

The Kinks: *Preservation*

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*Prelude: In submitting this for Dave's site, I felt the need to pre-empt my essay with a few things. My senior thesis from Indiana University is also on the Kinda Kinks site, complete with neatly-formatted citations and footnotes throughout. This piece has none of those, with most footnotes included in the text as parenthetical asides. What follows is my entire lecture on the **Preservation** rock opera, which I used as a script of sorts during my presentation.*

That said, there is no real formatting, quotes are uncited, and as this is the transcript of a speech rather than a proper essay, it makes for a much more informal read. I do currently have several other projects in the foreground (including a cross-country road-trip that my fiancée and I are using as the impetus for a book), but I certainly plan on returning to this subject, whether it is for a music journal, a book chapter, or even a book in and of itself.

I also want to give a few quick precursory shout-outs: Dave Emlen, for running the greatest Kinks website in the world; Ray Davies biographer Tom Kitts, to whom I am forever indebted as both a friend and an academic; Nick Triano, for being an all-round swell guy; and lastly, Jim Mello, whose essay on "The Two Walters" can also be found on Kinda Kinks, someone with whom I have recently reconnected after first meeting in 2009.

I hope you like what you read, and I encourage you to contact me via Facebook with any questions, comments, or vicious attacks. (Not a lot of Alex DiBlasi's out there, so I am relatively easy to find.)

In The Kinks' thirty-three years as a band, no era in their history is more dividing among both fans and critics than the period from 1973 to 1976, where Ray Davies wrote a series of rock operas, with The Kinks essentially serving as his backing band. The most ambitious of these is the *Preservation* saga, which spans three LP's across two albums. Upon their release, *Preservation Act One* barely dented the American Top 200, while its sequel, *Preservation Act Two*, didn't chart at all. In the time since their initial release, *Preservation* has come to hold an odd place in the band's catalog, regarded by some as unnecessary and self-indulgent, and by others – like me – as "Advanced Listening."

Several naysayers of this era point toward a quote from Ray Davies, where he says something to effect that there was a period where he probably should not have been allowed to make records. As a counter to that, I would like to present some quotes from the notoriously mercurial Davies saying just the opposite. Davies says *Preservation* is his "lifelong project," and this indicates just how central the concepts, ideas, and themes in the story and in the lyrics are to him and to his life work as a whole. He even calls *Preservation* "my trilogy," with *The Village Green Preservation Society* serving as the first of the three parts. With *Village Green*, we have Ray's first time addressing a lot of the ideas that would come five years later on *Preservation*: community, the working class, enjoying the simple pleasures in life, and nostalgia.

While community, extolling the working class, and learning to disconnect from the drudgery of modern living were all topics embraced by the counterculture of the late 1960's, it was the way in which Davies addresses these notions that set him apart. He views them as intrinsic to the past, using nostalgic remembrances to evoke a bygone

time. Although Davies would later subvert nostalgia as a vehicle for satire, like the hyper-nationalistic narrator from “Victoria” or on “Muswell Hillbilly,” where Davies begs, “take me back to them Black Hills that I ain’t never seen,” on the *Village Green album*, Davies regards the past with reverence, even yearning for it.

Given its time, released at the tail end of 1968, a year regarded by historian Mark Kurlansky as *The Year That Rocked The World*, a time when most of his peers were looking forward and ahead, nostalgia was a decidedly un-hip subject. Sure, there was an element of regression in a lot of British psychedelia, with Syd Barrett evoking childhood imagery on *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, for example, but consider the prospect of a rock musician looking to having a quiet life as head of household. Aside from Paul McCartney asking if you would still need him and feed him at age 64, who else but Ray Davies would have had the audacity to tell his audience, “Picture yourself when you’re getting old,” as he does on the song “Picture Book?”

To quickly go through the next several years, in 1969 the band does *Arthur, Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire*. The album was meant to be the soundtrack to a movie on the British Granada network. No known script of the program exists, but if the album’s lyrical content are any indication, with its sharp critiques of consumerism, war, and the history of England, it is no mystery as to why Granada pulled the plug on production. Although the passing decades have relegated *Arthur* into the shadow of The Who’s *Tommy*, which preceded it by five months, it was a bold album for its time.

