



Kevin Coyne's first music venture was a British blues band – or was it?

As SIREN's albums receive the deluxe reissue treatment, MAURICE BING goes in search of the truth

Whatever Siren were, one thing is for sure: John Peel was a fan. "When Mike Raven, of BBC and Transatlantic Records fame, sent me their demo tape, they were called Coyne-Clague if they were called anything at all," wrote the DJ on the sleeve of Siren's debut album – issued on Peel's Dandelion label in late 1969. "The tape was great – stomping, roaring rock things without complexes or complexities; thoughtful, sad little songs and a few familiar things nicely done. If, like me, you're fed-up with super-stars, fraud, pretension, 'art rock', and quasi-mystical hoggery, then you'll find this record a considerable treat."

As ever, Mr Ravenscroft's musical radar was well attuned. As the colourful idealism of the psychedelic boom faded and the decade wound to a close, the pages of *Melody Maker* were increasingly devoted to progressive/heavy rock acts insistent on ever more ambitious

concept albums and grandiose stage sets. Siren were the opposite, an unpretentious fusion of influences fronted by a singer later described as an "anti-star". If they were influenced by the blues, Siren weren't purists who defined their success by perfecting a Freddie King lick or delivering their fretwork at twice the speed of sound. Siren were... well, their own thing.

History records Siren as the first chapter in the idiosyncratic musical journey of Kevin Coyne, whose art school education, a career working in mental health and an addictive personality combined to inform songs which unsettled and provoked in equal measures – and were driven by his peculiarly intense and dramatic, yet soulful voice. If he emerged during the singer-songwriter boom, he probably had more in common philosophically with the punk movement that followed than the likes of Gilbert O'Sullivan or

(for all his personal angst) Elton John. No wonder that punk-era stars such as John Lydon and Sting publically expressed their admiration for him.

Despite Coyne's unique talents, Siren was very much a musical sum of its parts. Bassist Dave Clague had trodden the boards with the Bonzos in their prime for much of '67; pianist/guitarist Nick Cudworth was a talented musician and songwriter; with the team writing in various combinations, their music ran the gamut from quirky bar-room romps ('Ze-Ze-Ze-Ze') to poignant romantic ballads ('I'm All Aching'), folk-fuelled fair ('Wake Up My Children') and, yes, a fair share of the blues ('Get Right Church' *et al*).

Siren issued just two albums: the aforementioned, self-titled and largely self-produced affair and *Strange Locomotion*, issued some 18 months later in spring '71. Thereafter, Siren fizzled out: band members drifted away from the capital to settle down and raise families and Kevin was left to plough a solo furrow, dusting off the odd Siren session to swell his first, tentative solo sessions which led to his belatedly acclaimed solo LP *Case History*, issued then swiftly deleted at the tail-end of Dandelion's life in '72. Kevin spent the

rest of the '70s and early '80s making splendidly original records for Virgin Records and Cherry Red before emigrating to Germany. He died in 2004, leaving behind a rich legacy of music and a family dedicated to honour his memory.

It's the Coyne family, in fact, who have overseen two expanded 2-CD reissues of the Siren albums on their own Turpentine Records imprint – fittingly, given Kevin's past career, through Cherry Red. Even a cursory glance at the artwork – the first fronted by a nondescript empty bottle, the second a '30s-style cartoon drawing of a rotund man next to a motorcycle (presumably an embodiment of the title) – betrays their wilfully oblique approach. Even in an age of defiantly anti-commercial creativity, Siren seemed destined to remain in obscurity – and indeed, despite the attentions of Jac Holzman, who secured a release for both albums Stateside on Elektra, the band remained a best-kept secret.

We may have Dave Clague to thank for the many tracks which swell these new editions – somehow, he seems to have gone everywhere with a reel-to-reel tape recorder or ensured that their many moonlighting sessions were retained for posterity. Some embryonic recordings for Blue Horizon appear on *Siren*; but by his own admission, Coyne didn't want to play ball when Mike Vernon wanted to fashion them as the next Fleetwood Mac. Some of the bonus tracks are culled from sessions for an aborted second album *Rabbits*, which was originally conceived as a double album of poetry and song until Dandelion boss Clive Selwood said "No."

