

- CLOSE UP -

# KEVIN CUMMINS

*As one of the world's most admired music and portrait photographers, Kevin Cummins has spent more than 40 years staring into the eye of celebrity. Keith Wilson hears why he felt embarrassed by Bowie, inspired by Don McCullin and overcome by the light in LA...*

**T**he first thing Kevin Cummins mentions on his website biography is being born within 'crying distance' of Maine Road, the former home of Manchester City Football Club. Although best known for his seminal images of Punk, New Wave and Britpop bands, it's Kevin's devotion to Man City that rises above the crash and noise of the stage when he recalls his musical legacy...

**So, which interest came first: music, photography or Manchester City?**  
They're all interlinked in a way. My mum was very keen on listening to music and my grandmother (my mother's mother) was a nightclub singer. My mum used to play me West End musical albums, so I was brought up on Carousel and West Side Story. My dad and my mum's father were keen amateur photographers – we

had a darkroom in a cupboard under the stairs. When I was five my dad bought me a camera and a roll of film for my birthday, and we went on holiday to London; when we got home he showed me how to process and print the film.

**And Man City?**


My mum's parents lived near Maine Road, so at weekends I'd visit them and then go to the match. Sometimes my granddad would take me; sometimes I'd go on my own! I was going to away games when I was eight or nine on my own. It was a very different world in the 1960s – you wouldn't dream of letting your child out of your sight today; my daughter is 28 and she still comes to the match with me. So that's how it all started.

**I take it your daughter is a Manchester City supporter as well?**

Yes, she is. That's how it's all interlinked ►





 **PAUL WELLER**  
This shot exemplifies the  
gritty, 'real' style Cummins prefers





in a way. I hadn't thought of it that way until you asked that question.

**You studied photography at Salford. What was the course?**

It was a one-year foundation course and then a three-year degree, a mixed photography and graphic design course.

**When you graduated, what sort of photography interested you?**

I really liked portraiture and I really wanted to do that kind of thing, but I didn't like people – I realised then that the two were quite interlinked. I studied August Sander, Diane Arbus and Bill Brandt. Arbus died in my first year and I thought that was incredibly romantic. The more I learnt about Diane Arbus, the more

interested I became in her and her methods of working.

But I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I flirted with taking photos of gigs, but when you're on a grant even paying 60p for a gig was expensive. So I'd take the college camera case and just walk in, and no-one said anything – they thought you were from the *Manchester Evening News*, or something. I did that a couple of times, and then thought: "I'll put the camera in it next time and take some pictures".

**What camera were you using back in those days?**

The college Pentax Spotmatic 500. I think most colleges had them. The lens quality wasn't great shooting wide open, which I liked to do, and

**(TOP LEFT) SHAUN RYDER**  
The Happy Mondays and Black Grape frontman at the barber's

**(ABOVE LEFT) RICHEY EDWARDS AND NICKY WIRE, 1991**  
Richey Edwards and Nicky Wire of the Manic Street Preachers

**(ABOVE) DAVID BOWIE, 1970s**  
Ziggy-era Bowie 'doing this mime thing'. Cummins was unable to get the shot he wanted at an earlier concert in Manchester

in concert conditions the light wasn't great, so that's when I learned to push film to the maximum. At a gig I'd probably shoot at 1/60 sec or 1/125 sec at about f/2, sometimes 1/30 sec at f/4.

**Do you remember the first gig you actually photographed? And did you get the shots you wanted?**

Yeah, it was David Bowie at Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Although I had a ticket, it was for the back row, so I took the camera and forced my way to the front and took some pictures. He was turning in a circle, doing this mime thing, and I felt I was in the wrong spot for the shot, but I couldn't move or I would have lost my place. So I went to Leeds a couple of weeks later to see him



again because I really wanted to get that shot, and it was that shot [above] that made me realise that maybe I could do this for a living.

#### Did you sell it?

I actually sold it to the Victoria and Albert Museum – they bought it from me a few years later for their permanent collection. I gave Bowie a copy later in my career, when I met him to work with him.

#### Have you always got on with the acts you've photographed?

In the main, yeah – I don't tend to work with people I don't like. I always say an easy way to get on with the people you're working with is to get them to talk about their favourite subject, which is normally ►

## PROFILE Kevin Cummins

*Kevin Cummins' images have been published in the national press and in leading music – and football – magazines. He was a founding contributor to the influential style magazine The Face*

■ For 10 years Kevin Cummins was the chief photographer for *New Musical Express* (NME), the world's best-selling rock weekly.