The release of *Arthur* also coincided with the end of The Kinks’ ban by the American Federation of Musicians, which had been put into effect in late 1965. The ban kept The Kinks from performing or having their albums released in the United States. No longer having to pander to American sensibilities, Davies wrote songs from a distinctly British point of view, yielding what fans and critics alike regard as their golden era, beginning with *Face To Face* in 1966.

Needing a big song to announce the band’s return to the United States, Davies penned “Lola” in 1970, which proved to be an international hit. Its accompanying album, *Lola Versus Powerman & The Money-Go-Round*, is a concept album attacking the seedy underworld of the music industry, some nine years before Frank Zappa did *Joe’s Garage*.

The following year, The Kinks did *Muswell Hillbillies*, an album inspired by the emerging country-rock trend. What separates this album, however, from The Rolling Stones’ forays into country from this period is that The Kinks retained their Englishness. There are songs about tea, compulsory purchase (known in the United States as eminent domain), and mental illness. Moreover, Davies borrowed just as much from American country and folk as he does from a British genre of music called trad jazz. To augment this sound, Davies drafted a three-man wind section (trumpet, sax/clarinet, and trombone/tuba) for the album.

On 1972’s *Everybody’s In Showbiz*, the wind section remained, essentially expanding the group’s lineup onstage to eight. The album itself is a double album. The first LP, offering new studio recordings, tackled the band’s newly found stardom in the United States and life on the road, with some of the tunes humorous while others are more contemplative. The second LP is a live disc, a true oddity for its time. Where The Who’s *Live At Leeds* boasted “MAXIMUM R&B” at a record-setting volume and The Allman Brothers’ *Fillmore East* featured some fluent jamming across blues, country,

and rock, *Showbiz* features The Kinks playing the likes of “Baby Face,” “Mr. Wonderful,” and “The Banana Boat Song” amid some of their more recent tunes.

This brings us to early 1973, when Ray and Dave Davies unveiled their very own recording studio in London, called Konk Studios. Aside from The Rolling Stones having their own mobile unit and the infamous basement studio in a French villa where most of *Exile On Main Street* was recorded, a band or artist having their own recording facility was incredibly rare. There are pro and cons to an artist having their own studio. On the one hand, the artist no longer has to worry about studio fees, nor would they have to rush through a few block-booked days in the studio to get all their songs recorded. The biggest perk is that with unlimited time, songs could be worked on and developed while in the studio. (Again, these may all seem like common practice now, but at that point, studio time was considered sacred for many artists. Even The Beatles had to occasionally schlep over to Olympic Studios if EMI’s facility was booked.)

Perhaps the biggest potential drawback to the unlimited resources provided by having your very own recording studio: a perfectionist like Ray Davies could toil endlessly over his creation, and that is exactly what happened with Davies as The Kinks embarked on the sessions for *Preservation Act One*. At the time, there was no *Act One*; the plan had been for the group to release a double-LP containing the entire opus. In April 1973, RCA Records issued the band’s latest single, “One Of The Survivors,” backed with “Scrapheap City,” in anticipation of the new album. However, Ray scrapped the completed album as the result of it not being up to his standards.

While redoing his new songs and struggling for new ideas, Ray suffered a major personal loss: on his 29th birthday, June 21, his wife Rasa left him, taking their two children with her. The following month, at London’s White City Stadium, Davies announced he was “fucking sick of the whole thing [...] sick up to here with it,” and then, as the house music played over the PA – making Ray inaudible to all but the front few rows – Ray Davies declared he was quitting music. That evening, Ray was rushed to the hospital, having his stomach pumped due to a deliberate overdose of pills.

Thankfully, Ray channeled his emotions and his recovery into his music, approaching his latest project with a renewed vigor. That said, his creative process still proved too time-consuming for RCA, who finally demanded something from the band in anticipation of Christmas sales, so Ray delivered the single-disc *Preservation Act One* to the label, who released it in late November.

[Pull out LP]

Taken as its own, this record was a genuine head-scratcher when it first came out. Several reviews from the time hinted that they were eager for its second installment, but it is worth pointing out that the *Lola* album in 1970 had “Part One” suffixed to its title, with an intended Part Two going no further than a few backing tracks and demos.

The album opens with the “Morning Song,” a wordless prelude filled with flute trills and a pastoral melody hummed by Ray and several female vocalists. This segues into “Daylight,” which shows the town where *Preservation* takes place as they begin their day. The first lyric, “Daylight over the village green, early in the morning,” provides an immediate throwback to *The Village Green Preservation Society* – in my opinion, a telltale sign that this is the same village.

