

Kevin Coyne  
I Want My Crown (The Virgin Anthology)



This 4 disc CD was lovingly put together by Kevin's sons Robert and Eugene. It collects together work their dad did between 1973 and 1980, when he was on Virgin records. It is hard to pick a best of with an artist as prolific as Kevin Coyne. Perhaps a 'Best Of' is a pointless exercise? What is important is to show the scope and diversity in Kevin Coyne's work. I feel Robert and Eugene have done a very good job.

Kevin was influenced by the blues and rock and roll, also by music hall comedy. Frank Randle. George Robey, Bob Wilton and Billy Bennett being some of the music hall comedians he has mentioned as liking. But Kevin went on to influence some of the punk musicians. John Lydon is the famous example, another example is Leeds punk band The Mekons. In 2002 former Mekons John Langford and Sally Timms performed and recorded with Kevin. My first introduction to the music of Kevin Coyne came in the late 1960s when I heard his early band Siren on the radio. John Peel was a big fan of Siren as he was of Kevin's solo work. In fact Siren were signed to John Peels Dandelion label. I remember hearing a Siren song called Lonesome Ride that I was particularly fond of. In 1973 Kevin signed to the then small independent label Virgin and recorded Marjory Razor Blade. It was reading about the record, then hearing it, that really brought Kevin's music into my life. As did seeing him live for the first time a couple of years later. In fact I can say that discovering Kevin Coyne was a turning point in my life.

Like Marjory Razorblade in 1973 this anthology starts off with that records title track. I read somewhere that Kevin made the song up while he was shaving. He sings unaccompanied sounding like a music hall pub comedian. But underneath

the black humour it is a song about self harm. A taboo subject back then, as I guess it still is. Like on Marjory we now rock through Marlene. A great track with a gorgeous organ playing throughout. The other tracks from Marjory featured here, are the bleak acoustic Talking To No One, Eastbourne Ladies, another great rocker, and House On The Hill. This is a song that Kevin wrote from his experience working as a social therapist at the Whittington Hospital in Preston. When I interviewed Kevin in 2004 he told me that the song was also about his own experiences of being an out of work drunk wandering around Brixton. Kevin sings the whole song in the first person. When he sings about the Brixton Square, I wonder if he was referring to the Brixton Oval. A place just outside the centre of Brixton where drunks used to congregate. Throughout the song Kevin is accompanied by Gordon Smiths sensitive slide guitar. Here they created a genuine British Blues. The Anthology's title track I Want My Crown is also featured on Marjory. Kevin got the song from Big Joe Williams but put his own lyrics to the verses, I feel he is still sincere to the song. Big Joe Williams is best known as a blues artist. Especially perhaps for Baby Please Don't Go. They had a big hit with the song in 1964 but sometimes Big Joe got together with his wife Mary and together they would sing spirituals like I Want My Crown. The crown in question is the starry crown that we are given when we get to heaven. This is a theme that runs through a number of old gospel songs. There is a lot more to be said about Marjory as the whole record has been reissued but for now we must travel on.

In late 1973 Kevin released a single, the a side Lovesick Fool is included here. It has a great opening and rocks along nicely. Also recorded around the same time was an impressive version of Blind Willie Johnson's Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning. Kevin's soulful singing is accompanied by Gordon Smiths slide guitar. Here Gordon's playing reminds me of Mississippi Fred McDowell. Fred McDowell had also recorded the song. During 1974 Kevin released his second Virgin album Blame It On The Night. Again Gordon Smith is a constant companion. His slide playing was very much a part of Kevin's work at the time. The opening track River Of Sin is said to be one of Kevin's songs that inspired Johnny Rotten. The stark acoustic Sign Of The Times is very disturbing. The acoustic title track creates a similar disturbing atmosphere, the added strings work most effectively. There is a rough version of another song I Believe In Love. But these works in progress were all a valid part of Kevin's creative output. Following all this is Dance Of The Bourgeoisie from a 1974 John Peel Session. Here Kevin is accompanied by a saxophone. This bit of comedy shows the avant guard side to Kevin's music.

