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## KEVIN AYERS – The Unfairground

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...the long story...

**Kevin Ayers** (born 16 August 1944 in Herne Bay, Kent) is an English songwriter and major influential force in the early English psychedelic movement. Ayers was a founding member of the pioneering psychedelic band, Soft Machine, in the late 1960s, and was closely associated with the Canterbury scene. John Peel wrote in his autobiography that "Kevin Ayers' talent is so acute you could perform major eye surgery with it."

A long-time resident of Spain, he returned to the United Kingdom in the mid 1990s. He now lives in the south of France and is completing work on a new album, *The Unfairground*, recorded in New York City, Tucson, Arizona and London. It is his first release in sixteen years. In the past he worked with Syd Barrett, Brian Eno, Mike Oldfield, John Cale, Andy Summers, Ollie Halsall and many others.

Ayers is the son of BBC maverick producer Rowan Ayers, who created the BBC's Old Grey Whistle Test before moving to ABC. Following his parents' split and his mother's subsequent marriage to a British Civil Servant, Kevin spent most of his childhood in Malaysia. The tropical atmosphere and unpressured lifestyle had an impact, and one of the frustrating and endearing aspects of Ayers' career is that every time he seemed on the point of success, he would take off for some sunny spot where good wine and food were easily found.

Ayers returned to England at the age of twelve to attend boarding school, and in his early college years took up with the burgeoning musicians' scene in the Canterbury area. He was quickly drafted into the Wilde Flowers, a band that featured Robert Wyatt and Hugh Hopper as well as future members of Caravan. Ayers has stated in interviews that the primary reason he was asked to join was that he probably had the longest hair. However, this prompted him to start writing songs and singing.

The Wilde Flowers morphed into Soft Machine with the addition of keyboardist Mike Ratledge and guitarist Daavid Allen. Ayers switched to bass (and later both guitar and bass following Allen's departure from the group), and shared vocals with the drummer Robert Wyatt. The contrast between Ayers' baritone and Wyatt's reedy tenor, plus the freewheeling mix of rock and jazz influences, made for a memorable new sound that caught on quickly in the psychedelic 1960s. The band often shared stages (particularly at the UFO Club) with Syd Barrett's Pink Floyd.

After an exhausting and extensive tour of the United States opening for Jimi Hendrix, a weary Ayers sold his white Fender Jazz bass to Noel Redding and retreated to the beaches of Ibiza in Spain with Daavid Allen to recuperate. Before he went, however, Hendrix gave Ayers his Gibson J200 on the condition that he would continue writing songs. Ayers didn't disappoint, writing his first album, *Joy Of A Toy* while there. The album was one of the first released on the fledgling Harvest label, along with Pink Floyd's releases. *Joy of a Toy* established Ayers as a force to watch, with music that varied from the circus march of the title cut to the pastoral "Girl on a Swing" and the ominous "Oleh Oleh Bandu Bandong", based on a Malaysian folksong. Many of the songs on this album remain in Ayers' live sets. Ayers' old mates from Soft Machine backed him, with the addition on some cuts of Rob Tait, sometime Gong drummer.

A second album, *Shooting at the Moon*, soon followed. For this, Ayers assembled a band that he called The Whole World, which featured a young Mike Oldfield on bass and occasionally lead guitar, and avant-garde composer David Bedford on keyboards. Again Ayers came up with a batch of engaging songs interspersed with avant-garde instrumentals and a heavy dose of whimsy.

One interesting product of the *Shooting at the Moon* sessions was the single, "Singing a Song in the Morning", early recordings of which featured participation from Syd Barrett. The lead guitar that appears on the final mix was often

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thought to have been played by Barrett, even appearing on various Barrett bootlegs, but Ayers has said that he played the solo, emulating Barrett's style. The 2004 CD reissue of *Joy of a Toy* includes a mix of this song featuring Barrett's guitar as a bonus track.

The Whole World was reportedly an erratic band live, and Ayers was not cut out for life on the road touring. The band broke up after a short tour, with no hard feelings, as most of the musicians guested on Ayers' next album, *Whatevershebringswesing*, regarded as one of his best.

On the 1 June 1974, he headlined in a concert that was later released as a live album and became known under the acronym ACNE (so-called after the concert's line-up: Kevin Ayers, John Cale, Nico & Brian Eno). Mike Oldfield, by then having found fame with a string of solo recordings starting with Tubular Bells, played as well.

1974 was a watershed year for Ayers. In addition to releasing his most compelling music in this year, he was also instrumental in providing other artists with access to a wider stage, most notably Lady June (June Campbell Cramer). The recording, titled Lady June's Linguistic Leprosy, made in a front room of Cramer's home in Vale Court, Maida Vale, was a collaboration that brought Lady June's spoken word poetry together with the music and voice of Ayers, and also featured contributions by Brian Eno and Pip Pyle. Originally released on Ayers' own Banana Productions label (Virgin/Caroline C1509), it was reissued on compact disc in 1992. A most memorable track closes the album. Titled Touch-Downer it can best be described as the kind of answering-machine message that June might have left friends to announce her return to London Town after a long visit to Canterbury. The entire recording project and subsequent album release was underwritten by Ayers.

1974's *Confessions of Dr Dream* is the most cohesive example of Ayersian philosophy – that moonlit netherworld between sleeping and wakefulness where tears and laughter unite within a single continuum. The album marked Ayers' move to the more commercially-oriented Island record label – the production was expensive and the quality shows. Mike Oldfield returns from earlier days and the sublime Ollie Halsall makes his debut in a pact of brotherhood that would see him stand at Ayers side for the next 20 years. Tracks like 'Didn't Feel Lonely', 'Everybody's Sometime Blues' and the re-titled 'Why Are We Sleeping' are among Ayers' most magnificent and enduring songs. The release was closely followed by the live *June 1<sup>st</sup> 1974* collaboration with Nico, John Cale and Brian Eno but the record owes its reputation perhaps more to the hype that surrounded the event than to the quality and production of its contents.