[Song: “Daylight”]

In the final verse, there are two separate lyrics worth mentioning: “Lonely spinsters dream of dating Roger Moore or Steve McQueen,” and then one line later,

“Schoolboys dream of Captain Scarlet, battleships, and aeroplanes.” These two references to popular culture are contemporary to the album – 1973 – and something of a departure for Davies, who constantly wrote about and looked toward the past. *Captain Scarlet* was a children’s show that aired from 1967 to 1968; Steve McQueen was one of the biggest film stars in America at the time, having starred in two back-to-back films directed by Sam Peckinpah, while 1973 marked Roger Moore’s first outing as James Bond in *Live And Let Die*. In essence, these contemporary references to 1973 culture make *Preservation* Ray’s first explicitly “modern” work since “Dedicated Follower of Fashion” in 1966.

“Daylight” also introduces the central Tramp character – Tramp in the sense of a Chaplin-esque scamp rather than a woman of ill repute – who serves as both a narrator of sorts and as Ray Davies’ surrogate, the observing everyman. Knowing of his personal struggles and subsequent suicide attempt, the line, “I thank God that I’m still around to see another dawning,” carries with it a heavy poignancy.

[Song: “Sweet Lady Genevieve”]

Listed in the album’s libretto as being sung by the Tramp, this is a song that stands on its own without any context – either in the opera or as a biographical statement. Even in All Music Guide’s otherwise damning review of *Act One*, the critic singles out “Sweet Lady Genevieve” for praise, calling it “a real candidate for Davies’ forgotten masterpiece.” The lyrics are a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation, an obvious message to Rasa, masquerading as a carefree tune about whiskey-inspired misdeeds on a hot summer night.

On the following song, “There’s A Change In The Weather,” we have an ensemble tune, sung by characters described in the libretto as Working Class Man, Middle Class Man, and Upper Class Man. This sprightly little show tune is interrupted by an ominous bridge, predicting “See the holocaust rising, over the horizon / Gonna see a manifestation, total chaos, devastation,” before returning to its bouncy, tuba-driven chorus.

“Where Are They Now” is another song performed by the Tramp, asking about a galaxy of public figures who are little-known outside of England. He asks whatever became of Swinging Londoners, Teddy Boys, the Beatniks, the “Angry Young Men” authors of the late 1950’s, and finally asking whatever became of “all the Rockers and the Mods.” Regardless of their present station in life, the Tramp ends the song by comforting listeners that “rock and roll still lives on,” foreshadowing the next song.

[Song: “One Of The Survivors”]

Johnny Thunder is a character from *Village Green Preservation Society*, a rebel and self-appointed outcast from society who lives traveling on his motorcycle. It is also strongly implied, given its placement on the album, that he is the narrator on the *Village Green* track “Last of the Steam-Powered Trains,” where he declares “I’m the last of the good old renegades / All my friends are all middle-classed and grey.” On *Preservation*, he is – on the surface – celebrated as a survivor, “one of the originals,” but there is a subtext throughout that he is stuck in the past: “he’s got no time for complicated music, or too much sophistication.”

Note also that while some of the songs mentioned – “Hound Dog,” “Oh Boy,” “Great Balls Of Fire” – are famous, most of the groups who get a name-check (The Hollywood Argyles, Danny & The Juniors, Dion & The Belmonts, and Johnny & The Hurricanes) are among the lesser-known from the 1950’s. The hint of Johnny Thunder

being a fossil turns into full-blown derision in the song's final verse, where Ray reveals that Johnny "looks a little overweight and his sideburns are turning grey / But he still likes to be-bop, boogie, and jive to his worn-out 78's," rejecting not only Johnny's nostalgic impulses, but those of Ray Davies as well.

Side two of the original record begins with "Cricket," sung by the village's Vicar. In the song, the Vicar warns the congregation of the Devil's seductive nature. He chooses to use cricket as a metaphor because "it has honor, it has character, and it's British," highlighting the Vicar's loftier-than-thou view of the Church of England. Overall, it is a good song, but one easily lost on American listeners – an apt parallel would be a firebrand Evangelical preacher using football, with the devil acting as a quarterback instead of the bowler in cricket.

It is on the album's eighth track, "Money & Corruption / I Am Your Man," that the plot truly begins.

