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For Black 47, the Pipes Are Calling

Black 47 to Perform Final Show in Midtown



The band Black 47, performing last month at a bar in New Jersey, started in Irish pubs in the Bronx and worked its way up to stadiums and television appearances.

EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By **MICHAEL MALONE**

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Larry Kirwan stood at the microphone in his well-traveled green suede shoes. Fighting bronchitis, he sipped his Jameson's whiskey with honey and surveyed the crowd. His band, [Black 47](#), has had 2,300 performances over the years. It moved from humble origins playing in Irish pubs in the Bronx to appearing on David Letterman's show and playing in stadiums.

But on this cool October night, only a dozen shows remained before the band calls it quits after 25 years, and the gig at [Emmett's Castle](#), a pub on the grounds of a golf course in Pearl River, N.Y., was something new. About 100 people were there, and perhaps a third of them appeared dressed for golf, maybe expecting to hear

Irish ditties about green fields and whiskey on Sundays and the bustle of dear old Dublin.

Mr. Kirwan, 66, has said he is looking forward to resting his ragged voice and his beaten body. [Black 47's final show](#) will be on Nov. 15, at [B.B. King Blues Club & Grill](#) in Midtown Manhattan, but the band does not seem to know how to phone it in. At the Pearl River show, Mr. Kirwan strapped on his Stratocaster and set his whiskey on an amp. "Welcome to our very first golf club gig," he told the crowd. "We thought we'd done everything."

The band — with horns and pipes, sounding like a New Orleans marching band crashing an Irish pub — launched into "Elvis Murphy." Men in the audience spun women like tops. Young ladies step-danced like pistons. Beer spilled. The golf people looked on curiously.



Band members in their early-90s heyday.
BLACK 47

The impish Mr. Kirwan smiled. In a matter of days, this would all be over. And after that, who knows?

The characters in Black 47's songs are primarily Irish immigrants making their way in New York, an experience Mr. Kirwan knows intimately. Jim Kirwan, Larry's father, was in the merchant marine, and when he would return home to County Wexford in southeastern Ireland, he would bring tango and calypso records from far-off ports. Larry's mother loved opera. Traditional music — ballads conveying local history — was all around.

It piqued a curiosity about the world, and when Mr. Kirwan immigrated to New York in the early 1970s, he was instantly stimulated.

“In Ireland, everyone’s Irish,” he said. “It was not that way here.”



Black 47’s members, from left, included Larry Kirwan, lead singer; Thomas Hamlin, drums; Geoffrey Blythe, saxophone; Chris Byrne, a founder; and Joseph Mulvanerty, uilleann pipes.
NICOLE BENGIVENO / THE NEW YORK TIMES

He worked in construction, typed papers for N.Y.U. students and teamed up with a boyhood friend, Pierce Turner, in the new-wave band [Major Thinkers](#), which had a minor hit with a song called “Avenue B.” He and Mr. Turner became the house band at the Bells of Hell, a Greenwich Village bar owned by the Irish author-actor-raconteur [Malachy McCourt](#). By the mid-80s, Mr. Kirwan had shifted away from music to be a playwright. He wrote feverishly in his downtown apartment, and one day he felt the need to get out, get air, and hear Irish music and Irish voices. Walking up Second Avenue, he heard both spilling out of a bar on East 28th Street called [Paddy Reilly’s](#).

There was a “trad” Irish band playing. Its piper, Chris Byrne, grew up on Staten Island and Brooklyn but spent summers in Donegal, Ireland, where he discovered the [uilleann pipes](#), an Irish cousin of the bagpipes.

A police officer by day, Mr. Byrne recognized Mr. Kirwan from the music scene and brought him on stage. After, Mr. Byrne mentioned that his band was breaking up. Mr. Kirwan offered his services. He also suggested the name Black 47, a reference to the famine that decimated Ireland in 1847. It was ominous, political and Irish. Mr. Byrne loved it.

The pair took their act to the Bronx in late 1989, where live music flourished in the pubs. Their first performance preceded a speech by the Irish activist [Bernadette Devlin McAliskey](#).



The crowd at Tommy Fox's Public House in Bergenfield, N.J.
EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Back then, Mr. Kirwan, who had bright red hair and large glasses, would smash into the pub door with his amp and demand the televisions go off. “It was war the minute we walked in,” Mr. Kirwan said. “The bartender would say, ‘The lads are watching the match,’ ” Mr. Kirwan recalled. With a bit of profanity, he would instruct the bartender otherwise. “They’re here,” he would say, “to see Black 47.”