■ His photographs have also been published in *The*

*Times*, *Esquire*, *The Face*, *Mojo*, *FourFourTwo*, *The Guardian* and *Vogue*.

■ In 2003, Kevin's book *We're Not Really Here*, documenting Manchester City's last season at Maine

Road, sold out in three months.

■ Kevin's work is exhibited internationally, and also held in the permanent collections of the V&A and National Portrait Gallery.





## IAN CURTIS

*In May 1980, Ian Curtis, lead singer of post-punk band Joy Division committed suicide. Kevin's portrait of Curtis has since developed iconic status*

**What were you intending with the portrait of Ian Curtis?**

■ I thought a straight portrait of Ian would make a better cover than a band shot. I got him to look straight into my eyes and then I brought the camera up so that he was still looking at me. The rest of the band stood near me trying to make him laugh. I told him to zone out and ignore them because we wanted Joy Division to look like serious young men. I felt it had the elements of classic portraiture.

**Why does it work as a classic portrait?**

■ I think the strength of a good portrait is to break the barrier of the camera down. It was taken in the street, with him standing against a lamppost on a very snowy day.

**How important are these pictures?**

■ People's perceptions of artists are formed by those pictures. I did a talk where we were discussing media manipulation, and I said I wouldn't want to release pictures of Ian smiling because it didn't fit what we were trying to say about them. At the end of the talk, this girl came up to me and said: "Have you got any pictures of my dad smiling?" It was Natalie Curtis, his daughter, who I hadn't seen since she was a baby. She has no memory of her father, but she knows him through my pictures. That's quite a responsibility.



(ABOVE) BLUR, 1991  
The Britpop band  
recreating the cover  
image from Blondie's  
Parallel Lines album

themselves! Then be prepared to listen for hours.

**Do you find that rock stars are mostly narcissistic?**

I don't think you get on stage and perform unless you've got an ego, however much it can be downplayed. But that's what I like, that's why I like working with actors and musicians. I like their world and I like the supreme confidence that they have. They are generally good-looking people, so it makes my job a little bit easier.

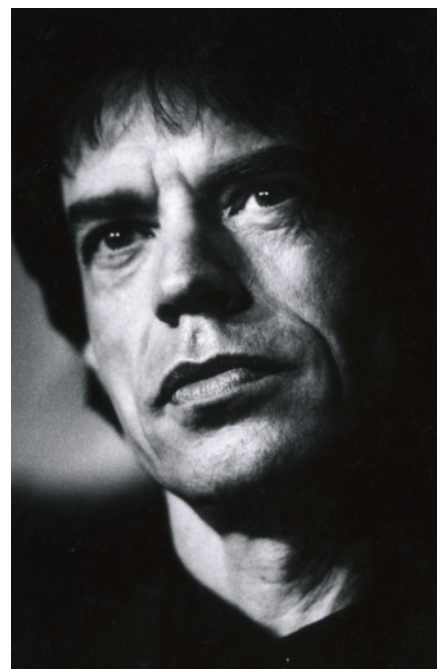
**Do you prefer shooting live gigs, portraits or album sleeves?**

I prefer portraits. Live gigs are an entry point and it's always interesting to shoot a show because the stage is their place of work, but I'd rather spend time with someone and get a portrait. I'd rather get a gritty, real shot of somebody. I was always interested in good reportage. The stuff that I grew up on was the stuff that was in *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* magazines in the late 60s and early 70s, when these magazines valued photography.

“ I'd rather spend time with someone and get a portrait; I'd rather get a gritty, real shot of somebody ”

Kevin Cummins *Music and portrait photographer*





### Who were the photographers from that era that inspired you?

I love Don McCullin, to be honest. You can't not, can you? Also, a lot of the American Magnum photographers. I have always liked photographers like Weegee and Brassai, people like that, who were shooting under very, very low light conditions. I like people who can shoot in the dark. I think it's quite a skill. It's something I've had to do for most of my career.

