

From Fan to the Bandstand (My Tenure with *Black 47*)

By Joe Burcaw

The year was 1993, when MTV actually played newer cutting-edge music videos on its station. I was up late one evening channel surfing when I remembered that Matt Pinfield's program *120 Minutes* was airing. Pinfield was a well-known east coast radio DJ who had a knack for staying up to date on what was "hip & current" on college radio, and as a result, played a lot of these up-and-coming alt-rock bands on his television show. I was an avid fan and always made sure to tune in whenever possible; it was a true education learning from the wealth of information stored in Pinfield's cranium. He was, and still is, a walking encyclopedia when it comes to musical facts and trivia. This is where a Celtic rock band out of New York City called *Black 47* first got onto my radar. The song was *40 Shades of Blue*, which along with *Funky Ceili*, started getting a lot of airplay and promo on MTV and terrestrial radio. I was enamoured by the band's ability to fuse traditional Irish music with folk, rock and hip-hop genres. They had this punk rock ethic on stage that commanded the audience's attention. I remember standing in the back of T.T. The Bear's Place up in Boston thinking to myself, "These

guys have the most raw yet exhilarating live show I have ever seen, and on top of that, they're incredibly tight!"

So, that is where my initial introduction to this fantastic group began. Fast forward ten years later, and I found myself living in Brooklyn, New York hammering away at the downtown singer-songwriter music scene. These were the days when Craigslist was a reputable place for bands and musicians to post classifieds for auditions, and for work for hire gigs. *B47* were in between bass players and took it upon themselves to place an advert that was brief, direct and covert, at the same time. I answered the ad on top of answering a dozen others and thought nothing of it. A week later, Hammy (*Black 47*'s drummer), who went by a pseudonym, emailed me and asked if we could speak on the phone at some point. We eventually exchanged numbers and spoke a few times over the course of a two-week period. We hit it off instantaneously, and once Hammy felt comfortable enough with me, he asked me "out of the blue" if I had ever heard of the band *Black 47*, because he was, in actuality, Thomas Hamlin, the drummer of the band. My mouth dropped on the other end of the receiver! I played it cool and kept my composure (when in reality my heart was racing like a Formula 1 race car), admitting that I was, indeed, aware of the band.

I mailed Hammy a press-kit, (half a decade before EPK's were the norm) and heard back from him shortly after submitting it. He liked my playing, but wanted to hear more,

and wanted to see me do my thing in a live setting before moving forward. Luckily, at that juncture in my life, I was a hired gun performing in five different musical acts. We made plans to meet up at The Cutting Room in mid-town Manhattan the following weekend. It was a miserable, cold and rainy November evening, where barely ten people showed up to the show. When our set was finished, I figured "with some disappointment" that Ham never made it to the gig, due to the poor weather conditions. I proceeded to pack up my gear and



head home. A half hour later, there was a message on my phone from him apologizing for not introducing himself after the performance. He had, in fact made it to the show, but only stayed for a few songs – being he was drenched from the downpour of rain. He liked what he saw and invited me down to Ultrasound studios for an audition two weeks later.

I learned a handful of material and showed up to the audition fully prepared and ready to tackle anything that could possibly be thrown at me. This was a chance of a lifetime opportunity that I wasn't about to let slip out of my hands! I knew there was a guy auditioning before me, so getting there two hours ahead of time was to my advantage. My curiosity got the best of me, and I attempted to put my ear up to the rehearsal room door to hear how he was interpreting the songs, and how he interacted musically with the band. I wasn't too impressed or concerned after taking a listen. I could tell there was something amiss in the chemistry; it just wasn't gelling. However, I did make sure to make some minor adjustments to the bass lines to *Downtown Baghdad Blues* and *Rockin The Bronx*. The next thirty minutes of waiting seemed to drag on for days, with the anticipation of, "What if?" As a result, my audition lasted over an hour, and the synergy was felt the moment I walked into to the rehearsal room. I was put on a one-month trial-basis period of 6-8 shows, and was officially asked to become a full-time member of the band New Year's Eve 2006. It has been close to a decade later this all transpired, and I am now writing this piece as a former member of *Black 47*. We had our final retirement show back on November 15th 2014, exactly twenty-five years after Larry Kirwan and Chris Byrne started the band in a tiny pub up in The Bronx.

I cannot express enough the amount of gratitude, love and respect I have for Larry, Hammy, Geoff, Freddy and Joseph. They embraced me with open arms from the beginning giving me the validation and kick in the ass I needed to become the "Road Dog" I am, now. I feel as though I have been with the guys since they started out, back in 1989; it was a smooth and effortless transition. This has been a dream come true opportunity that has given me credibility and confidence as a player and musician. The most memorable crowning achievements for me have been performing on *The Tonight Show*, recording three professional albums and a live DVD, and having a

chance to travel and perform around the country (including Ireland) to thousands of die-hard fans. I have been a very lucky person who has been able to experience what many aspiring musicians only dream of achieving when honing in on their craft up in the bedroom of Mom and Dad's house. I never, ever took this position for granted, always keeping myself in check, knowing that at any moment, at a snap of a finger, this could all be taken away from me.

We said goodbye to our fans properly by releasing a new album entitled *Last Call*, which I am so extremely proud of, and by touring around the states to virtually every market to say farewell. I will miss *Black 47* immensely and still haven't been able to process the fact that it's finally over for good. Now in my mind's eye, I hold onto a positive memory of the mark "a little band that could" left on the music industry map. Thank you, *Black 47*, and thank you to our dedicated fans!

Sincerely, Joseph "Bearclaw" Burcaw **BGM**

