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Black 47 brings farewell tour to BergenPAC in Englewood

By: JAY LUSTIG | September 18, 2014

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It's getting close to the end of the road for the New York-based band Black 47, which plans to play its last shows ever in November. It's possible that **its show this Saturday at BergenPAC in Englewood** will be its last Jersey appearance.

Led by Irish expatriate Larry Kirwan, the band has been playing its gritty, high-spirited fusion of folk, rock and hip-hop music for 25 years, and has been feverishly busy of late, with its final studio album, "Last Call," released in March, and a new album, a compilation of some of its most politically oriented material titled "Rise Up," just out now. We talked to Kirwan — also an author and playwright, and the host of the



Larry Kirwan, front and center, with Black 47.

Sirius XM satellite radio show, “Celtic Crush” — by phone, yesterday, about the breakup, “Rise Up,” and the band’s strong connections to New Jersey.

Why do you feel it’s time to break it up?

There was never any thought about it. But then we were onstage in Buffalo a year ago, and I remember thinking, “Wow, that sounded great.” ... And I remember thinking, you know, maybe it’s a good time to go out, when you’re soundin’ really good, and everyone’s happy, and whatever: Go out ahead. So I broached it to the band, and everyone was cool with it, and what we decided to do was play on for another year, and that would bring us exactly to the 25th anniversary of our first gig, which was in November ’89. To give people a chance to see the band, if they wanted to, another couple of times, and for those who hadn’t seen the band but were always interested in seeing it, it would be the same: Well, now’s your chance, if you want to do it.

I always put off going to see two great bands — I’m not comparing ourselves to them — but the (original) Who and Led Zeppelin, I thought, they’re always going to be coming through, you know, and I didn’t go to see them. And then, I never saw either of those two bands. It pissed me off afterwards: I had plenty of chances to do it. I just put it off.

So we decided, let’s give it a year, and that’s it. But then we decided instead of going out and playing all the old favorites, we would do a new album (“Last Call”), and go out like that.

There is, of course, a great tradition of rock bands saying they’re on their farewell tour, and then coming back in a few years. Do you think there’s a chance of that?

Nah, this is definitely it. Twenty-five years is a good run. We have 15 CDs or something at this point, and have played 2,500 shows. It’s there, up on YouTube, if people ever want to see it. I always think, if you’re done with a thing, you move on. If you’re not thinking like that, then you’ll never do anything else. You’ll be always thinking, I can always go back to this. But it’s better to get up on the high divin’ board and jump, and hope for the best.

So will you become a solo artist after this? You’ve done some solo things before, but is that your future, that you’ll just be on your own?

I don’t know. To tell you the truth, it’s been so much work, and so much playing, and recording, and gettin’ the albums out and everything, that I haven’t really had a huge amount of time to think about what I’ll do after it. It’s like, I have to finish up this in the right and a dignified manner ... but I won’t be joining another band or forming another band, ’cause after Black 47, there’s no need to do that. If I wanted to be in a band, I’d just keep this going. But I have a career in musical theatre, and theatre. My musical “Hard Times,” I think it’s coming back to New York — and to Broadway, eventually. ... And I have the Sirius XM show.

But I'll definitely play solo. I don't want to lose being onstage. I just haven't figured what way to do it, or what to do. There's 25 years of Black 47 material. I think actually the first thing I'm going to do is I'm gonna relearn all the Black 47 songs, just by myself, with a guitar, and see what happens. I've had another album out — "Kilroy Was Here," a (2001) solo album — I'll do some songs from that. And I'm sure some new songs will come out.

So is there a chance you'll do another Jersey show later, or is this definitely the last one?

Uhhhh ... you know, we may do the Stone Pony, or something like that, because we have such a bond to the place. But I actually don't know. This will be one of the last Jersey shows, definitely.

Do you feel the band has a special bond to New Jersey? I saw one of those Stone Pony shows, early on, and the crowd was just insane, so enthusiastic. And there's that Hoboken show (a legendary outdoor show that caused near-chaos in the city) ...

You know, we always had a bond with Jersey, I guess 'cause we knew a lot of musicians from New Jersey and everything. You know, New York and New Jersey, to me, were always ... because I'm from Ireland, originally ... not interchangeable, there's definitely cultural differences ... but you go through the Holland Tunnel and you're in New Jersey, it's just a couple of miles away, was the way I looked at it. And New Jersey always had this ... there are certain towns and states that are really into music, and some that are not. And the old hardline Democratic places are the best places for music. I think it's because they tended to be more immigrant-based.

An old black guy said to me one time ... we were talking about me being Irish and him being black, and he said, "We two have something in common. To us, music is a necessity, it's not a luxury." 'Cause it's free, for the most part — you can hear it on the radio — and it's a way of binding people together. And New Jersey was just always a great music state. And you would think there's a big cultural difference between South Jersey and North Jersey, but I never really found that. In Wildwood and Cape May, they're as crazy about music as they are in Bergen County.

I don't know, certain states are like that. You can draw a line, say, from Boston and New York out to Minneapolis, along Route 80, and pretty much every city and town on the old Rust Belt are great music cities. Cleveland, Buffalo, Toledo, right out to Minneapolis.