[Song: "Money & Corruption"]

The two songs comprise one track, despite the fact that they are two different numbers. On "Money & Corruption," we have the townspeople, in what I imagine being one of those old-fashioned town hall meetings, raising their grievances about those in power. Unfortunately, this is a song with a message that resonates in the present day, written in such a nonpartisan manner that it could potentially appeal to someone of any political ilk. Then again, so long as politics remains the realm of people who are morally bankrupt and are in it only from themselves, this song will always remain relevant. Musically, this song is interesting in that it is The Kinks' only real foray into Prog Rock. The original version of this song ran an extra minute longer, giving keyboardist John Gosling an extended solo set against drummer Mick Avory's jazzy backdrop. This extended version can only be found on Rhino Records' 1991 CD combining both albums, *Preservation: A Play In Two Acts*.

The townspeople's plea for a leader, who by the song's end they demand also be a "savior," which of course brings in a heavily religious connotation, leads to the next song, "I Am Your Man."

[Song: "I Am Your Man"]

This song marks the introduction of Mr. Black, in his only appearance on *Act One*. He brings with him some fresh ideas, while also making some promises of his own – just minutes after the townspeople complain that "all we ever *get* are promises!" This song has always reminded me of John Lennon's "Imagine," musically, asking the listeners to "unite" (as opposed to Lennon's appeal that the audience "join us"). The lyrics also seem to be a dig at the mansion-dweller Lennon writing "Working Class Hero," where Black sees "a day where people will be free [...] living in a new society," which includes the promise of every home having "a stereo and TV / A deep-freeze, quadrasonic, and a washing machine."

Mr. Black's vision of a free and happy society doesn't just include the elimination of "class distinction, slums, [and] poverty," but also the celebration of material goods, and in the case of a quadrasonic sound system – another item dating the narrative's setting – cutting edge technology. Black's lofty promises and assurances are Utopian, but his evocations of "five year plans" and urging the people to "save the Fatherland" are suggestive of real-life regimes from both Germany and the Soviet Union.

[Song: "Here Comes Flash"]

Countering Mr. Black, we have Mr. Flash, the villain of the story. The surf guitar lick played throughout the song serves as a *leitmotif*, a melody associated with a particular character in a musical narrative. (The most famous example of this is in Prokofiev's *Peter & The Wolf*.) In the song's bridge, the townspeople hint towards Flash's past – "Once, we loved and trusted him / Now, his thugs and bullies make us live in sin" – and the present-day warning to lock up both your daughters *and* your wives reminds me of The Rolling Stones' manager Andrew Oldham's provocative press release entitled, "Would you let your daughter go out with a Rolling Stone?"

On "Sitting In The Midday Sun," Davies uses the Tramp to once again visits a concept first explored on *Village Green*: the simple pleasure of an escape into nature. This is a common theme in Davies' work, with songs like "Lazy Old Sun," "Drivin'," and of course "Waterloo Sunset" all using nature and being around it as a means of release from the real world. Although Stephen Trousse, critic for *Uncut* Magazine's special Kinks issue, considers the song to be an update of "Sitting By The Riverside" from *Village Green*, it actually has more in common with "Sunny Afternoon," where its narrator is left after a breakup to watch the taxman repossess his items. The Tramp, despite being jobless and lonely, is able to enjoy a sunny day.

[Song: "Demolition"]

With "Demolition," which closes the original album, we finally get to see Mr. Flash and his gang in action. They plot the purchase, destruction, and paving over of "every town in the vicinity, every farm and village green," replacing the landscape with rows of "identical boxes" (a turn of phrase first heard on "Muswell Hillbilly") marketed as luxury apartments. Dave Davies gets a solo spot on the bridges, delivering the most venomous lyrics of the entire album: "It's time to make some money / It's time to get rich quick / It's the wonderful world of Capitalism / I've got to make a profit / Got to satisfy my greed / It's my faith and my religion."

My fiancée and I used to live in Long Island City in Queens, and we heard stories about long-time tenants whose buildings just happened to be on prime real estate getting harassed with citations for bogus offenses and neighboring businesses constantly fielding calls from developers begging them to sell. Needless to say, these themes of the evils of capitalism, where historic buildings, landscapes, and communities are bulldozed in favor of profit-maximizing luxury houses have ultimately proven to be life imitating art. I should also add that in our present travels across the United States, this is a plague throughout a lot of major cities, where garish "modern" buildings tower over historic districts. So, back to the album, the curtains close over another musical motif that will figure prominently in *Act Two*. As the album ends, the village is demolished.

