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Article updated: 8/7/2013 12:10 PM

'70s and '80s hitmakers 'sail' into Aurora

By **Jamie Sotonoff**

In the late 1990s, John Ford Coley had an impostor.

The man did concerts in the New York area, playing England Dan & John Ford Coley's hits from the 1970s and posed as him in radio and TV interviews. After Coley's lawyers got involved, the man ended up spending a year in jail.

"He didn't have both oars in the water, so to speak," Coley said. "But that's what made me get back on the road."

After the fake Coley stopped playing, the real one started touring again in 1997 and hasn't stopped since.

"They now require two forms of identification and a credit card when I play," joked Coley, 64, who often tells funny stories onstage about his nearly 50 years in the music business.

The real John Ford Coley will be at the new RiverEdge Park in Aurora Saturday, Aug. 10, as part of "Sail Rock" -- a concert featuring 1970s and early 1980s stars Coley, Christopher Cross, Orleans, Gary Wright, Firefall, Robbie Dupree and Player.

Coley will perform solo, as his famous partner, "England" Dan Seals, died of lymphoma in 2009.

There was tension between the two following their split in the 1980s, and they never performed together again. But Coley said they mended fences before Seals' death. Coley even spoke to Seals on the phone the day before he died.

"The way that we talked to one another, I felt everything was complete and nothing was left unsaid," Coley said. " (At the end) everything was kinda like it was back when we were working together. You're going to have hard feelings, but at a certain point, I said, 'This is ridiculous.' Dan and I are good friends, and we've worked together, grown up together and traveled the world together. We decided this is nonsense to hold on to this, and just let it go."

The Grammy-nominated duo did have a long history together, including a string of hits in the 1970s that included "I'd Really Love to See You Tonight," "Love is the Answer," "Never Have to Say Goodbye Again" and "Nights are Forever Without You."

Coley will open "Sail Rock" with those four songs.

"I just play the hits, and then I go into the backroom and eat," Coley said. "There are all of these wonderful songs being played onstage (during 'Sail Rock'), and you go, 'Oh, I remember that one! I remember that one!' There are a lot of great memories."

Coley has known -- and played with -- most of the "Sail Rock" artists for decades.

"We're a bunch of nice guys," he said. "No one believes it's 1976 anymore. We just love the music."

England Dan & John Ford Coley were in bands together since they were Texas teenagers, scoring their first hit, the "Smell of Incense," in 1969. In the mid-70s, they reluctantly recorded "I'd Really Love to See You Tonight," after their manager talked them into it.

"We didn't want to do it. We thought it was more of a feminine song," Coley said.

The Arista Records' executives didn't like the song either, but the guys from a smaller label, Big Tree, did. It's a story Coley recounts in his book, "Backstage Pass."

"When we got the first royalty check, we went back to the songwriter (Parker McGee) and said, 'What else have you got?'" Coley said. "We were just blessed. It kinda took off from there."

The song went on to become a No. 1 hit, and was rerecorded by everyone from Barry Manilow to Reba McEntire.

England Dan & John Ford Coley were on the rocket ride of success, with a string of light rock hits and world tours.

"It was a lot of work," Coley remembers. "Now, everybody wants to be a star. We never set out to be stars. We were just trying to work and provide for our families and enjoy doing what we were doing. I'm just a young Texas boy. I hadn't been out of Texas all that much. And then we started traveling all over the world with everyone -- Chicago, Fleetwood Mac, Elton John."

A classically trained pianist -- who was raised on opera and show tunes -- Coley now lives in Nashville where he helps other artists produce records and continues playing his classic hits on tours around the U.S. and Asia. Like many '70s artists, England Dan & John Ford Coley remain especially popular in the Philippines and Japan.

After "Sail Rock," he'll return to the suburbs Oct. 11 for a solo show at the Arcada Theatre in St. Charles.

And he's an author, too. Coley also just finished his second book about his spiritual journey back to Christianity.

"I don't talk about politics or religion onstage," he said. "People don't come to hear that. They want to hear the music."

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