By 1975 Kevin's band had grown. Andy Summers joining Gordon Smith on guitars. His 1975 album Matching Head And Feet lacks the acoustic spontaneity of the previous two albums but it contains some good songs, and is very much a testimony to the power in Kevin's voice. Saviour starts off with bass player Archie Legget before building into one of the most powerful things Kevin ever recorded. There is a bit of unaccompanied singing in the middle, perhaps a bit reminiscent

of Captain Beefheart, then the band come back in and the song builds to a climax. Bang. Over the years Saviour was often a regular part of Kevin's stage performances. In later years the song became a vehicle for Kevin's spiritual searchings. Here, however, it is very much an exorcism from an ex Catholic. Lonely Lovers is a song from the troubled side of suburbia. A subject Kevin often sang about over the years. Sunday Morning Sunrise is a beautiful love song; however, Turpentine is a blast of proto punk, with its nightmare visions. Kevin gives an extremely powerful vocal performance, while Gordon Smith's harmonica wails away in the background. It is extremely explosive. I first saw Kevin on stage in 1975 and he was a wild performer. There definitely was a sense of danger about what he was doing.

Around this time Kevin made a couple of commercial singles. Let's Have A Party is a live recording complete with audience noise. Lorna rocks along nicely, sometimes putting me in mind of Slade or Mud. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. However while Kevin was making these commercial singles, he was also working in more adventurous areas. Side two opens with two songs from a play he co wrote with playwright Snoo Wilson called England, England. The play was about the Kray Twins. I never saw the play so I can't comment on it. The two songs featured here are called Which Way Can I Go, and A Life Divine. I am particularly fond of Which Way Can I Go. Over Andy Summers sensitive slide playing Kevin sings of friends deserting him. The repetition of Well. Well, Well, in the chorus puts me in mind of Blind Willie Johnson. However it is very much a Kevin Coyne song with references to institutions like Marks and Spencer's, Wilfred Pickles, and Winston Churchill. A very moving song.

Around this time Gordon Smith left the band and Andy Summers took over all the guitar duties. Kevin was now working with a four piece band that included legendary keyboard player Zoot Money. In 1976 they released Heartburn. This was perhaps the most commercial record that he made in the 1970s. It was not as explosive as Matching Head And Feet, however it contained some good songs. I Love My Mother has an eerie feel to it, America is a song that I think also appeared in England England. Here it has a music hall feel to it with references to the little boats on Millwall docks, and the Pearly Queens from Tooting Bec. Then there is the Gangster King holding out his hand to say "hello son". Shangri-La looks back to a bygone era with its references to Frankie Lane and Johnnie Ray. A couple of years later Kevin would record Jonnie Ray's hit Cry. After Heartburn Kevin and the band toured England. Some of the gigs were recorded for the live album "In Living Black And White". For me this is one of the great live albums from the 70s. Here it is represented by the two opening tracks to the show; both feature Kevin on his own. Case History no2 with its poetry and piano playing, memories of childhood, memories from his social work experiences in Camden. Befriending someone whose body he would later have to go and visit in the morgue. Fat Girl features Kevin's frantic acoustic guitar playing. Both songs walk a tightrope between the absurd and the tragic.

