

Sounds/Chris Smith **SHAMROCK & ROLL**

“. . . *Fire of Freedom* will be released next week. Will the gutsiness of Black 47's live show come through the cold plastic of a CD? . . .”

THE SUNGLASSES LOOK COOL, OF COURSE. But Chris Byrne wears dark shades onstage for a very different reason: He can't shake the memory of enraged patrons cursing and spitting at his band, Black 47, when it began playing the Bronx Irish-bar circuit four years ago.

The customers along Bainbridge Avenue, a hub of the Irish-immigrant social scene, were expecting something along the lines of sentiment-rugging traditionalists like the Chieftains. When Byrne appeared with his uilleann pipes, a variation on bagpipes that dates to medieval Ireland, no one raised an eyebrow. Then Byrne and his partner, Larry Kirwan, started playing: Irish jigs tooted from Byrne's pipes, accompanied by feedback from Kirwan's electric guitar and by pounding hip-hop rhythms from a drum machine. That's when the audience responded with middle-finger salutes and more than a few choice words.

"People were coming up to the stage screaming, 'You suck!'" Byrne says. "I still haven't gotten out of the habit of not looking at people in the crowd."

Probably the only reason Byrne and Kirwan weren't physically attacked was that they made sure everyone knew that Byrne spent his daylight hours in uniform as a New York City cop. "We put out the word that there was a gun onstage," Kirwan says.

Black 47 has added quite a bit more hardware to its act since then—notably a trombone and a saxophone—but has kept the raw energy of those early days. Audiences have gone from openly hostile to wildly enthusiastic: The band's rollicking hybrid sound—part rock, part reggae, part reel—and its rowdy tales of sex, drinking, and Irish political history have packed a tiny Second Avenue bar called Paddy Reilly's each Wednesday and Saturday night for the past three years. Now Black 47 faces a challenge that's stumped many a great local band: It has built a cult following on the basis of a live show that depends as much on sweaty barroom ambience as it does on Marshall amps. Will that gutsiness come through the cold plastic of a compact disc? When SBK/ERG releases Black 47's first album, *Fire of Freedom*, next week, the stakes will be high for at least one band member. Chris Byrne, a father of three, is nearing the end of a yearlong paternity



LOCAL BAND: Proud, unsentimental songs about the Irish.

leave from the NYPD; if the album sells, Byrne will quit his dangerous Hell's Kitchen beat forever.

The band's tumultuous, mongrel musical style comes out of the lives of its two founding members. Byrne, 30, grew up in Brooklyn, the funny, profane, bullnecked son of a civil-service accountant; each summer, to keep him out of trouble, Byrne's parents would ship him to relatives in rural northwestern Ireland. To kill the boredom, Byrne, whose teenage musical tastes ran to the Clash and the Who, picked up an Irish tin whistle, then learned to play the uilleann pipes. At 20, he took and passed the NYPD exam, but kept playing in rock bands on the side.

Kirwan, a flame-haired 36-year-old intellectual, is from Wexford, Ireland, a small harbor village on the island's southeastern coast. His father was a merchant seaman who frequently sailed to South America, returning with armloads of cypso records. At 15, Kirwan started playing bass with one of the hundreds of roving Irish "show bands" that performed Top 40 tunes in small-town dance halls. Young Kirwan also signed up with leftist political groups, but not the Irish Republican Army, which some of his friends had

joined. "Violence solves nothing," he says. "It's one of the reasons I left."

Kirwan came to New York on a temporary student visa in the mid-seventies and never went back, spending three years as an illegal alien before acquiring a green card. He had some success in a band called Major Thinkers, "until we were royally screwed by a record company." For five years he wrote plays and occasionally strummed avant-garde guitar for a downtown poet called Copernicus. "I did this tour of Eastern Europe and Russia with Copernicus, playing for a lot of dissidents," Kirwan says. "It was at that

point that I realized that rock music could have a part in social change again."

Kirwan ran into Byrne one night in a downtown bar, and they started talking; staggering out of an after-hours club at seven the next morning, the duo invented Black 47 on a downtown sidewalk. "We wanted Black 47 to be the logical American Irish band," Byrne says, "the way the Pogues were the logical London Irish band."

So they mixed hip-hop and reggae beats with centuries-old jigs, and Kirwan wrote proud—but unsentimental—songs about new Irish immigrants. They also made sure Black 47 had a populist political conscience, beginning with its name, which comes from the worst year of a nineteenth-century potato famine. On *Fire of Freedom*, Kirwan's ambitious lyrics try to work big ideas into the backbeat by connecting obscure Irish political crusades with the grinding, poignant modern-day struggles of young Irish women and men who have come to New York for jobs as nannies and construction workers.

So far, all this makes Black 47 sound about as much fun as a three-course meal of spinach. But the band supplies a rich and intoxicating musical backdrop. The trombone (played by Fred Parcells) and saxo-



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phone (Geoff Blythe, formerly of Dexy's Midnight Runners) add a wonderful, woozy punch to the melodies. In live shows, there's a ragged, spontaneous glory to Black 47; the horns, drums, and guitar in "Maria's Wedding" seem on the verge of careening into chaos, only to be pulled back at the last minute by Byrne's forceful uilleann pipes. "Funky Céili," the album's first single, is the comical and passionate story of a stout-loving young Paddy who impregnates his girlfriend: "She said I'd have to be tellin' her Da/ So we drove the Morris Minor to Cork/ The ould fella said, 'You've got two choices, / Castration, or a one-way ticket to New York!' " Kirwan alternates stinging, Joe Strummer-like guitar chords with Byrne's chirping pipes, giving the song a tone that's both ragishly brash and guiltily mournful.

Kirwan's singing, flecked with the accents of his homeland, is as quirky as the arrangements. At Paddy Reilly's, Kirwan's exuberant Dylanesque tenor is the perfect complement to the railing horns and pipes, struggling valiantly to be heard over the clamor.

Fire of Freedom, however, captures the group's illusive interplay only intermittently. *Fire* was co-produced by Kirwan and Ric Ocasek, who used to lead the Cars, and Ocasek seems to have tried to make Black 47 more radio-friendly by adding female background vocals and odd synthesizer riffs. The results are mixed: on the album, there's a declamatory, nasal quality to Kirwan's voice that too often dominates the songs; in "Rockin' the Bronx," his attempt at rap comes off sounding embarrassingly similar to the vocal stylings of that Austrian oddity Falco, of "Rock Me Amadeus" infamy.

"Maria's Wedding" and "Funky Céili" are beautiful and bawdy, however, and there's no way to mess up a terrific song like "40 Shades of Blue." Kirwan wrote this tragicomic saga about a brilliant friend who came to New York from Ireland and left his sobriety somewhere over the Atlantic. The song begins with the strains of a classic Irish reel. "Down by the Salley Gardens," played on Byrne's pipes—but somehow Byrne is able to strip decades of accumulated weepiness from the reel. The tune then segues into a straight-ahead rocker, but Kirwan's lyrics subtly undercut the party mood: "And the letters that you sent back home/ Were full of all the things you'd done/ But they don't say you're down there on Blecker Street/ With your hand out on the bum."

"When I write, I try to use Yeats as a guiding line," Kirwan says. "One of his great quotes is that poetry should be 'as cold and passionate as the dawn.' I always try to make my lyrics work in that way." Kirwan's lyrics work fine; it's just too bad the album wasn't recorded between the Guinness-soaked walls of Paddy Reilly's. ■