In addition to the many aural delights on both packages, the Siren story is told by both Dave Clague and Nick Cudworth, who offer the same story albeit at intriguing tangents to each other. Nick was an old friend of Kevin's from Art College in Derby and he recalls his first experience of meeting the singer. "I noticed a tense, solitary figure sitting in the seats away from the stage," he writes. "Then came a seminal moment. This sound emerged, a voice accompanied by a harmonica that stopped everyone in their tracks. This was Kevin Coyne and for the first time in my life I thought, 'This is the real thing,' with a sense that all my efforts up till then had been foolish, childish copying. This was real, pure musical power and I wanted to be part of it."

In due course, Cudworth hooked up with Clague, who was putting together a blues band of sorts, and introduced Kevin to the band. Even a cursory listen to the first Siren album betrays the sense of tension during the sessions, which Nick ascribes to two reasons. First, there was something of a power battle within their ranks. "It soon

became obvious that Kevin would provide the major driving force for the band," Nick reveals. "I always remember tension with Dave Clague, who seemed

Alarm bells: Siren circa 1969. L-R: Nick Cudworth, Tat Meager, Kevin Coyne and Dave Clague



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most reluctant to hand over the reins to Kevin. However, Dave did have all the musical contacts."

Second, their new star wasn't at his most comfortable travelling to London to sit in a recording studio. "We began to record songs after hours at Regent Sound where Dave knew the engineer, Tom Allom [later involved with Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Def Leppard]. Kevin was always very tense and ill at ease in London at this stage and would work himself to fever pitch. I remember such was his state during the recording of 'Ze-Ze-Ze-Ze' that he would rush off to the lavatory during the instrumental breaks – hence 'Here comes that

feeling again' now acquires a new dimension!"

Apparently, Siren were more of a collective than an out-and-out band. Indeed, the band name was only arrived at on the eve of the release of their first LP (two earlier singles were meant to have been credited to Coyne-Clague but a mistake led to them being miscredited purely to Clague). "Siren was not an actual unit – it never really was," admits Cudworth. "I can remember going round Chelsea's graphics department studios enquiring if anyone played blues guitar... it was here that I encountered David Gibbons on jazz rhythm guitar and John Chichester who played lead guitar... Tat Meager was a fine jazz drummer from Cheltenham. His main claim to fame was writing 'Good Morning' for Leapy Lee, and Kevin was merciless in his withering sarcasm on this subject – in fact, Kevin was a pretty merciless critic on most occasions."

After a trip to America, Nick returned to share a flat with Coyne, who had eventually committed to full-time life in the capital. Although Clague's role remained as significant as ever, many of the best songs that ended up on *Strange Locomotion* were derived from lengthy jam sessions at their flat in Clapham. Despite the patronage of Peel, however, few were truly aware of Siren's talents. Not that it seemed to bother their frontman any.

"Kevin was one of those all too rare artists who was not remotely interested in tailoring his product to the market place," admits Cudworth. "He, and only he, was the strictest judge of his work and he dismissed the review out of hand as total bullshit... Considering how much heavy drinking we were doing – endless late night sessions smoking everything we could get! – if we had followed that commercial route and gained the success we perhaps deserved I would most certainly have been dead and would not be writing this now!"

Back in '70, Kevin himself summed up the spirit of Siren quite succinctly. "Siren primarily performs for itself and although it likes people most of the time, it isn't prepared to crawl on its knees to entertain them, make them smile all the time, play like machines till they're physically exhausted... Playing for Siren isn't a 'special' activity: we don't want audiences observing a precious ritual. We all sing and play every day: we also shit and fart and eat. If a band or a musician *wants* to 'entertain', *wants* to contrive atmosphere, they can – the less inventive among us *need* arranged stimulus. *We don't* and we would like it if our audiences didn't either." □

Siren and Strange Locomotion are now available as deluxe 2-CD editions on Turpentine