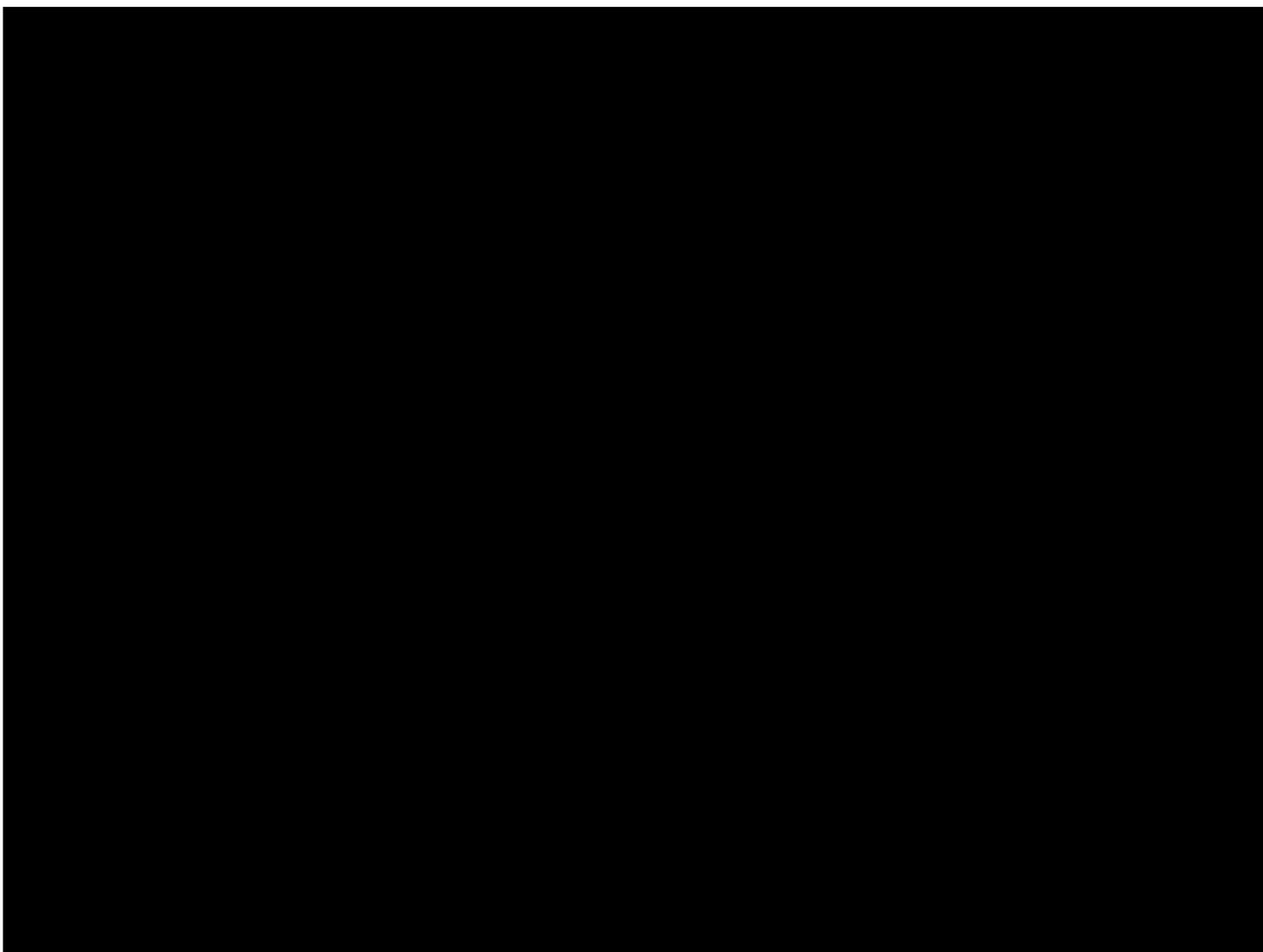
Of course, we have a Republican governor now in New Jersey.

Yeah, but even he is a Bruce (Springsteen) fan. And you can feel the kickback at times, against him. It's there. It's there with musicians, anyway.

So the idea of doing the politically oriented album ... it's always been pretty obvious to me that there's a strong political element in your work. But did you just want to kind of

emphasize to people that that element is there, and draw attention to it?

What happened was, we released a (2011) compilation called “A Funky Ceili,” of the kind of party, rowdy tracks. But there’s always been a side of Black 47 that’s a political side, and yet not a preachy side. So ... the idea was that we would do this one at some point, too. ... It was tricky thing to do ... when I went back to look at those songs, there wasn’t the right swing to them. So I decided what I would do is start with the very first political song we recorded back in ’89, which is Dominic Behan’s “Patriot Game,” and then finish up with “The US of A 2014,” which is our last political song. Start with one, finish with the other, and then maybe not even do the most popular ones, or even my favorite ones, but pick out songs where the album would swing from one song to the next. And once we made that decision, I did three tapes of putting songs together, and the third one just really worked, I thought. It seemed like the songs flowed into each other — musically, though not necessarily thematically.”



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