

RAY DAVIES' VISION OF AMERICA

One major theme intrinsically associated with the songwriting of Ray Davies is his celebration of the English way of life. He praises his homeland's glory years in the voice of what Tom Kitts calls "a short-sighted individual"¹ on *The Village Green Preservation Society* and *Arthur, Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire*. The tossing aside of this past is discussed and explored on *Muswell Hillbillies* and the *Preservation* saga.

In spite of this inseparable connection to England, there are several instances in The Kinks' catalog where Ray focuses his attention to the United States, most notably in "Holiday In Waikiki" from *Face To Face* (1966), "Oklahoma USA" from *Muswell Hillbillies* (1971), and "Catch Me Now I'm Falling" from *Low Budget* (1979). Each of these songs present different views and attitudes towards the US.

"Holiday In Waikiki" chronicles the narrator's free trip – won in a local newspaper competition – to Hawaii. His expectations are never fully spelled out, though his vacation is rife with disappointment. To begin, his seemingly free trip brings with it some ludicrous expenses. As he sings, "A genuine Hawaii ukulele cost me 30 guineas." (Thirty guineas was approximately \$88.20 in 1966.) Even the generally free activity of going for a swim comes with a price tag. A hula dancer at the beach turns out to be a half-Greek, half-Italian and not a true Hawaiian native. Advertisements for Coca-Cola grace otherwise quaint shacks, and the authentic grass skirts for sale are in fact made from PVC.

¹ Email to author, March 29th, 2009.

Written at the peak of the band's satirical era, we are presented with an America where vacationing is anything but a relaxing getaway. Commercialism dominates the way of life, no less different than in the fatuous culture of England presented in "Dedicated Follower Of Fashion." The same sense of greed and materialism propelling the fashion boutiques on Carnaby Street in London also drives the tourism industry on an island in the Pacific.

With this, Ray treats an American location with some of the satirical techniques Tom Kitts outlines in *Not Like Everybody Else*: the song is told in the first person, his character defined in the song's opening verse.² When he sings "I'm just an English boy who won a holiday in Waikiki" in the chorus, the usage of "just" carries a tone of desperation: he has traveled across the globe for some time off, all he wants is to relax.

This hint of exasperation aside, there are two more satirical devices put to use in this song: humorous irony and musical incongruity. The sights and situations described in the song are funny, without any overt indication of the narrator being depressed or greatly upset by his experience. John Mendelssohn points out in the liner notes to *The Kink Kronikles* that "Holiday In Waikiki" owes some debt to one of the greatest icons of modern American music, Chuck Berry. Ray's rapid-fire delivery on the verses is not unlike "Too Much Monkey Business" (which The Kinks covered on their debut album), while the telling of a complete story is something straight out of a Chuck Berry song. Another possible source of inspiration is Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" from his landmark electric debut *Bringing It All Back Home*: it is in roughly the same

² Tom Kitts, *Ray Davies: Not Like Everybody Else* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 79-80.

double-time swing tempo, and both songs make good use of the slide guitar.³ The song's speed and tongue-twisting lyrical rhythm are in sharp contrast to the depiction of a typical vacationer in Hawaii, instead portraying a man too frantic to relax. The only aural evocations of Hawaii are in Dave's delightfully noisy slide breaks, which he refers to as being done on a homemade Hawaiian guitar,⁴ and the inclusion of the sound of crashing waves at the song's fade-in and fade-out.

Five years later, *Muswell Hillbillies* would present an interesting combination of lyrics addressing English topics and distinctly American-derived music, including blues, Dixieland jazz, and country. "Oklahoma USA" is a piece of escapism told in the third person. The song's subject, a female, romanticizes over the America she sees in the 1955 film adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*. She lives in a crumbling old house, but it doesn't matter to her as she envisions herself as a character in the musical.

The mundane act of buying her paper is set in her mind to "The Surrey With The Fringe On Top," a song from the musical. On her way to work, she pretends she is Rita Hayworth or Doris Day, awaiting her dream man – in this instance, it is Errol Flynn – to whisk her off to live happily ever after. This brand of delusion, laced with naivety, would manifest itself again in "Jukebox Music" off of *Sleepwalker* six years later, where music is the heroine's escape from everyday life. Her vision of America is one that does not exist, and never did, an idealized portrait painted by Hollywood. The prevalence of Hollywood itself in England shows the influence of American popular culture overseas.

Ray's observing narrator posits one of his deepest questions at the song's beginning and end: "If life's for livin', what's livin' for?" The story indirectly answers it,

³ Glenn Gass, email to author, April 1st, 2009.

⁴ Dave Davies, *Kink* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 16.

suggesting that these moments of fantasy make a seemingly unbearable existence livable, that these dreams, however unrealistic they may seem, give the girl a sense of hope. She imagines the film's happy ending for herself, with a dashing male lead taking her away from the dreary life she leads to a glorious Technicolor paradise.

