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Interview: Ray Davies

On singing in the choir, his American experience, and who'll play Dave
By ELIZABETH GEHRMAN | November 6, 2009



In 1964, the scorching five-chord chorus of "You Really Got Me" changed rock music forever. Written by Kinks front man Ray Davies but transformed by the then-shocking carnality of his brother Dave's distorted guitar sound, "You Really Got Me" has been called both the first punk song ever recorded and the track that invented heavy metal.

The Kinks played together for three tumultuous decades, a period that included not only the requisite sex and drugs of the rock and roll lifestyle, but also legendary battles, both offstage and on: one intra-band fight knocked Dave Davies unconscious during a concert, while the band's dispute with the American Federation of Musicians led to a four-year ban from the United States.

Throughout it all, and in his 13-year solo career since the band split up, Ray Davies — whom many consider the godfather of Britpop — has written some of the most enduring tunes and memorable character portraits in rock and roll. His new album, *The Kinks Choral Collection*, grew out of a performance Davies did with the 65-member Crouch End Festival Chorus for the BBC's 2007 Electric Proms, a London music festival that seeks to create "new moments" in music. He's performing at the Berklee Theatre on November 17.

It's a bit strange interviewing someone who has written several songs about not liking reporters.

I don't know if I ever really disliked reporters. There were some run-ins in early days. I came into this when I was a kid, and I didn't understand why they had to ask about your private life.

I'll try to avoid that. Will there be a choir at the Berklee show?

No. Logistically, we couldn't work it out. But I've just done a European tour — Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium — with the five-piece band I'm bringing to Boston, and I think it's the best band I've worked with in a long time.

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What prompted this new direction?

I'd written a choral piece 10 years ago, a commissioned work called "The Flatlands" — a 50-minute piece with a symphony orchestra. I performed it three times, and left it at that. Then for the Proms, I thought of a choir, and thought it would be nice to incorporate some of those people on Kinks songs. It was an amazing success. One thing led to another, and now we have this album.

Is there a religiosity you're exploring? Your last album, *Working Man's Cafe*, was a bit heavier than previous work, with "Hymn for a New age" and "Imaginary Man" seeming to reflect on your life.

I recorded *Working Man's Cafe* in Nashville. I wanted to use a choir on "Hymn for a New Age" and went with my producer every Sunday to hear different choirs in churches. I thought of it, but to do it on just one song would have been out of context with the record. I rediscovered something within myself, because the world is challenged now about religion. Western cultures are losing it. In "Hymn," the first line is "I don't believe that God is a man with white hair, sitting in a big chair." It says I won't become a born-again preacher. I believe if you've got a message, use Western Union. I'm proud of it, in many ways. It touches on sparks of religion, but says you should go find it within yourself.

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with a black and metallic-plastic arm gauntlet. I swing with my left fist, and am again knocked away effortlessly. I can see my reflection in his sunglasses, framed in white.

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And "Imaginary Man"?

I believe in individuality. "Imaginary Man" is the downside of individuality, about what can happen when one has tried so hard to be an individual, but now finds he has lost something.

Do you ever wish you could be like everybody else?

I try desperately to, but always fail at the last moment. I'm a bit like the guy in [One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest], who breaks a window to jump out but, at the last minute, he can't do it. I can go into the room to join everybody else. I'm invited — "Come in, be one of us!" — I get to the door, knock on the door, and run away.

How did you decide what to include on the new album? "See My Friends" is not an obvious choice, but it sounds great.

I didn't want to re-record Kinks hits. I think old Kinks hits stand for what they are, so I wanted, where possible, to reinterpret them. "Waterloo Sunset" is almost a no-brainer arrangement, the original vocals are so claret-clear. For "See My Friends," I wanted to capture the spirit of where I wrote the song, in India, and revisit the feeling I had then. We tried it with a few instruments and it didn't work, and in the end decided to do it *a cappella*. It was a brave thing to do — there's no back-beat. But it works really well. On the other hand, on "Shangri-la," from [the album] *Arthur*, I didn't want the choir to be just backing vocalists. I wanted to integrate them into the song itself, so that they provide another voice. Shangri-la is suburbia, and the people in the chorus come from there. I feel like the people I wrote it for are singing it.

When "Shangri-La" came out, you got some flak for the lyrics, and I remember reading once that you said, looking back on it, you thought you were a brat when you wrote it [in 1969].

The interesting thing is the juxtaposition — now I'm singing it as a man later in life. Maybe the song was anticipating what I would become. It gives it a new slant, in a performing sense — a new point of view, new insight. I'm no longer just looking out observing people with dull little lives.

When you played here in September 2001, you opened the show with "Better Things," which was pretty much the only song you could possibly have started with on that tour. It was the first time I had smiled in two weeks. Did you see the transformative effect you had on audiences?

It was very hard to think of any song to sing at that time. Everything in the world seemed to have a new connotation and new meaning. I made my home-video diary on that trip. We had to travel by road, because flying was difficult. To see the changing face of America, the devastating effect it had on the spirit of people. We stopped at a little diner in Texas, and people just were not talking, trying not to watch the TV, in shock. I have some works in progress on that, but I wouldn't put them out, because I don't like to capitalize on things like that. If the content of the songs is good, they'll come out eventually, in a year or so.

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I read a quote once that you thought your American fans were different from the British ones, because you were banned in the US for a time.

It's odd, but we became more popular because of our unpopularity. It's difficult to explain. Village Green came out during the ban and a few hardcore fans got together and formed like a cult or society, and the "God Save the Kinks" movement started. I don't think that could have happened anywhere else but in America. I have no explanation.

Does the England you wrote about exist anymore?

Nope. I was born into a dying empire. I meet as many people of my parents' generation as I can while they're still around. So many soldiers felt betrayed after the Second World War. Many came to the so-called colonies. I wrote a whole album on it, *Arthur*.

How is your brother doing? I hear he's touring next year, for the first time since his stroke in 2004.

It's incredible, wonderful news. I think he's just testing the waters to see how he can cope on tour. I would love to play with him again. Two of my — well, I have other reasons to live, but one of them is to make his life as difficult as possible, and the other is to make music with him, because out of that difficulty sometimes comes this incredible creative spark of energy and performance.

Were you a bit at sea after the Kinks broke up?

We never broke up. I'm still waiting for the phone call. That time was tempered by my book *X-Ray* and then the "Storytellers" tour [which told the story of the Davies family and the early days of the Kinks], so it was almost like they were onstage with me, anyway. Afterward, I realized how difficult it was to get a touring band together, but now I've got probably the best band I've had since those days.

You did a musical based on the album *Come Dancing* in London last year. Any plans to bring it to the US, or are you working on another one?

Yeah, I'm working on *The Kinks Musical*. I'll be touring with it in the UK at the start of the new year, with the same cast. If I can cast it properly, I would like to bring *Come Dancing* over here. There's a lot of new music in it that I'm really proud of. It takes place at the end of the Big Band era, when my sisters were growing up in postwar England.

How can you possibly find someone to play Dave?

I don't know. I'll scour the lunatic asylum. I think Joe Pesci's not doing much at the moment.

Elizabeth Gehrman is a Boston-based freelancer. She can be reached at ategehrman@mac.com.

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