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Interview: Larry Kirwan Shares 25 Years of Black 47, Politics in Music, and Legacy

OCTOBER 23, 2014 BY [STEVE MALINSKI](#)

Many bands come and go throughout the years: some lasting briefly as a sort of novelty, some with long and hearty careers who only later drift away into touring to a tune of nostalgia, and everywhere in between. Sometimes the "going" part of that is mired by tensions in the band or some other misfortune but there are other times when a band simply won't stand for apprehension in their ending and know when the time is right. This past year we saw Mötley

Crüe sign an **agreement to cease touring**, therefore retiring as a band while the Crüe are still friends and the tours are strong as opposed to raising Devil's horns from rocking chairs and adding new meaning to their song "Kickstart My Heart."

Our story here takes us to **Black 47**, a band representing a ventricle of the NYC music scene. A bit more modest than crashing arenas but by no means lacking a fire, Black 47 has earned respect by their authenticity – doing things their own way, how they want, and on their own terms. After 25 years the band felt it right to disband this year while they are at a zenith with tight sounds and great vibes. The band will soon have come-and-gone but not before first bringing closure for themselves and their fans with an aggressive tour wrapping up next month and two new albums, *Last Call* (new material) and *Rise Up!*, a collection of some of the band's protest songs.

Prior to their set at the **Hudson Valley Irish Festival** in Peekskill, NY, frontman Larry Kirwan joined UpstateLIVE's Steve Malinski on the banks of the Hudson to share some of his insights to the band's 25-year run and some of what has set Black 47 apart in the music scene.



Larry Kirwan (middle) singing "Living in America" with friend Mary Courtney (left) and bandmate Joe "Bearclaw" Burcaw (right) at the 2014 Hudson Valley Irish Fest in Peekskill, NY

Steve Malinski: You've got a pretty busy day with two gigs, so thanks for taking a few minutes here before your set.

Larry Kirwan: It's a pleasure. What a beautiful setting here, right by the water.

SM: The big question on your fans' minds when you announced last fall that you would be disbanding this year is why now, and why not in say, five years? What fell into place to make the decision come now?

LK: Well, I actually had the decision come to me on stage in Buffalo exactly a year ago and the band was just sounding so good then. I'd always wondered how Black 47 would break up, and when we were on our way back from Buffalo I was thinking, "maybe this is the time to go, when you're sounding good and everything is together still." We decided to do one last album of original songs, *Last Call*, and to go out playing new stuff too. So it all just kind of came together and it seemed like the right time to do it. I'm not even sure what I'm going to do, but I didn't exactly know what I was going to do before Black 47 either, so we'll see.

SM: What's the emotion like with the band now that your final show is quickly approaching?

LK: You know, I think everyone is a little nervous about it. It's pretty momentous to play with the same guys for 25 years – we're so close as friends, there are no problems internally in the band. But yeah we're all a little nervous, apprehensive. But the amount of love we're getting from people all over the country as we travel around is great and people have been telling us how much the band meant to them and what particular songs meant to them, what particular CDs got them through rough times or whatever. So there's a lot of emotion out there. But this is it, November 15.

SM: Yeah, and when I met Bearclaw [bass] at your Garcia's gig in Port Chester he mentioned this year is like the nail in the coffin for Black 47. Do you think though that you guys might get the itch to come back and do a sort of low-key show in a few years, just for fun?

LK: No, I don't think so. It's better to just do it and finish so your brain is free to think about what's next. If we were thinking of that, the why break up at all, you know? We have a big following. We could keep playing but it just feels right to go at this point. I don't see that we would get back together again.

SM: So with it being a done deal, what's next for everyone? Have they figured that out yet?

LK: Y'know, I don't think so. We've been too busy to figure anything out with the number of gigs we're doing and the new CD we have, *Rise Up*, the collection of political songs, and the amount of interviews you have to do for each gig nowadays. I've just been really busy. I know

what I'm doing immediately after – I'm going to Ireland for a week. I think I'll start doing solo gigs in February or March. But I want to clear my head from the whole music scene because I manage the band too, so it's a huge space in my head I gotta keep. I do a number of other things but Black 47 has always been my number one priority. So, just in a certain sense, not having that "to-do" is like having a vacation at this point. I don't think I've taken a vacation in 25 years! Even when I am on vacation it's always there – thinking about writing a new song or I have this-or-that to do. It's been 25 years of non-stop going for me. I don't get home from a gig and it's over – it keeps going on.