The optimism attached to *Muswell Hillbillies* and its defiant self-assurance that the old ways will carry on is completely inverted by the time of *Low Budget*, released at the opposite end of the 1970's. Laden with what Matt Resnicoff calls "grim urban survivalism,"⁵ *Low Budget* captures the struggle with life in the modern world, one where gas is unaffordable and a massive recession looms in the horizon. Thirty years after the album's release and civilization is facing the exact same problems on an equally dramatic scale, making the album just as relevant in the present day.

Low Budget bears a strong distinction in The Kinks' catalog as it was conceived and almost entirely recorded in New York City. Inspired by their surroundings, the band gives their own takes on disco, punk, new wave, and metal. The album is often compared to *Some Girls* by The Rolling Stones and Neil Young's *Rust Never Sleeps* as a career-reviving work. Keeping up with the times gave them an edge in avoiding the dreaded dinosaur label of the time applied to aging rockers by the English punks.

The album's genesis in New York in turn yielded a product geared towards the American record-buying public. No song embodies this more than "Catch Me Now I'm Falling," where Ray, the man who once yearned for the days of Queen Victoria and sought to preserve village greens, not only addresses an American concern, but also acts as the voice of America. The song is a plea for foreign aid from Captain America,

⁵ Liner notes, *Schoolboys In Disgrace*, Velvel CD.

reminding other nations of the times the US has lent their support. Lyrically, the song repeats the request for aid in the verses and choruses, while the bridges exhibit first disappointment, then resentment, that the rest of the world fails to respond to America's call. It's a confusing topic for an Englishman to address, but it is delivered with sincerity, showing genuine and mature concern. From a musical standpoint, the song rocks along with a heavy punch, not unlike a Crazy Horse tune, although it unashamedly borrows the signature lick from The Rolling Stones' 1968 single, "Jumpin' Jack Flash."⁶

These three songs give a glimpse into Ray Davies' personal views towards America. In the first instance he looks down his nose at America as a playground for commercialism at its nastiest, worse than in England. Advertisements besmirch the natural beauty of Waikiki, the souvenirs are overpriced, and he observes a "genuine" Hawaiian experience replaced with New York-based hula dancers and plastic grass skirts. His hostility towards the States isn't unfounded: for the latter half of the 1960's, The Kinks were banned from performing in America resulting from disputes with the American Federation of Musicians.

Five years later, this satirical view is replaced with naïve idealism, due in some capacity to the band's second wave of popularity in the United States after "Lola" in 1970. Contemporary society in America may be just as materialistic as in England, but Ray recognizes a rich past and a nostalgia for it inherent in the American arts. The cowboy setting in *Oklahoma!* is as central to America's past as the beloved age of Victoria and village greens for England. Moreover, the music on the record is steeped in

⁶ As a sidenote, Neil Young himself cribbed the riff from "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" on the Buffalo Springfield song "Mr. Soul." Later, the song "Borrowed Tune" directly – and admittedly – lifts the melody from "Lady Jane."

traditionally American musics. Like The Rolling Stones, The Animals, and The Yardbirds, The Kinks got their start as a blues band, inspired by Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and in their particular example Big Bill Broonzy. The music on the album provides a sepia-toned backdrop for lyrics dealing with the good times of yesteryear and besetting the problems of the present. Ray had clearly grown past being the angry young man in the mid-60's, openly recognizing his appreciation for American culture.

The idealistic portrait of America in "Oklahoma USA" is usurped by a realistic vision in "Catch Me Now I'm Falling." The United States was on the brink of turmoil in early 1979. The Shah of Iran fled his country in January of that year among increased threats of an Islamic revolution. Iran's oil exportation suffered as a result of the tumult, triggering an energy crisis. Ray is no stranger to politics or current events, as evidenced on *Preservation Acts One and Two*, so voicing his concerns for America's well-being continues in showcasing his own sense of worldly wisdom and maturity in reaching a broader audience. With its incorporation of new American music and its focus on issues of equal, possibly greater, concerns to Americans, *Low Budget* can be interpreted as a modern, Anglo-American update of *Muswell Hillbillies*.

For The Kinks, like so many of their peers from the British Invasion, success in America was viewed as a crowning achievement. They viewed America with a degree of respect. It was, after all, the land of their idols. This artistic gold medal would remain out of reach for Ray Davies throughout the 1960's. The Kinks finally did achieve stardom in the US at the beginning of the 1970's, only for Ray's artistic pursuits – in the form of concept albums and stage presentations – to disorient listeners in England and America alike. The return to a more commercial approach in 1977 saw The Kinks' emergence as a

tight, arena-ready ensemble. At the decade's end, with the release of *Low Budget*, The Kinks ventured into what would be their greatest era in terms of success. This final wave of success would cement their legendary status in the rock world.