EP is pure bliss, with expert weaving of master instrumentalists on full display.

Brian Tracey has been doing double duty with this tribe and The Mickey Finns, who have gone through some hard times with the loss of their singer Ray Kelly last year. Byrne is thrilled to have the drummer pounding the bongoes behind him; I witnessed the reconstituted lineup tear through a spirited set at the Jersey Shore Irish festival where they thrilled the crowd with some bohemian reels.

“He kinda puts the tribe in this Lost Tribe,” Byrne says. “Due to unfortunate circumstances he ends up with us and ever since he played with us for the first time, it made sense.”

Byrne looks like he’s having the time of his life in the band these days, a smile cracking his stern face when the musical muscle of the band blends the bongo with the djembe to take him by surprise.

“I’ve really enjoyed it,” he says. I always liked Irish music but I like putting new spins on it. I don’t imagine we’re really like anyone else, which is the whole point. The center at festivals these days is on Celtic rock, which is cool but it’s not for me anymore.”

An interesting comment coming from the man that took the genre to an art form with Kirwan.

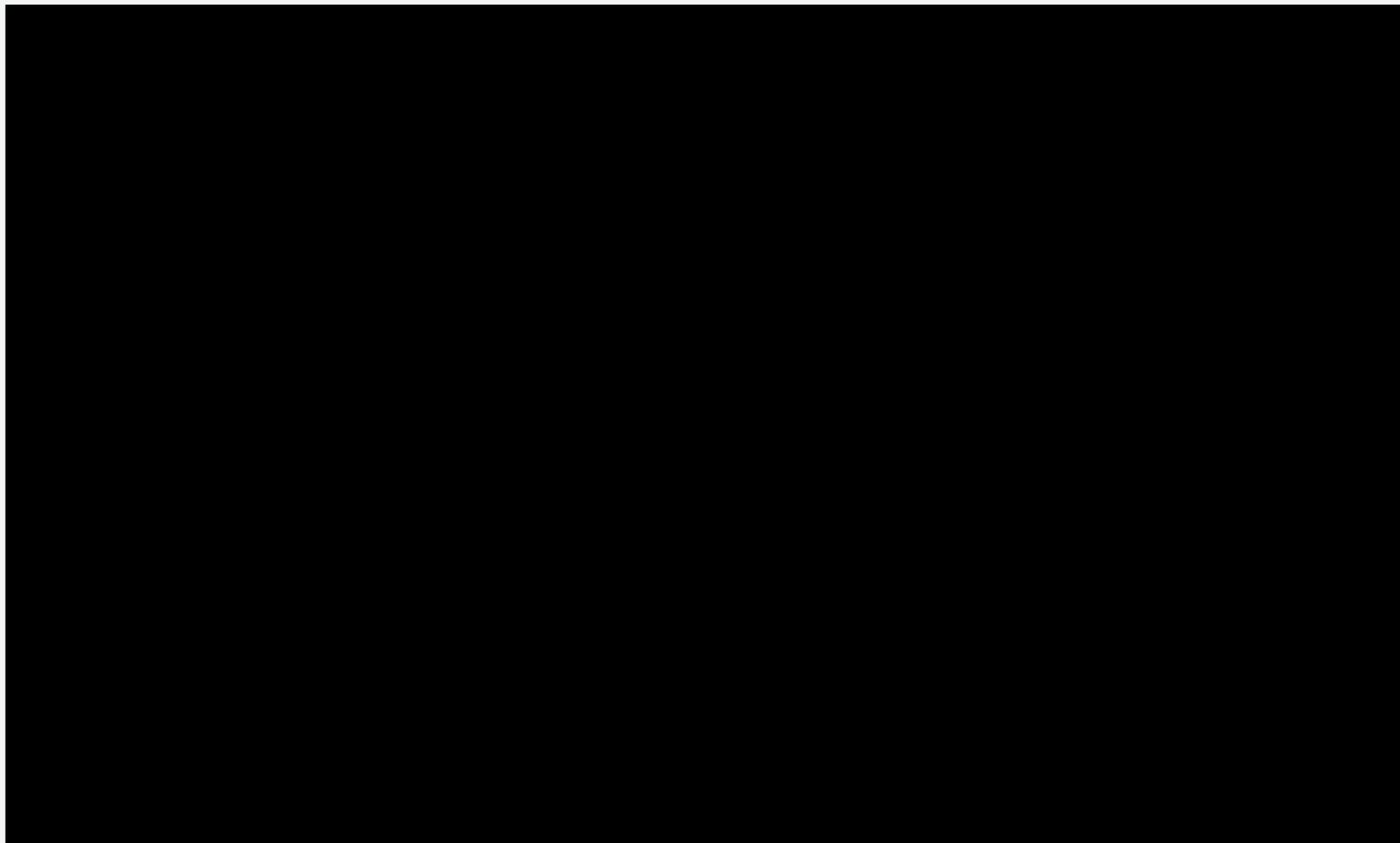
A lot of bands have the Americana style these days,” he continues. “There’s something defiant about not hiding behind drums, bass, and amps. This is raw. That is the idea of punk rock--not a style of music but an attitude. Those are my roots. I was playing in pubs when I was 16. I’m past the point where I’m, like ‘gee, I hope the crowd like this.’ We have a small but loyal following that really gets what we’re doing and that’s fine by me. The most popular restaurant in the world is McDonads which proves there’s no accounting for taste. If someone gets turned onto the music, it’s like playing MSG even when you’re not.”

If you haven’t been there yet, Rocky Sullivan’s is the kind of pub that’s all but disappeared from Manhattan. Apart from the great bar menu and pints, they play host to up and coming singer songwriters like John Rafferty. If you’re lucky, you might even find their old bartender Damien Dempsey drop by for a pint and a seison when he’s in town. Byrne reasons this remote outpost might be the last place to find true Irish pub culture in these parts.

“I think because of the changes that came around Manhattan--a big money city--you have a hard time staging something original in the pubs,” he reasons. There is nowhere I am aware of where you can mix high rents with anything remotely creative. A lot of the pubs have become top 40 radio and play the

blandest thing you can. Most pubs are under pressure to keep as mainstream as possible. I'm not criticizing them for that. Still, I have no intention of learning 'Margaritaville' anytime soon."

Thank God for that! Lost Tribe of Donegal plays Rocky Sullivan's most Saturday nights, which means there's always great craic even when Black 47 isn't on the bill. For a full schedule of events, check out www.rockysullivansredhook.com.



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