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STING | ANDY PARTRIDGE  
CHRIS DIFFORD & GLENN TILBROOK  
MADNESS | ANNIE LENNOX  
BILLY BRAGG | JOHNNY MARR  
NEIL TENNANT & CHRIS LOWE  
LEE MAVERS | DAMON ALBARN  
NOEL GALLAGHER | JARVIS COCKER  
LILY ALLEN | LAURA MARLING :|  
**ISLE OF NOISES | DANIEL RACHEL**  
CONVERSATIONS WITH GREAT  
BRITISH SONGWRITERS

**DANIEL RACHEL**

# **ISLE OF NOISES**

**CONVERSATIONS WITH GREAT BRITISH SONGWRITERS**

**PICADOR**

**Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again.**

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act III, sc. ii.

**What do you call that noise that you put on? This is pop.**

'This Is Pop', Andy Partridge

# INTRODUCTION

*If the will of every man were free, that is, if every man could act as he pleased, all history would be a series of disconnected accidents.* LEO TOLSTOY, *WAR AND PEACE*

5–4–3–2–1, counted down the introduction to Manfred Mann’s 1964 top-five hit, signalling the start of *Ready Steady Go!* I was a teenager when I first watched a Channel 4 rerun of the show, and as the declaration THE WEEKEND STARTS HERE filled the screen in bold letters, I was transported back to the heyday of classic British songwriting – the time of The Beatles, The Who and The Kinks. The songs put to shame many of the superficial records of the Eighties and invited me to explore a popular music beyond the immediate present.

Having spent a lifetime listening to records and making my own music, I have always been intrigued by the creative process behind popular songs. I was instinctively drawn by the small mysterious piece of information that sat beneath each song’s title: the name of the songwriter. I was fascinated to imagine Lennon and McCartney, Pete Townshend or Raymond Douglas Davies plucking words and melody out of the ether, and hunted for information about composition in biographies and magazines. Disappointingly the focus was invariably on the musicians’ lifestyle. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Paul Zollo wrote a book called *Songwriters On Songwriting*. It was a collection of interviews with many of North America’s most celebrated writers talking about their craft. It is a compelling and absorbing read. Sometime in the late 1990s I found myself in Borders bookshop on Charing Cross Road asking for the British equivalent. To my amazement, it did not exist. A seed

was planted and ten years later I made up my mind to fill the gap.

To a songwriter, the question of what comes first, the words or the music, is a tired cliché. Writing a song is a highly personal process. If successful, the result is shared with an audience of thousands if not millions, something that requires composers to ‘let go’ of their precious creations. When I talked with the twenty-seven songwriters in this book I had all my questions laid out in front of me divided into neat themes: Words; Melody; Routine; Audience/Performance; Musicality; Building a Song. I was fascinated by how differently each songwriter responded, and keen to follow up the unexpected insights they offered. Common themes began to emerge, as well as the idiosyncrasies of individual methods. They should be easy to find, whether you choose to read this book sequentially or just dip and skip. The most frequent phrase to appear is ‘There is no one way to write’. It is no surprise. The book is a celebration of imagination, and its insights are gained not only from the artists’ precise analysis of their own methods but also from their self-protective deflections.

In all but two of the conversations (Pet Shop Boys and Annie Lennox) my questions were not submitted ahead of talking with the artist. As a result, what you will read here is the transcription of songwriters’ words as they collect their thoughts and search for the exact phrases to capture their meaning. It is likely that only a few of the musicians will remember what they said to me until they read this book (although Bryan Ferry, Mick Jones, Madness, Annie Lennox, Pet Shop Boys, Damon Albarn and Noel Gallagher all approved their chapters ahead of publication), but the threads

of their thoughts reflect their deepest beliefs and working practices. A few stories may seem to be more rehearsed anecdotes from rock 'n' roll mythology, but whilst they may be known by one set of fans, they may be entirely new to the next. The artists are presented chronologically, loosely based upon the timing of their initial impact in musical history. This arrangement reflects developments in politics, social change and recording technology, all of which affect writing, from the language of the lyrics to the equipment of the recording studios and the devices songwriters employ to remember ideas.

