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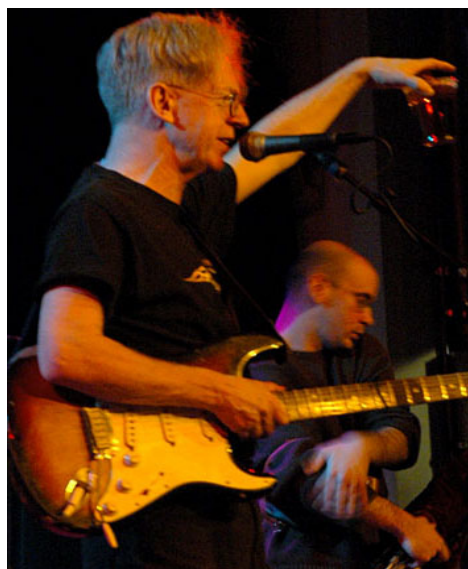
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Black 47's Larry Kirwan: At 'Sixteen' Still a Voice for Underdog

- Posted by [The Wild Geese](#) on April 25, 2013 at 5:30pm
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Whether singing about [James Connolly](#) or Bobby Sands or quoting Federico García Lorca, Wexford-born rocker and writer Larry Kirwan casts a discerning, empathetic and sometimes angry eye on the world. With "[Bittersweet Sixteen](#)," a new retrospective album out, he takes time out to discuss his oeuvre, old and new. Alex Féthière reports. [First published in May 2006]

(Larry Kirwan, foreground, performing with Black 47 on March 16 at State Theatre, Falls Church, Va, below.)

NEW YORK — Fielding questions while sitting in an NYU classroom, Black 47's Larry Kirwan is quietly intense, the flames of his hair, orange on stage, now seen as ashen blond. Though ostensibly a rock star promoting his new album, "[Bittersweet Sixteen](#)," 83 minutes of conversation make it clear that he is also a writer with deep political convictions. He is also a sworn enemy of the "cult of celebrity."

Kirwan and Black 47 became nationally known by dint of MTV's extensive airtime of the band's breakout single "Funky Ceili" in 1993, and their prodigious energy in performing more than 100 times a year. While avoiding the trappings, and the trap, of fame, the Wexford-born immigrant seems to understand its power in Irish history. His opus, which includes 11 plays and musicals, 15 albums (including his solo work and the new release), and three books, often invokes the involuntary "celebrities" that have emerged in the history of Ireland's struggle for nationhood, figures like revolutionaries James Connolly, Michael Collins, and Bobby Sands. The last two are referenced in "[Bittersweet Sixteen](#)."

In fact, Black 47's name and mission rely on such historical consciousness: The name refers to the worst year of An Gorta Mor, the 1845–1851 Irish potato famine, and resonates with the underclasses that supported the band early in its career. It is these blue-collar fans that are always foremost in Kirwan's mind. "That's the nature of the free market, and there'll always be people on the bottom, so there's always a gig for Black 47, trying to bring people up," he said with a wry chuckle.

Whether writing plays, music, or performing, Kirwan exhorts the audience to educate itself, participate, and actively engage ideas. He rails against television and "Emptyv" as enemies of music and thinking. "I won't watch television because I'm stupid enough, I figured out a long time ago I get stupider watching it," he said. He knows the band will never be on MTV again, but trusts in the strength of the music and message to carry Black 47. Perhaps it is the inertia of watching television, consuming information without critical synthesis, that irks him. "The only thing I don't like is passivity," he said.

In admitting this, he readily characterizes Black 47's music as a soundtrack for tribulation, saying: "For some reason Black 47 music works really well in times of crisis. Black 47 does well in the areas where people are not going to have as good a lifestyle as their parents." Apparently there are enough of those people — and other fans — around because Black 47 still performs 150 nights a year. March, obviously, was a major touring month, with dates in Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Florida, and, of course, Manhattan's Knitting Factory on St. Patrick's Day for "New York's hometown band."

Kirwan also finds fans — and an economic angle — among the soldiers fighting in Iraq. "This is a class war," he said. "This is a war that a working class is fighting." He says Black 47 would take a USO tour if given the opportunity, but doubts that they would be considered acceptable entertainment. Yet the sounds of Black 47 ring in Iraq: A U.S. Army sniper requests more Black 47 music on the band's Web site, and not only does the site administrator promise to send releases, but he asks the forum members to furnish any bootlegs they may have. There should be a few: Black 47 allows videotaping, recording, and photography at their shows. Kirwan says he's not concerned about the threat to his CD sales, because the band never plays the same set twice and he's happy that there is a record of each unique performance.