### How do you cope in bright light?

The first time I went to LA to do a job for the *NME*, I couldn't believe how bright it was. I'd never seen light like it – you know, I'd grown up in Manchester! They wanted to do the shots at midday, and I said to

**(TOP LEFT) SUEDE**  
Lead singer Brett Anderson and guitarist Bernard Butler

**(TOP RIGHT) THE STONE ROSES, MANCHESTER, 1999**  
Cummins' legendary 'paint splatter' *NME* cover shot

**(ABOVE LEFT) THE SEX PISTOLS, HUDDERSFIELD, 1977**  
The band's last UK gig with Sid Vicious

**MICK JAGGER, LONDON, 1989**  
Jagger was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989

them: "You're going to have to wait until seven in the evening, because I can't use this light!" It took me a long time to work out how to use light like that, because when we were shooting in Manchester, when I was shooting stuff at college, I was shooting through fog almost. It was like having a piece of gauze over the lens all the time.

### Which is your desert island lens?

I have two. Can I have two?

### Yeah, go on!

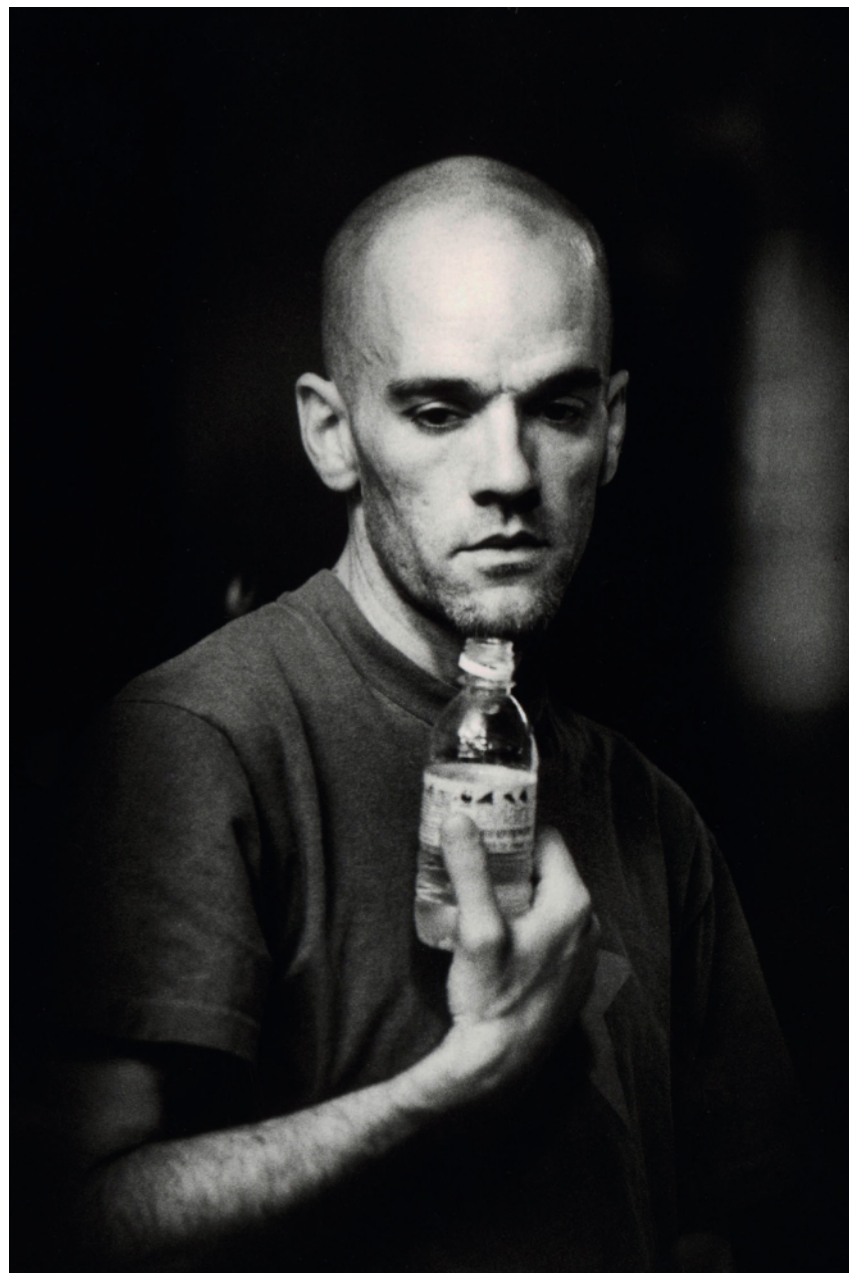
The lens I used to always, always use was a Nikon 20mm f/3.5. I used that for portraits, because I could sit as close to subjects as I am to you and I could just move them a bit and still shoot; I could actually hold them

a bit and still shoot. I like working that close. Then I bought a 35mm f/2 lens. The last massive project I did when I was still shooting film was the year I spent with Man City for the last season at Maine Road (2002-03). I shot all of that on film, all on Nikon, and the lens I used the most was the 35mm f/2. I love it. It's a great lens, pin-sharp from corner to corner. I'm not massively into hardware, but I absolutely love my Nikon F3 and that lens.