Songs were stage dramas in miniature — fleshed-out characters with full story arcs. “I wanted to write about New York,” Mr. Kirwan said. “The cops, the construction workers, the junkies, the nannies, the immigrants — the Bronx, the Lower East Side.” Other songs were intensely political, depicting historical figures, such as the Irish labor leader James Connolly.

Mr. Byrne loved hip-hop. Mr. Kirwan came from punk. The blend was by all accounts chaotic. “It was something you’d hear standing in the middle of the street in Jamaica, Queens, coming out of the apartment windows,” said [Mike Farragher](#), longtime music critic for The Irish Voice.

Yet according to Mr. Byrne, Black 47 was “proactively” despised. “If you don’t like the band, you just leave the bar,” he said. “But instead of just leaving, they’d come over and tell you how much you suck.”



A table of the band's merchandise.
EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Beatles had Hamburg; Black 47 had the Bronx. There were more pubs than bands along Bainbridge Avenue; when Black 47 was fired from one place, band members hauled their gear next door. They did four sets a night. After a few

months in the Bronx, Black 47 headed o Paddy Reilly's. Thomas Hamlin, who played with Mr. Kirwan in Major Thinkers, came to watch with a trombone player, Fred Parcells; the two ended up sitting in. "It became a casual 'we'll stop by with our instruments' kind of thing," Mr. Hamlin said. "You never quite knew who would be there."

Performances were loose but impassioned, fueled by Mr. Kirwan's steely belief in his songs. "We didn't rehearse the songs, we just did them," he said. "When a new one wouldn't go well, I'd just take a swig of my pint." If there was a point in the band's history that seemed to signal a chance at fame, it was when Vin Scelsa, host of the influential radio program "[Idiot's Delight.](#)" was given a vinyl copy of Black 47's "Funky Ceili." Mr. Scelsa said he played it "over and over and over" on his program on 92.3 FM. He grew even more enamored after seeing Black 47 at Paddy Reilly's. "I was just blown away," Mr. Scelsa said. "And I'd never had Irish cider like that before."

Back when radio was a force in launching bands, people flocked to Paddy Reilly's on Mr. Scelsa's word. That included Pete Ganbarg, then senior director of artists and repertoire at SBK Records. "It was as if Springsteen and Shane MacGowan" — the lead singer of the punk Irish band the Pogues — "had this illegitimate love child," Mr. Ganbarg said. "This combination of uilleann pipes and bodhran and the stench of Avenue B — it was something I'd never heard before."

Mr. Ganbarg, now an executive vice president at Atlantic Records, said he was "almost magnetically pulled" to see Black 47 again a few days later. "The more I listened, the more mesmerized I became," he said.



Black 47 in 1990 at Paddy Reilly's pub in Manhattan.
BLACK 47

Neil Young and Brad Pitt and Matt Dillon would turn up, the bar manager, Steve Duggan, said. Mr. Scelsa saw Joe Strummer of the Clash at a Black 47 gig and yelled to him: "The Clash! The only band that matters!" To which Mr. Strummer replied: "Black 47! The only band that matters!"

Black 47 signed with SBK. The album, "Fire of Freedom," released in March 1993, had Paddy Reilly's on the cover. Songs included "Living in America," a duet about the courtship of an Irish demolition worker and a nanny, to the tune of the

traditional ballad “The Foggy Dew”; and the infectious “Funky Ceili,” about a troubadour who is exiled to New York by his lover’s father after he gets her pregnant. “Does the baby look like me, Bridie?” wails Mr. Kirwan. “Has he got red hair and glasses?”

Perhaps no song better captured the Black 47 ethos than the title track, a reggae number that rips racism and religion, promises “blood on the streets” to lying politicians, and has a refrain sung in Gaelic. “Funky Ceili” spent a few weeks on Billboard’s Modern Rock Top 30 in early 1993. In April, the band was on “Late Night With David Letterman.” The word among fans: See Black 47 at Paddy Reilly’s while you still can.

Indeed, there were huge concerts. They played Farm Aid at Iowa State’s 55,000-seat football stadium, and a half-dozen times at Shea Stadium after Mets games on Irish Night. “We played Shea more than the Beatles did,” Mr. Kirwan said with a smile.



