

Kinks' songwriter reflects on America ... and himself

By Chris Kocher

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Ray Davies, "Working Man's Café"

Imagine this nightmare scenario: You've been shot in the leg during a botched street robbery in a foreign country, and you're lying in a hospital bed surrounded by the controlled chaos of an intensive care ward. From an IV stand above you, the morphine drips slowly and masks some of the pain — but no amount of medication can stop the insistent voice inside your head: "Will I live?"

After a brush with death like that, anyone would be reflective about his place in the world. If you're legendary British songwriter Ray Davies, once (and future?) front-man for the Kinks, you naturally grab a pen and try to make sense of it all.

On "Working Man's Café" (released Feb. 19 on New West/Ammal Records), the 63-year-old Rock and Roll Hall of Famer shares those first days after his 2004 shooting in New Orleans. "Morphine Song" seems like half Mardi Gras funeral, half drug-fuzzed observations about the characters he sees around him: orderlies, junkies, fellow patients and "the bed ... full of cables and leads/ nobody visits, nobody grieves." It's the same keen eye for detail he's employed since mid-1960s hits such as "A Well-Respected Man," but more personal that

CD Review

ON TOUR

- ▶ April 5: Tower Theatre, Upper Darby, Pa.
- ▶ April 6: Orpheum Theatre, Boston
- ▶ April 8: Beacon Theatre, New York City

ON THE WEB

Unofficial Kinks Web site:
kinks.it.rit.edu

he's ever allowed himself to be.

As you'd expect, the shooting weaves its way throughout the album's 12 songs — sometimes in obvious references and other times more subtly. The angry "No One Listens" spits accusations about how the criminal case was handled and appeals for help to anyone from the Dalai Lama to the National Guard. "In a Moment" ponders how everything can shift "from day to night" in a split-second, and "Imaginary Man" explores how little of a person's inner life is seen by others.

Even songs such as "Peace in Our Time" and "Hymn for a New Age" take on deeper meaning when you know the circumstances that prompted them. "Peace" finds Davies surveying a fractured relationship and seeking to rebuild; "Hymn," one of the few all-out



RAY DAVIES

rock anthems, is a search for spirituality in a confusing 21st century full of holy wars and bloodshed: "This is my hymn for a new age / rewrite the book on a fresh page / If I'm going to find God and be saved / I need a hymn for a new age."

That moment of violence in the French Quarter was also a culmination of sorts for Davies' exploration of the United States after the 9/11 attacks, and "Working Man's Café" is a tourist's view from the outside looking in. "Vietnam Cowboys" is a cynical take about globalization, and "The Real World" reflects the sad diaspora of Hurricane Katrina victims from the Big Easy. The languid shuffle and oppressive heat implied in "The Voodoo Walk" hide the sinister message that we may all be "zombies" from time to time.

"Working Man's Café" is billed as Davies' "American"

album, and not without reason — in addition to its obvious touchstones, it was recorded in Nashville and polished by prolific U.S. producer Ray Kennedy. But in the CD's title cut, Davies returns to his roots

with a meditation on England's fading cultural identity: He finds himself lost in a shopping mall "where the fruit and veg man used to stand" and wonders why "everywhere I go it looks and feels like America."

Then, in the middle, Davies seems to appeal for reconciliation with estranged brother Dave, whose creative friction was — for better or worse — the three-decade core of the Kinks ethos: "There's gotta be a place for us to meet / I'll call you when I've found it / I only hope that life has made us / a little more grounded."

For now, though, Davies has found his own solid footing on his second true solo outing. Here's hoping the inspiration for his next project is not as life-threatening as this one.