

### **Muswell Hillbillies (1971)**

Nearly every band or artist of renown has had a “return to roots” record, the first batch being near the end of the 1960’s. Bob Dylan marked his return to the fray after his 1966 motorcycle accident with *John Wesley Harding* in December 1967. The Rolling Stones’ *Beggars Banquet* in 1968 was a throwback to acoustic blues and folk (the influences of their own influences) after dabbling in acid-soaked psychedelia. The Beatles worked fervently on the *Get Back* project throughout January 1969, vowing no overdubs and rehashing old rock and roll standards as well as Lennon/McCartney tunes from a much simpler time. With *Muswell Hillbillies*, Ray Davies tapped into his past and influences as well, though the era he evokes is anything but a simpler time.

*Muswell Hillbillies* takes the wistful nostalgia of *The Village Green Preservation Society* and twists it on its head. The simpler way of life depicted on *Village Green* has been transplanted into the modern world, where it is rapidly fading away. While by no means a concept album, like *Village Green* it functions as a thematic piece, focusing on the life of the working class. Besides Ray’s own life, other characters from his family (and a family friend or two) provide inspiration, or at least get a name check. The modern world ominously looms over their heads; the change may be inevitable, but each tale on the album shows a different reaction to it. Various characters get militantly angry, delve into escapism, or simply go mad. It is important to note that no matter what, even in the album’s closing track, where the titular characters are being relocated to “identical little boxes”, there isn’t a hint of complacency or resignation; they instead pledge defiance by refusing to change.

The opening track on the album, “20th Century Man,” amplifies this theme by a hundredfold. The song begins with the gentle strumming of an acoustic guitar, though it almost immediately picks up and has an aggressive rhythm. The guitar pauses, as if to breathe, only to be joined by the insistent drumming of Mick Avory, playing with the metronomic pace of an assembly line. Ray sings that the “age of machinery” is little more than “a mechanical nightmare.” He sarcastically sums up the “wonderful world of technology” by naming off three horrifying developments of the modern world: napalm, the hydrogen bomb, and biological weaponry.<sup>1</sup>

Modern times have taken a toll on the singer, as “too much aggravation” in this “age of insanity” has him yearning not for the village green or the “land of hope and Gloria”, but instead “the green pleasant fields of Jerusalem.” The music stops as Ray declares himself a Twentieth Century man, only to add, “...but I don’t wanna be here.” As the music resumes, Dave’s slide guitar ushers in the next verse. Ray references a generational gap with his complaint that his mother – from the generation before him – “can’t see [his] motivation.” He asks for security, but receives none.

Interestingly, it isn’t just modern technology that has Ray on edge: in the next verse he tells the audience to keep their “smart, modern” writers and painters, he’ll stick with the certified classics of William Shakespeare, Rembrandt van Rijn, Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), Leonardo da Vinci, and Thomas Gainsborough. Each of these artists worked in different time periods (save for some possible overlap with da Vinci and Titian), but their

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<sup>1</sup> While napalm was developed for use by the Allied forces in World War Two, it gained most of its notoriety as an instrument of war in Vietnam. The hydrogen bomb was developed in 1951 in the early years of the Cold War. Biological warfare dates back to ancient times, though once again the notion of a mass killing agent could only exist in the era of large scale industrial production.

work has existed long enough to be considered masterpieces. The fear of modern warfare and the impending overthrow of his beloved art and literature prompts Ray to turn to his girl and declare that he needs to find both a way out and a “solution,” whatever it may be. He once again declares himself a Twentieth Century man, though now not only does he not want to “be” here, he doesn’t want to “die” here. Repeating the first refrain, John Gosling’s organ fades in on the right channel, providing atmosphere for Dave’s guitar solo (which sounds as if it is being run through a Leslie cabinet).

The bridge features just Ray and two guitars (one acoustic, one electric), creating a vibe that would not have been out of place on a Byrds record. He sings that he was “born in a Welfare State,” something perhaps lost on American listeners. The Welfare State was established in 1942 as an effort to combat the “Five Giant Evils” that were plaguing British society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness, and disease. What resulted was a massive nationalization of education and healthcare,<sup>2</sup> while also establishing welfare programs for the impoverished and unemployed.