SM: *Last Call* is an album that seems like it was recorded as a sort of going away present for your fans. Did you have any special intents behind the album, or did you approach it as simply the next recorded collection of new Black 47 material?

LK: Yeah I did. I thought it would be a really good idea to make it more from a musical point of view rather than from a lyrical or song point of view, so I got the guys a lot more involved with the arrangements and allowed the band to stretch out musically because we do that on stage all the time. But sometimes in the studio you're trying to make things concise for radio play, although there's no real radio play anymore for anyone, anywhere. So there was that. I also wanted to capture... I've been writing a history of Irish music because I've seen it and I was dealing a lot with different sounds and I really wanted to capture a New York sound. We've always been known as a New York band, and there was a whole sound in New York in the late 60's and early 70's and I wanted to tap back in to that particular type of sound. So there were a number of different things on my agenda as a producer. But, whether that worked or not, I'm not sure!

SM: One of the tracks, "**The Night the Showbands Died**," struck me as the most profound, given the emotion and the way the music and lyrics worked together. What was your motivation behind that song – did you have a connection to **The Miami Showband**?

LK: Yeah, I did. Fran O'Toole, the lead singer, wasn't exactly a friend but I knew him and he was very encouraging to me starting off in music. It was just a real shock. Steven Travers, who I've been in touch with over the years, was in the band too. He told me about the different things that were happening. There was a British officer who showed up at that point, so it did seem like there was a collusion going on that the Loyalists and British for whatever reason wanted to kill a band. Up until then showbands and musicians had been off-limits for anyone on either side. So that night kind of ended the showband era too – although it was ending already that sort of put the nail in the coffin. Showbands worked five to six nights a

week and once they couldn't go into the north of Ireland anymore, then it was the end of the showbands; the end of a whole scene. I also wanted to capture a little bit of a David Bowie sound because Bowie's early stuff had influenced me a lot. Yeah, it's a tough song – it really gets into you when you're playing it because you're talking about people you knew who died and didn't need to die. I think it kind of sums up a certain way the whole Troubles in the north of Ireland – how people who are not political (and the Miami Showband were totally non-political) get caught up in something and get swept away in the same way committed people do.

SM: In the last 25 years you've played something around **2,000 or 2,500 shows**. Are there any that stick out as particularly memorable (or bad)?

LK: Many of them are memorable. You know, we never allowed a show to be bad. We're often under rough circumstances but the band is just so committed to the music and to having that moment... There's always a moment in a Black 47 show when things click. It's almost like sex – it's orgasmic at that point. So you're always waiting for that to happen. Let's face it, musicians don't have pensions or 401(k)'s or anything like that so everything you're going to get from a performance you're going to get at that moment. So, there's always been that angle. You know, I suppose something else that stands out is playing with famous people – Neil Young at Farm Aid and Willie Nelson, and Johnny Cash. But the one that strikes me the most was this one that was crowded at Paddy Reilly's which is a small bar that we started off playing at. When I first wrote "James Connolly" and the feeling from that song... It was the first time we were doing it, we didn't really know it. Paddy Reilly's is always rowdy. So as we went on with the song it got deadly quiet and when we finished the song there was total silence and everyone knew something had happened because that was the first time we had introduced the middle part with the dialog in it. We all knew something great had happened. The song is still a classic Black 47 one. So, there's big gigs, and small ones where there's bound to have something memorable happen – they're more important to me than the big ones.



Larry Kirwan and UpstateLIVE's Steve Malinski after **Black 47's show at Garcia's** in Port Chester July 31, 2014

SM: Are there any notable people, in music or otherwise, that you've met or worked with who have had an influence on you?