I began writing the book by making a list of classic British rock and pop songwriters. Forty or fifty names immediately came to mind, but if the project was to cover fifty years, it felt right to condense the list to twenty-five artists. Since I was taking John Lennon and Paul McCartney's composition and recording of 'Love Me Do' in 1962 as the starting point of modern British music, I decided that the songwriters also needed to be performers. I also tried to give each of the decades from the Sixties to the present day roughly equal representation. By now the list of artists was slimming down to a more manageable thirty names. I discussed my ambition with Richard Thomas, a man renowned for his encyclopaedic knowledge of music and connected to both the rock and pop and the literary worlds. His response was encouraging but also realistic. Musing on why no one had ever attempted this before, he perhaps answered his own question by predicting that only a third of the list would agree to participate and that the project would take at least five years to complete. I then picked up the phone, searched the Internet for contact numbers and names, and began to send out invitations.

People say 'No' because they have not been persuaded to say 'Yes' – this was my maxim throughout the process. I have pestered, annoyed and cajoled in the pursuit of my ambition. I was convinced that the book belonged on the shelves of every music lover, musician, writer and social historian. I clung doggedly to this belief despite repeated rejections from within both the publishing and the music industries. Whilst this is not a definitive work by any stretch of the imagination, I would argue that the artists involved have all contributed uniquely to the progression of classic

British songwriting. But what is meant by that term, 'classic'?

A song can get us from A to B as simply and effectively and with the same familiarity as a daily journey to work or a walk to the local pub. But some songwriters choose to take the scenic route. It's still the same starting and finishing point, but our minds have been opened along the way and our senses excited. Along with depth, originality and imagination, great music that makes a lasting impression has an honest craftsmanship running through it. Over time, and often with renewed appreciation, we bestow the word 'classic' upon it.

Equally tricky to pinpoint is the unique character of 'British' music. When we identify music in this way, we are making an association with the spoken voice of our language: dialect, slang, places and names. We recognize our accents and phrases, common codes of speech and our stresses of expression, but at the same time much of our island's musical heritage is imported. It would be a bold musician indeed who would lay claim to British modern instrumental originality. In the wake of The Beatles, Sixties songwriters drew from American R&B, Fifties rock 'n' roll and pre-war genres. Even punk, despite all its posturing and claims to raw self-expression, found its roots in the same music as its predecessors. The beat was simplified and the rhythm straightened, but the style and structures were still essentially American. Reflecting the classical compositions of Walter Carlos (*Switched On Bach* and *A Clockwork Orange/Music From The Soundtrack*), electronica, which found favour with so many artists in the Eighties, was born out of a European phenomenon, particularly the Seventies German movement that produced Faust, Can, Neu! and Kraftwerk. Musicians learn through imitation. Their originality is in the revoicing of an influence with creative imagination.

Only four female songwriters are questioned in the book. This is a reflection of historical male dominance, though a few artists turned down invitations to participate and some are no longer with us, namely Sandy Denny, Kirsty MacColl and Amy Winehouse. I was keen to address the gender disparity by asking the songwriters I met for their thoughts on the subject. Their answers make for fascinat-

ing reading and it is no accident that the final chapters of the book, representing the most contemporary work, come from two female songwriters, Lily Allen and Laura Marling.

This book chronicles a golden age of British songwriting through the artists who have made their mark on the music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The joy of their work will always be in the listening: the words best sung; the music best felt. But the conversations that follow offer a privileged insight into each writer's imagination. The techniques revealed range from editing and sharpening wordplay to finding rhythms and rhymes, and from pursu-

ing melody in search of hooks to exploring studio possibilities. *Isle of Noises* challenges the notion that youth alone provides originality, whilst the wider conversation champions songwriters who have followed their artistic instincts, free from convention or commercial constraint. At a time when technological advances constantly distract listeners from the craft of songwriting – downloads without compositional credits; songwriting acknowledgements reduced to unreadable sizes on the iPod – there has never been a better moment to celebrate fifty years of classic British songwriting. God Save the Noise.

