

# Chapters and Verse

*In memoir, Black 47's Kirwan traces an immigrant's journey*

By Steve Camelio

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Either write things worth reading or do things worth the writing." To write one's own life story, both of these criteria must be fulfilled. For those who pick up "Green Suede Shoes: An Irish American Odyssey" (Thunder's Mouth Press), the new memoir by Larry Kirwan, best known as the lead singer and guitarist for the rock 'n' roll band Black 47, Kirwan proves worthy on both accounts.

"Green Suede Shoes," which Kirkus Reviews calls a "lively narrative," follows Kirwan through his many travels, triumphs and travails: his upbringing in "cozy" yet "narrow-minded" County Wexford; his baptism into the world of sex (a young lass sitting on his lap), drugs (a bottle of Harp) and rock 'n' roll (Wexford's Elvis Murphy) in the backroom of the Catholic Young Men's Society; his immigration to New York City and subsequent discovery of the "cauldron of varying and competing lifestyles" of the Lower East Side; and the countless stories of over 25 years in the music business.

If that doesn't seem like enough to keep you busy, Kirwan's writing inspired a new Black 47 album, titled "Elvis Murphy's Green Suede Shoes," that comes out on St. Patrick's Day as well. Each chapter of the book in fact begins with the lyrics to a Black 47 song. When Kirwan couldn't find a song in the band's back catalogue that fit a chapter, he decided to write a new one. Ironically, the songs of Black 47 were suppose to be the inspiration for the story of his life, but, as Kirwan found out, art doesn't always imitate life.

"My editor suggested setting a memoir around the songs of Black 47," Kirwan said recently. "But while some of the songs are autobiographical, others are more fictional, so that using the songs at the beginning of each chapter became more expressionistic." In the end, the songs came to serve as poetic introductions to the essence of each chapter of the book.

Despite the different realities represented by the songs and the book, for Kirwan the stimulus to write each is the same.

"You can turn an original thought into a song, a book or a play; it's just a different way of looking at it," he said. "A song is about condensing one impression into a three-minute shard, but with prose you have to look at the

big picture and let the story flow outward."

No matter the medium, anyone familiar with Black 47's music, of which Kirwan is the chief lyricist, knows of Kirwan's prowess as a storyteller. Now with the publication of "Green Suede Shoes," Kirwan has positioned himself to join heralded writers such as Nuala O'Faolain, the McCourts and Hugo Hamilton as the next breakout star of what has been called the "Irish memoir industry."

But where many Irish-themed memoirs are focused almost obsessively on reliving the past, Kirwan's story is the tale of a man always running, almost at a break-neck pace, toward the future.

"Writing the book, I realized the speed with which I made the transition from Irish in Ireland to Irish immigrant to, basically, a New Yorker," Kirwan said.

Despite this rapid cultural transition, Kirwan is far from being a man torn by his loyalties. The book shows how Kirwan's abrupt transition has given him a unique perspective on the relationship between the Irish and their Irish-American brothers.

"The great unkept secret between the two is that Irish people basically don't like Irish-Americans, at least at first," Kirwan said. "I'm Irish but I'm in a band that plays to a lot of Irish-Americans, and doing so I quickly grew to like them. I admire their toughness and the lives they've built for themselves and for their children."

