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Listening Booth: Black 47's Larry Kirwan

BY JOHN DONOHUE



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMON HASSAN / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

When Yeats wrote, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” he wasn’t, of course, referring to tonight, the first St. Patrick’s Day in a quarter century without a show by Black 47. But, for many, it must feel that way. Ever since the band came slouching like a rough beast out of the Bronx, in 1989, with a mix of Irish melodies, hip-hop beats, and rock charisma, its St. Patrick’s Day shows have been raucous touchstones of identity for a certain subset of the tangentially, momentarily Irish.

And, for the more determinedly Irish, the band's regular shows in the nineties along the East Coast were rites of passage of another sort. Named for the worst year of the Irish potato famine, Black 47 has consistently delivered a strident political message in the dynamic cacophony of its sound. With songs about the revolutionary leader Michael Collins, the socialist hero James Connolly, and the hunger-strike protester Bobby Sands, the band introduced a generation to the history that shaped Eire.

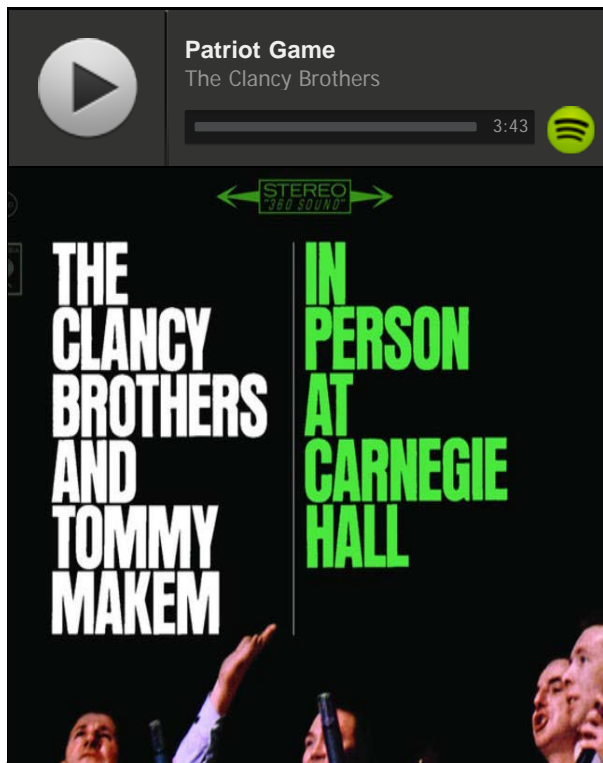
Black 47 was started by Larry Kirwan, an East Village rocker and playwright and from County Wexford, and Chris Byrne, a New York City police officer with a thing for Donegal, the Uilleann Pipes, and rapping. In the mid- and late nineties, the group rode the band to major-labels deals, late-night-TV appearances, and stadium-concert heights, before upheaval in the record business and changing tastes slowed them down. Byrne left amicably the band in 2000 to work on his own music, but Black 47 carried on before calling it quits last November, playing a show in Manhattan on the precise day of its first gig, twenty-five years earlier.

Kirwan, in addition to having led the band, writes plays and novels. Many of his musical compositions are first-person adventures with a singular point of view, and his playwriting skews beyond the ordinary, too. His most recent play, "Hard Times: An American Musical," puts the composer Stephen Foster in a Five Points bar during the summer of 1863 and reframes his classic tunes through the eyes and ears of the Irish Americans and African-American immigrants who lived in the gang-ridden neighborhood.

Kirwan would never consider giving up performing, and tonight he's at the Cutting Room, in Manhattan. The transition to life after his band has been abrupt. "I had been so intent on finishing up Black 47 on a high note with recording and constant touring that I hadn't given any thought to solo work," he told me recently. "Then, on my first solo gig in Ireland—days after Black 47's last show, I realized I was playing the acoustic guitar like a Stratocaster. In other words, there was no going back."

To mark St. Patrick's Day, I asked Kirwan if there was one song that was especially influential or meaningful to him. "I would have to say it's still 'Patriot Game' and especially

the version by Liam Clancy in the ‘Live from Carnegie Hall’ album from 1962,” he said. “Clancy’s delivery is chilling and still a thing of wonder. Which begs the question of why political songwriting is either so obvious or anemic of late?”



John Donohue is the night life editor of Goings On About Town.

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