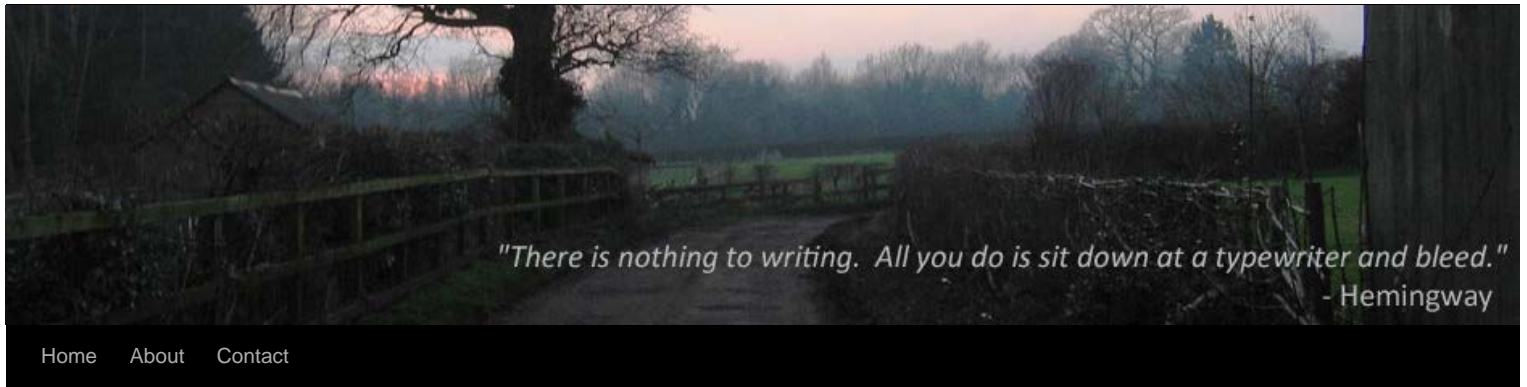


Stephanie Silber Wordworks

Love, Work, and Random Lunacy



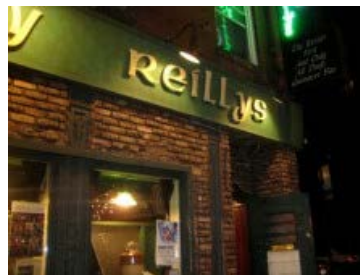
← YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE WE ARE MAGIC (nothing can stand in our way)

FANATIC HEART: Twenty-Five Years of Black 47

Posted on [October 1, 2014](#) by [Stephanie Silber](#)

We stayed up well past our bedtime last Saturday night. We'd turned out for Black 47's last show at Connolly's, New York City headquarters for over 15 years to that peripatetic band. Though we'll attend the "[final show ever](#)" at B.B. King's on November 15th, the occasion was nevertheless bittersweet.

I remember well the first Black 47 gig we attended at Paddy Reilly's in May of '94. The band, founded by Irish born frontman and songwriter Larry Kirwan, along with then-Brooklyn cop [Chris Byrne](#), had exploded onto the music scene in 1989, capturing the hearts and imagination of an ever growing and wildly mixed-bag fan base. To say that the Black 47 live experience was a dizzying and all-encompassing Bacchanalia would be putting it mildly.



Fists pump the air as the music surges. The place is on fire. Hipsters, cops and firemen, suburbanites, socialites and the odd celebrity, shout in exuberant unison along with the lyric. "My name is [James Connolly](#) / I didn't come here to die / but to fight for the rights of the working man..." It's a slice of Irish history, [Black 47](#) style, delivered as only Larry Kirwan can.

Says Kirwan, "In the early 90's we set out to give a voice to the whole nationalist population in the north of Ireland. They were so down at the time. What we were trying to do was wake people up."

Wake people up they did. The Black 47 narrative is not solely a story about a band, or even the man who drives it. It's a story about politics. Irish politics, American politics,

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the politics of the music business, and most importantly, the politics of love and freedom. Indeed, the band's name is derived from the worst year of the Irish potato famine. In the end, for Larry Kirwan, politics is his life's work, and poetry a means to convey his eloquent message. Don't make the mistake of thinking about Black 47 as an "Irish band." They're anything but, as many a tavern owner on Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx would attest to, back in the band's early days. The unique New York City/Irish nexus is the bedrock of their music.

"Take all the sounds you hear in New York; the hip-hop, the reggae, the noise in the East Village. Put 'em together in a big melange and this is Black 47," comments Kirwan.

