

Kevin Ayers and Valerie Plame

Record fairs are a singular area of focused attention. *Kevin Ayers* 2013 concerns the collector's pursuit of coveted sounds. But most important for the voyeur with a camera is the array of fascinating hand gestures: fingers flipping at a frantic pace through stacks of dusty, cat-clawed albums, or, most beautiful of all, the pivot of the vinyl disk help in suspension between palm and fingertips to catch the light and reveal fatal flaws. At the record shops in Liverpool and Manchester, it is the degree of specificity of the labeling that most intrigues: 'Classic Trance', 'Early Belgian Rave', and the invocation of 'Hacienda Classics', scenes known to me second-hand only via the movies.

Waiting to board at JFK en route to Liverpool I read the *New York Times* obituary for English singer-songwriter Kevin Ayers, in which he's quoted remarking: 'I think the clever people are the ones who do as little as possible', a sort of ideal many have fantasized about, including Chekhov, who, on his deathbed, wondered if he'd have been happier choosing fishing over a life of writing. Later, on the plane ride home to New York, I came upon a short piece in the *Guardian* co-written by the former CIA Operations Officer Valerie Plame and her husband commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the onset of the second Iraq war, and the shameful circumstances surrounding it. I remain shocked by what happened to her, and by what we all collectively 'let happen', as she puts it in the article. The artwork in the gallery that bears her name doesn't directly link to Plame, though it does contain references to other reprehensible behavior: public hangings and an infamous miser Hetty Green, dubbed the 'Witch of Wall Street'.

Kevin Ayers and Valerie Plame are obscure brackets of my adulthood. When *Hangmen of England* was suggested as the title for the Tate Liverpool show it resonated on a few different levels: Valerie Plame 'hung out to dry' to punish her husband for refusing to collude on the supposed weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; and the struggles of my Irish-English grandfather (featured in one of the vitrines, walking down Westminster Road in Morecombe), a talented man who never got much of a break. Later, another reason for adopting the 'Hangmen' title emerged: the LPs I'd brought back from my first trip to Liverpool, and had been listening to as I worked on the show included Bonnie 'Prince' Billy's *memento mori* album *I See A Darkness* and PJ Harvey's elegiac *First World War* songs on *Let England Shake*.

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