After *In Living Black And White* Kevin went back to solo performing. Although his partnership with Zoot Money was to continue both on record and on stage, where they often worked as a duo. Late 1977 saw the release of *Beautiful Extremes*. This was a collection of songs recorded between 1974 and 1977 that never appeared on any of his records. I feel the record contains some little gems. The tracks feature either Kevin accompanying himself on guitar or piano or Kevin singing to Bob Wards guitar accompaniment. Kevin and Bob Ward were to work together a lot over the next few years. The three songs selected here are *Roses In Your Room*, a nice love song sung to Bob Wards guitar accompaniment. I feel the song is also a search for spirituality, with its reference to harps in the chorus. In the background there is a second Coyne voice talking. It fades in and out, as such it is not always easy to make out what the voice is saying, this becomes very effective. *Mona Where's My Trousers?* Is the story of a boy pleading with his father not to give him a beating after he loses his new duffel coat. Kevin accompanies himself on piano and uses both a speaking voice and a singing voice going simultaneously, to tell the story, which he does by playing the part of the boy. Through all the black humour this is a frightening song. There is also the surreal *Rainbow Curve*. Following this is *Rivers Of Blood* from a Peel session Kevin recorded in early 1978. *Rivers Of Blood* portrays England as it was at the time with the National Front making their intimidating presence felt. Kevin uses the Wandsworth Road where he then lived as a location for part of the song. The Wandsworth Road runs from Vauxhall to Battersea, it borders on to Clapham.

In 1978 came the album *Dynamite Daze*. Recorded at the Alvic studio in Wimbledon, this had a different sound from the two previous albums. The title track is a homage to the punk and new wave music of the time, something Kevin had himself helped to inspire. *Brothers Of Mine* echoes a sense of persecution one could feel through being an outsider. The scary *I Really Live Round Here* speaks of urban fear and paranoia. This is followed by a powerful performance of John Clare's poem *I Am*. A poem that John Clare wrote in a Northamptonshire asylum. Kevin accompanies himself on piano, and half speaks, half sings the words with a lot of soul. This was my first introduction to the work of John Clare. It made me want to hear more of the poets work. *Dynamite Daze* is very varied in its styles. After the rockers like the title track and *Brothers Of Mine*, there is *I Am* and *I Only Want To See You Smile*, the latter a beautiful love song. Kevin singing to a piano accompaniment. The simplicity of this song is most effective, and deeply felt. *Juliet and Mark* shows two ex lovers fighting their way out of the darkness, struggling to find their spirits again. In the chorus Kevin sings "Funny how the gramophone never seems to play when you're down". Side two ends with a song called *Older Woman* from a record called *The Virgin Songbook*, which I have never heard. Around this time Kevin had started experimenting with early drum machines. Some of the results can be heard on a song called *Having A Party* from his 1979 album *Millionaires And Teddy bears*, which starts off side three. The album title comes from *Having A Party*, a song inspired by a music business party that Kevin went to. It is a pointed attack on the exploitation there. The song would often feature in his set over the years. It is also a theme that

Kevin would expand on with the publication of his book of short stories *Show Business* in 1993. *I'm Just A Man* is a sensitive love song, *Pretty Park* is a rocker with a lovely quiet middle where he sings about Doreen and Michael being friends until the end. Always sitting on the same old bench. *Marigold* is about the militant type of feminists who want women to take over the world. One of the musical delights on this record is the keyboard playing of Paul Wickens. One track where they are most effective is on *The World Is Full Of Fools*. A beautiful song. Kevin sings about a big bookcase hiding the window, being covered in pamphlets that he throws into the sea, and the struggle to go out and enjoy himself on a sunny day. But us fools aren't bad people. *Millionaires* came out in January 1979. Around the same time Kevin did a concert at a venue called *Rockplast* in Cologne. From this concert comes the *Burning Head Suite*. Over a distorted transistor radio broadcast Kevin sings through a transparent mask. The effect is most creepy. Having seen this on you tube *Zoot Money* also wears a transparent mask as he plays his keyboards.

