

THE KINKS

INTRODUCTION BY COLIN SHEARMAN



Virgin
MoDERN iCoNS

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书章



Virgin
MoDERN iCoNS

'I was a nobody, then I was successful. It was

Ray Davies on fa

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ISBN 1-85227-678-9



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Acknowledgements

With very grateful thanks to Philip Dodd, Morse Modaberi,
Helen Johnson and to Michael Heatley,
Northdown Publishing and the staff of the National Sound
Archive for their help in the research of this book.

Colin Shearman has been a regular contributor to *The Guardian*
arts page since the 1980s, as well as working for *Time Out* as a
TV writer. He has been writing for *Q* magazine since its very first
issue, and specialises in rock music from the 1960s.

First published in 1997 by
Virgin Publishing Ltd
332 Ladbroke Grove
London W10 5AH.

Modern Icons series conceived and developed
for and with Virgin Publishing Ltd by Flame Tree Publishing,
a part of The Foundry Creative Media Company Limited,
The Long House, Antrobus Road, Chiswick, London W4 5HY.

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ISBN 1 85227 678 9

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.



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INTRODUCTION

Britain was a strange place in 1964. Cultural barriers had been falling as the 'angry young men' movement swept through literature and the theatre, and disaffected young musicians were also starting to express their anger and frustration at how things were. If you'd asked any of them exactly what they were rebelling against, they'd probably have mimicked Marlon Brando's famous line from *The Wild One* — "What you got?" — but there was definitely a new anti-authoritarian attitude making its presence felt in the early R&B-based work of The Kinks, The Rolling Stones and The Who.

The Kinks's 'You Really Got Me', released in August 1964, just as Merseybeat was losing its chirpy charm, was one of the first records to really pick up on this aggression and refusal to kow-tow to authority. It may have taken The Who to articulate the idea fully a year



later in songs like 'My Generation', but it was certainly flexing its muscles in the raw, heavy guitar riffs of the Kinks's first hit and the follow up 'All Day And All Of The Night'.

Many accounts of the group's early days often slot them in as a Sixties art school band because of songwriter/lead-singer Ray Davies's student background, but his younger brother, Dave, who actually formed the group was more responsible, both musically and visually, for their early success.

His wild image and stage act, wearing outrageous clothes and playing frenzied guitar solos on his knees, made The Kinks one of the first pop groups with attitude. Lead guitarist Dave also invented the heavily distorted guitar sound which charged their early records with so much energy. Via their influence on The Who, he established power chord riffs as part of rock's basic language, paving the way for heavy metal and, eventually, punk.

In fact, the legendary resentment and on-and-off stage fighting between the two brothers is at least partly down to the fact that, as with Oasis, an elder song-writing sibling joined up at a later stage and eventually took over his younger brother's group. As late as 1989, Ray was nursing a crunched knuckle where he'd hit a wall rather than his younger brother's head in a studio argument. And like Oasis, The Kinks's long-running success is also partly due to the competitive, creative tension between the brothers.

Given the group's early image, Ray Davies was always quite happy in many of their initial hits to come across as some kind of

passive sexual object, in songs like 'You Really Got Me', 'Set Me Free' and 'Tired Of Waiting For You'. So it was no surprise that once he'd established himself, he got down to the serious business of being the bloke sitting in the corner who just watches the world go by: Terry and Julie walking over Waterloo bridge in 'Waterloo Sunset' or the 'Dedicated Follower Of Fashion' pulling up his frilly nylon panties in Carnaby Street. The first signs of this change came with the December 1965 EP 'Kwyet Kinks' in which, on tracks like 'A Well Respected Man' and 'Such A Shame', he began to adopt a more lyrical, very English style of writing which embraced satire, social comment and nostalgia, frequently in a melancholy way.

He also developed a knack for telling little stories about slightly odd or engaging characters that set new standards in pop writing. 'Dandy', for instance, satirises an ageing philanderer, 'Situation Vacant' introduces a domineering mother-in-law while 'David Watts' – later covered by The Jam and apparently stealing the name of a real-life concert promoter who tried to seduce Dave Davies while on tour – is a wonderful study of adolescent hero-worship. Sixties rivals like Paul McCartney and Pete Townshend often told stories in their songs too but, with odd exceptions such as 'Eleanor Rigby', their characters were frequently just ciphers to move the three-minute plot along. They rarely managed to bring them to life as Davies did.

Ray and Dave were brought up in the 1950s in Muswell Hill, North London, in the run-down part of an otherwise fairly middle-class area. Growing up amid such social inequalities may well account for



how obsessed Ray was in his songs with the English class system. In 1966, while others were falling for the myth of swinging London as a classless society where cockney pop stars and photographers could rub shoulders with minor aristocracy, Davies was describing the death of the post-war dream in two highly successful singles viewed from either side of the class barrier: the dispossessed and nearly

bankrupt aristocrat dreaming of tax exile in 'Sunny Afternoon', followed a few months later by the demoralised working-class family trying to make ends meet on 'Dead End Street'.

