

Mark Wegman  
November 2008

As many of you know, Saturday is the 40th anniversary of the U.K. release of *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*.

"One of the most successful failures of all time" is how Ray Davies has described his masterpiece. The spring of 1968 found The Kinks in a state of limbo. The relative failure of their "Wonderboy" single in April 1968 seemed to testify to their fall from popular grace even in the singles genre, which had traditionally been their strong suit. Even though the group had produced increasingly intricate and innovative albums, the albums had been likewise increasingly ignored (i.e., *Something Else*).

The panacea of the hippie flower child "peace and love" culture began, even at this early date, to lose some of its luster - fueled in America by the sight on the evening news of America's youth being slaughtered wholesale in far-off Vietnam for a purpose that was increasingly unclear, other than "America has never lost a war!" America had become more polarized both politically as well as culturally. The assassination of Robert Kennedy and violent riots at the Democratic National Convention that summer in Chicago had jolted many in the "free love" generation to become more politically active.

The emergence of the "underground" and the "movement" in both print, music and on the radio waves only helped to fuel the activist viewpoint. In the States, you were either "cool" or you were a "pig," you either were part of the solution or you were part of the problem. I remember letting the bangs of my hair grow down to my eyelashes in a vain attempt to align myself with this new "movement" - letting one's hair grow over one's ears was not allowed under my school's "appearance code." Even though by today's standards my hair then would be considered quite short, a friend of my dad's would come into our house and ask my dad, "Who's the girl? Where's your other daughter?" (referring to my sister).

The Stones were singing "Street Fighting Man." The Beatles issued their single "Revolution," which embraced social change but repudiated the use of violence: "But when you talk about destruction / don't you know that you can count me out." (It is interesting to note that between the issue of the single version of "Revolution" and the album version on *The Beatles* (a.k.a. "The White Album") that the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago had occurred. On the album version, you can hear one of the Beatles - sounds like it may be Lennon - singing "you can count me IN" while the other vocals sing the "OUT" line. Revolution was in the air and social unrest set heavy on the nation.

In music, a group was either AM or FM, Top 40 or "heavy." Rock FM radio emerged, which frequently played songs that extended past three minutes by groups that had never been heard of. In fact, whole albums were sometimes played in their entirety, something the Dick Clark-style AM DJs didn't even begin to comprehend. In Britain, the music scene had polarized in a similar fashion. Groups were either classified as a

"singles" group or an "albums" group. A group was either "bubblegum" or "progressive." The Kinks were increasingly becoming to be seen as a "singles" group. A similar thing happened with The Hollies. One of England's most successful singles bands (they were second only to The Fabs in top ten singles in the UK in the 1960s), they also had produced increasingly ambitious and creatively excellent albums - albums the public refused to buy. This is partly the reason Graham Nash departed the group for the U.S. and Crosby, Stills and Nash (that and the rejection of his innovative and excellent single "King Midas In Reverse"). Only The Beatles, it seemed, were able to establish a footing on both sides of the divide, producing commercially successful singles as well as albums that sold and at the same time were accepted as "serious art" by the intellectual rock snobs.

Into the cultural and political chaos that seemed to be everywhere came Ray Davies, driving a horse and buggy through an idyllic pastoral English countryside along with his fellow Kinks all dressed in Edwardian attire and singing nostalgically about memories of friends past, saving Donald Duck and virginity, a steam train going insane because he is held to the confines of a museum, a motorbike rider, a flying cat, the village wicked witch, the village lady of ill virtue, the embarrassment of having your friends see you perform along with their best friends, sitting by the riverside with you, an overwhelmed and indifferent God Himself/Herself, and looking at a past that existed in the golden memories, both sad and happy, that were contained in a picture book that we call life.

With The Beatles, The Moody Blues, Pink Floyd and others making monumental, "mind-blowing," if also somewhat pretentious statements - writing songs about the joys of tobacco ("Harry Rag"), working in one's garden ("Autumn Almanac"), "Afternoon Tea," and domestic rivalries ("Two Sisters") seemed trivial in comparison. The universe that Davies discovered and explored within each subject - which basically was all aspects of the human condition, possessed a subtlety that was completely lost on most in this era of grand-scale, "acid rock" "mind-expanding" productions. Not once was revolution mentioned in their lyrics, not once was fighting in the streets, not once did Ray "kiss the sky where Lucy resided in a purple haze in a yellow submarine floating beneath a lemonade lake surrounded by crystalline mountains." The Kinks were becoming terminally unfashionable.

One thing that one needs to understand about The Kinks is that by this point in their history they had become laws unto themselves. True to their anthem "I'm Not Like Everybody Else," they refused to be dedicated followers of fashion and jump on the magic bus along with seemingly everybody else that owned an electric guitar at the time. The one thing that seemed to be lost on Ray at this time, as well, was that without some degree of commercial success, the artistic freedom and independence that he seemed to crave and need simply was not possible.

By early 1968, The Kinks' popularity had drastically changed from what it had been even a year earlier. The relative failure of "Wonderboy" in April 1968 had signaled a definite downturn in the group's status of being almost permanent fixtures in the UK Top 10. "Days" returned some confidence in the group's chart credibility in late June when it just

scraped the UK Top 10. The group would not return there until the release of "Lola" in the summer of 1970. Ray submerged himself into Pye Studio No. 2 - writing and recording new material at a prolific rate as if to escape from the realities of the Kinks' diminished commercial status in the world outside. What emerged was some of the greatest music the group has ever produced.