# RAY DAVIES

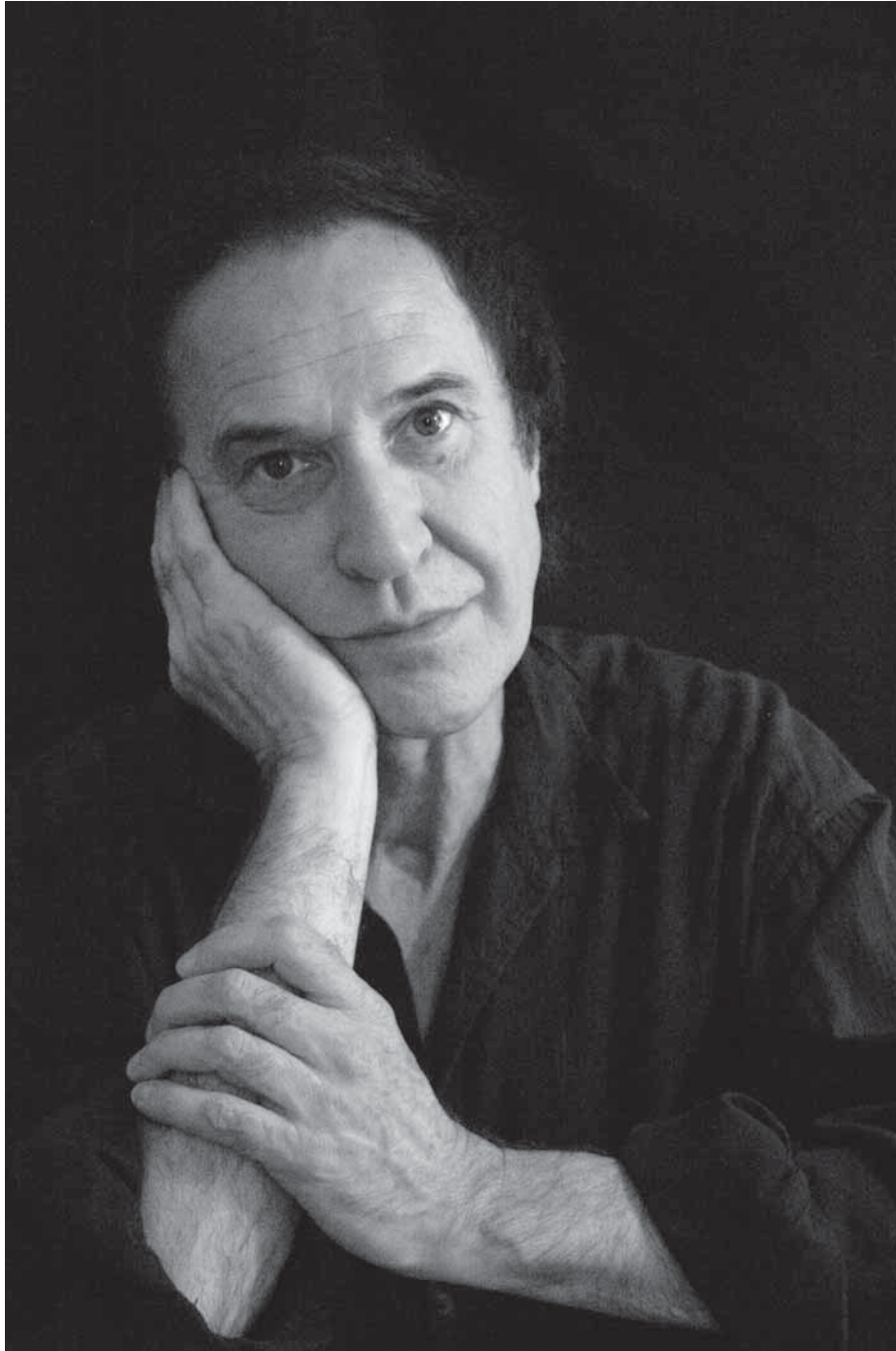
*And just when I wanted no one to be there / All of my friends were there / Not just my friends / But their best friends too.*

