

CASE HISTORIES

In the early '70s, unorthodox singer-songwriter KEVIN COYNE was being groomed for success by his record label. Championed by Peel, idolised by a young John Lydon, he was even invited to replace Jim Morrison in The Doors. As Coyne's friends, former bandmates and family confirm: "He should have become an English institution." So what happened?

IN AN ANONYMOUS terraced house, a man awakes from his single bed by the window and begins shuffling around his small domain, stringing together the rudiments of a breakfast. At first, he appears to be looking after the flat for some absent person, but then you realise, as his behaviour becomes manic and his speech eddies into tics and whirls, that this is a man who's lost his mind. He cages himself behind a chair, sticks his head inside a wardrobe, arse akimbo, muttering repetitive phrases and veering from ecstasy to misanthropy, swearing like a bipolar trooper.

This is *The Institution*, a rarely seen 1978 film co-credited to experimental filmmaker Ian Breakwell and his old friend from Derby College of Art, Kevin Coyne. Coyne is the man in the frame, and to witness this performance now is to see something unbearably poignant unfolding. Coyne was drawing on his own experiences working with mental patients in the mid-'60s, much of which also seeped into the content of the songs he wrote by the score as one of Britain's most distinctive singer-songwriters of the '70s, but within a few years this man, whom so many former friends and colleagues recall as a funny, confident and fascinating individual, the man Elektra's Jac Holzman called one of the 10 greatest voices in the world, the Virgin Records darling behind the classic albums *Marjory Razorblade* and *Matching Head And Feet*, would himself crash into an alcohol-induced nervous breakdown that would change the course of his life.

"Kevin should have become an English institution," believes guitarist Andy Summers, a member of Coyne's band in the mid-'70s. "A remarkable talent, ruined by excessive alcohol and possibly too much feeling, too much raw emotion. He should have received more recognition."

In the mid-'70s, there was no shortage of 'troubled' singer-songwriters – John Cale, John Martyn, Roy Harper, Davy Graham – dealing with their own respective demons. But none, perhaps, fell harder than Kevin Coyne. Watch the recently released DVD of his Rockpalast television performance in 1979, and you'll see a man in an advanced stage of disintegration committing career suicide on camera. "When you're going nuts," Coyne once told an interviewer, "often you're the last one to know."

I'M YOUR FAN



➤ "I loved Kevin Coyne. He was hilarious good fun. He'd absolutely cheer you up. Just proper drinking music. And being somewhat underage, it was brilliant. A bloke like Kevin Coyne, you could rely on him. If you couldn't go in, you could go around the back and say to someone, 'Tell Kevin there's some youngsters', and he'd come and get you in. That kind of friendliness, that community. That vibe's very important."
John Lydon

KEVIN COYNE WAS born in 1944, into a richly musical family: his brother, Arthur, was a jazz musician, his sister was an opera singer, his father played drums and his grandfather had been in an Army band. Coyne later referred to having been brought up as an 'alien spirit' in this Catholic family. While Kevin was attending Derby College of Art in the early '60s, Arthur, 10 years his senior, suffered a traumatic nervous breakdown. Kevin, who revered his brother, embarked on a new career as a mental health worker, spending 1965 to 1968 as a social therapist at the Whittingham Hospital near Preston. At the same time, he was playing rudimentary guitar along with friend Nick Cudworth, and voraciously buying records, from American blues to vintage rock'n'roll.

In many ways, Coyne's music represents an attempt to shake the spirit of his beloved rock'n'roll – "so full of guts" – out of its perpetual adolescence to address deeper ills. His work with the mentally ill seared into his creative output. The author and historian Robert Ferguson, a co-worker at the Whittingham and one of Coyne's closest friends in that period, recalls the atmosphere as a "sanctuary". "Kevin became interested in the very institutionalised people. He gave them a little department to do art. And there was a club called the Century Club, where patients in varying degrees of mental degeneration would perform and sing, very strange performances. Some of that spilled over into his stage act – putting a chair on his head as he sang, stuff like that. To him it had almost a religious aspect: these lost souls, could he help them? He had no notion of a thing being a waste of time. He was a very uncynical person."