Another area taken over by the Welfare State was housing, which is a central theme of *Muswell Hillbillies*. Though some parts of the Welfare State would end up being privatized under Margaret Thatcher, it was still in effect at the time of “20th Century Man.” Another line in the bridge creates an Orwellian picture: “Got no privacy / Got no liberty / ’Cause the Twentieth Century people / Took it all away from me...” Is this 1971 or 1984? Regardless, with the bridge it is made apparent what the true source of the singer’s angst and disillusionment is: the government. Musically, the inflection of Ray’s vocals in the bridge along with the two-part harmony (which, as would become the

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<sup>2</sup> The National Health Service found itself the subject of a song on 1979’s *Low Budget* album.

trend on a surprising amount of Kinks songs, is Ray singing with himself and not Dave,) suggest a largely unexplored sound for The Kinks: country music.

As the rest of the band joins in, John Gosling dominates, with his organ leading the interplay between himself, Dave, and Mick. Oddly, John Dalton's bass is barely audible throughout the song up to this point. With the next verse, the band is in full swing, especially Mick, as they stop and start to augment Ray's dramatic plea to not be "shot down / By some trigger-happy policeman..." On that same line, Ray's voice is treated with repeat echo and reverb, making it sound less like he is singing into a microphone and more like he is singing through a megaphone. Ray states in the CD liner notes for *Muswell Hillbillies* that for the song's narrator he envisioned "the last man on the block, who doesn't want his house torn down," adding he "wired the whole house, including [himself], with explosives...It was one of those do or die situations."<sup>3</sup>

This, coupled with the added notion from the bridge of a police state and this last verse of homicidal cops has turned what started off as placid folk-rock into a heavy-handed declaration of independence. The band backs Ray up like ardent supporters of his cause as he repeats an earlier verse: that his mother can't understand him or see his motivation, and that he doesn't "want to die here." Ray isn't singing with a gentle folk-blues style anymore, his strained yell turns into a full-on bellow with the refrain. Both of these elements provide an all-new context for a line that connoted little more than a generational gap the first time around. Now, his mother can't understand his militant approach, and his plea to not die is with the presence of a brutal police force acting on the orders of an intrusive government.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Doggett's liner notes for *Muswell Hillbillies*, 1998 CD reissue.

During this instrumental passage, the rest of the band sonically portrays utter chaos. This musical version of a street riot is once again led by a now manic Gosling and Mick playing on his ride cymbal bell (evocative of an alarm or old-time fire engine), constantly adding perfectly-timed fills on his toms, while Dave and John Dalton provide a steady backbone. With the chant of “Don’t wanna, Twentieth Century man...” the band calms down, leading right into the final verse. Ray repeats that the Twentieth Century is laden with “too much aggravation!” and once more that this is an “age of insanity”, though like the previous verse he is shouting his lungs out. Again, this line in a different context carries with it an all-new image, with the disgruntled singer-turned-revolutionary shouting above the din of police. The six-minute song ends in a bit of an anticlimactic manner as the music goes back to its original calm during the fade-out.

Tom Kitts refers to “20th Century Man” as being “a manifesto and an overture...without irony or ambiguity, [the song] states succinctly Davies’ world view.”<sup>4</sup> As a proper musical overture, the lyrics predict two future songs (“Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues” and “Here Come The People In Grey”) when he calls himself “a paranoid, schizoid product of the Twentieth Century” and remarks on the “people dressed in grey” controlling the working class. As a political manifesto, its references to totalitarian paranoia were so brashly twisted and misinterpreted by John J. Miller of the conservative publication *National Review* that this song somehow made number ten on his list of “The 50 Greatest Conservative Rock Songs.”<sup>5</sup> It should also be noted that the top three songs were “Won’t Get Fooled Again” by The Who, “Taxman” by The Beatles,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Kitts, *Ray Davies: Not Like Everybody Else* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 160-161.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Miller, “Rockin’ The Right,” *National Review Online*, May 26, 2006, <http://www.nationalreview.com> (accessed September 25, 2008).

and “Sympathy For The Devil” by The Rolling Stones. The list-topper warns against the dangers of revolutions and the herd mentality associated with it, while The Beatles complain about paying taxes. The messages in these songs are as bipartisan declarations of fact as saying terrorism is bad. On the other hand, “Sympathy For The Devil” and “20th Century Man” are about as conservative as flag-burning.