Despite being dismissed by many people, including DJ Tony Blackburn, as much too dreary a subject for pop music, 'Dead End Street' nonetheless became a Top Five hit. Its theme of ordinary people struggling in the modern world cropped up time and again in Davies's work over the next few years: especially in his concept albums 'Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)' and 'Muswell Hillbillies'. This kind of detailed social observation, reflecting the preoccupations of working-class novelists like Allan Sillitoe and David

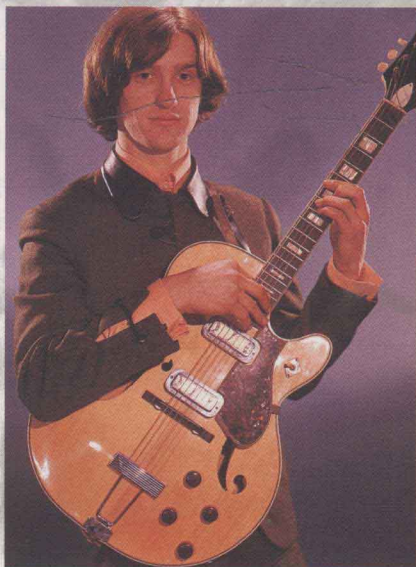
Storey but quite new in British pop music, helped break down the barriers between high and low art so common at the time. Davies's concern for the failed aspirations of ordinary people also made The Kinks one of the few Sixties groups acceptable to punk and new wave bands in the Seventies, influencing in particular The Jam's many songs about urban angst. What is 'A Town Called Malice' if not 'Dead End Street' re-written from a more strident, political viewpoint?

Also breaking new ground for the time in its intended mix of beat music and serious drama was 'Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)'. Originally planned as a TV play for Granada Television with a script by respected writer Julian

Mitchell, the play was eventually axed for financial reasons and the 'soundtrack' album appeared on its own. The loosely connected songs look back over the life of an ageing World War I veteran, Arthur Morgan, on the day his son and daughter-in-law emigrate to Australia. Tracks such as 'Shangri-La', 'Yes Sir, No Sir' and the title track are bitter complaints about the way ordinary people who'd made heroic sacrifices in both world

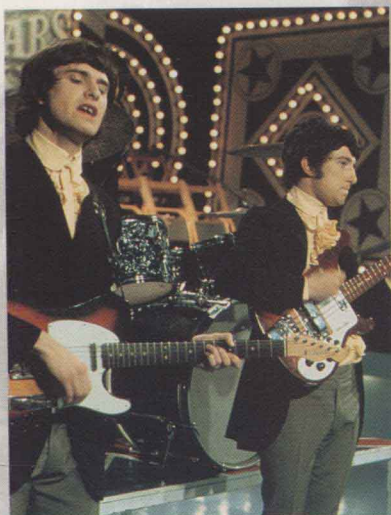


wars had been pushed around or sold down the river ever since. 'Muswell Hillbillies', recorded two years later and inspired by the compulsory re-housing of the Davies brothers' elderly grandmother in an anonymous council flat, describes the way traditional working-class communities – and the values they represented – were being mindlessly destroyed by Sixties redevelopment.



Davies's retreat into nostalgia on these two concept albums and their predecessor, '(The Kinks Are) The Village Green Preservation Society' (1968) is often put down to his own sense of rootlessness and dismay at modern life. Admittedly, he's always had a tendency to nostalgia, as in the much-covered B side 'Where Have All The Good Times Gone?', but there's more to it than that.

At the height of the Kinks's fame in the Sixties, there was a strong feeling – based on the encroachment of American popular culture and a public debate about whether or not Britain should join the Common Market – that England and the English identity were



being swallowed up. It was an affection for all things British and a way of life that was disappearing which led Davies, by his own account, to present English traditions in his work and write about specifically English subject matter, even deliberately trying to sing in an English voice (from the cheeky-chappie music hall tradition of 'Autumn Almanac' to the upper-class accent in 'Sunny Afternoon') rather than the

transatlantic drawl offered by most pop stars of the time.

In this respect, an interesting comparison can be made with those other great satirists of the sixties, *Private Eye* magazine. Both *Private Eye*'s sneers at anything modern and Davies's respect for the old ways of life were equally fuelled by the gradual disappearance of the England they loved. It all comes down to the old cliché, 'If You Didn't Laugh, You'd Have To Cry'. Where the mainly public school, Oxbridge-educated *Private Eye* crowd chose to laugh, often cruelly, Davies, the secondary modern boy from Muswell Hill, chose to cry.

That's not to deny the wit and humour in his songs but even his most comic material still has a sense of loneliness behind it. And it's