In 1976 Ayers released *Yes, We Have No Mananas (So Get Your Mananas Today)* - a lovely album that could almost stand as a set of ten perfect Ayers singles (he was a prolific supplier of the 45 rpm genre). Ayers was back with Harvest for a brief Silver Age – slightly more at ease with the slower EMI air of tradition than the pace, razzamatazz and unreal expectations of Island. Opening track 'Star' defines Ayers' angst – the ceaseless wheel of dilemma that places the artist beneath a spotlight whose heat will eventually consume him.

From the same year came the compilation *Odd Ditties*, released on Harvest's budget Heritage label. Still widely unavailable on CD (a Japanese import exists), this is a delicious salad of Harvest outtakes and B-sides that remains the personal and unerring favourite of many fans. These songs are fallen leaves by the roadside that still glow with the warmth of summer. The irony that such genius resides in songs once rejected is generally enjoyed as an essential part of Ayers' appeal .....

The late 70's and 80's saw Ayers as a self-imposed exile in warmer climes, a fugitive from changing musical fashions and a hostage to turbulent emotional circumstances. 1983's *'Diamond Jack and the Queen of Pain'* was, perhaps, a low-point for Ayers. Indeed, losing control over his own music is still a sore point with Kevin today. The road back was marked with 1988's prophetically titled *'Falling Up'*; a very consistent and professional record with a sympathetic mix that returns Kevin's voice to the forefront. 'Another Rolling Stone' is an exceptional and beautiful song co-written with Marvin Siau, leader of Ayers' current band. 'Am I Really Marcel' bares the soul of Ayers naked.

The 90's had the finest possible start with the release of *Still Life With Guitar*. Well-crafted songs sparkle with a clean, acoustic mix to present Ayers at his most accessible on the surface whilst the lyrics of 'Ghost Train' or 'Feeling This Way' still conceal the Ayers of old. *'Still Life'* is an unmistakably modern record that, had it been



given any semblance of promotion, could have reached a much broader and more mainstream audience. As it is, it remains a gem for the uninitiated to discover.

One further significant and hugely enjoyable release would be *Turn The Lights Down* – 2000 issue of Kevin's gig with the Wizards of Twiddly in Brentford in 1995. In addition to being a showcase of Ayers' 'greatest hits', the set is the only recorded evidence of an (almost) unadulterated live set from an artist whose charisma as a continuing live performer is rarely given the credence it merits. Moreover, the twelve month liaison with Liverpool's Wizards illustrates the respect that a whole generation of younger musicians owe to Kevin Ayers – his music has been a catalyst that bridges time and culture.

This brings us to Kevin's most recent outing, *The Unfairground*. In 2006 Kevin was living the life of a recluse in the South of France. At a local art gallery he met and befriended American artist Tim Shepard. As the two became close, Ayers passed some new recordings onto Shepard, most taped on a cassette recorder at his kitchen table. The songs were by turns poignant, insightful and honest and Shepard deeply moved by what he heard started to wonder how he could let more people hear these songs.

Hooking up with London's Lo-Max Records, Shepard found equal enthusiasm for the demos and as he made some tentative enquiries he discovered a hotbed of enthusiasm for Kevin's work amongst the current generation of musicians. New York's Ladybug Transistor set up rehearsals for a possible recording and Kevin flew out to New York with no little trepidation. When the rehearsals gelled, the entourage which had now swelled to include horn and string players flew out to Tucson, Arizona where the first sessions were recorded in a dusty hanger known as Wavelab Studios.

The results from the first sessions were very encouraging, so Shepard set about completing the album in the UK, where by now word had spread and a host of generous and enthusiastic musicians started gravitating to planet Ayers. Shepard remembered meeting Teenage Fanclub at a Go-Betweens concert and their unbridled enthusiasm for Ayers' music and wrote a letter to singer, guitarist Norman Blake. Within a couple of weeks Ayers was in a Glasgow studio with Teenage Fanclub and a host of their like minded colleagues who had all assembled to work with their hero. Bill Wells from the Bill Wells trio rubbed shoulders with Euros Childs from Gorkys Zygotik Mynci. Frank Reader from the Trash Can Sinatras traded lines with Phil Manzanera.

Ghosts from the past also visited the sessions. Robert Wyatt provided his eerie Wyatttron in the poignant 'Cold Shoulder', Phil Manzanera flailed his axe on the brooding 'Brainstorm', Hugh Hopper from Soft Machine played bass on the title track and Bridget St. John, beloved of John Peel who signed her to his Dandelion records, duetted with Kevin on 'Baby Come Home', the first time they had sung together since 1970.

But the record belongs to the young musicians. The enthusiasm of performers from Gary Olson, to Norman Blake to Euros Childs and Candie Payne gave Ayers the platform to express what are without doubt the most profoundly moving songs he has ever committed to tape. Whether he is staring death in the face on 'Only Heaven Knows' or remembering the exuberance of his old friend Syd Barrett on 'Walk On Water' or simply enjoying the inevitability of it all on 'Run Run Run'. Ayers is speaking to you with an honesty, wit and empathy that few of his peers have ever managed. *The Unfairground* spans the generations, unifies the old and the new, pain and pleasure, hope and regret, life and death. It marries the brutality and beauty of truth.

## Welcome to the Unfairground.