The idea of madness, expressed to a violent degree in “20th Century Man,” is revisited in the second song on the album, “Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues.” The narrator’s dilemma is strictly internalized, with a surprisingly humorous presentation of the singer’s own personal Hell. Too frightened to set foot outside, the narrator blames his reasoning on political demonstrators, worried that “they’re gonna start the Third World War.” It could very well be the scene depicted in “20th Century Man” that has rendered this character so timid and nervous. However, a scientific diagnosis from his “local head shrinker” classifies it as acute schizophrenia.

As the narrator accuses the milkman of being a spy, the grocer as his own personal stalker, and that “the woman next door’s an undercover for the K.G.B.,” it becomes clear he is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. In the song’s final verse, he suspects “they” (whoever “they” may be) of watching his every move at home and tapping his phone, evoking the lack of privacy mentioned in “20th Century Man.” From a scientific perspective, a genetic cause is established when the singer learns his father suffered the same illness. Another source of strife for the narrator is the government. His privacy is invaded by “the man from the Social Security,” while at the same time “the income tax collector’s got his beady eye on me.” The madness described in the song is attributable to the same source as in the previous track: the government. While this is

hardly the only reason for the struggles depicted in *Muswell Hillbillies*, it certainly remains at the center. The government is responsible for the urbanization programs, which in turn means relocation, pollution, and economic stress for the people.

“Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues” itself sounds like it could have been recorded in the 1940’s. To achieve this, Ray and engineer Mike Bodak used out-of-date microphones to give the vocals and the instruments a vintage sound; the microphones used were at least a decade old. Kitts notes that ten years was “an eternity given the developments of recording technology in the 1960’s.”<sup>6</sup> With “20th Century Man” sounding like a rock song from 1971, it is hard to determine if every song on the album was recorded the same way, though the album’s kick-off could very well be the sole exception. “Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues” marks a new addition to the sound of The Kinks as a band beyond using dated gear, one that would remain with them for the duration of their tenure at RCA Records: a brass section, specifically a British jazz combo called The Mike Cotton Sound. The group consisted of Mike Cotton on trumpet, Alan Holmes on clarinet, and John Beecham on trombone and tuba. While Cotton would leave by the start of 1973’s *Preservation* project, Beecham and Holmes would play in various capacities with The Kinks for a majority of the 1970’s. On this particular song, the brass/wind trio adds a distinct Dixieland flavor. Using a jazz ensemble is the finishing touch in creating a sound several decades old. The whimsical feel of the music perfectly complements the goofiness of the lyrics.

“Holiday” maintains the album’s primarily vintage flavor, opening with a soft acoustic guitar. Ray recalls in the CD liner notes of *Muswell Hillbillies* that he was in a

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<sup>6</sup> Kitts, 160.

bad mood when it was time for him to record his vocal track: “I was sat at the piano with a cigar in my mouth...that probably helped to make the performance more realistic.”<sup>7</sup> Praising the weather, Ray hints that his vacation is not completely voluntary, saying “I’m oh so glad they sent me away.” Adding to this, in the first verse, he ends by expressing a desire for his loved one – “Hoping and dreaming you were here / To share my little holiday.” This is a character who is utterly discontent wherever he goes, complaining about the lack of sun, and yet the audience is not just amused by his misfortune. We feel for him, as he expresses he is better off on a holiday than to be trapped “in that dirty old town.” This rationalization continues in the next verse to an exaggerated degree, assuring himself that he’s “leaving insecurity behind...” He adds that he doesn’t need sleeping pills or sedatives to help him relax. What reads like an assurance of strength on paper, swearing off any sort of depressants, when sung by Ray sounds more like humorous desperation – as if he had left his sleeping pills at home.

However much complaining the singer had about the lack of sun, he has apparently gotten a hefty dose of it by the final verse, his “back burned rare.” Kitts makes a connection between Ray and his lyrical references to finding solace in the sun, specifically when discussing Ray being influenced by the Romantic poets of the 19th Century where he calls it “a central image of healing.”<sup>8</sup> In a technical sense, this could even go back to ancient civilizations engaging in sun worship. As previously stated, Ray’s songwriting on this album is an update – even a perversion – of his Romantic inclinations on *Something Else* and *Village Green*. With this song, he completely inverts the symbolism of “Sunny Afternoon,” “Lazy Old Sun,” and “Autumn Almanac” wherein

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Doggett, *Muswell Hillbillies* liner notes.