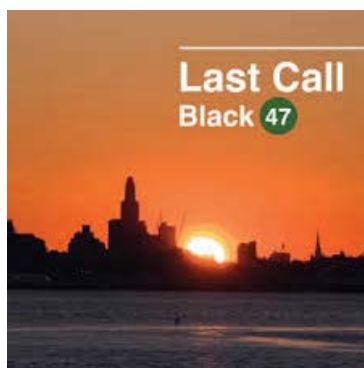
Long ago, the band was informed by an alternative radio station that their sound was "too alternative to be alternative." Maybe. But in spite of the vagaries of a fickle business, the group did have its fifteen minutes — and it stretched that into twenty-five years. Theirs is a story of survival.

Other than the venue, last Saturday night differed little from that May of '94 at Paddy Reilly's. Personnel has shifted a bit, and many more songs are to be found in the canon, but the band's dynamic, the energy, and the message remain the same. Time collapsed. The packed house rocked in place. Fred Parcell's trombone interlocked seamlessly with Geoff Blythe's wailing sax. Thomas "Hammy" Hamlin pounded the skins as if there would be no tomorrow, with Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcaw providing a robust bass line, while Joe Mulvanerty's uilleann pipes skirled madly. Kirwan, resplendent in his trademark green suede shoes, has lost none of his nimble footwork and passionate delivery.



I might have wept, but I was too busy dancing like a dervish. I confess, however, that the tears sprang to my eyes and my throat closed up a little as the applause roared on and on, after the calls for more, and still more, had been satisfied.

Thanks, Black 47. We were lucky to have had twenty-five years with you. And I think it would not be hyperbolic to say the world is a better place because of your contribution to it.





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13 Responses to *FANATIC HEART: Twenty-Five Years of Black 47*



Layla says:

October 1, 2014 at 2:44 pm

By the sounds of it, it was THE place to be. I'n killing time at the airport in Charlotte enroute to Knoxville.



Cynthia Nelms-Byrne says:

October 1, 2014 at 3:10 pm

Steph: Great images of the band then and now in this piece. I don't know Black 47, but wish I did after reading your words. I don't think Chris Byrne is any relation – such a common name back in the old sod – but who knows?



Stephanie Silber says:

October 1, 2014 at 4:30 pm

Thanks for the kind words, Cindy! It would be cool if there were some relation! Who knows indeed?



Michael Connolly says:

October 1, 2014 at 7:32 pm

Hello Stephanie

Long time... Great read. I wish I could have been there and also to B B's for the last show. I do have the 3 Ohio shows and Pittsburgh next week to look forward to.

Take care



milo says:

October 2, 2014 at 6:31 am

Nice one, Steph. Perhaps some video of you “dancing like a dervish”?



Wayne says:

October 2, 2014 at 6:44 am

Stephanie,

Well written. I have had the pleasure to see them perform at least 20 or 30 times, over the years. I hope to see them one last time. I know BB Kings is sold out, so I will try to catch them at another venue. Fortunately, I was able to see them twice already this year. The landscape will look a bit different once they are gone, but at least they have left us with some beautiful music to treasure for years to come.



Stephanie Silber says:

October 2, 2014 at 9:18 am

Thanks for the kind comments, Michael, Wayne, Milo. Sorry, Milo, no dervish video! There is going to be vacuum when they are gone for sure, but yes, the music is forever.



Emily Hegarty says:

October 2, 2014 at 1:08 pm

Thanks for this wonderful write-up. I saw their last Boston show that same weekend and it was definitely bittersweet. I too am going to the final show at BB Kings but it does almost feel like the farewells have already been said. I hadn't really taken stock until now of what an important role this band has played in my life over the years; I will really miss them.



Stephanie Silber says:

October 2, 2014 at 1:36 pm

Emily, thanks for weighing in. The band will be dearly missed by so many — it's really astounding how many lives they've touched over this quarter of a century. We hope to be shooting at B.B. King's that night. Come and say hello if you can. Though my partner Vic and I have produced a couple of docs around the band, it's never been the definitive portrait that we've always wanted to do. We're still hoping for that! We have built quite an archive over the years.



Stephanie Silber says:

October 2, 2014 at 1:37 pm

Milo, I hope no video!!!!



Stephanie Silber says:

October 2, 2014 at 1:38 pm

Enjoy, Michael! Moments to savor...



Kris says:

October 2, 2014 at 4:30 pm

Hi Steph — Popular post for a popular band! Certainly captured the excitement of the evening, and great job explaining their importance/significance and why they'll be missed.



Stephanie Silber says:

October 2, 2014 at 5:01 pm

Hey, Kris, I can always count on you for that encouraging word! Thanks as ever.

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