"This experience seemed to have marked him and fuelled him," recalls Andy Summers. "It was something he referred to often... at times it seemed as if we were all in the asylum. Hilarious in recall, but painfully difficult at the time." ➤

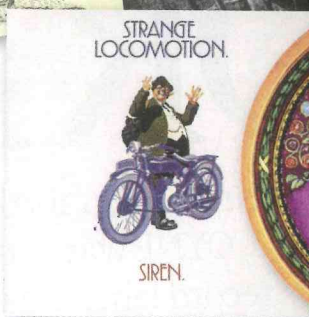
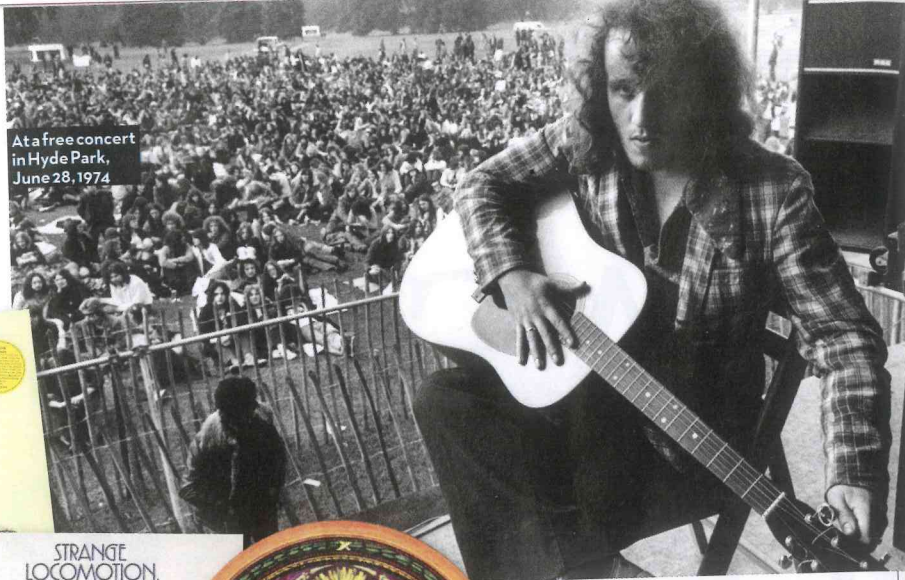
By 1969 Coyne was exhausted and depressed by his

KEVIN COYNE

work, but raring to become a professional musician ("I was quite ruthless about becoming a rock'n'roll star", he told Nick Kent). He moved to London where he joined Cudworth's friend, guitarist and ex-Bonzos member Dave Clague, in blues-based outfit Siren. "We got enough tapes together to go round the record companies," recalls Clague. "Then John Peel was interested, and he put out two singles on Dandelion. So many people were copying blues singers in those days, and churning out covers, but he made it all up. The band could count in and start playing and Kevin could come in with a lyric every time." Siren released two albums' worth of material for Dandelion before Coyne embarked on a solo career with 1972's *Case History*. The title gestured strongly back to his experiences at the Whittingham, and to the work he undertook when he first moved to London, as a drugs counsellor in Camden Town. "He didn't see himself as part of the record industry," believes Dave Clague. "He was more of an artist. He was drawing and painting as well as singing – it was his commentary on the world." This distance licensed him to puncture pretension wherever he found it. "In those days," says Clague, "you could drop in to Peel's flat at the top end of Harley St for a cuppa. You'd see Marc Bolan sitting in a corner. One of the objects of Kevin's derision was Principal Edwards Magic Theatre. 'Let's go round to Peel's and do some prancing!' He didn't have time for that kind of thing."

Case History displays remarkable confidence, and an "aggressively unimproved" rhythm guitar style, as Ferguson puts it. "He couldn't play the guitar," confirms Clague. "All he could do was open-tune and whack at it, and it came out in that aggressive way." Jac Holzman, who released Siren on Elektra in America, even asked him to fill the late Jim Morrison's shoes in The Doors – an offer Coyne declined.