A rift was also developing between Ray, who felt that Pye Records only viewed him as a singles hit machine, and Pye, which was becoming less and less inclined to humor Ray on his vague and ill-defined concept album without him providing them with the "hits" as well. In the meantime, Reprise Records in the U.S. demanded another Kinks album. In June 1968, Ray provided, under some degree of protest, 15 tracks to Reprise, which tagged the collection with the title *Four More Respected Gentlemen*. Depending on whose account one believes, either Ray or Reprise then whittled this listing down to 11 tracks. Although he feigned indifference, Ray Davies was far too savvy to present something that was just thrown together at the last minute. The high number of high energy rockers that populated the collection - the scorching "She's Got Everything," the energetic "Polly," Dave's "Susannah's Still Alive" and the rocking "Berkeley Mews" made it seem obvious that Ray was attempting to "give the people what they want."

It seemed he thought that Americans would reject wholesale the British parochial concept album that he was focused on producing. Despite this, he still included a large number of tracks that would eventually appear on *VGPS*. Reprise then held off after being told a completely new Kinks album would be ready for release in September of that year. After the *VGPS* album was delayed in September of that year, Reprise's patience wore out. In October, Reprise began preparing album sleeve design art, label-copy sheets, and a small number of white-label test pressings for the *More Respected LP*. It was even listed in Schwann's Record Catalog as being an available Kinks LP scheduled for release in November. Only after being assured of the high quality of the upcoming *VGPS* album did Reprise again stall production preventing what is sometimes referred to as *The Great Lost Kinks Album* (not the compilation by the same name released by Reprise in '73) from ever being released.

Ironically for an album that was originally conceived to be a Ray Davies solo effort and one that held his personal stamp more than others, all of the other members of the group agree that he was more receptive than ever in accepting ideas from all the members of the group while recording *VGPS*. After a short tour of Sweden in June '68, the band returned to the studio to finish more tracks for the album. Drummer Mick Avory said: "We developed it together, which was the first time that had happened, really ... Because it had a theme, I think he wanted some kind of continuity of feel for it. We were adhesive and locked into each other's way. He trusted us a bit more." Bassist Pete Quaife: "I'm not quite sure what it was - either Ray was not feeling too well or he was very tired, maybe it was the court case - but all of us managed to get in ideas and put them over and do them, which was amazing. In the studio, it was a lot easier to get ideas across or to suggest things."

In August, a photo session was scheduled for the album cover for the record. Pye's company photographer and photographer Barrie Wentzell from *Melody Maker* met the group at Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath. The group strolled out onto the heath and the photos that Ray now considers to be the last photos of the original group were shot. All involved agree that it was a golden day - the Indian summer of the group. Ray: "When Barrie Wentzell took those last cover shots outside Kenwood House in Hampstead, he was documenting the end of the band."

Meanwhile, in early September, Pye prepared to release what would have been a 12-track version of *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society*. Some ads were placed in the music rags. Production masters were sent to Pye associates and subsidiaries in Scandinavia, France, Italy and New Zealand. At the last minute, Ray halted the production of the LP in the U.K. In the aforementioned countries, however, the 12-track version was released, each in distinctive sleeve art of which copies are now highly collectable.

Another dispute developed between Ray and Pye. Ray decided that he wanted to release the album as a double disc LP containing 20 tracks and sold for the price of a single album. Pye refused. After all Pye had allowed Donovan the luxury of releasing an elaborately packaged double-disc set, *A Gift From A Flower To A To A Garden*, in '68, why not The Kinks? A compromise was finally reached. The album would be released as a single disc, but Pye would allow Ray more time to record three new tracks, ending up with a final version containing 15 tracks. The band went back into Pye Studio No. 2 around October 12th, and recorded "Last Of The Steam Powered Trains," "Big Sky" and "All Of My Friends Were There." The re-scheduled release of the album was set for November.

*The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* was finally released in the UK on November 22nd, 1968. Coincidentally, the album *The Beatles* (a.k.a. "The White Album") was released the same day. It seemed that *VGPS* was ignored by almost everyone. The media focus of course was on the release of The Beatles' first double album. It is said that in the U.K., *VGPS* sold only slightly more than 20,000 copies. When it was released in the States (on Feb. 5, 1969), it did receive some admiring reviews in the emerging "underground" press like *Crawdaddy* and *The Village Voice*, and a flickering of interest began to be felt which would provide a small foundation for the group's return there later that year. It is said, however, that *VGPS* sold only around 25,000 copies in the U.S. The "White Album" sold over 2 million copies only two weeks after its release (it was released in the U.S. on Nov. 25th).

In England during the Christmas rush, the album was trampled in the race to buy "The White Album," the career-reviving *Beggar's Banquet* (the Stones had also suffered a downturn in popularity in the U.K. after *Satanic Majesties*), or the Jimi Hendrix double LP *Electric Ladyland*. People would ask me later that winter, "Have you heard the 'White Album'?" "Yeah! Have you heard 'The Village Green Preservation Society'?" "The what? Huh!? What's that?!!!"

In what may be an example that there is some ultimate justice in this world, it is now considered by most knowledgeable music critics to be one of the best British albums of the 1960s - indeed perhaps ever. It is said that it is now the best-selling album of all the Kinks' Pye era re-releases. There are no standout tracks on the LP - they are all mini-masterpieces. Everyone has their personal favorites from the album, but each song has a character and personality which is all its own. All of the songs on the album seem to talk to each other. They all seem to be inhabitants of the "community" or the "village." If you do not have the album - get it. NO credible rock album collection is complete without it. If you only have one Kinks album in your collection, this should be it.

I was 17 when *The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society* was released. I am now 57, and with each passing year I increasingly appreciate and treasure the beauty and the voice of genius within this work that spoke to me then, and still speaks to me now. God Save The Kinks. God Save the Village Green.