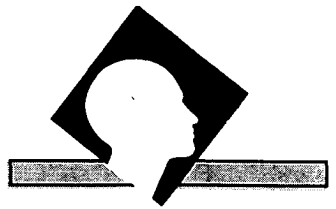


Notes of a Fringe-Watcher



MARTIN GARDNER

█ *Eyeless Vision*

For four decades Ronald Coyne (pronounced "coin"), a Pentecostal preacher who lives in my hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, has been wowing church groups with what magicians call an "eyeless vision" act. But first a little background.

For centuries conjurors have known how difficult it is to blindfold a person so effectively that he or she cannot obtain a peek down the side of the nose. Noses project so far from the cheekbones that an opaque blindfold, covering nose and eyes, invariably leaves two tiny loopholes. This is not the only method of obtaining vision while seemingly securely blindfolded—magic shops sell a variety of blindfold tricks—but it is the simplest, and one still unknown to the public.

Magicians using the nose peek usually add other dodges to strengthen an audience's belief that they cannot possibly see. Powder puffs or silver dollars may be placed over the closed eyes and fastened down with tape. Eyelids may also be taped shut.

Kuda Bux, a magician from India, was famous for his eyeless-vision act. Because he is no longer living, and no performer now uses his method, I will explain here, perhaps for the first time, exactly how he managed to see.

After large globs of soft dough were pushed over Kuda's eyes, a black

blindfold was tied over the dough. Assistants then wrapped his entire head with a long strip of cloth of the sort used to make turbans. The cloth swathed his entire face from chin to forehead, giving him the appearance of a mummy.

After his face was swathed, Kuda would raise his hands to adjust the portion of the cloth that crossed his nose. Beneath his fingers, his thumbs, unseen by the audience, would push up through the dough, along the sides of his nose, to form two tunnels that reached to the inside corners of his eyes. In a few more minutes the dough would harden, leaving permanent passages through which both eyes could peek.

Now back to the Reverend Coyne. In 1950 in Sapula, a town close to Tulsa, young Ron (then seven) accidentally slashed his right eye with baling wire. His parents rushed him to Tulsa's St. John's Hospital where an ophthalmologist tried to save the eye by surgery. This proved impossible. The eye was removed and a plastic eye substituted. Three months later Ron was "saved" in a rousing conversion experience during the altar call at a local Baptist vacation Bible school.

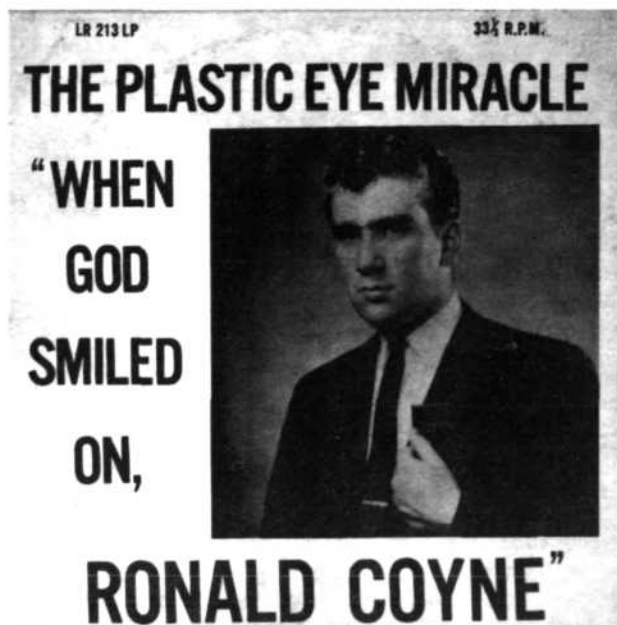
For ten months Ronald was totally blind in his right eye. Daisy Gillock,

wife of an Assembly of God pastor in Odessa, Texas, and sister of the well-known Pentecostal faith-healer T. L. Osborn, came to Sapula to conduct a revival. During the faith-healing part of the service, young Coyne followed others to the platform. Not knowing Ron's right eye was false, Daisy Gillock prayed that sight in the eye be restored. As Coyne tells us in his literature, he at once began to see with the plastic eye—first the altar steps, then the microphone and his fingers.

