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# 'Last Call' for Celtic rock's Black 47



Black 47 frontman Larry Kirwan says the band wants to go out on top.



**GALLERY: Black 47 frontman Larry Kirwan says the band wants to go...**

By Nick Cristiano, Inquirer Staff Writer

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It was late last summer when Larry Kirwan first thought about bringing the saga of Black 47 to a close.

"We were coming back from a gig in Buffalo, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, the band sounded *really* good,'" the frontman for the Celtic-rock sextet said from his home in New York. "And I thought, 'This would be a good time to call it a day - go out when you're sounding really good rather than for other reasons.' . . . Everyone in the band was down with it. It feels like a great time" to finish.

So Black 47 will end in November, exactly 25 years after beginning with the simple ambition of "Rockin' the Bronx." The band went on to do more than that. With a big sound incorporating both uilleann pipes and horns, and spicing the rock with rap and reggae, Black 47 hit like a galvanic blend of the E Street Band and the Clash (Joe Strummer was a big fan).

It created quite a buzz for a while, especially after the major-label debut, 1993's *Fire of Freedom*. But even after returning to the indie ranks, the group that brought the "Funky Céili" to MTV never lost its edge, and that goes for the appropriately titled final album, *Last Call*.

Kirwan, also a playwright and novelist, brings a cinematic sweep to bloody street melodramas, tales of historical figures, and humorous misadventures. But he's also drawn to politically charged issues, from Northern Ireland to gay rights to the war in Iraq. The band's stand against the war, particularly on 2008's *Iraq*, had serious repercussions, even if it mostly was a visceral, grunt's-eye view of the conflict.

"It was vicious," Kirwan recalled. "We lost a lot of gigs over it. . . . But it was a really important thing to do, because people see patriotism as going along with your government. I came from a background in Ireland where you were allowed to be against your government if you thought it was wrong and not be considered unpatriotic."

The son of Wexford also cites changes in the live-music industry for Black 47's exit. But Philadelphia has always been a stronghold for the group, right from the first show there. It was late 1990 or early 1991 at the Chestnut Cabaret, as Kirwan vividly remembers.

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"It was one of our first gigs outside New York," he said. "We did a sound check . . . and then we went off and got something to eat. When we came back the place was jammed, and I remember turning to [the guy] at the door and said, 'Who's playing here tonight?' We thought it must be the band before us. He said, 'Black 47, man.' . . . We didn't know we had an audience.

"We had to climb over people to get in. And they were trying to push us back, and we were saying, 'You'd better let us up because there's no show until we get on the stage.' "

Black 47, with Barleyjuice, plays at 7 p.m. Thursday at World Cafe Live, 3025 Walnut St. Tickets: \$18 to \$30. Information: 215-222-1400, worldcafelive.com.

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