At a free concert in Hyde Park, June 28, 1974



"Kevin didn't see himself as part of the record industry, he was more of an artist"

DAVE CLAGUE (BONZOS)

AROUND 1972-'73, WHEN Coyne was given a deal with Virgin Records, he was being groomed for a major songwriting career in the mould of Roy Harper, Joe Cocker, Van Morrison, et al. His first sessions at the newly appointed Manor Studios in Oxfordshire formed the basis of his enduringly brilliant *Marjory Razorblade*, which featured Clague as well as a newly convened group including US percussionist Chili Charles, bassist Tony Cousins and blues guitarist Gordon Smith. The latter two both knew Coyne, as all three had been employees of the Virgin Records shop on Notting Hill Gate. "I used to go round his place and we used to play together," remembers Smith. "It was great – he was a funny guy, a unique character. He was a Northerner, same as me, so we hit it off. We used to stay at the Manor and record through the night. He had all the songs in his head, so he just rattled them off, one after the other. There was no rehearsal, we just did it there and then." "Richard's paying!" was the cry," adds Dave Clague, in reference to the entrepreneur behind Virgin. "The atmosphere was laid back in those days. Mike Oldfield was there finishing off *Tubular Bells*. He asked Kevin to put vocals

HOW TO BUY

THE BEST OF KEVIN COYNE...



MARJORY RAZORBLADE (VIRGIN, 1973)

This bilious outpouring of serrated folk-blues/rock remains Coyne's pinnacle, with shades of Captain Beefheart ("I Want My Crown") and his devastating indictment of the care system, "House On The Hill".

9/10



MATCHING HEAD AND FEET (VIRGIN/EMI, 1975)

With Andy Summers drafted in on guitar, *Marjory's* follow-up exudes a confidence that ranges from tender family ballad "Sunday Morning Sunrise" to the punkoid suburban malaise of "Turpentine".

8/10



1979 LIVE AT WDR-STUDIO L COLOGNE (BLAST FIRST PETITE DVD, 2012)

A musical theatre of cruelty that's hard to switch off. A bedraggled Coyne opens the set by announcing he's unwell, and plays most of the solo set in a fevered sweat. "Saviour" is notable for its Suicide-al drum machine.

8/10



KEVIN COYNE & JON LANGFORD - ONE DAY IN CHICAGO (SPINNEY, 2005)

"Kevin was like a young hunting dog, straining on his leash," said the Mekons man of a good-humoured collaboration recorded in 2002. Backed by The Pine Valley Cosmonauts (with Coyne's son Robert), the singer's self-deprecating wit comes to the fore.

8/10



NOBODY DIES IN DREAMLAND (TURPENTINE, 2012)

The latest from the label set up by son Eugene Coyne are these newly discovered private demo from 1972, showing Coyne's immense on-the-hoof invention and lyricism. Excerpted from a 40-a-week songwriting habit, the songs just pour out of him.

7/10

The Kevin Coyne Band, Copenhagen, August 1975 (Andy Summers far left)



EYEWITNESS!

"HE WAS TOUCHED WITH SOME KIND OF GENIUS..."

Andy Summers on Kevin Coyne

"I first heard Kevin Coyne at a concert in Hyde Park. I thought he was very droll and different. A few days later I heard he was looking for a guitarist.

"When we were actually playing, rehearsals were fine. But as long as the pubs were open we generally wouldn't get started, as the pub was where he really wanted to be. The alcohol could lead to some startling improvisations on Kevin's part, but also a psychological dismembering of each player. It could get rough...

"His performances - usually based around a chair that he would find backstage - were manic, very funny and unpredictable. He was an electrifying and confrontational performer who had a remarkable gift for verbal improvisation - he literally spewed imagery.

"Kevin was not mad, but he drank excessively, and this did lead to difficult times. After the first gig with him, he started into me... so I told him that was it: one gig and I was out. However, he called me next day full of apologies and so I stayed on. But this was the pattern. There were times when it was unbearable. I don't think we will ever see his like again. He was touched with some kind of genius. I remember him with great affection."

on it, but he said it wouldn't fit - it was a different scene."