This anti-commercialism is part of Kirwan's philosophy, as well. He contends that broadcast media at large has sacrificed its integrity for profit and sees a lot of promise in satellite radio's all-inclusive creative vistas. He hosts a twice-weekly program, "Celtic Crush," on [Sirius Satellite Radio](#) showcasing his own broad definition of Celtic music.



After a show, Kirwan is more likely to relax over a laptop than a pint. In writing novels he appreciates the retreat from collaboration: "You don't need a band, you don't need actors, you don't need a director, it's just you and the page." When writing plays, he concentrates on character development and sustaining dramatic tension within a play's inner "truth," never straying from this grail lest the artifice of the play becomes apparent and lose the audience. "In a play, if there's one second that the audience sees through a character, the play's over at that point." He credits dramatic composition with improving the depth of his lyrics, particularly between the years 1984 and 1989 when he had left music for playwriting. "When I came back to doing songs in '89, I was writing in a different style because I had gotten so much into character."

This motif also applies to his best Black 47 performances: Just as he strives to write plays that immerse the audience throughout, he performs songs like "James Connolly" as though he and the song must be seamlessly joined to transport performer and audience alike into the message. Kirwan blinds himself on stage to avoid being distracted by eye contact with audience members, to better isolate himself with the song and its mood. "I always take my glasses off because if you get that one look at a person's eyes, you're drawn back to 'What are they thinking?' It's all about losing the thought process and becoming one with the material." This is particularly true of his commemorative biography songs: "Take the James Connolly song, for instance, I won't do that every night. Because what I have to do is become a method actor when I go into that song, I have to become Connolly. I have to go through the whole thing that he went through, and then you lose yourself in that, and then it becomes something special."

Connolly, of course, was severely wounded while commanding the republican forces in Dublin's General Post Office during the failed 1916 Easter Rising. He was executed by a British firing squad, propped up in a chair because he was unable to stand.

Famous as well for his commitment to raise up Ireland's working class, Connolly agonized about joining forces with the more parochial Irish Volunteers, finally doing so. In the midst of the British siege of the GPO, Kirwan's song relates, Connolly cries out to his wife: "Oh Lily, I don't want to die, we've got so much to live for. And I know we're all goin' out to get slaughtered, but I just can't take any more. Just the sight of one more child screamin' from hunger in a Dublin slum Or his mother slavin' 14 hours a day for the scum Who exploit her and take her youth and throw it on a factory floor Oh Lily, I just can't take any more."

The son of a sailor and the grandson of a monument sculptor, Kirwan, who declined to provide his age, is steeped in both middle- and working-class morés. This anchors a populism that is also rooted in his reading. "Reading Che (Guevara) again, I realized that was one of the reasons I got into politics and became left wing," he recalled. "'Look after those below you'; it's communism in a way, using communism in the broader sense of commonality."

Kirwan believes that a detached irony has permeated popular culture, and it "is not even irony any more, it's a gray squeezing-out of any emotion. If you want the perfect antidote to that you go to (Spanish poet Federico García) Lorca. Everything is passion, it's blood and roses, great love and great tragedy, it's a great antidote to modern life." Lorca's passionate work and theory of duende are of great aesthetic interest to Kirwan. The duende theory holds that great art depends upon an acute awareness of death, connection with a nation's soil, and an admission of reason's limitations — all of these are present in Black 47, and strongest in the songs that draw deeply from the wells of Irish tradition.

The passionate and informed person is naturally compelled to action, and Kirwan thinks the times require such motivation because "there's a battle going on for the soul of America." He decided to become an American citizen because he wanted his children raised as Americans and wanted to commit himself fully to living here. While he expects people to elevate themselves, he doesn't slight the politically disengaged, because there are so many ways in which people can act to improve their society. To express this, he paraphrases IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, "No one can do everything, but everyone has their part to play." Interview over, he rushes away, to interview Rosanne Cash on Sirius. **WGT**



Brooklyn, N.Y.-based writer Alex Féthière has a particular interest in music and the arts. A graduate student in New York University's journalism program, he also pursues sculpture and metalworking where he lives/works in the East Williamsburg Industrial Park.

[Black 47 Official Website](#)

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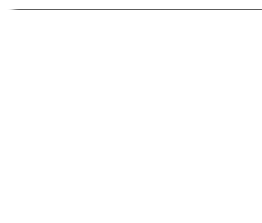


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