To change up the pace and provide an intermission of sorts, one interesting point I would like to make is that in looking at the All Music Guide website, the page for The Kinks' discography has two columns for star ratings, one indicating the "Editor's Rating," and one indicating "Average User Rating." There seems to be a pretty good consensus on what are the agreed-upon classics, as *Face To Face*, *Something Else By The Kinks*, *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society*, and *Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)* all share the same 5-star rating in either column.

However, *Preservation Act One* receives a subpar 2.5 stars from the editor, while its user rating (which, as of May 2nd, is an average of 58 voters) is 3.5 stars. The sequel

suffers even more, with *Preservation Act Two* holding a dismal 1.5 stars from the editor; the fan rating, voted on by 29 users, is the same as *Act One*: a respectable 3.5 stars.

So, why this discrepancy? Why the dramatic difference between modern critics – there were some good reviews for both of these albums from their time, by the way – and how fans view the albums?

The biggest criticism, which can be seen in the All Music Guide's review of *Preservation Act One*, is that it is "tedious," and that any song on it that does not push the narrative forward is an example of Ray Davies' "artistic hubris." AMG's critic, Stephen Thomas Erlewine, goes on to say that "the storyline was so convoluted, it necessitated three separate LPs, spread over two albums, and it still didn't really make sense because the first album [...] acted more like an introduction to the characters, and all the story was condensed into the second album."

My initial response to any particularly hyperbolic or harsh critic is this: when exactly is *your* rock opera coming out? If those who can't do, teach, then those who can neither do *nor* teach become music critics.

Kidding aside, Erlewine's critique is based on the idea that a rock opera should be compact and straightforward – albums like The Pretty Things' *S.F. Sorrow*, The Moody Blues' *Days Of Future Passed*, and even The Kinks' *Arthur* unfold a story over the course of a single LP, occasionally you'll have one that spans two discs. *Tommy*, for example, runs right around 75 minutes across two records. What Erlewine – and other critics – are not taking into account is that Davies conceived *Preservation* as a full-fledged musical. The narrative of a rock opera may require less of one's time and attention, but the narrative of a proper musical allows for songs that are pure exposition: we get a sense of setting, of characters, of relationships, before the introduction of the plot.

With that in mind, *Preservation Act 2* shifts the balance to where it is mostly all plot, with only a few expository songs scattered throughout.

[Pull out LP]

Just from the packaging alone, when compared to *Act One*, you can tell right away that this is going to be a very different experience. Gone are the latter-day hippies from *Act One*, resplendent in bellbottoms, denim jackets, and floor-length skirts. Instead, we get a tattered, neon-lit billboard set against a landscape that looks like it has been bombed. On the billboard is Ray dressed as the ashen-faced, cigar-wielding Mr. Flash. Inside the gatefold is Flash, surrounded by his harem, with the other Kinks in costume as well: Dave, complete with fake mustache and switchblade, and Mick, with his hair slicked back, are Flash's pinstripe-clad henchmen; John Dalton is a member of the People's Army; and John Gosling, with a vicar's frock, is Mr. Black.

[Song: "Announcement 1"]

[Song: "Introduction To Solution"]

Although the same melody that closes *Act One* introduces *Act Two*, the urgency of the newscaster's words and the album's musical "Introduction" tell the listener right from the start that this will be a very different experience. The introduction is sung by the Tramp, who on this record is no longer musing about the past or basking in the midday sun, and is instead now dreading the present while also fearing the future. Musically, the band sounds like never before, and I mean that both stylistically and sonically: Mick Avory plays a funky *Shaft*-inspired sixteenth-note rhythm on his hi-hat, John Gosling's electric piano sounds like it came straight off of a Stevie Wonder record,

Dave Davies discovered the wah-wah pedal, and John Dalton is playing a Rickenbacker bass on the album, giving him a fatter, almost metallic tone. The forecasted doom and gloom from “There’s A Change In The Weather” has arrived and is in full force.

[Song: “When A Solution Comes”]

On “When A Solution Comes,” we have Mr. Black strategizing out loud. If his promises and proposals on *Act One* seemed earnest, if a bit too idealistic, then Mr. Black’s musings here about how “the red, black, yellow, the white / Even the Arabs and the Israelites, are all gonna feel the bite” of his revolution are downright terrifying. There is also a definitely sinister undertone, with allusions to a “final solution” and his plans to “use a little manipulation” to “build a new civilization.”