By this time Coyne had a distinctive look: with his shock of unkempt hair, striped braces and intelligent cruelty, he looks like a *Clockwork Orange* droog. His voice bridged the gap between Captain Beefheart and Alan Bennett. Smith recalls his "very dark humour sometimes, but he could be very funny as well - he could have been a stand-up. He reminded me of someone from the old Northern music hall."

His monologues could veer one step away from his comic hero Les Dawson, and his son Eugene remembers how "he would give the teddy bears voices and have them tell stories. The voices were gruff, and the bears were often rude." His songs are frequently wreathed in a fishy, pier's-end whiff: girls called "Bertha Lee", "Bonnie Lou", "Fat Moaning Minnie", "Jackie And Edna". In his teens he'd sung for the patrons of a Derby bingo hall, so he was steeped in the traits and foibles of working-class British life. That was what made songs like "Eastbourne Ladies" - a track selected by John Lydon on a 1979 radio show - so convincing. Today, Lydon (see panel page 19) still cites "Marjory Razorblade" as a favourite song.

Coyne's wry observations of ladies lurching at the genteel seaside resort degenerates into a demented shakedown for spare change - it's absolute vintage Coynerama - Alan Bennett with a safety pin. "He wouldn't talk about what was going on at work [in the mental hospital]," says Clague. "But he could see potential clients when we went out and about!" "House On The Hill", an album highlight, is a pitch-perfect tribute to his years at the Whittingham, visiting the different inmates in their private, tragi-comic worlds.

"He was the patron saint of the drug addicts and lost souls - they just adored him," adds Robert Ferguson. "Kevin was the first person who awoke me to the thought, 'Why not do it yourself? You like books, why not write one yourself? You like music, why not write it yourself?' It was life-changing. We're just ordinary people, but why can't we have a go?"

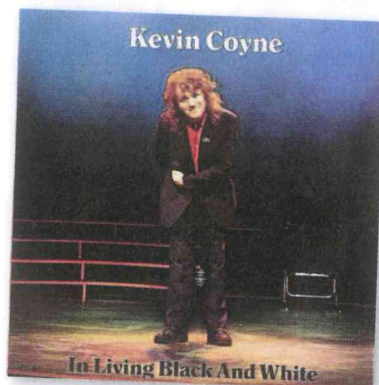
Coyne certainly practised what he preached. *Blame It On The Night* (1974) and *Matching Head And Feet* (1975) followed. "Virgin tried to make him into a rock star," reckons Gordon Smith. "They kept me and a guy called Tim Penn, who joined on keyboards and got rid of the rest of the band. Chili went

back to the States and we got a different drummer [Peter Woolf], and then they brought in Andy Summers."

The future Police guitarist joined Coyne's group in 1975, following a stint with Kevin Ayers. His distinctive electric style added extra bite to Coyne's songwriting, which was moving into reggae-inflected modes as well as the hard rock of "Turpentine", which oozes suburban menace.

On *In Living Black And White* (1976), one of the great live albums of the 1970s, Coyne sounds in full control of his demons. Summers, his former bandmaster Zoot Money on keyboards, Woolf on drums and Steve Thompson on bass, sounds invigorated and spunky. Coyne is impish, breaking into songs to deliver short, confusing monologues and taunts to the audience, before ordering the group back into action.

Underneath "House On The Hill" he plays a tape recording of himself babbling like some mad old weasel in a pub. At some shows, Lesley - his wife and mother to his two sons, Eugene and Robert - would sit at a table on stage, covering her ears when things got too loud. This is the stuff that keeps a working band on the tips of its toes. "He was determined to raise the musical standard of the band and subsequent recordings," says Zoot Money. "The bursting into ad lib sections on stage we treated as 'theatre', and always found a way back to the plot."



IN THE SLEEVENOTES to *In Living Black And White*, Coyne writes of the revolutionary potential of a secret underworld of 'mavericks' who operated outside of music industry constraints: "We'll just have to steam in and sort a few people out... Infect a bit of humanity and reality into music... We have to. I'm quite prepared to take on the whole fuckin' world!"