Behind Ray Davies is the celebrated British music hall tradition: an era of song, laughter and alcohol. Music hall was riotous and unconstrained by the Royal Patent which regulated legitimate theatres, and its songs told stories in the folk tradition. Rogues, wastrels and criminals were remembered and even celebrated on the Victorian stage, like 'Sam Hall' or George Leybourne's comic character 'Champagne Charlie'. The created persona is also a characteristic of Ray Davies's songwriting. Just as the revered Vesta Tilley was the first music hall star to dress as a man, so 'Lola' was the first male pop character to dress as a woman. The molly houses of eighteenth-century London streamed with cross-dressers and effeminate masculine personalities. Following in the tradition, music hall stars were able to offer a contrast to contemporary prudishness just as modern pop can challenge archaic attitudes. Hoxton-born Marie Lloyd sang the saucy 'She'd Never Had Her Ticket Punched Before'. This story of a naive country girl arriving wide-eyed in London has echoes in the Davies ballads 'Big Black Smoke' and 'Polly'. His songbook runs riot with sexual ambiguity as well as an eye for male vulnerability: 'Out Of The Wardrobe' and the more directly *gay and fancy-free* figure of 'David Watts'. The Kinks, as their name suggested, played theatrical camp.

The London of 1860 had conspicuous parallels with the world Ray Davies would mirror in song a century later. More than 50,000 prostitutes were earning a living on the streets of the capital. The city was rife with disease and filled with an awful stench from the Thames, and tens of thousands

of families lived packed into one-room tenements. Charles Booth's study of the working class revealed that almost a third of Londoners were living on or around the poverty line. In 1966, at the height of the media-proclaimed Swinging Sixties, the disparity between excess and bare existence was equally shocking. When England lifted the World Cup at Wembley the nation's number one singalong was 'Sunny Afternoon'. Davies had conceived the song in stark contrast to the mood of the age. Behind the knees-up rousing chorus the song attacked in subtle, cutting verse the *big fat momma*, symbol of an all-consuming, taxing government, and the *drunkenness and cruelty* of a broken-down aristocrat. 'Dead End Street' reflected the country's failings with equally devastating observation, referring to *a crack up in the ceiling* and family nourishment limited to bread and honey. The song was reminiscent of Fred W. Leigh and Charles Collins's standard 'My Old Man', which told of a couple fleeing from the burden of unpaid rent. Davies's compositions offered musical gaiety to sweeten bitter tales. The naked E major descending scale of 'The Money Go Round' robed itself in vaudeville delivery whilst attacking the theft of intellectual property. 'All Of My Friends Were There' described a *disguise of shame* with a worn moustache and parted hair. Out of the circus rhythm, falling notes in F major release the song's joviality into a beautifully segued half-time melancholy. Wit was a Davies tool of anger handled with precision blows.

The great British songwriting legacy is traditionally in defiance of the establishment. Like Jagger and Richards, the outspoken Davies paid little heed to convention. A century earlier Harry Clifton had accepted payment from factory owners to write songs encouraging employees to graft,



**Ray Davies at home, 2009 by Chris Metzler**



but 'Work, Boys, Work and Be Contented' reflected a very different mood from the industrial world of the Sixties. Davies voiced the grievances and plight of the neglected working man. His songs recognized the hardship and struggle at the propping-up end of society. '(Wish I Could Fly Like) Superman' was a song of escapism from strikes and bills, whilst the celluloid dreamer of 'Oklahoma USA' asks *all life we work but work is a bore, if life's for livin' then what's livin' for?* Davies's songbook is a chronicle capturing the pulse and heart of the British working man. His stories show the realities with telling insights from everyday life, and his observations blend quaint and humorous storytelling with damning indictments of authority. He tells of prosaic characters and their everyday rituals, such as taking *afternoon tea* or *roast beef on a Sunday*, watching football or negotiating the weights and pulls of emotional attachment. His words are accessible and easy to understand, and there is a magnetism in the song construction that is deceptive in its simplicity. One of The Kinks' greatest achievements was *The Village Green Preservation Society*, celebrating a nostalgic image of a disappearing world. The village green acts as the focal point for the characters of 'Walter' and 'Johnny Thunder', representing a decaying of innocence. But it was not just a fondness for the past and the last *good old-fashioned steam-powered trains* that informed the album. There was an underlying sense of hope, determination and an ache for change. As the Seventies dawned, Davies would take these desires and re-examine his relationship to pop music.