This miracle, reported by Tulsa's two newspapers, caused a sensation in the area. Coyne claims that his mother, a devout Christian, accepted the miracle at once; but his father, a professed atheist, refused to believe until one day when Ron asked his dad to blindfold his good eye. After seeing and hearing Ron read print with the other eye, the father was so stunned that he was instantly saved.

Soon young Coyne was appearing in nearby Pentecostal churches to demonstrate how well he could see when his good eye was "securely" covered. From that day to this, more than 40 years, Coyne has been presenting his sensational act to believers all over America, and even abroad.

If you send a dollar to Ronald Coyne Revivals, 3702 E. 51st Street, Tulsa, OK 74135 (phone: 918-744-0309), you can obtain Coyne's life story in a 77-page booklet, *When God Smiled on Ronald Coyne*. It was written by his mother in 1952. For four dollars you can buy a long-playing album with



This long-playing album, recorded in the mid-sixties, presents one of Ronald Coyne's entire acts.

the same title. Recorded in the mid-sixties by Loyal Records, a Birmingham, Alabama, company, its two sides present one of Coyne's entire acts, complete with background organ music and shouts of Glory to God, That's Right, Praise the Lord, and Thank You Jesus. You can even hear Coyne belt out the lyrics of "Only Believe."

The front cover of this album shows a photograph of a handsome Ronald clutching a Bible. On the back cover are these stirring words by Walter Bailes, president of the recording company:

Can you imagine the shock it must have given a seven-year-old boy to be told that he must have an eye removed from the socket forever because of an injury to that eye and that it would be replaced by a plastic eye. Can you imagine the hurt that a praying, God-fearing, trusting mother must have felt at the news. Think of how this must have added

even more doubt to an already atheist father. But wait a minute! The story doesn't end here. In fact this is only the beginning. But Ronald tells it so much better himself on this album. I would like to say though that I have personally witnessed this miracle of his seeing through this plastic eye and know that it is a work of the One who created all things.

Now in his fifties and grossly overweight, Coyne is still flimflaming the faithful. In 1989 the tabloid *Weekly World News* (August 15) featured him on its front page. The inside interview, by Ross Johnson, quoted Coyne as follows:

The Lord is a mystery. Men cannot understand Him. I often wonder why He gave this miracle to me instead of all the other people who need to be healed.

In fact, the first thing I'm going to ask when I get to heaven is: "Why me, Lord? Why me?"

It's an abnormal thing that goes against everything that is taught by medical science. If a doctor who's a Christian sees me with the glass eye, he'll say, "It's a miracle of God." If a doctor who isn't a Christian sees me read he'll say, "The man really is reading—just don't give me any of that God stuff."

Nobody can understand it. Some people try to fight it. But everybody agrees that they've never seen anything like it. I'd say 99 percent of them accept it as the divine miracle that it really is.

Louisiana skeptic Henry Murry attended one of Coyne's performances on April 28, 1989, in a tent on Highway 10 near Jackson, Louisiana. His account of the show appeared in the May-June 1989 issue of *La Raison*, a publication of Baton Rouge skeptics. Murry says at 6:45 P.M., before Coyne arrived, he was subjected to "an hour

of electronic noise, accompanied by foot-stomping, hand-clapping, and a wide range of vocal sounds."

Reverend Coyne began his act at eight. Money collections were made before and after the performance while he sat on two chairs because his weight seemed more than 400 pounds. "As he began to preach," Murry writes, "his thunderous voice hinted that he may have learned to whisper in a saw-mill."

Coyne began by recalling sinners who had been saved by Jesus from the eternal flames of hell. His numerous Bible quotes were met with loud amens, hallelujahs, and praise-the-Lords. An elderly woman was called to the platform. After holding her hands and jabbering in the Unknown Tongue, Coyne suddenly yelled "Now!" The poor woman fell backward, "slain by the Lord," into the arms of two women behind her. For five minutes she lay on the floor, arms upraised, lips trembling. A dozen others were similarly "slain."