### Which was your first Nikon?

The first Nikon I bought was a Nikon FM. I could have bought the FE, but I preferred the manual one. If I'm shooting live, I'll shoot at about 3200 ASA, and if I'm shooting in the street in England I'll shoot at about ►





1600 ASA. My printer hates me. He says my negs are a challenge, and I say to him, 'You look at Bill Brandt's archive – mine aren't a challenge!'

**What else do you have in your Nikon kit bag?**

I've got two F3s; I rarely use the F4 because I like the weight of the F3. What I love about the F3 is that when I'm shooting gigs and someone gets in my way, a nudge with the motordrive gets them out of the way! They're like weapons, they're

solid. Lenses: I've got a 200mm, 70-200mm, 16mm, 30mm, 35mm, 50mm macro, and an old 85mm and 105mm. And I've got a 2x converter, and a 500mm mirror lens.

**Vinyl records are making a comeback. Is there an album sleeve you wished you'd shot?**

I wish I'd shot Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, or the cover of his *Aladdin Sane* album. I got to work with Bowie later, but I'd have been terrified of him back then.

**“ I wish I'd shot David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, or the cover of his *Aladdin Sane* album ”**

**Kevin Cummins** *Music and portrait photographer*

(ABOVE LEFT)  
**COURTNEY LOVE,**  
**ZURICH, 1995**  
The Hole frontwoman,  
photographed the year  
after the death of husband  
Kurt Cobain

(ABOVE RIGHT)  
**MICHAEL STIPE,**  
**LOS ANGELES, 1994**  
The REM singer,  
photographed in Burbank

**Why do you say that?**

I'd grown up with pictures of him on my wall. The first time I shot Bowie was during his *Tin Machine* period, when they were rehearsing for a tour. I normally shoot two or three rolls of film in a shoot, but for Bowie I thought I'll do a lot because there's a lot of pictures I want, but every roll I shot I thought: "This is worse than the last one". I felt hamstrung because he was someone I'd idolised as a kid and I couldn't get that out of my mind, and I couldn't ask him to do the things I wanted him to do. I shot about ten rolls, and thought I may as well not get them processed.

**What did you do?**

I said to him: "Can I watch you rehearse for a bit?" He said: "Sure".





He sat on the edge of the drum riser to have a cigarette, and I thought that would make a great shot. I took a couple of pictures, and he heard the camera, looked over and raised an eyebrow, and I took another shot. I just said: "Thanks", because I knew I'd got the cover shot then. The next few times I worked with him everything was great, because I'd got over my initial embarrassment.

**Which artists understand the value of good photography?**  
Morrissey does, massively.

**Speaking of Morrissey, did you find The Smiths or did The Smiths find you?**

I'd seen them live and I hadn't taken any pictures – I don't take my

camera to every gig I go to. Then I was commissioned quite early on by the *NME* to photograph them for a feature and it was supposed to be a cover, which you can tell from the solo shots of Morrissey because there's lots of space in the top left-hand corner for the logo. At the last minute the editor decided the band weren't going to be big enough to go on the cover of the *NME*, and he put Big Country on instead – a decision he's regretted ever since.

**Do you have a favourite photo from your time with the *NME*?**

I've got lots of favourite pictures but I couldn't pick just one that summed up my work, because you're shooting for different reasons a lot of the time and under different conditions. ▶



**(TOP) JOY DIVISION, MANCHESTER, 1979**  
The band in T J Davidson's rehearsal rooms in Little Peter Street

**(ABOVE LEFT) BERNARD SUMNER, MANCHESTER, 1979**  
Sumner formed New Order with Joy Division band mates Peter Hook and Stephen Morris after Ian Curtis's death in 1980

**(ABOVE RIGHT) KATIE WEST (RIGHT) AND JULIE HESMONDHALGH, 2014**  
Publicity shot for Simon Stephen's play *Blindsided*

## 36 FRAMES OF... DIGITAL

*Although Kevin has been shooting digitally for more than 10 years, there are aspects of working with film that he misses – and old habits he can't break...*

**Do you still prefer film to digital?**

■ Well, in an ideal world I'd shoot film. I think with digital there is a temptation to repeat, but if you shoot on film there is a finite number of pictures. Also, if you're shooting people, with film they can't say: "Can I have a look at that?" I hate showing people a picture on the screen on the back of the camera, particularly when it's someone who is quite vain! When I shoot on digital I shoot it as if I've got 36 frames in the camera. The reason is that for a long time the film counters on my F3 cameras were broken, so I'd count to 36 in my head so I'd know when I got to end of a roll. Even now, when I shoot on digital I still count to 36, and I'm thinking 'I don't need to do this!'