The fountainhead of Ray Davies's imagination is London. 'Waterloo Sunset' conjures the unique atmosphere of the city's famous river. It is the nearest pop music has to Impressionism in art. The paintings of Whistler and Monet depict the fog of London shrouding the Thames, and Davies too draws the *dirty old river* with strokes of enduring symbolism. His eye for detail came from an art-school background. As a student at Croydon Art College he regularly crossed Waterloo Bridge, and this, coupled with a brief period as an in-patient at St Thomas' Hospital where he was able to watch the river flow, provided the idea for the song. His simple storytelling and eye for life's everyday detail bring to mind Hogarth's paintings and the fiction of Charles Dickens. Davies, though, connects with his audience via the highly

accessible channel of popular melody. 'Waterloo Sunset' rests on three sets of five-note melodies working their way lazily down one octave. Another inspirational Londoner, William Blake, published in 1794 his collection *Songs Of Innocence And Of Experience*. The poems juxtapose the contrary states of humanity that interest Davies: good with corruption; childishness with adulthood; sexual purity with lust and jealousy. Two centuries may divide the writings, but the common ground is clear. Like Blake before him, Davies is keenly attuned to the city and the human beings who inhabit it.

In 1964, the newly elected Labour government, the first in thirteen years, boasted a straight-talking prime minister with a Yorkshire accent. The Kinks, too, traded on accent. Davies sang in his natural north London voice, establishing a semi-spoken delivery. Equally characteristic of The Kinks' early releases was the group's instrumentation. The sound of Dave Davies's guitar on 'You Really Got Me' and 'All Day And All Of The Night' was revolutionary. Both songs rested upon raw driven chord movement, abrupt key changes and fierce staccato. Fifty years later Metallica re-recorded 'You Really Got Me' for Ray's collaborations album. It represented a homecoming for heavy rock's founding influence. Before the invention of foot pedals to change frequency dynamics at the press of switch, Ray's younger brother experimented by skewering a knitting needle into his eight-amp guitar speaker. Dave's home-modelled Green Amp, once fed through a Vox AC30, emitted a cacophonous distorted effect. It was ahead of its time and defined the early Kinks sound.

The Davies brothers were born at 6 Denmark Terrace, Muswell Hill. Raymond Douglas arrived on 21 June 1944 as British troops advanced through Italy. Three years later David Russell Gordon completed the family of two boys and six girls. 'Come Dancing', written by Ray four decades on, and adapted in 2008 as an award-winning off-West End musical, nostalgically revisited his childhood memories: his sister dancing *at the local Palais* and he the unseen observer at the window watching *two silhouettes saying goodnight by the garden gate*. Tragically, on the eve of Ray's thirteenth birthday, his older sister Rene collapsed on a West End ballroom dance floor and never recovered consciousness.

Her present to him was a Spanish guitar. It was the birth of Ray's complex relationship with music. The front room of Denmark Terrace offered a new space for night-time revelry. It was the home of the family piano and later the gramophone, and the room of entertainment, particularly when the boys' father came home drunk from the pub over the road. The finger-picking country-and-western-styled two chords of 'You Really Got Me' were radicalized with dramatic key shifts and repetition on the front-room upright. Davies would increasingly construct ideas at the piano. He told *Melody Maker* in 1966, 'The chords come first. The lyrics grow from fitting words to sounds . . . I'm not a good piano player. If you are reasonably good on an instrument and use it to compose on then you tend to get too complex – and that doesn't work in pop music.' Ray and Dave had served their apprenticeship in north London free-and-easies. In 1960 The Ray Davies Quartet, augmented by school friend Pete Quaife, performed their first shows, playing local dances. The band name changed from The Ramrods to The Boll Weevils to The Ravens until a settled line-up with the addition of Mick Avory on drums signed to Pye Records as The Kinks on 23 January 1964. Within a year the quartet was celebrating a trio of number-one singles.

