



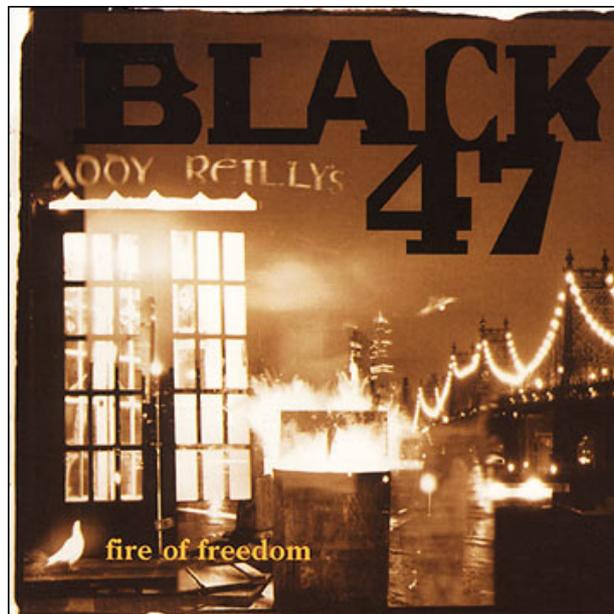
POPULAR MUSIC

Great Albums You Might Have Missed: Black 47's *Fire of Freedom* (1993)

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I was sitting shotgun on DJ duty during a long volleyball road trip back in high school when I put on a new tape (yes, cassette days) that I was loving of a band I had recently seen playing live at [SUNY Albany](#) (yes, pre Internet days). The group was [Black 47](#), the album [Fire of Freedom](#). After about 30 seconds of "Livin' In America" my witty coach who was driving commented "Irish Music is a step below Irish Food", my response was "This isn't Irish Music, it's New York City music."



With St. Patrick's Day on the horizon I wanted to take a second to showcase one of the better albums that my coach would lump in as "Irish Music". Sure you can find loads of traditional songs in [audio form](#) or in [books](#), you can find Irish bands who update the traditions [in punk-ish](#) or even [prog-rock ways](#) but [Black 47](#) plays Irish music in a New York way.

The group during the recording of the album was Dave Conrad (bass), Thomas Hamlin (drums), Fred Parcells (Trombone), Geoffrey Blythe (Sax), Chris Byrne (Uilleann Pipes/Vocals) and Larry Kirwan (Guitars/Lead Vocals). The core played various whistles and programmed drum machines to go along with a host of backing vocalists but at it's center was the 6 players and their style.

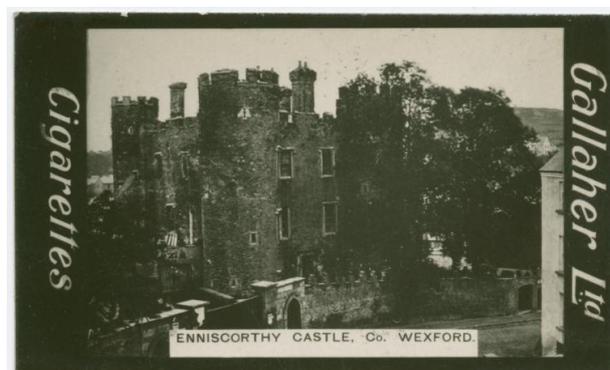


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The band had cut their teeth with legendary live shows at Paddy Reilly's serving as an almost de facto house band for a period of time and put out an independent album that contained lots of songs that would show up on *Fire of Freedom*, there was one big difference between the two though, the producer.

Ric Ocasek became involved due to a common manager and a love for the group. He spruced up the independent album, added some of his own playing and produced the disk we are talking about today, but the band deserves their own intros.

Overarching the whole group as front-man, storyteller, creative force and song writer is Larry Kirwan. His roots are in Wexford, Ireland but has been a NYC resident and in various bands since he was 19. From these early days Kirwan has gone on to become a playwright and author as well as a musician. His writing on *Fire of Freedom* is the backbone of the disk but variety is soaked in all over probably with help from other members as well as Larry's own diverse interests and passions.



Chris Byrne was a balancing factor to Kirwan's dramatic ways. An NYPD officer from Brooklyn Byrne had a street sense that was vital to Black 47's appeal, playing the roll of "Everyman" the realist cop counteracted the political dreamer next to him on stage (at least in outward appearance). His pipe playing was lively but it was his attitude that set him apart. Musically the group benefited from ex-Dexy's Midnight Runners horn man Blyth, who along with Parcells created a dynamic horn arraignment that proved chameleon like over the course of the disk or live show; both seem to solo and sound entwined somehow.



