



Still full of surprises

Rock survivor Ray Davies releasing first solo studio album

By CHRIS KOCHER
Press & Sun-Bulletin

A lot of rock stars don't age very well. They make a bright flash early in their careers, when they're young and brash – but then burn out, fade away or meet untimely ends. Worse yet, they end up on a *Behind the Music* episode, dishing out disturbing tales to bask in that last two minutes of fame.

Not so with Ray Davies, one of rock 'n' roll's most tenacious survivors. It's been almost 42 years since he and brother Dave buzz-sawed into the British rock scene with The Kinks' *You Really Got Me*, a touchstone for both punk and heavy metal that followed.

Since then, Davies has persevered through vicious band fights, bad record deals and having his music fall in and out of fashion. In 2004, he was shot by a mugger in New Orleans and required extensive leg surgeries.

While Ray Davies the man always has been hard to figure out – often called eccentric, prickly or even cruel, and that's just by his brother – his music is some of the best in the rock canon. *All Day and All of the Night*, *Waterloo Sunset*, *Days*, *Lola* – these are just the few you might hear on the radio (if you're lucky), but there are dozens more that are just as worthy.

Now, at 61, Davies' first solo studio album (to be released Tuesday on V2 Records) shows that he still has some surprises up his sleeve.

Other People's Lives may be the most appropriate album title this year – the best of Davies' work has always shown a laser-sharp insight into the human experience by adopting other personas. And yet – much as the man himself might deny it – the album also may be the keenest look into Davies' own soul.

A highlight is *The Tourist*, which faults those who see every port of call from inside a rose-colored bubble, when the reality is much different:

"I'm just another tourist checking out the slums / With my plastic Visa, drinking with my chums / I dance and swing while ABBA sing / And I flash my Platinum / To the sound of *Livin' La Vida Loca*."

The obvious inspiration for the song is New Orleans, but don't think Davies is writing about being shot – the song was recorded at least a year before then, which makes it eerily prescient.

The album's title track is another standout, with its Latin-flavored

ON TOUR

Next month, Ray Davies begins his first U.S. tour since October 2001. Within driving distance of Binghamton:

- March 20: 9:30 Club, Washington, D.C.
- March 21: Tower Theatre, Upper Darby, Pa.
- March 24- 26: Irving Plaza, New York City.
- March 28: Orpheum Theatre, Boston.

ON THE INTERNET

- **Ray Davies Web site:**
www.raydavies.info
- **Unofficial Kinks Web site:**
kinks.it.rit.edu

arrangement and stinging indictment of Britain's tabloid media. A female club singer coos backup vocals in Spanish, making this almost a tango.

As you might expect, some songs have a definite Kinks-like vibe. *Next Door Neighbour*, a tour through the crises of a middle-class street, has the bouncy tempo and brass section of the classic album *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* or The Kinks' early 1970s repertoire. *Run Away From Time* or the pick-me-up sentiment of *Is There Life After Breakfast?* could have been 1980s offerings.

For some of the album, however, Davies sheds his straightforward songwriting style for something more akin to poetry, with bold images and broad strokes that leave much of the interpretation to the listener. The hard-rocking opener *Things Are Gonna Change (The Morning After)* is a firm pledge for a better life after an all-night bender. *After the Fall* weaves biblical imagery with one common man's fall from grace.

Over My Head, which should have been the album's closer, is a dreamy ode to removing yourself from the rat race, to rest so you can fight another day. (The previously released *Thanksgiving Day* is tacked onto the end – a fine tune, but out of place here.)

A history of The Kinks would take up an entire book (and has, most notably Davies' "unauthorized autobiography," *X-Ray*). The full story of *Other People's Lives*, with roots that stretch back to last millennium, could take almost as long.

Here's the thumbnail version: In 1999, Davies was touring with his successful "Storyteller" tour – a stage show that combined The Kinks' greatest hits with readings from Davies' memoir – when he began to make plans for his first true solo album. He signed with Capitol Records, but he frustrated executives when he kept his new songs close to the vest (a Davies trait stretching back to the 1960s).

In August 2000, in a hastily arranged three-night stand at New York's tiny Jane Street Theatre, Davies showcased a brace of those new tunes (five of them eventually ending up on *Other People's Lives*). Reports of the album became like Elvis sightings: It would come out in 2001; its cheeky title would be *Why Suddenly Now?*; Davies would tour with a full band for the first time since The Kinks, possibly made up of musicians from indie-rock favorites Yo La Tengo. But by 2002, he parted ways with Capitol without the label releasing anything.

In 2002 and 2003, Davies finally ended the "Storyteller" format, assembled a full band (neither The Kinks nor Yo La Tengo, but worthy musicians nonetheless) and toured all over Great Britain. Somehow, though, the tours never stretched across the Atlantic – as if Davies was saving America for an album release that never materialized.

That's not to say he wasn't visiting the U.S. Davies, who usually splits his time between London and New York, had found solace in New Orleans' mix of music, culture and humanity.

On New Year's Day 2004, Buckingham Palace announced that Davies would be named a Commander of the British Empire (an honor just below knighthood). But three days later, he was shot as he ran after a mugger who had stolen his girlfriend's purse.

The shock of it seems to have shaken Davies from his creative ennui: He signed with Virgin-owned V2 and finally mixed the album for release.

If a criticism can be made of *Other People's Lives*, it's this: For a guy who used to produce a Kinks album every couple of years, an eight-year gestation period seems too long. Maybe it's time for Davies to make peace with his brother, so "Dave the Rave" can give him a friendly kick up the backside now and again.