<sup>8</sup> Kitts, 88.



this great source of life and happiness has now become a source of misery. The salt from the sea only irritates his sunburn more, and a hint of the ugly urban life Ray is seeking to escape manifests itself in the final couplet: “The sea’s an open sewer, but I really couldn’t care. / I’m breathin’ through my mouth so I don’t have to sniff the air!” The final repeat of the chorus, which is lyrically the same as the introductory chorus, is now laden with irony and sarcasm. His holiday isn’t lovely, and he certainly isn’t glad he got sent away. If one were to sift through *Muswell Hillbillies* with the intention of finding a story implied through the songs, these first three tracks alone form a narrative arc: the main character’s delusional rant against society (“20th Century Man”), his realistic rant against society (“Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues”), and now a prescribed remedy to his angst with “Holiday.”

This argument is effectively ended with “Skin And Bone,” told in the third person about someone who isn’t outwardly insane or depressed. As the song shuffles along, Ray tells the tale of Fat Flabby Annie (it is no coincidence that Ray and Dave’s mother, Ann, was of corpulent build), weighing in at “sixteen stone.”<sup>9</sup> A hint of the sinister creeps through as Ray sings of a “fake dietician” putting her on a diet, suggesting she is now underweight, looking like the “Skin And Bone” of the song’s title. Aside from watching what she eats, Annie now meditates and does yoga, Eastern practices alien to the partisan narrator. This flushing out of tradition is carried out further with her having “thrown away the *Good Food Guide*.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The “stone” is a unit of measurement in the United Kingdom, oddly equivalent not to a metric unit, but to fourteen pounds. In this case, Fat Flabby Annie weighs 224 pounds.

<sup>10</sup> The *Good Food Guide* is an annual publication listing all of the best eateries in the United Kingdom, first published in 1951.

Her changes in diet are listed, culminating with the chorus: “Don’t eat no mashed potatoes / Don’t eat no buttered scones / Stay away from carbohydrates / You’re gonna look like skin and bone.” This warning against carbohydrates came three decades before the Atkins diet became a fad in 2003, and a full year before Dr. Robert Atkins had his book *Dr. Atkins’ Diet Revolution* was published in 1972. Though the author is not one to point out prescience, it is still an interesting coincidence.

Annie’s weight loss has alienated her to some extent from her family. In a jocular manner, Ray sings that her relatives “can’t see her walk by” due to her figure, later saying “Oh what a sin ‘cause she’s oh so thin / That she’s lost all the friends that she had.” He doesn’t mention whether or not her new way of life – practicing Eastern traditions and avoiding some stereotypically unhealthy foods and drinks – has won her any friends. The statement of Annie looking like skin and bone and her family not being able to see her from the side are presented as light-hearted jabs not meant to be taken literally. Her weight loss is presented as just one facet of Annie changing herself all-around and rejecting her parents’ way of life, from the cuisine to spirituality. In the bridge, Ray pitches dieting and exercise to the audience before leading us through some basic calisthenics. This lent itself to audience participation, which along with some minor additions made “Skin And Bone” an audience favorite for a majority of the 1970’s.<sup>11</sup>

Another future live staple follows with the song “Alcohol.” The Mike Cotton Sound dominates on this track, with Beecham’s baritone horn accenting the one and three beats during the verses, making the song lumber and stagger like the “drunken lag” depicted in the song. Cotton’s trumpet and Holmes’ clarinet add a great deal of flair to

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<sup>11</sup> Its live tempo on *Everybody’s In Showbiz* (1972) is a rollicking boogie-woogie, while on the 2001 *BBC Sessions* it is paired up with the spiritual “Dem Bones”

the song, notably Cotton's flourish when Ray mentions tequila and in the instrumental break from 2:43 to 3:00, featuring some great interplay between Holmes, Cotton, and Gosling on accordion. With these being the lead instruments, the song sounds as if it were recorded in the late 1940's instead of 1971. Though he doesn't steal the show, Dave's snarling country guitar deserves mention in setting a grim tone for the song. Mick Avory does a great job not sounding like a British rock drummer from the early 1970's, a stark contrast to his playing on songs like "Rats", "Powerman", or "Top Of The Pops" from the previous year. It takes a great deal of talent for a drummer to be able to play such extremes, but Avory did it excellently. Ray's voice has a unique effect in the song's chorus, sounding like he's singing in a bathroom.