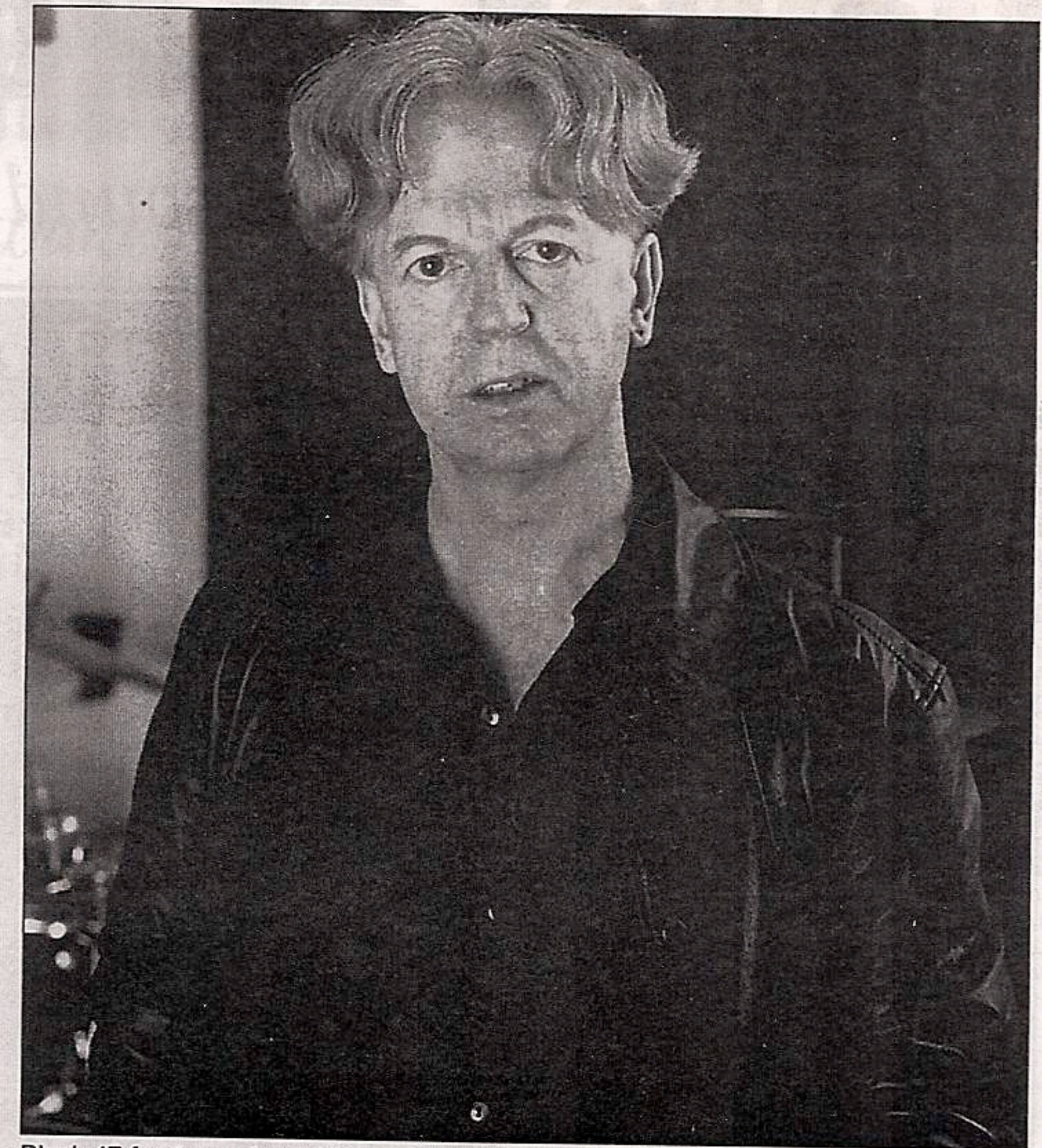
Such outspokenness is not uncommon in "Green Suede Shoes," the book or the album. In fact, Kirwan's forthright nature seems to be a direct outgrowth of the places he has called home and people with which he has associated.

When Kirwan was 10, he moved in with his grandfather and uncle, whose staunch Irish republicanism has had obviously effects on Kirwan's music and writing.

And if the rebel attitude was planted in Kirwan in Wexford, then it sprouted and bloomed in downtown Manhattan. During the 1970s, Kirwan found a home and a voice among the punks and immigrants who inhabited what he calls the "Republic of the Lower East Side." Kirwan's affection for the community flows through his

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writing, and the sections that deal with the neighborhood are among the most resonant and touching passages of "Green Suede Shoes."

"It was a vibrant, anarchistic university of the streets," he said. "There was this counterculture feeling that you could reinvent yourself and be whoever you wanted to be." And, having seen bands like the Clash, the Ramones and Television tear through the clubs and bars of his adopted home turf, Kirwan knew exactly what he wanted to become.

The book also points out that living in the Lower East Side meant that Kirwan came into contact with a world of tastes, sights and, especially, sounds that were new to him.

"The melting pot of communities meant I was exposed to jazz, reggae, hip hop -- all for the first time," Kirwan said. All these new types of musical expression reawakened Kirwan's passion for his own culture.

"After being exposed to new experiences, you swing back to your real roots," he said. "Forming Black 47, I took those new sounds and reinterpreted them through my Irish music roots."

The trials and tribulations of 15 years of Black 47 feature prevalently in Kirwan's life and his book. He celebrates the good times of the band, like the 1992 hit "Funky Ceili" and the heady days in the early '90s when they were the toast of New York City. Still, Kirwan says the book was also written to serve as a cautionary tale to fellow musicians about the dysfunctional world of the music business.

But don't pity him for the band's "Behind the Music" moments.

"We knew we were making a deal with the devil every time we signed a record deal," Kirwan said. "But we learned from it and now we are totally independent."

Independent musically, maybe, but not cut off from society. Just like Black 47's music, Kirwan's writing is filled with strong opinions on political issues like the current Iraq War. "Elvis Murphy's Green Suede Shoes" even features a track entitled "Downtown Baghdad Blues."

"There is not a party line in Black 47, or for our fans," Kirwan said. "As long as we get people thinking, that's cool."

Now a U.S. citizen with two children, Kirwan also uses his writing to voice his concerns about the "alternative universe" of TV and the "tawdry consumer-driven society" we live in. Despite him being a man of his convictions (or probably because of it), don't expect Kirwan to give up playing music to join the list of entertainers who have decided to run for office.

"When you get up on stage and hit that first note on an electric guitar, something indescribable goes through you," he said. "I can't give that up."

That doesn't mean that Kirwan won't keep trying new things. Having added memoirist to a list of titles that already includes poet, playwright and novelist, Kirwan is, as always, already heading in a new direction.

"I'm writing a musical with Tom Cahill, who wrote 'How the Irish Saved Civilization,' about a boatload of Irish women convicts sent to Australia in the 1940s," he said. "Since he has written the script and I am writing the lyrics and music, it's something new and interesting for me."

And Kirwan certainly knows that anything new and interesting is something worth doing.