It didn't happen. His album sleeves offered unconscious clues to an interior instability. On the front of *In Living...*, Coyne takes a bow, grinning to the camera; while on the reverse, he conceals a gleaming shank behind his back. A promo poster for *Heartburn* (1976) showed Coyne falling to his death from a tower block. "He knew that anyone who is 'normal' is very close to a mental patient as well," insists his second wife, Helmi. "So for him there was no difference. He knew it's a very fine line."

KEVIN COYNE

A MANY-SIDED COYNE

ACTOR, ARTIST, AUTHOR...

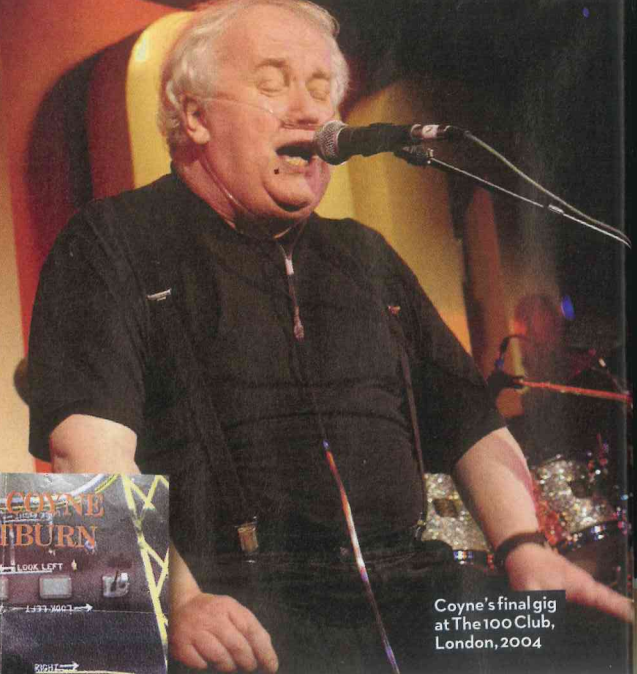
The other talents of the singer-songwriter

THE DRAMATIST

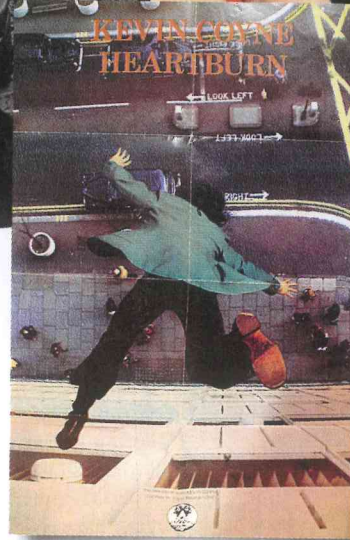
Coyne co-writes *England, England* with Snoo Wilson, a play about the Kray twins and British nationalism. Performed in 1977 in London, starring Bob Hoskins, it featured several Coyne songs (including "Big White Bird" and "America"). The *Babble* LP derived from Coyne's one-man play, performed in the late '70s.



Near his home, overlooking Wandsworth Road, March 1978



Coyne's final gig at The 100 Club, London, 2004



→ Slowly but inevitably, the madness he enacted so convincingly in *The Institution* turned into his reality. Compassionate soul though he was, Coyne found it increasingly hard to look after himself as the '70s wore on. "We used to do a lot of drinking in them days," confirms Gordon Smith. Helmi Coyne: "He was overwhelmed. He was so young when he started his career, there was no rulebook – how do you behave, what do you do in your spare time? It's difficult to find a reason to stay sober." Coyne was also notoriously unworldly, as Helmi Coyne explains: "He told me Richard Branson said, 'What would you like?' And he said, 'A house', but being very moderate, he just had a tiny little house. Money was not a big thing for him, but for him the most important thing was his integrity, to be free and do what he wanted to do."