LK: Joe Strummer was a huge fan of the band which was amazing to me because I was a huge fan of The Clash. One night at the same place (Paddy Reilly's) I was playing and had my eyes closed while playing a solo. I couldn't get the solo right so I kept doing it over and over and you could do that in Black 47. Songs don't have to be a certain length or whatever. I finally opened my eyes, kinda got it right finally, and Joe Strummer was the same distance as you are to me [a few feet] looking at my fingers and it was like... Joe Strummer?! I almost fell over backwards. So we became friends and he was very instrumental in getting Black 47 some of the gigs out of the Irish pubs. We had wanted to keep it in the Irish pubs and have people come to us rather than go through the CBGB system, which I've been through many times before. But Strummer was saying "You have to play this place, you have to play that place" and he would go to those places and say "here's these guys" and I would be turning him down all the time. Finally the guy from Wetlands, which was a great club in New York, said to me "for God's sake just do the gig to get Strummer off my back!" Then I said "oh, Strummer's doing this!" Everyone was calling us for gigs and it was because of Strummer.

SM: One that that's different about Black 47 is that you have a totally open policy on photography and recording, even more liberal than a band like the Grateful Dead. What's your

philosophy on that?

LK: Well, every show is different. We do a different set every night so we just felt that if you want to capture it (we're not going to capture it), then why can't you do it? We've spread all over the world that way too. A friend of mine was walking over the Charles Bridge in Prague one day and he heard "Funky Ceili" playing live from some gig we were doing and someone had sent him a tape of it – it was on a cassette. So the music spreads that way too. But we always just felt that, you know, why not? Music in a certain sense is free and what we do hope is that, if someone does tape, they go back and buy a CD or whatever to get more of a pure sound. Also, the CDs keep the band going because the merch is just so important for any band. So I'd advise your readers that if you really want to support a band that they buy one of their CDs because that will make up for a budget shortfall that the band might have. That's the best way to support live music.

SM: What's your hope for people to take away from Black 47 once it's all done?

LK: That we were a band for the moment and we did it exactly the way we wanted to. We never bowed down in any sense to commercialism. We just played exactly what we wanted to play. We fought the good fight I think, dealing with the British problem in the north of Ireland, being for the troops and totally against the Iraq War when no one else was. So we made all the stands. I always thought we were on the sides of the angels and we did it even though it cost us gigs all the time because we were outspoken. Certain places didn't want us because they thought there would be protests against us or whatever. So we just did it our way. And, I think we have chronicled New York in particular and the US and Ireland over the last 25 years. If you want to know what was going on, you could just go to the Black 47 songs and you'll know what we were thinking at that particular point in time.

SM: As a follow-up to that, with being so outspoken on political and social issues, have you met a lot of resistance?

LK: Oh man, physical resistance, yeah. Physical, mental, everything. Financial. The Iraq War between 2003 and 2006 was a nightmare for Black 47 because we had the songs from the *Iraq* album and every night we would do them and people would get up and walk out or smash CDs or stick their finger in the air and complain to the venues. But I always felt that it is patriotic to resist your government if you think the government is doing the wrong thing rather than just go along with it. That to me is nationalism, where patriotism is standing up for what you think is right even if it is not the popular view and Black 47 – that's how we've done it. We probably

would have had a little more success if we were more middle of the road, but we didn't choose to be. I think Black 47 will become a bigger band when the band is finished actually because we stood for certain things and now it's up to other people to do that. I don't really see many bands coming in and doing that. So, I think there will be a nostalgia there. Well, not nostalgia but people will be interested in the band after we've gone, even more so than before. We've had plenty of attention.

SM: Well, after all that you're still here 25 years later!

LK: Yeah, and that's amazing to me because I never thought about that. I think one of the things I'm looking forward to is to let some of the memories come back in because for me, I've been at the center of this vortex – of this storm almost – of Black 47 for 25 years. There's never been a moment down, always been very much stormy. Creatively it's always been great which is a storm in your head too. So I think I'm going to take a couple of months and just let the whole thing sift in. I'm writing this history of Irish music and the last chapter will be this ending of Black 47.