“Money Talks” reintroduces us to Flash and his cronies, celebrating the power that comes with a vast wealth of money: “Money can’t breathe and money can’t see / But when I pull out a fiver people listen to me.” Musically, the song is a deliciously trashy romp into glam rock territory, with a heavy beat and boisterous sax solo.

With the second of five spoken word announcements, we the listeners are taken to a live broadcast of Mr. Black and the People’s Army addressing the nation.

[Song: “Shepherds Of The Nation”]

Mr. Black’s statement of purpose establishes him both as a moral crusader and as a tyrant in his own right – “Put all the perts in jail, bring back the birch and the cat-o-nine-tails / Bring back corporal punishment, bring back the stocks and the axe-man’s block / Let righteousness prevail.” What was funny in 1974 sounds today like little more than a Red State campaign speech, but some of the humor is still intact: “Sodomites beware!”, and the song’s chorus – “We are the new Centurions, shepherds of the nation” – owes its melody and meter to an earlier Kinks song.

[Clip: “The Village Green Preservation Society”]

Davies is once again subverting his own past works, this time to highlight the dangers of clinging to a “good old days” mentality.

[Song: “Scum Of The Earth”]

Kicking off side two of the original record, Mr. Flash’s response to Mr. Black’s message is not one of mudslinging or name-calling, but of hurt feelings and a demand that he be viewed as vulnerable human being rather than a one-sided monster. Musically, this is Ray Davies at his most theatrical – calling upon Shylock’s famous tirade in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, asking “Have I not lungs to help me breathe?” his fourth-wall-breaking command of “Stop the music!” and the dazzling girl-group bridge in the song’s middle. The next song, “Second Hand Car Spiv,” gives more of Flash’s back-story, being born “a product of mass-produced factory fodder, streets full of tenement blocks, rat-infested filth and squalor,” adding more depth and pathos to a character who simply wanted a better life for himself.

[Song: “He’s Evil”]

The song “He’s Evil,” another “party political broadcast” by Mr. Black, is more anti-Flash propaganda. Using a catchy guitar riff – which is the same sequence used by OK Go on their song “Here It Goes Again,” the one with the treadmills – Black wages a heavy-handed character assassination against Flash. Black paints Flash as an abusive monster, a threat to the safety and livelihood of women living in the country. The song’s second half, where the only lyrics are “He’s evil” repeated endlessly, becomes almost a mantra, brainwashing the public into hating Flash even more.

Due to time constraints, I am regretfully excluding “Mirror Of Love,” where Ray hilariously sings from the perspective of Belle, one of Flash’s beloved floozies. Owing some musical debt to the classic blues ladies of the 1920’s, with more clarinet and trumpet than guitar and bass, Belle lists all the mistreatments she endures at Flash’s hand, lamenting that “you’re such a cool lover, but you are a cruel lover / You’re a mean and obscene lover, but you are my dream lover / Even though you treat me bad, you are the best love I’ve ever had,” with the so-called “Mirror Of Love” making their troubled relationship look good.

The album’s second side concludes with a late-night news report of a massive battle taking place between Flash and the People’s Army, with casualties reported to be “very high indeed.” News of this violence leads to the Tramp’s personal response, “Nobody Gives,” my personal favorite song from the entire opera.

[Song: “Nobody Gives”]

No one else out there, except maybe John Fogerty or Bruce Springsteen, is as able to speak so directly both to and about the experience of the little man, who frequently suffers at the hands of whichever side is in charge, only to suffer more once the other side inevitably takes over. “The workers told the unions, who blamed it on the government / The politicians blamed it on the strikers and the militants / And everybody’s guilty and everybody’s innocent.” I also cannot think of another musician who can be so overtly political without forcing the audience to take a side.