Later in 79 Kevin released the album *Babble*. It was also the stage show, and both in the show and on the record Kevin collaborates with German singer *Dagmar Krause*. Featured here is the stark opening track *Are You Deceiving Me?* Kevin singing to a piano accompaniment. In *I Confess*, Kevin confesses to the Priest, only to have the Priest laugh at him. *Happy Homes In The Moonlight* looks at the disturbance beyond the neatly cut suburban lawns. *Mother In Law* is having fun, while the *Son In Law* is toying with a gun. There is also a version of *Lonely Man* from 1975. Kevin singing a song that *Dagmar* sings on the record. We now move to March 1980 and *Bursting Bubbles*. This was a collaboration with guitarist *Brian Godding*. The record has no bass on it, as such it has a raw feel. *Children's Crusade* starts off with Kevin's guitar, on the second verse drums come in, with the third verse a saxophone starts wailing. Over all this Kevin gives a powerful passionate vocal. *Learn To Swim, Learn To Drown* has Kevin singing over *Brian Godding's* guitar and a drum machine. The song links together the turbulence in the mind with the turbulence in the outside world, rain storms, barricades burning etc. *Dark Dance Hall* is about seedy dance halls, for me it is also a song about loneliness. *The Old Fashioned Love Song* is like a 50s love song. However when we get to the choruses Kevin's singing is accompanied by screaming. It is a powerful record. The autumn of 1980 saw the release of *Sanity Stomp*. This was a double album, recorded at a time when Kevin's mental health was in poor shape. Disc 1 was recorded with punk band *the Ruts*, disc 2 with *Brian Godding, Robert Wyatt, and Bob Ward*. All the tracks here are from disc two. The sentiments of *A Loving Hand* are as relevant in these days of political uncertainty as they were in the early days of Thatcherism. *Wonderful Wilderness* finds Kevin in a spiritual frame of mind as he recites poetry over a very atmospheric backing. The closing track *You Can't Kill Us* is a statement of intent. Kevin singing over his frantic acoustic guitar. In 1981 Kevin left *Virgin* and signed with the then new independent label *Cherry Red*. He then recorded *Pointing The Finger*, an album that saw him trying to climb out the other side of a nervous breakdown but this is another part of Kevin's long story.

On disc four we travel back to 1974 for two live performances. Both gigs feature a band lead by Gordon Smith. The first was recorded at Golders Green Hippodrome for a BBC in concert. This features various tracks from the then new album Blame It On The Night including the title track and Poor Swine. There is also an early version of the Marjory Razorblade Suite, an expansion of the original song. Also an early version of Fat Girl. Who is the DJ? The other concert comes from Hyde Park. A free concert. Why I never went to this gig I don't know. I wish I had gone. Kevin starts off with an acoustic Mad Boy from Case History, after this the band comes in and they go into Mummy from Marjory Razorblade. There is another song from Case History Need Somebody, also the Marjory Razorblade Suite, and then Poor Swine. The concert ends with a rocking version of John Lee Hookers Boogie Chillun. Both the gigs show what a great live performer Kevin was.

At £34 this record might seem a bit expensive, but it is worth saving up your money for. There are four discs here, This is no more than you would pay for a four CD set by the Beatles or Bob Dylan, and Kevin is just as worthy. This is an excellent introduction to Kevin Coyne. For me it brings back memories of buying Kevin's records and seeing Kevin on stage. The 70s weren't always happy times for me. But listening to Kevin's onstage humour helped me find a little humour inside myself. I also found that I could identify with a lot of what Kevin was singing about. This anthology shows that Kevin very much earned his crown.

Frank Bangay  
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#### Editors Note

For what it's worth I was lucky enough to attend that Hyde Park Concert and it lives long in my memory as a very special day.

A very warm sunny day.

A smaller crowd than the previous Blackhill gigs with the likes of Pink Floyd etc the gig was situated closer to The Serpentine and seemed a nicer event for it?

Paper plates, Gong, Kevin Ayers in fine fettle and an abiding memory of standing fairly much side on to the stage as Kevin Coyne stood right out front, haranguing the audience yet engaging them and bringing them in too; the sun bright through the trees behind him. It all sounds too perfect but its how I remember it.