Black 47 bowing one last time for Connolly's in NYC, September 27, 2014

SM: One last parting though. If there was one Black 47 song, or album, that you could lock away in a time capsule for 1,000 years and have it listened to again when it is opened, what would it be?

LK: I think the "James Connolly" song. I didn't really ever think of the songs... There were so many Black 47 songs. I just met a guy over here in the park who said his favorite song has

always been “Orphan of the Storm” saying it meant so much to him and I’m thinking ‘wow that’s great!’ So different songs... songs are like children. If you work with them and you have them, they’re always important to you. But I think the “James Connolly” song – for one thing it’s radical and it’s a radical point of view at a time when the whole country is just so right-wing that it’s necessary to be there. But from a creative point of view, having the whole inner dialog in the song and what it’s meant to people (the song) over the years – I think I’d go with that one.

SM: Larry, thanks a lot for talking with us. It was great to hear everything you had to share.

LK: My pleasure man, thanks so much for having me.

With less than a month to their final show at the BB King Blues Club in NYC on November 15 (which is sold out), Black 47 only has a handful of appearances left including one last Upstate NY stop at the [Towne Crier Cafe](#) in Beacon, NY on October 26. Check out Black 47’s [tour listings](#) for details on their other final regional shows (with tickets still available) in the coming weeks at Wantagh, NY, Bergenfield, NJ, and NYC.

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About Steve Malinski

Steve is an engineer by day formerly from the Capitol District, now from the lower Hudson Valley. He has a Bachelor of Science from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and a Master of Engineering from Cornell University in Civil Engineering. Aside from analyzing and solving technical problems over several cups of coffee, Steve has a profound interest in music. He has been an active DJ since 2004 and (more recently) the local music director on WRPI in Troy and hosts a weekly Grateful Dead program on WVBR-FM in Ithaca.

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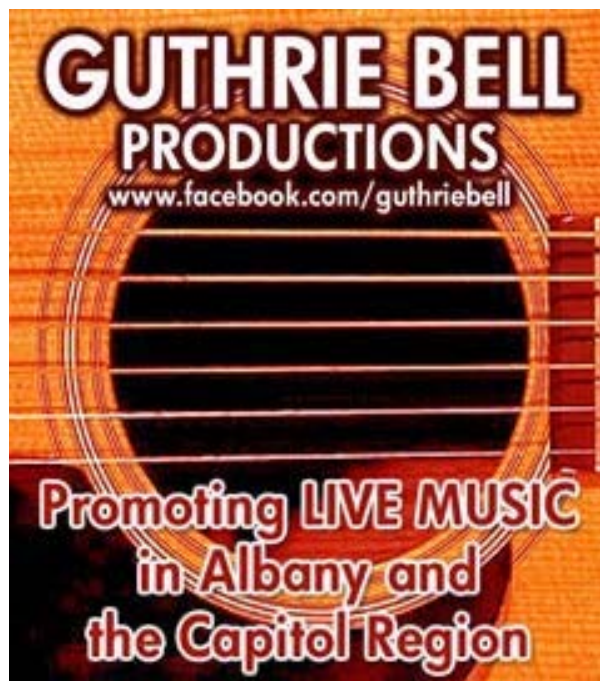
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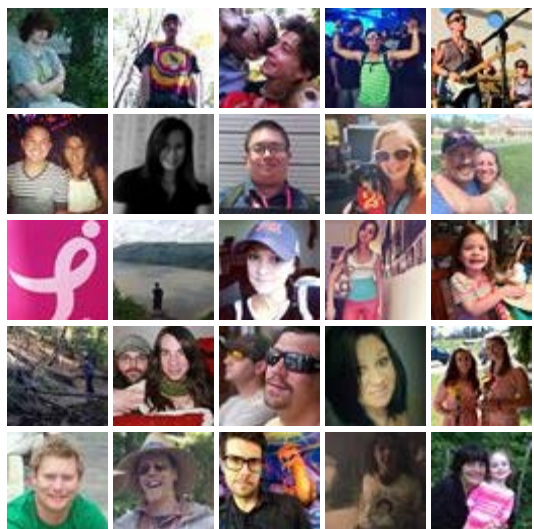
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