The song’s repeated phrase, “Nobody gives a damn anymore,” could be about any party – the workers for striking, the politicians for dodging blame, or even the public, with their own apathy and indifference leading to corrupt leadership. Again, functioning as Ray’s surrogate in the narrative, the Tramp repeats his message that he’s “only sitting here, listening to both sides,” with a tangible sense of fear and anger in his voice. Rather than continue to sit by idly, on the next song, “Oh, Where Is Love?”, the Tramp resurrects Davies’ nostalgic spirit, this time positively. Sung as a duet with Mary-Ann Price, and you’ll have to beg the indulgence of the romantic in me, I have always envisioned this song marking a reunion of the Tramp with his beloved Genevieve. As this is the Tramp’s last song in the narrative, I also picture the character fleeing from the chaos – but again, there is no specific hint of this in the libretto. If any of you ever meet Ray Davies, run that by him and see what he thinks.

In the next two tracks, we return to Mr. Flash. “Flash’s Dream (The Final Elbow)” is a goofy scene of straight-up dialog, consisting of Mr. Flash being awoken by his conscience, who tells him to “take one final look into the past, Flash, because you have no future!” The track even includes snippets of audio from *Act One*, climaxing in a sound collage where Flash comes face to face with his misdeeds.

[Song: “Flash’s Confession”]

Flash awakens from his dream and confesses everything, all of his shortcomings and all of his wrongdoings. What motivates him is his ominous vision: “I was standing on the street with a whole crowd of people / No one knew my name, I was just another face.” The first few lines intimate some level of narcissism on the part of Mr. Flash, where no longer being the rock-star politician gracing neon-lit billboards is his idea of Hell. However, in a classic example of Ray Davies’ knack for lyrical twists, he hits the nerve: “No one looked at me or touched me, spoke to or acknowledged me / I had no identity or individuality / No thoughts of my own, no mind or personality / I was just a no one, a total nonentity.” Flash’s dream was not just of his own star fading, but of a

homogenized society where individual thought is as much a thing of the past as the village greens, the Angry Young Men, and Johnny Thunder. Musically, this is a mightily powerful performance. The lively surf lick from “Here Comes Flash” is slowed down here to a wah-wah drenched nightmarish vamp, punctuated by Judgment Day beats on the tympani from Mick Avory. John Dalton’s counter melody on the bass also deserves mention.

[Song: “Nothing Lasts Forever”]

Before giving himself up to the People’s Army, Flash seeks to reconcile with Belle, voiced on this track by Mary Anne Price. In the narrative, Flash’s remembrance of the way love used to be is met with Belle’s rebuke, asserting that time wounds all heels and that they had both changed. It is a gut-wrenching lyric, especially when Belle scoffs, “And who were we to think we’d always be? You see, nothing lasts forever.” Left alone and dejected, Flash goes into the gorgeous coda, where he vows “Your live will die, but mine will last forever [...] And though you are gone, you’re in my mind forever,” echoing the same bittersweet breakup sentiment in The Kinks’ 1969 single “Days.” Taken as art imitating life, this song is clearly the bookend of “Sweet Lady Genevieve,” where the bargaining has given way to depression and finally acceptance. This moment of heartache quickly subsides with the following tracks.

[Song: “Announcement 4”]

[Song: “Artificial Man”]

This is a song that requires the libretto, as we get Flash’s final words, but also Dave Davies singing the role of a Scientist, along with Ray playing Mr. Black. Flash can’t believe his nightmare is becoming a reality – by proxy, this is a nightmare that predates Flash’s dream on Side Three, one that can first be heard on the opener from *Muswell Hillbillies*, “20th Century Man,” where Ray expresses that today is “the age of machinery, a mechanical nightmare / The wonderful world of technology / Napalm, hydrogen bombs, biological warfare...” The Scientist and Mr. Black rave of an “antiseptic world, ruled by artificial people,” with technology used as a means to regulate, monitor, and control the population.

Mr. Flash is presumably the first of the population to succumb – against his will, mind you – to this conversion, from human to artificial man. “Tell the world we finally did it: modified the population / Put the senses and your mind under constant observation / Even when you’re dreaming...” meaning that even subconscious and unconscious thought is now under surveillance by the government. It is the stuff of dystopian science fiction, and a theme that still pervades popular culture to this day, but the song’s musical arrangement softens the lyrical blow, with its female chorus, Ray’s hilariously theatrical vocal delivery, and the song changing tempos, stopping and starting several times in a span of five and a half minutes.

The album’s closing tracks, “Scrapheap City,” the final announcement, and “Salvation Road,” bring the story to its conclusion. “Scrapheap City” is sung by Belle and her fellow floozies, as the libretto notes, while Flash’s empire is dismantled piece by piece. “Salvation Road” is led by Mr. Black. Now, I will let the three tracks play out without comment, and then ask for your thoughts on them and then on the opera as a whole.