The lyrics are a morality play, telling another third-person tale, this time of a businessman, a deviation from Ray's stories about the everyman. His job, social life, and his spouse have all brought tremendous pressures onto him. A gold-digging floozy gets the businessman to blow all his money away on the drink and on her. She leaves him once he's run out of money, at which point he finds himself "in some Salvation Army mission." In the chorus, Ray takes the voice of the businessman – perhaps the reason for the echo effect – and laments that the "demon alcohol" has given him "memories [he] can't recall," then wonders aloud how he could have become "a slave" to alcohol. While the last song depicted a list of harmful foods avoided by Fat Flabby Annie, "Alcohol" names off a list of drinks – nothing was too good for him, "As long as all his troubles disappeared." He eventually hits a brick wall when his drinking causes him to get violent and beat his wife. All the while, the floozy has repeated her process with "another sucker," getting him to drink to excess and robbing him blind. After returning to the

chorus once again, a piano melody quietly plays, taking up the last twenty seconds of the song, mimicking the despair evoked by the song's lyrics.

In concert, once again as heard on the live disc of *Everybody's In Showbiz* the following year, this pro-temperance anthem would be turned into an over the top production. During the song, Ray would stumble about drunk, balance a beer bottle on his head, spray beer on the audience, and as in the case with the version on *Everybody's In Showbiz* he would drunkenly switch his words around: "He messed up his wife / When he beat up his life..." Kitts asks an oft-wondered question about the reality of Ray's drunken, campy performance, writing that "Davies is arguably rock and roll's master actor."<sup>12</sup> John Dalton pointed out that Ray was a light drinker, adding it was in fact "A few of us [who] liked a drink – and lots of it."<sup>13</sup> Musically, the song's first verse is punctuated with pauses to amplify the mock-seriousness of the message. The driving instrument throughout is Gosling's organ, adding a faux-erie element to the story. During the second chorus, the audience can be heard cheering in reaction to being sprayed with beer. Kitts likens the original song's message on the studio album to a late-1800's melodrama or a silent film, albeit a spoof of it; this spoof heightened in its live performance, which Kitts calls "Dionysian" and a "blend of comedy, parody, satire, absurdity, and showmanship."<sup>14</sup>

A bed of slide guitar and Gosling's organ opens up "Complicated Life." Returning to lyrics in the first person, Ray once again confronts an internal struggle. This time, the narrator's stress is manifesting itself with physical symptoms. His doctor tells

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<sup>12</sup> Kitts, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Neville Marten and Jeff Hudson, *The Kinks* (London: Sanctuary, 2001), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Kitts, 167.

him to “Cut out the struggle and strife / It only complicates your life.” The patient takes it easy with both drinking and women, but takes his doctor’s advice too far, completely giving up on ironing his clothes, cleaning his shoes, getting any form of exercise, reading the paper, and even going to work. As a result, he sings “I sit ‘n twiddle my thumbs ‘cause I got nothin’ to do.” The sing-along quality of the chorus gives it a feel that wouldn’t be out of place in a pub. Ray mentions his affection for what he calls “pub jazz...it reminded me of when families used to get together and have a knees-up.”<sup>15, 16</sup> The whole of the album was influenced by this type of bar sing-along music and Trad jazz, a British treatment of New Orleans-styled jazz; the two easily go hand-in-hand.<sup>16</sup>

The narrator’s avoidance of stress has turned into complete laziness. In the third verse, the consequences of this laziness are spelled out. He has run out of food, holes have appeared in his shoes and socks, and he has lost his job. He is unable to pay his bills, even. The song concludes that life is still complicated for him, proving the cure was worse than the disease. Ray’s vocals suggest a complete detachment and disconnect from the situation, and indeed from his own life. A very similar character – one almost completely removed from the daily concerns of society – would emerge in the Tramp of *Preservation Act One* and *Act Two*. One of Ray’s finest one-liners can be found in this song, a statement too profound for an analysis: “Life is overrated.”