For the next four years Davies's rapidly developing conversational tone demanded centre stage. Band arrangements become subservient to narrative storytelling. 'Where Have All The Good Times Gone' recalled *Daddy didn't have no toys and mummy didn't need no boys*; 'Well Respected Man' reflects Fifties conformity and class, but the main character secretly *adores the girl next door 'cause he's dying to get at her*; 'Dedicated Follower Of Fashion' points to the writer's interest in subterfuge: *they seek him here, they seek him there*; 'Situations Vacant' addresses upward social mobility and 'Mr Pleasant' superficial domestic happiness. Ray was the cruel observer with a fragile vocal delivery: *if I can't have you to myself / set me free*. The writing revelled in the elasticity of language: *my poor rheumatic back / yes, yes, yes it's my autumn almanac* and was sparing in the use of the word *love*. Davies brought an emotional and intellectual core to popular music delivered with subtle satire and social commentary. His trick was to favour imagination over reportage. Unfortunately in 1966, the American Fed-

eration of Musicians of the United States withheld permits, preventing The Kinks from touring the country. The Davies brothers' historical infighting on stage had fallen foul of an Anglo-American union agreement. In 1969 Ted Dreber, assistant president of the Federation, told *Rolling Stone* magazine that although there was no reference to the band on file the 'reciprocity agreement allows either union to withhold permits for a group if they behave badly on stage or fail to show for scheduled performances without good reason'. In 'Americana' Davies described the problem slightly differently: . . . *the English beat group known as The Kinks are banned from America / Their licence to perform has been revoked indefinitely*, before centring the disagreement on an altercation with a television union representative: *You with your red hunting jackets and your yellow frilly shirts . . . you're never gonna work in America again*. For Ray it was a disastrous and at the same time pivotal moment in his career. He responded by going underground. What emerged was exploratory and adventurous writing rewarded with commercial wilderness. Spirituality undercut 'God's Children'. Loss, depth and maturity blessed the *endless and sacred 'Days'*. The successful writer 'Sitting In My Hotel' *dressed in satin strides and two-tone daisy roots . . . writing songs for old-time vaudeville revues* was a sumptuous piano ballad with unexpected movement of chords and melody. As the Seventies began the American ban was lifted but Davies has always felt that The Kinks were denied their greatest opportunity. The country would embrace the band again, culminating with a performance (including the appropriately titled 'Give The People What They Want') to a sold-out Madison Square Garden in 1981, but the momentum of the Sixties had been irrevocably crushed.

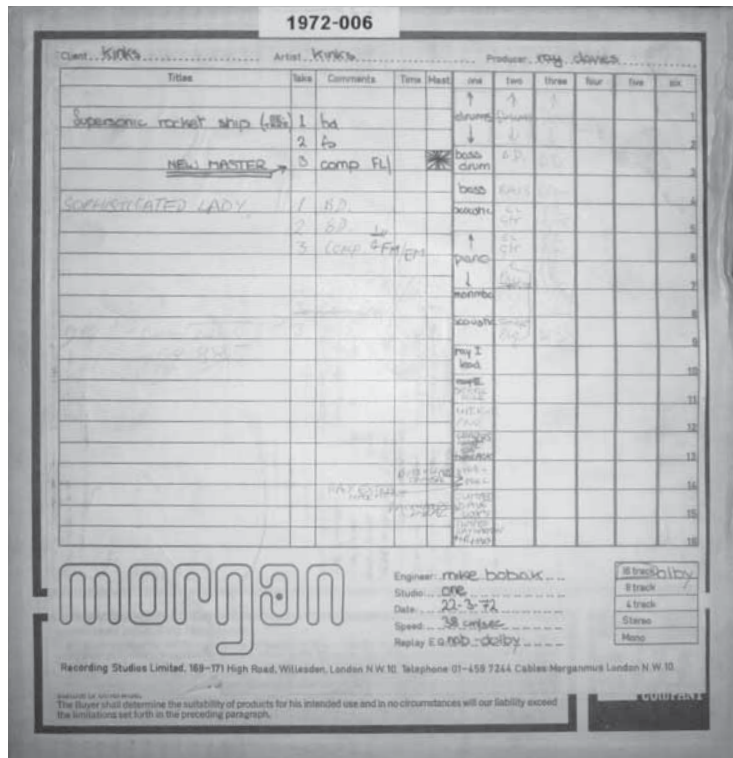
The British Music Hall Society motto, 'cherishing the jewels of Britain's musical past but actively supporting the interests of the future' might have been created for The Kinks. Much of the extensive commentary on the band's work would have you believe that Davies's writing career halted abruptly sometime around the end of the Sixties, then briefly reappeared in the early Eighties, before conducting a valedictory tour in the 2000s. Music chart statistics do a great disservice by suggesting that success is directly linked to artistic achievement. The songwriting