He was also trying to juggle a mass of parallel activities that threatened to get the better of him. "My dad was very prolific," says Eugene Coyne. "He was driven to create. Not just music: he was also writing, painting and drawing constantly." In his mid-thirties, while he recognised new energies in the arts (his song "Dynamite Daze" saluted the dynamism of punk), the drink was dragging him down and leaving him unable to keep up. 1980's *Sanity Stomp* – made with musicians from The Ruts, and partly featuring Robert Wyatt on drums – was "made when I was clinically 95 per cent nuts", Coyne later commented. "My wife tells me I'm crazy," he sings on "My Wife Says". "The next minute she says she loves me/I can't imagine a better state/Than being a reprobate." Five years later, he went rogue in the most drastic circumstances. He abandoned the family home and bought a one-way ticket to Germany, where he spent the remainder of his life. In 1985 he was in an abject state. Eugene Coyne: "My dad had a terrible drink problem. When he left the UK and settled in Germany, things were very bad for a few years – I lost touch, but by all accounts he hit rock bottom." Coyne settled in Nuremberg, divorced Lesley and eventually married Helmi, a young fan who initially helped him cure his alcohol habit. "He just had a couple of T-shirts, that was it. He stayed in his flat, reading, drinking. I gave him a lift to the AA." In the safety of a secure home, Coyne was free to indulge

his creative impulses to the full. Between 1985 and his death in 2004, he released 18 albums, published six books of fiction, poetry and memoir, and painted many large canvases. "There was no day where he didn't draw or write," says Helmi. "He wasn't interested in social things. He was just happy to be in his room surrounded by books, records – and a cup of tea. He'd work night and day and I brought him pencils and stuff for painting. He'd scribble on anything

he could get his hands on. He was totally obsessed. He missed Britain every day. But when he was there, he missed Germany. He had Pay TV just so he could watch the football. He missed cricket, libraries... he was one of the most well-informed people, he read the English papers every day."

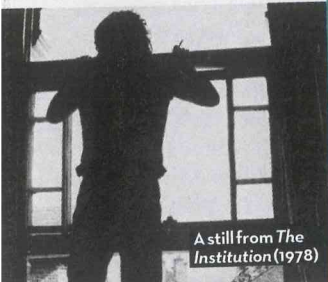
IN OCTOBER 2003, Coyne took part in a Dandelion reunion in Shrewsbury, when Siren got together again and a host of Coyne's old friends rallied round. By then, he was receiving treatment for lung fibrosis, diagnosed the previous year. At a final solo show at London's 100 Club in 2003, "I went to see him with Tony Cousins," says Gordon Smith, "and it was a shock to see him with an oxygen tank. It was a bit sad, but he was still humorous – he said we should do some stuff together again. Later, he left a message on my answering machine, saying it was great to see me again, and a couple of days after that he died." In fact, Coyne appears to have suspected the end was coming, as many friends report receiving a phone call over the last few weeks. He died peacefully on December 2, 2004. According to Helmi,

"His greatest fear was to die lonely in a hotel room, like so many musicians"

HELMI COYNE

in his last years this troubled man achieved a measure of peace. "He did what he wanted to do and he was free, and he had good friends, he was always in touch with his family," she insists. "[In 2003] A German guy [Boris Tomschiczek] made a documentary called *One Room Man*, and there [Kevin] describes his death, which is really haunting: 'I want to die...' This was his greatest fear, to die lonely in a hotel room, like so many musicians... he wanted to die in his own bed in his own place, in the early morning, surrounded by his books. And that's exactly how it happened. So, terrible as it was, it was the perfect ending for him, in a way." ☪

Nobody Dies In Dreamland is available on Turpentine



A still from *The Institution* (1978)

THE FILMMAKER/ACTOR

The Institution (1978), co-credited to Coyne and old friend Ian Breakwell, is a one-man tour de force as Coyne, alone in a flat, inhabits the persona of a lunatic. Coyne: "It's a film about loneliness, sadness, misery and cities. But there's a lot of humour, too. It's not a hopeless message." Opening credits feature Coyne's harsh electronic noise soundtrack.

THE AUTHOR

Coyne's published writings include *The Party Dress* (1990), *Paradise* (1992), *Show Business* (1993) and *That Old Suburban Angst* (2004).

THE ARTIST

Hardly a day went by without Coyne making a drawing or painting. His colourful, faux-naïf oils show a host of oddballs, lost teddy bears and anthropomorphic animals.

PENNIE SMITH; BRIGITTE ENGL/REDPERNS