Side two of the record begins with “Here Come The People In Grey,” a less extreme continuation of “20th Century Man.” Both are among the heaviest songs on the album by far, both carry a spirit of angry defiance, and both make mention of the “people dressed in grey” beleaguering the song’s protagonist. This time, the narrator has had his

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<sup>15</sup> British vernacular meaning “party” or “dance.”

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Doggett, *Muswell Hillbillies* liner notes.

day ruined because he has received a letter informing him of compulsory purchase<sup>17</sup> being used to acquire his home. He is clearly attached to his house, noting the floors, walls, and even the drains are going to be torn down. A hint of totalitarian fear is present in the titular line: “Here come the people in grey / To take me away,” along with the protagonist’s relocation to “Lord knows only where”. The move-out sounds hurried, as he’s “got no time to pack and I got nothin’ to wear.”

The solution to the hero’s dilemma comes in the next verse: he and his lady are going to hop a train to the middle of nowhere and pitch a tent, living in true survivalist manner. The merits of this are well-defined: no more rent checks, no more bills, and no more taxes. He even boasts “We’re gonna buy me a gun to keep the policemen away.” In the bridge, Ray pledges “I’m gonna pass me a brand-new resolution / Gonna fight me a one-man revolution” as a way of warding off these governmental oppressors. The third verse introduces a familiar sound that has been all-too absent from this record: Dave’s backing vocals. By this point, the powers that be have deprived the narrator of his “right to voice [his] complaint.” Though it is not the most comforting thought in the world, eminent domain/compulsory purchase is written into the law.<sup>18</sup> Its usage to satisfy greedy and corrupt politicians would become a driving force behind the story of *Preservation* two years later, where the wicked Mr. Flash tears down all the cottages to build higher-yielding luxury flats.<sup>19</sup> The verse goes on to include a line where the narrator expresses worry that he would have to “tell all [his] secrets to / The people in grey.”

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<sup>17</sup> The British equivalent of eminent domain in the United States.

<sup>18</sup> In the United States alone, the Supreme Court has long upheld eminent domain as part of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. In England, this can be traced back to William the Conqueror seizing all property in 1066.

<sup>19</sup> Email to the author, January 4, 2009.

This lament shows once again, as in “20th Century Man,” that these seemingly justifiable complaints are not fueled by practicality, but instead by anti-statist, possibly anarchic, paranoia. His solution is to escape society completely, ready to shoot any officer of the law (“some trigger-happy policeman,” perhaps?) who comes near. The notion of the all-powerful government flexing its muscles is suggested with “20th Century Man,” spelled out in “Here Come The People In Grey,” and revisited one last time in “Muswell Hillbilly,” though the third time around the narrator’s reaction to bullying and relocation is far less violent but much more effective. The song ends with a repeat of the “people in grey” coming. This leaves it open as to whether the narrator is able to escape or if he winds up complying and accepting his compensation for the compulsory purchase.

“Have A Cuppa Tea” is the antithesis of “Alcohol.” The character of Granny is a strong contrast to the floozy, though both push a drink as their solution to one’s problems. Granny is symbolic of an entire generation raised during the temperance movement in the UK (during the First World War) where hours were mandated for bars, beer itself was diluted with water, and a penny tax was added to pints of the drink.<sup>20</sup> The movement pattered out in light of the complete failure of Prohibition in the United States. However, Granny’s connection with the temperance movement is speculative at best; Tom Kitts informed the author that “tea...has always been a panacea for the English,”<sup>21</sup> a quaint escape from life’s troubles and a brew with curative properties. Ray lists off that it can cure depression, insomnia (though the caffeine content of most black teas would suggest to the contrary), hepatitis, tonsillitis, and even arthritis or bursitis (referred to as

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<sup>20</sup> Nick Brownlee, *This Is Addiction: Alcohol* (London: Sanctuary, 2002), 106.

<sup>21</sup> Email to the author, January 4, 2009.

