

### Celtic twilight

Black 47, renowned for hard-charging, politically infused Irish music, to bid local fans farewell at festival

By David Malachowski | September 10, 2014



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Tip

IMAGE 1 OUT OF 2

Black 47

There are two kinds of farewell tours: The "It's all over, no one is talking to each other, let's make one last grab for cash before we kill each other" ones and the "It's been great, let's quit while we're ahead" ones.

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Led by Larry Kirwan, a singer, songwriter, guitarist, author and playwright from Wexford, Ireland, Black 47 certainly seems to be doing the latter. "We made a decision about 9 months ago," says Kirwan by phone from his New York City home. "Everyone was getting along great, and sounding great, why not go out while you're ahead?"

All was needed then was to pick when. "Then we set the date, Nov. 15 at B.B. King's (in New York City), he says, "exactly 25 years from our first date, an auspicious one."

Along with Kirwan, the current configuration includes Geoff Blythe (sax), Fred Parcels (trombone, whistle), Thomas Hamlin (drums), Joseph Mulvanerty (uilleann pipes, bodran) and Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcan (bass). After 25 years, the band is hanging up its pipes and beer mugs, but once the choice was made, funny things began to happen, like a last record. "Songs began to flow out," Kirwan remembers, "it seemed like it been dammed up, it flowed out into the 'Last Call' album."

The band's sound is a blend of many things, with Celtic in the center, but that said, music or style was not their real motivation in the first place. "We were more determined to be a political band right from the start," he says "that was more the driving part. So we weren't actually setting our selves up to be a Celtic rock band, I never really thought of ourselves as that, it was more 'what ever the song calls for,' but it was different, like a Celtic New Orleans marching band."

Sadly, Kirwan sees the whole politically based Irish band thing fading. "I've played these Irish festivals all summer, and I didn't hear one political song, one historical song even. In the Irish tradition, there were always songs about England, revolutionary songs. It's almost like were the last of the breed that does that."

The band — the name refers to the Irish famine year of 1847 — has had incredible moments, playing Shea Stadium, with Jay Leno and David Letterman and just recently played on the "Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon" for Saint Patrick's Day. They played over 2,600 shows, put out 14 CDs and were basically known as New York City's house band.

Then, there are the surprise run-ins with musical heroes, "I was playing a solo," he recalls "nothing great, just trying to get it right – I had my eyes closed, concentrating, at the end I opened my eyes and there's Joe Strummer (the Clash) three feet from me."

Part of the band's story includes many trips to the Albany area — like Friday's Irish 2000 Festival — and farewells will be had. "We have a long history with the Capital Region, the Parting Glass, McGear's, all the festivals around there. It'll be a great way to say goodbye to so many people."

After Nov. 25, he's not exactly retiring to Florida, though.

"What I've been doing at the solo shows," he says "is reading my memoirs, and autobiographical songs, doing them acoustically. I have a musical, we're developing it to take to Broadway. It's about the life of Stephen Foster, and the draft riots he was in in 1863 in NYC."

And of course his radio show "Celtic Crush" on Sirius XM.

When all is said and done, what will be the band's legacy be? "We opened up the whole way people look at Irish music," he proudly says, "and for other bands to give their interpretation of it. We were very involved with the political side of things. It meant something to a lot of people that we were doing that." But most importantly, "We always did what we wanted to, we never gave a damn about commerciality. Is the song good, is the song saying something?"

David Malachowski writes frequently for the Times Union.

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#### More Information

**If you go**

**Irish 2000 Festival**

**When:** 5 p.m Friday, 10 a.m. Saturday

**Where:** Saratoga County Fairgrounds 162 Prospect St. Saratoga Springs

**Admission:** \$20 (Friday), \$25 (Saturday)

**Info:** 885-9701. <http://www.irish2000fest.com>



By David Malachowski

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