of Ray Davies dispels this notion single-handedly. After a breathtaking run of magnificent singles in the Sixties, he began to look outside mainstream expectation. A series of records investigated the possibilities of the long-player and its relationship to popular music. They were bold and daring explorations. *Soap Opera* addressed the privileges of fame, using spoken-word links. *Schoolboys In Disgrace* was a collected song cycle examining education whilst *Preservation I and II* took Davies's theatrical leanings into scripted character parts. The release of *Arthur (Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire)* in 1969 coincided with The Who's rock opera, *Tommy*. The two albums, though vastly different in conception, embraced a thematic song cycle reminiscent of Italian cantata. But whereas Pete Townshend began to sidestep the structures of the popular song, verse, chorus, middle eight, Davies remained episodic, allowing each song to work independently within the greater theme. In his twenties Davies had taken orchestral lessons and their influence has affected various of his projects since. A com-

missioned piece, *Flatlands*, in the early Eighties, recorded with the Britten Sinfonia, used a choral offering to evoke the atmosphere of the Norfolk landscape. *The Kinks Choral Collection* in 2009 allowed long-forgotten gems such as the yearning 'Celluloid Heroes' and the suburban conformity of 'Shangri-La' to be arranged for the Crouch End Festival Choir. Noel Gallagher employed the same voices in his debuting *Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds* in 2011. It was a clear tribute and a reminder of a 66-year-old's influence in the new millennium.

In conversation Davies has consistently and perhaps deliberately given his songs ambiguous interpretations. *X-Ray: The Unauthorized Autobiography* was a masterclass in veiled truths and opacity. He is like a crossword: the pleasure is found in the challenge, not the personality of the game-setter. Meeting for our conversation was a flirtation of phone calls, theatre visits and backstage bonhomie. Ray has a kind, inviting manner and is a tease when explaining the songwriting process.

**The Kinks' 'Supersonic Rocket Ship'  
2" tape box, 1972**



**Carol Ann Duffy suggested in an interview that words take on a greater value when they are typed because in print they seem more glamorous and important.**

Strangely enough, thinking back to ‘Dedicated Follower Of Fashion’, that was typed out, first draft, never changed a word, as was ‘Come Dancing’. I use a pen quite a lot. I do like to write things out. I keep lots of notes. She’s absolutely correct. It’s maybe an age thing, but if I see something typed out on a screen I can only really evaluate it when it’s in hard copy. So I’d go one step further: they have more power when you see the hard copy and even more value when they’ve been chiselled out in the lithograph.

**When you have ideas how do you remember or capture them?**

I’ve gone through periods of not writing anything down, believing if the idea is good it will stick. It’s a really good question: whatever it takes. I literally do use serviettes in restaurants. I carry a bag round with me sometimes with various quite thick notepads. I’ve been a bit slack this year; I’ve only used two notepads up. There’s always a few sheets of paper in my pocket.

**When you’re pulling ideas together do you need certain circumstances in which to write?**

I remember writing when I had my first marriage. I had the television on. I was playing music. The two kids were crawling around the floor. All right, I was twenty-two years old, but I could work better in that situation than in silence. I liked being bombarded with external sources. My theory at that time was, if the idea’s good it can survive all these onslaughts from the outside world.

**Has the capacity stayed with you?**

To a degree. I try to take the preciousness out of writing. Alone in a quiet room I tend to be too reverential of the space needed. It’s the old Jimmy Webb theory: apparently when he wrote ‘Up, Up And Away’ and the hits for The 5th Dimension he lived in a car and had a very transient lifestyle. According to folklore he had all the success, bought a fantastic house, put a studio in it and then couldn’t write.

**Did that ever happen to you when you made the move from Muswell Hill to larger houses at the peak of your success?**

It worked to a degree. Sometimes you need space. The tidier the space the tidier the ideas; and they’re not always interesting.