“water on the knee.”) It is unsure, due to Ray’s almost unemotional delivery, whether Granny’s home-spun cure for every ailment known to man is an object of affection or ridicule. The latter is present with the hint of derision in the line “You get tea with your afternoon tea,” but there is a running motif throughout the song that implies the former.

That idea is that this song perhaps gives the deepest insight into the British working class. Much like “Autumn Almanac,” this household is steeped in traditionalism: Grandpappy is never late for his evening meal, which he tops off with brandy and “a fresh-made pot of tea.” He would be perfectly at home expressing his affection for “football on a Saturday” or “roast beef on Sundays.” Another point made is in the final verse, where tea is shown as a universal drink. It transcends all social and political boundaries. However traditional Granny might seem, pushing tea under her grandson’s nose at every chance, this subtle advertisement for tea hides a message of Utopianism beneath its surface. Musically, it matches the quaintness of the lyric, never really picking up in momentum.

“Holloway Jail”<sup>22</sup> is a thumping rocker, introducing a soon-to-be permanent fixture of Kinks songs for the next several years: female backing singers. Its bluesy intro ushers in a brooding drumbeat from Avory; Dalton, Gosling’s piano, and the guitars are playing in unison, giving the song a thick, heavy feel. The song’s chords are strikingly similar to “Alcohol.” Where the guitar riff in “Alcohol” is centered on A-minor and E-major, in “Holloway Jail” both chords are minor. It is basic music theory that minor chords can connote melancholy, and this song does it perfectly. The tale in the song

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<sup>22</sup> Her Majesty’s Prison Holloway is in Islington, a borough in North-Central London. Islington is just south of Haringey, the borough containing the Davies brothers’ home of Muswell Hill. At one point during his trial in 1895, Oscar Wilde was an inmate at Holloway Prison, though around 1902-1903 it became a women’s-only prison.



describes the narrator's "baby" (whether it's his girlfriend or daughter is never revealed) and her fall from grace.

It bears some lyrical and melodic similarities to "Big Black Smoke," the b-side of "Dead End Street" in 1966. The girl gets mixed up with "a spiv named Frankie Simes."<sup>23</sup> The story is simple enough: an innocent girl gets seduced by urban life, only to have her Svengali sell her out to the police with the C.I.D.<sup>24</sup> being hot on Frankie's trail. The line "she went and took the rap for him" could hint that she was willing to take all of the blame. Although Simes' deeds are not spelled out, Kitts puts forth that the girl in the song had become a prostitute, and Simes was her pimp.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the case may be, the narrator observes the girl's beauty wither away as her tenure in prison carries on. Musically, the song is a stirring one, full of emotion. This is not a criticism of the tracks preceding "Holloway Jail," but had Ray's vocals on this track matched the deliberately limited dynamics – the detached attitude of "Complicated Life" in particular comes to mind – the song would not be as effective.

"Oklahoma U.S.A."<sup>26</sup> introduces the theme of embracing all things American, which will be further examined in the album's title track. The song is musically notable for its complete lack of Mick Avory on drums. The song is gorgeous melodically, with Ray's singing augmented by Dave at only a few points in the song. John Mendelssohn

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<sup>23</sup> The word spiv is an out-of-fashion term in England for a well-dressed street hood. British comedian Arthur English often performed as a fast-talking spiv, loudly dressed and sporting a pencil-thin mustache and tilted fedora. This image would enter The Kinks' universe through Ray and Dave's appearance in character as Mr. Flash and Mr. Twitch on the sleeve of *Preservation Act Two* in 1974.

<sup>24</sup> The C.I.D. is the Criminal Investigations Department, established in 1878 and investigating major crimes and criminals.

<sup>25</sup> Kitts, 162.

<sup>26</sup> See *Ray Davies' Vision Of America* for more on this track.

mentions the singer's question of "If life's for livin', what's livin' for?" as the "single most potent line" of the entire *Muswell Hillbillies* album.<sup>27</sup> The girl in the song is near the bottom of society, living "in a house that's near decay." To escape her dismal surroundings, she envisions herself as part of the Rodgers and Hammerstein play-turned-film *Oklahoma!* (1955), with a name-check of the film's stars, Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae.