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/woodstocknick>

When the songs start on *Fire of Freedom* a loose narrative can be traced but as opposed to a structured concept disk; *Fire of Freedom* has the flow of a drunken night complete with laughs, tears, politics, beers, dancing, lies and love.

The tribute to the past is direct and forefront as the album intros with "Livin' In America" allowing Mary Courtney to recap her night behind a slightly accelerated version of the Irish Folk song "Foggy Dew". This nod to the old, with feet firmly planted in the present, is everywhere on this release. The track fades, the horns and drums kick up, and a raucous tale of debauchery flows out. "Maria's Wedding" showcases a drunk ex coming in and "dancing up Baryshnikov upon the high altar" to the chagrin of the bride. Kirwan's accounting of the tale is humorous and exuberant while the energy stays soaring for the biographical "Rockin' The Bronx".



While Maria could have some poetic license, The Bronx is pretty straight ahead in its joyous retelling as critics compare them to past acts over a hip-hop influenced beat via drum machine. The pace slows and the first political leanings are displayed in the weeping "Fanatic Heart".

The tune is gorgeous in its rawness, love is at the center as pipes swell with brass all behind a strumming acoustic guitar. The lyrics talk of pain and losing a loved one during clashes between Protestants and Catholics on The Twelfth which has set off riots in the past.



Black 47 have never been shy in their support of Irish Republicanism, but while the tale of “Fanatic Heart” is sparked by that struggle the core of the song is love, longing and loss. The group does a 180 on the next track with their most upbeat, non-political (and popular) song of their career as “Funky Ceili” rings out via it’s “jigs, reels, and slides”. The tune is a whirlwind of Irish brass and humor over a cold slapping beat, infectious worming its way into your ear.

The 6th and 7th tracks continue the string of hits but in completely different directions. The title track is the most surprising on the album with reggae beats, slow dripping brass and chant worthy chorus of Óró sé do bheatha abhaile which has become a rebel song and when translated means "Welcome Home".



The politics soar on the strong “James Connolly” a tribute to the Irish Republican leader who was killed for his part of The Easter Rising of 1916. The programmed beats are helped along by great percussion from Hamlin as the musical tide rises all around. The tune is a stirring tribute to the man, keeping the starry plough on high. Dynamic, dramatic, inventive and touching, all the best traits of the band.

A break is needed at this point and it comes in the form of a recall to the intro, here is where you would flip the album over before starting side 2.



While the second half of the disk doesn't contain as many highs as the first it is still an amazing tribute to this great city with some of the best Irish/NYC tunes around. Kicking things off is the drama of "Banks of the Hudson" appropriate that the band is looking over at New Jersey because the Bruce Springsteen comparisons are hard to avoid here, yet well deserved. A film noir lyric that is propelled head long by Blyth's saxophone the tune fades into the rushing river.



The pipes moan as the downtown anthem "40 Shades of Blue" paces drunkenly between Canal St. and Old St. Marks. Kirwans voice wobbles perfectly as the group swaggers along calling out to Johnny Cash and bumming an extra cigarette off him. The East Village music scene gets a toast with "New York, NY 10009" before the mournful swelling of "Sleep Tight In New York City/Her Dear Old Donegal".



The terrible tale from where the band took it's name and what became known as "Black 47" rings fourth defiantly while "Livin' In America" wraps the whole shebang up with the gang putting a bow on this huge ode to the town they love and live in.



*1847 was the worst year of
the Irish Potato Famine*

The album received glowing reviews and air time for their video of "Funky Ceili" on MTV. They also played late night shows and were in national magazines. Unfortunately the band never truly capitalized on its success but instead have gone on to become a New York City institution

Back in the present Black 47 are currently wrapping things up with a final album and tour, so catch them while you can. You can also go here to find out the back story on all of the bands recordings and if you are lucky enough to be in town for St. Patrick's Day you can see them live at BB Kings. Also for more on the holiday you can read this post from a few years ago that contains a bunch of great links.

IN THE NYPL CATALOG:

Fire of Freedom by Black 47

To Preview some great tracks from *Fire of Freedom*, click the links below:

- "Livin' In America"
- "Funky Ceili"

Please Note: online audio tracks are an excellent source for previewing, but are compressed and do not match CD quality audio.

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