Postscript: In the interest of sharing this lecture with the global Kinks community (kommunity?), I’ll give my thoughts on these final tracks here. As stated

above, this document functioned more or less as my script within a two-hour timeslot (hence the abbreviated discussions of select tracks).

I absolutely adore “Scrapheap City.” These final two songs might be the most extreme examples of Ray Davies’ pairing of grim lyrics with a catchy tune – see also “Did You See His Name,” “People Take Pictures Of Each Other,” “Life Goes On,” among others. The scenes described range from astute observations on the inherent ugliness of modern urban life – “Look at all the people / Why, they all look the same,” the visage of “identical concrete monstrosities” – to depressingly dystopian, where all of the flowers are dug up and the animals are being killed off. To add an extra level of earnestness to the lyrics, Ray has Mary Ann Price on vocals.

That final announcement about curfews, rationing, and the shutting down of all other media outlets is downright terrifying, and Chris Timothy’s matter-of-fact delivery drives home the horror.

A heavy note of triumph colors “Salvation Road,” the new national anthem, sung by “Everyone,” according to the libretto. I picture this song sung not by any of the fictional characters, but by Ray Davies himself, in the same way Charlie Chaplin’s end speech from **The Great Dictator** is thought of as Chaplin stepping out of character to directly address the audience. Ray bids “goodbye youth, goodbye dreams, good times and friends I used to know,” also giving a farewell to freedom and instead welcoming a climate of fear, where a “brave new world has suddenly appeared,” an obvious nod to Aldous Huxley’s novel.

In the finale, the chorus proclaims that the entire population will “all march along,” down the titular Salvation Road, but there is no doubt that with their freedoms removed – down to their own thoughts and dreams – that they are in a living Hell of sorts. Ray also ultimately casts away all nostalgia, not personally, but within the narrative, where he pledges, “No more reminiscing.” This provides an extreme counter to Black’s revival of the good ol’ days of pillories and public beheadings for sexual deviants – practitioners of various sexual kinks, if you will, with or without an uppercase K – a world where living in the past is discouraged.

When I first heard **Preservation** in my youth, roughly the same amount of time passed between hearing **Act One** and **Act Two** for me as there was for the record-buying public, about six months. As I went about my daily eighth-grade existence, picking up nearly every other Kinks album (but for some reason keeping myself in such suspense), I found myself entranced by Mr. Black’s promises of freedom and happiness.

On my first listen-through of **Act Two**, I was disappointed and even a little upset about the ending. It felt a lot like John Updike’s hapless Sammy at the end of his short story “**A & P**,” where his principled stand is met with indifference, and his intended audience is nowhere to be found. The story ends with one of my favorite lines in all of literature:

“...my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.”

Call it a valuable life lesson: the world in which we live is one of moral ambiguities at best and inherent hypocrisies at its worst, where “family man” politicians (on any end of the spectrum – there’s a John Edwards for every Newt Gingrich) are routinely caught having affairs, where anti-gay clergy commit acts of same-sex pedophilia, where anti-gun politicians (and presidents) turn a blind eye to

children killed overseas by drone strikes, and where the assurances of safety and prosperity only end in the stripping away of our basic rights.

*My own leftist preaching aside, I came to appreciate the story for what it was as I grew older. Musically, I think it represents The Kinks at their most diverse, which is saying something – consider the baroque-edged sound of **VGPS**, the symphonic rock of **Arthur**, forays into hard rock on **Lola** and **Percy**, trad-jazz and country on **Muswell Hillbillies** and **Everybody's In Showbiz**, never mind previous excursions into world music like “See My Friends” and “No Return” – and the band clearly worked hard (or were at least pressed hard by their bandleader) to turn in some masterful performances.*

*Each member stands on their own merits: despite the absence of guitar solos, Dave plays some incredible riffs and licks throughout, Dalton's bass playing on **Act 2** is punchy and melodic, Mick Avory remains one of the greatest underrated rock drummers, and John Gosling's chops are in full force on the entire opus. Ray also gives the best vocal performances of his entire career, ranging from goofy camp theatrics to angry politicking to emotive heartbreak.*

The entire package is an astounding work, made under a good deal of personal duress on the part of its creator, a breathtaking work of satire from a man who stands as one of rock's greatest satirists.