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Black 47: I FINALLY get it — better late than never (Paddy Reilly's, Manhattan, 1/6/14)



How does someone like/know/follow a band for 20 years and NOT totally get it — until last night, their sixth-to-last show, my penultimate Black 47 show? Didn't know how necessary it was to see them last night at Paddy Reilly's.

I've seen them at least a couple dozen times at nightclubs, at fairs, at Irish clubs and, once, an amphitheater in Hollywood. But I never saw them in their true element until last night. Never saw them at Reilly's. Yeah, I know, there was that bar up on Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx where they cut their baby teeth, and the original Reilly's, when they first achieved fame, was a block south on Second Avenue, but nonetheless, it was Black 47. It was Reilly's, their last hurrah there. And a week from tomorrow night, on the 15th, when they play their final note at B.B. King's, everything truly, sadly, will be one huge was.

Got there from Connecticut at quarter to 6 for an 8 o'clock show because I thought the small bar would sell out and I should get there early. (And thanks to Diana the bartender for saving me a ticket.) Set up a spot at the end of the bar a dozen feet from the stage and treated myself to takeout from the Italian place next door as Larry tested out his guitar (most memorable riff: "What'd I Say") and Geoff adjusted his mouthpiece and played some nimble riffs on the sax, and the band ran through "Fire of

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Freedom" with Larry's younger son, Rory (a lanky blonde, like his mom, with matinee looks), doing the hip-hop fill on the b

Magic just kinda happens sometimes — just add water, or "water" from behind the bar, or Guinness, or family and friends, or hardcore fans; last night, it was all of the above. (I saw Larry and wife, June, for the first time since I had dinner with the family after one of his book readings at R.J. Julia in Madison in the late 2000s; also met Geoff's wife, Clare, and Hammy's wife, Amy. And a nice surprise — my New Haven-area friends John and Carr, whose wedding I DJed in the early '90s, came in and sat next to me up front.) The room — a narrow bar, about one-and-a-half times the size of my New Haven musical watering hole, O'Connell's, with a postage-stamp corner stage three-quarters the size of the room — still fairly empty come 7, but slowly, the numbers came and the noise level began to rise.

And by the time the band made its way to the close quarters at the corner around 8:30, the



Joe "Bearclaw" Burcaw, Larry Kirwan and Geoff Blythe, a dozen feet from the end of the bar at Paddy Reilly's.

room was sufficiently loud — and stuffed. And joyous. At least 200 people, plus a video cameraman and a couple of still photographers who've been working for years on a documentary on the band. And, since it's my nature to be that person everyone cuts in front of or

around at a show, I was right along the expressway to the bar, so I did my share of passing money and pints back and forth (and one guy bought me a pint for my troubles). In Connecticut, there would be tension and hostility in such a scenario. This night? Not at all. We were all friends.

My mind is a blur from the adrenaline and the Guinness (though I was sober by the time I left), but they started with "Green Suede Shoes," their ode to Michael Collins, "The Big Fella," and straight into "The Reels," the instrumental fury — accompanied by Irish dancers from the audience — that they usually save 'til later. No one stepped up from the crowd to dance — but then, this young man, another lanky glass of water in his mid-20s, climbed onto the bar right next to my elbow, his serious dancing shoes on, and tapped and clogged and stomped himself into a quiet rage, part Michael Flatley, part Michael Jackson. I had never seen a male dancer during "The Reels," and never had anyone danced so spectacularly through it. His name is Jake, and it turns out he has danced for several of Larry's theatrical productions. It was the first of his several climbs atop the bar.

Over the course of two hours, they did at least something from every album except "Bankers and Gangsters." There was the medley of "Three Little Birds"/"Desperate." "Livin' in America."

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"Fanatic Heart." "Rockin' the Bronx." "Fire of Freedom," with Rory. Chris Byrne, the band's co-founder and original piper, joined them for "Walk All the Days." "Downtown Baghdad Blues," from "Iraq." "Culchie Prince" and "Salsa O'Keefe," from "Last Call." "Mychal" turned my joy to almost tears, as Larry talked about the fans who couldn't be there — the firefighters who never came home from 9/11, his longtime pal and Black 47 sound engineer Johnny Byrne, and Father Mychal Judge. Not sure what brought the waterworks up so close to the surface, as I never knew these people, but Larry paid them a wonderful tribute and let them know they were still there.

And the end couldn't have been more rousing: "40 Shades of Blue." (And yes, there were still a few smokers who threw cigarettes at Larry.) "Funky Ceili." And, after an exhortation from Steve, the bar manager, an encore with "G-L-O-R-I-I-I-I-A!" at double-time, followed by "I Fought the Law." (And a trip in the memory banks to March 5, 2004, at Toad's Place in New Haven, where I used to introduce the band on stage. My final show before my eight-year exile in California. And since he knew "Who Killed Bobby Fuller?" was my favorite Black 47 song, Larry brought me up to sing "I Fought the Law" with them as a lovely parting gift.)

And then, at 10:40 p.m., all over, save for the band talking and taking photos with everyone in the back room. Friends and family. It was like having a jam session in the basement, except that, in this case, it was one of the most revolutionary bands of the last generation, a group of guys who changed the image — and the course — of Irish music and storytelling and political discourse. (And Larry reaps the intangible reward of playing many of the younger bands that have followed Black 47 on his Sirius XM show, "Celtic Crush.") And few people wanted to leave. I only left because I needed to catch a train home.

It was the band in its true element — in extremely close quarters, not spread-out over some huge stage. The energy was compacted, concentrated, not dissipated; they thrived off the energy of the people up-close, crowded-in around them, and returned that energy in kind.

During the show, I told J.C. what I said up top: "I can't believe I've followed this band for 20 years and didn't fucking get it 'til now!" And his answer was spot-on: "It's like seeing The Ramones at CB's."

And not because Larry was wearing a CBGB t-shirt, either. But the allegory wasn't lost on me, and probably a lot of other people in the room. I'm not sure how the grand finale at B.B.'s can match last night (and I'll find out for myself), because I can imagine there will be all sorts of emotions flying and whirling about the room. But last night at Paddy Reilly's, save for "Mychal," was pure, unfiltered joy. Home, at last, for the last time. And my first time. And I didn't realize until the first notes were played just how necessary it was.



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Thanks John!

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