**Are you a photographer who keeps everything, or do you delete as you go?**

■ I keep it all! I couldn't delete a picture, because that would be like putting a frame of film out and throwing it away. Why would you do that?





True, but there are some that an audience seem to gravitate to... Oddly, because I've shot a lot in black and white, my colour one of The Stone Roses where they are covered in paint is a favourite, because it was an idea I'd had for a while. I thought it would be an act that would bring them all together, so I'm really proud of that. I think it's a defining image of the band. If another photographer had taken that I'd be really despondent because I'd think: "What on earth can you do with this band now?" That picture is

**JOY DIVISION, MANCHESTER, 1979**  
Kevin's icon portrait of the band, shot on a bridge over the Princess Parkway

like a full stop. To photograph them, where do you go from there? I kind of like that.

**You're also very well known for your Joy Division pictures.**

Joy Division on the bridge in the snow is a great photograph. It defines the band, and it defines the band's sound. At the time I felt our responsibility was to show the reader that by looking at this picture you will know whether you like this band or not. That picture was bleak, it had a lot of space in it, and that was their music to me.

**I've read that some fans form their attachment to a band when they have seen a photo, before they've even heard them. Is that true?**

Yeah, it is interesting. I did a talk at UEA (the University of East Anglia) for a Latin American arts weekend and a guy from Chile came up to me

– he's now a professor at Birkbeck – and said: "You defined my life. How does it feel to have taken two of the most important photographs of the 20th century?" Then he said: "I saw that Joy Division picture and I wanted to know more about them, and the only way I could do that was to get hold of somebody in England to send me the record. I knew from that picture that this was the band I was going to like."

**What was the other picture that guy mentioned?**

I think it was the Ian Curtis shot, where he is in his overcoat and staring straight into the camera.

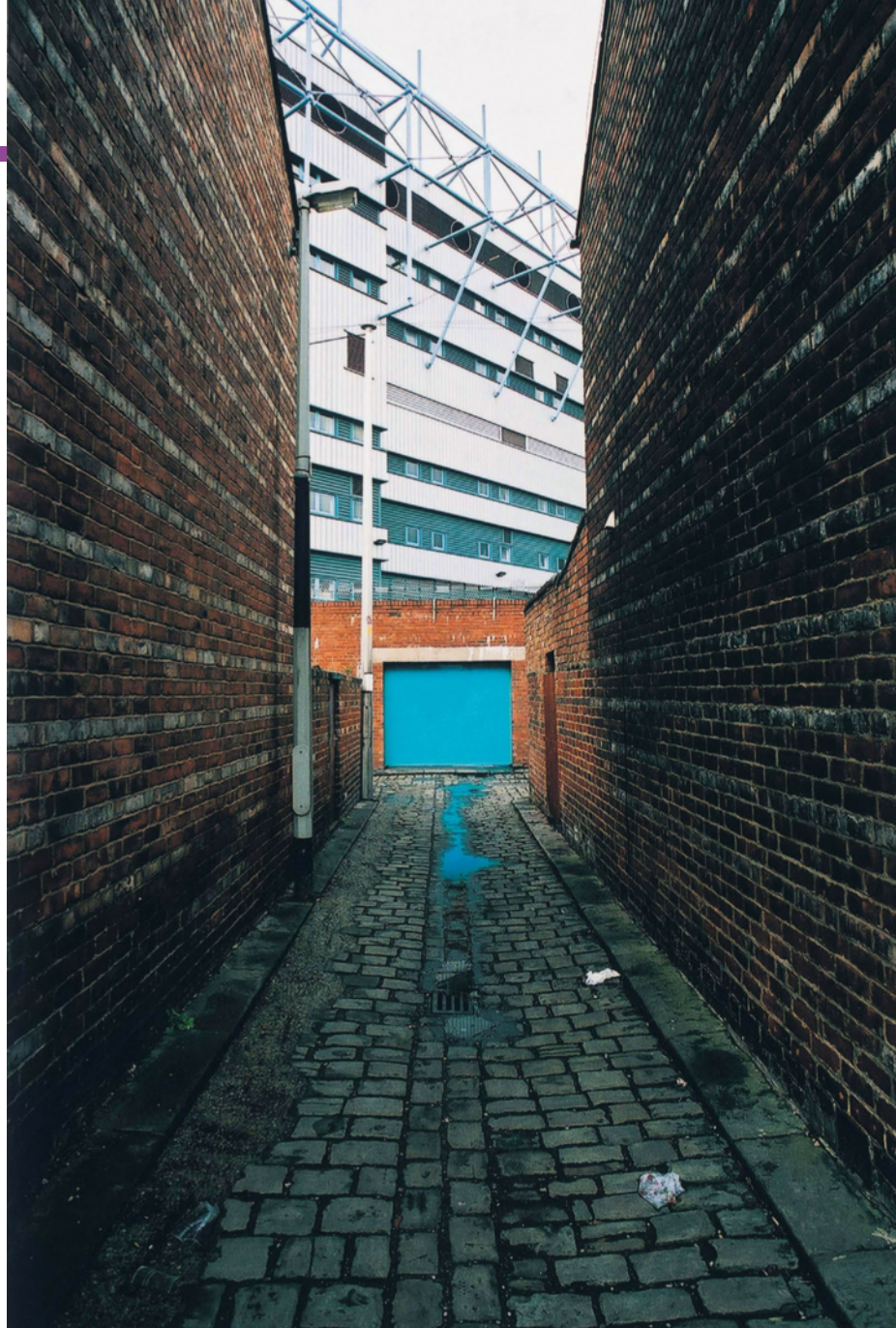
**I know the one you mean. It's so simple but there is something about his look...**