As she goes to pick up a copy of the newspaper, "She's walking on the surrey with the fringe on top."<sup>28</sup> Walking to work she still envisions herself in a Hollywood movie, this time as Rita Hayworth or Doris Day. She isn't just dissatisfied with her environment, she is unhappy with herself. Her dreams extend to romantic fantasies, where the dashing Errol Flynn rescues her from her existence. This disconnect from reality would become a running theme Ray regularly returns to, either in the first or third person. The accordion at the song's end plays a theme that keen listeners would hear again on "In A Foreign Land" from 1978's *Misfits*.

At first glance, "Uncle Son" is a simple nod to one of the "little men" caught up while assorted ideologies clash. Liberals and Socialists are presented as hapless dreamers, while "conservatives live in a world gone by." As a contrast to these opportunistic politicians, Uncle Son is presented as "an ordinary man." The chorus promises to the song's subject (presented in a way that implies he has passed away) he won't be forgotten "when the revolution comes." The lyrics can become enigmatic if one doesn't bear in mind that Uncle Son is most likely an allegorical figure, a man whose way of life remains

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<sup>27</sup> John Mendelssohn, *The Kink Kronikles* liner notes, 1972 LP.

<sup>28</sup> "The Surrey With The Fringe On Top" is one of the most famous songs from the musical. This lyric doesn't quite make sense, as a surrey is a type of carriage.

unchanged regardless of who is in power. However, Ray reveals in the liner notes to the *Muswell Hillbillies* CD that there really was an Uncle Son in his family.<sup>29</sup>

With its fade-in, “Muswell Hillbilly” is introduced with an almost triumphant crescendo, heralding the final track of the album. The song begins with the narrator bidding farewell to a girl named Rosie Rooke, again a name from Ray’s past – this time of Mother Davies’ childhood friend<sup>30</sup> – as he is being relocated to a new neighborhood. The relocation to Muswell Hill was a reality for Ray and Dave’s parents, being moved out of Islington due to redevelopment.<sup>31</sup> Instead of pledging to buy a gun and live in a tent with his girl, a different method of defiance is presented: vowing to not change his old ways. The chorus is a deliberately confused hybrid of England and America, where the Muswell Hill natives declare themselves to be Muswell Hillbilly boys, though their allegiance rests with “old West Virginia.”

Following the theme presented in “Oklahoma U.S.A.,” Ray confesses he’s “Never seen New Orleans, Oklahoma, Tennessee,” which aren’t arbitrary locations in the United States, but havens for blues, jazz, and country. All of these musical styles were born in the United States, and all of these musical styles (in various shapes and forms) are present on *Muswell Hillbillies*. The chorus ends with the narrator saying he still dreams of the Black Hills (found in South Dakota and Wyoming) “that I ain’t never seen.” The American plains region, however idealized it might actually be, sounds like an apt escape for the singer.

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<sup>29</sup> Doggett, *Muswell Hillbillies* liner notes.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

He has only seen these places in his dreams, but that is good enough for him. His intended place of relocation is a neighborhood full of houses that look the same – “No character, just uniformity,” a sign of things to come with the “identical concrete monstrosities” of “Scrapheap City” on *Preservation Act Two*. The narrator’s “cockney pride” is too strong for a crash course in proper elocution.<sup>32</sup>

Once again returning to this idea that *Muswell Hillbillies* is a thematic update of *The Village Green Preservation Society*, this yearning to preserve “the old ways” is being put through the ultimate test. The village green is being paved over, the old houses are being repossessed via compulsory purchase, and the residents are being relocated to new “computerized communities.” They are bringing their old ways with them, but will it survive?

It’s left for the listener to decide. Ray would weigh in on *Preservation Act Two* in its horrifyingly dystopian conclusion that given a demagogue with enough charisma, the people would be willing to sacrifice their own humanity for a cause. Of course, that album also boasts that “the people will go on forever.” It is impossible to hear “Muswell Hillbilly” and envision the worst for its subjects, and it is all a testament to the strength of Ray Davies as a lyricist and songwriter.

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<sup>32</sup> Cockney is a word long used to describe both the working class citizens of London’s East End as well as a dialect of British English, made most popular (to the author’s annoyance) by Julie Andrews in *My Fair Lady*. It is a distinctly “improper” speech pattern, much like a Southern accent in the United States.