In 1993 in Ames, Iowa, on the Farm Aid tour.
BLACK 47

A second album, “Home of the Brave,” was released in 1994, featuring a reimagining of “Danny Boy” into a rap about a gay Irishman living in Woodside, Queens, who stands up to bigots and ultimately succumbs to AIDS.

But what followed was a merging of record labels, a new boss and, suddenly, said Mr. Byrne, “They don’t have your poster on the wall anymore.”

Mr. Ganbarg recalled the albums with abundant fondness and some lament. “We just assumed they’d be the biggest band in the world,” he said. “Maybe we had visions that were too grand for the Walmart masses.”

Black 47 played on, finding a new home at a pub in Midtown, Connolly’s, and recording for a string of independent labels. There were dark moments: An off-duty police officer, Christopher Gargan, [committed suicide](#) at a St. Patrick’s Day show in 1996. The band’s sound engineer, Johnny Byrne, died in a fall from an apartment window. The Black 47 van rolled over on an icy stretch of I-95; band members were lucky enough to walk to a nearby state police barracks. Chris Byrne, with four young children and his own band, left Black 47 amicably in 2000.



In 1997, at one of its six performances at Shea Stadium in Queens.
BLACK 47

Throughout the difficulties, Mr. Kirwan continued to record New York history. Tracks on the band's 2007 album, "Iraq," were inspired by letters from the band's fans who were fighting overseas. But the city was changing, and gigs were harder to come by. Black 47 went from up to 90 performances a year in the mid-2000s to two dozen last year. The pubs that used to be filled with live music have opted for D.J.s, and sky-high rents have made bar owners risk-averse. The decision to call it quits came following a festival in Buffalo last year. The band had never sounded better, said Mr. Kirwan, who liked the idea of going out on top. His bandmates, for the most part, agreed with the decision. An album, fittingly called "Last Call," came out in March.

Fans say they figured Black 47 would go on forever. Seamus Keane said his band, the Narrowbacks (which opened for Black 47 last month at Emmett's Castle), might never have started had its members not grown up with Black 47's music. He said he was already thinking about St. Patrick's Day without a Black 47 show. "It's like the uncle or aunt you see at one holiday each year that passes away," Mr. Keane said. "You kind of forget they won't be there the next year."

Others lament the loss of the rare band that still practices unflinching activism.

Younger bands, for the most part, don't aspire to change the world, said the activist singer-songwriter Billy Bragg. "If you wanted to listen to the voice of your generation, you listened to music," Mr. Bragg said. "Now you go to Twitter, you go to Facebook. I salute Black 47; I'm sorry to see them go."

Black 47 leaves behind 14 albums, its songs set in all five boroughs. As Mr. Kirwan sang of the Irishman with AIDS in "Danny Boy," he has no regrets. "I wasn't real impressed by the fame thing," Mr. Kirwan said. "I knew it for what it was. You enjoy it, and it moves on to someone else. It was always about the music for us — music and politics."

During an extended instrumental break during the show in Pearl River, Mr. Kirwan shuffled offstage to a private barroom. Alone, he held a towel to his face and did not move for half a minute. For the first time all night, he looked his 66 years.

Fans delivered the motions that go with Black 47's best-known songs. During "James Connolly," a defiant fist in the air. For "Funky Ceili," middle fingers for the man who booted the young rover to New York. Turning his phone toward the fans, Fred Parcells, the band's unofficial archivist, shot video. Brandy Kish, a freckled 38-year-old, step-danced as if gravity did not exist. She first saw Black 47 in 1993, sneaking into Paddy Reilly's as a teenager. "I fell in love with the band's energy," she said. "Seeing them tonight brings back the feeling of friends and family and everything is good."

Two hours after starting, the boys of Black 47 took a collective bow. The crowd's chant for more was drowned out by the D. J. cuing up "Sweet Caroline." The TVs came back on. What was left of the golf people headed out. Back in the private barroom, Mr. Kirwan sat on a stool, yanked off his shoes — "Green Suede Shoes" is the name of both a Black 47 album and the singer's 2005 memoir — and accepted an envelope from Emmett Woods, the bar's owner.

Kirwan's face displayed something between a smile and a grimace. "My voice hurt from the first note," he said.

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