Well, he's looking at me. He's not looking at the lens. That's what I liked about a lot of Diane Arbus's

**“ I think the best thing to remember if you want to work with famous people is never assume they're that interested in you, and don't try to be their best friend ”**

**Kevin Cummins** *Music and portrait photographer*





photographs. I've always loved Jane Bown's pictures too, there's a lovely softness to them.

### From where else do you derive your inspiration?

Great portrait photographers, I think. I'm not a big fan of rock 'n' roll photography to be honest. But when I was growing up I liked Pennie Smith's pictures, because I liked the reportage style of them. I remember going to see Bryan Ferry at the Royal Albert Hall on his first solo tour in 1974, and I wandered down to the front for the encore with my camera, hoping no-one would notice me. I saw this woman wearing this long black coat and I knew it was her. I introduced myself and said: "I want to be you one day".

### How did she respond to that?

She just laughed! I get on quite well with Pennie. We share similar

**(TOP LEFT) DAVID BOWIE, 1995**  
"He was someone I'd idolised as a kid and I couldn't get that out of my mind, and I couldn't ask him to do the things I wanted him to do."

**(BELOW LEFT) MAINE ROAD**  
The iconic blue of Manchester City tells you where these seats are

**(RIGHT) CITY BLUE**  
*We're Not Really*  
Here also showed how Man City fans' passion spills over into their everyday lives – quite literally in this case

ideals about things. She's a great portrait photographer.

### What has been your greatest moment as a photographer?

Doing the book for Man City, because it could have been a disaster. Football clubs are very closed shops, and a lot of people said: "Do you really want to do it, because you might hate them after three months of working with them?" It took the players about a month to accept me, and I knew I had been accepted the day I was on the training pitch standing next to Kevin Keegan, and the players were making wall passes against my legs while I was trying to take pictures!

**And the most embarrassing?** On one occasion I had the camera set up for a band shoot, and had been waiting for two hours for the sunlight to fall across a wall in just

the right place. When I got to frame 37, 38, 39, I realised I'd forgotten to put film in the camera! I had to make a big play of pretending to wind film back into my camera and say: "Can we just do another roll fairly quickly?" I got away with it!

### What's the best piece of advice you can give to someone starting out as a music photographer?

Apart from don't do it?! I think the best thing to remember if you want to work with famous people is never assume they're that interested in you, and don't try to be their best friend. Always keep a distance; never take sides. So long as you make the process very easy and don't impose yourself too much on people, you'll probably get called again. ☑

• You can see Kevin's portfolio at [www.kevincummins.co.uk](http://www.kevincummins.co.uk)