The show's second half was Coyne's long-practiced act. A borrowed handkerchief was folded and taped over his good eye. "I was seated about twenty feet in front," Murry writes, "and even with my poor eyesight I thought I could see the tape come loose under the eye." With his artificial eye, apparently now made of glass, Coyne read aloud Kipling's "Gunga Din," as well as social security numbers, driver's licenses, and other items handed to him. One woman fell into a trance after he correctly read her driver's license.

Coyne then proceeded to "heal" anyone who came forward with an ailment. A skeptic who had accompanied Murry to the show raised his hands to declare himself an atheist who did not believe Coyne was actually seeing with his glass eye. Unflappable, Coyne calmly said, "The

TIME WARP IN THE DEVIL'S TRIANGLE!

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WEEKLY WORLD

NEWS

August 15, 1989

70¢

**Kiddie tycoon, 7,
yanks 5 teeth to get
\$\$ from tooth fairy!**



It's a miracle and a mystery, say doctors

BLIND MAN READS WITH A GLASS EYE!



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**AIDS is
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the world's
vampires!**



**Dead granny found
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frozen peas, corn
and TV dinners!**

HOW TO LOOK 10 YEARS YOUNGER IN JUST 10 DAYS!

Front page of *Weekly World News*, August 15, 1989.

Lord will destroy you, probably on your way home this evening." I should add that Coyne likes to pop out his artificial eye and continue reading with the empty socket.

To make sure Coyne was still performing, I wrote to ask. "Yes," Coyne replied in a handwritten note, "we are still working and traveling for Jesus. I will look to hear from you." Signed "In Him, Ronald Coyne."

When I accuse Coyne of using a nose peek, I am unworried about libel action. Truth is not libelous. Coyne

would have to prove in court that he can see through his eyeless socket after an expert covers his good eye so thoroughly that no nose peek is possible. This, of course, Coyne cannot do.

One of the saddest aspects of Protestant fundamentalism is that so many evangelists who are nothing more than greedy con artists are able to take millions from the generous contributions of gullible believers. Steve Martin's marvelous film *Leap of Faith* (1993) is about just such a

hustler.

The film is based mainly on the shattered career of faith-healer Peter Popoff. Popoff pretended to have supernatural powers, given to him by the Holy Spirit, to know details about the lives and ills of persons called up to be healed. In reality, as discovered and exposed by James Randi, the Reverend Popoff was receiving this information through a hidden earpiece. His wife and assistants would go through the audience, prior to the show, and converse with spectators. Later, from a trailer outside the auditorium or tent, Elizabeth Popoff, seated in front of a television screen showing the platform, would relay this information to her husband.

Combine the hypocrisies of Popoff and Coyne with the tears and swaggers of Jimmy Swaggart, and you have Steve Martin's phony evangelist. Not until a crippled boy is genuinely made to walk is the healer stricken with remorse—remorse intensified by the desertion of his girlfriend, subtly acted by Debra Winger.

One of his clever "miracles" is secretly painting open eyes on the closed eyelids of a giant wooden Jesus, nailed to a cross behind the tent's platform. This was an invention of the script writers, but such a miracle is not far from those perpetrated by actual faith-healers. Marjoe Gortner, who began his Pentecostal career as a child evangelist at the age of four,

made an appalling documentary in 1972 in which he freely confessed his many deceptions. One was to paint a cross on his forehead with a chemical that turned red from perspiration while he preached! "You don't get booked back unless you have a gimmick," Marjoe told *Newsweek* (July 31, 1972). He estimated that he had earned \$3 million for his parents, who were part of the scam.

Coyne's gimmick is the nose peek. Now that he is nearing the end of his long and shabby career, and few congregations today accept him as genuine, he would do well to imitate Marjoe. A documentary explaining his method of seeing, and telling how he has hornswoggled good believers for four decades, ought to bring in much needed loot. My guess is he lacks the guts to make such a film, even though it would be a fine way to atone for his sins.

Coyne's act is an exception among eyeless-vision performers. Most of them are self-styled psychics who pretend they can read print with their fingers or toes, or see through their foreheads. In China in 1980 a group of "psychic" children read printed material after it was shoved into their ears or put under their armpits. For details on the history of eyeless vision by psychic charlatans, see my paper "Dermo-Optical Perception" (*Science*, February 11, 1966). It is reprinted with additions in *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus* (Prometheus Books, 1981). □