**I recently saw the Victoria & Albert exhibition dedicated to the artistic life of Annie Lennox. She explained how moving landscapes from taxi windows, tour buses or trains sparked her imagination.**

I know what she means, people writing in transit, that's a good way to write. Like I say, the ideas have to be more durable and have to sustain themselves. If you're in perfect silence . . . that's why people drink, I suppose.

**How developed are your ideas before they are committed to a written form?**

I think the thought process is interesting. We didn't have tape recorders when I started writing songs. You couldn't tape ideas. I had to notate a lot of stuff. I've still got 'You Really Got Me' notated somewhere. Generally speaking, the good ideas stay in the head. I've got a couple of tunes going round my head and they won't leave me alone until they're finished. It's something I've built into my artillery. I use military words for songwriting: my artillery, my weaponry. I train my brain to remember incidents and people; sometimes they morph into one, certainly in a work like *Return To Waterloo*. That was an interesting project because for a couple of years I was going up on that same route making notes about imaginary people: people that I'd observed. Then I wrote the screenplay for it and it all just came out. It was all in my head. The discipline of that was interesting because each railway station along the line had a specific memory. I didn't realize it. I was writing that treatment for the two years I was taking that journey up on the train with it going through my head. When I got the commission to write it I took the journey on the train and said, 'Yes, I remember that man, this will happen at the second part of the story and this station reflects that emotion.' It's an interesting way, sort of Pavlov's theory of writing songs, writing a bigger piece.

**Reading the *Waterloo Sunset* short stories gives the impression that your songs have developed backstories much as an actor's depth of character is implied by suggestion, not explicit explanation.**

You can't do too much with a three-minute song. It's possible to layer it in such a way and throw in lyrics, ideas that trigger the imagination of the listener. All great songs can do that. I like to put in backstory. My theory is this: doesn't matter if you're writing a novel or doing an Edward Bond play or doing a short sketch on TV; if you've got the backstory right, you know the characters right.

**Do you write in long form and then condense it down to a pop-song structure?**

I believe in the three-act structure whether it be a film, play or song. It's a little test. Sometimes it doesn't work, but it's a good rule I have.

### **Aristotle would say the final act is resolution.**

I guess you've got character, conflict and resolution. Sometimes it's bad to write to that sort of formula. It's a good thing to have in the artillery.

### **Much of your writing thrives on other people's lives; what is the attraction?**

One of my favourite actors is Alec Guinness. I was shocked when he was interviewed saying the reason he's so good in all these great characters he played is because he's like an empty shell. Most good actors let the character consume them. One of the first books I bought after I started writing songs was Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*. I learnt that a lot of the rules that actors use can be applied to songwriting. It's not as profound being a songwriter, but I am more interested in seeing other people. Other people's lives have to resonate in me or else I couldn't write the song. Sometimes it takes strangers that fascinate me to trigger off the creative urge. I like non-attractive people with big emotions.

### **What would make you reject an idea?**

Feeling I'd done it before. I've got a high rejection rate and I reject too easily. There's only so many ideas, so many things you can write about. The secret is to put things in it that are unique. I'm writing a couple of love songs; it's really hard to write them. They're the ones that go through my head all the time and I'll put something unique in and I'll find something. It's like whittling down. I used to describe songwriting – I think it's when I was writing 'Waterloo Sunset' – it's like whittling down a stone and smoothing out the rough edges: it becomes perfect. You have to pitch songs to yourself. Sell it to yourself.

### **Have you had to overcome dried-up periods?**

It's not drying out, when you sit down and write . . . like this morning I got up and I wrote some things and was finishing off some unfinished work. I realized sometimes the reason there's a problem with a particular song is it should be a bigger piece. So I started writing a bigger piece of music because that's what I was trying to do, but I thought I was doing a three-minute song. So I got it out of my system and put some samples in and created a more orchestral pad. Sometimes the orchestra's enough and you don't need the lyric. It's one of my ambitions to do an instrumental record with just as much narrative in it as some of my songs. Revisiting *The Village Green Preservation Society* was an overwhelming and humbling experience. I was amazed by the depth of the songs. I re-demoed every song to bring out the words. I did skeleton arrangements before they were orchestrated. I was very proactive in that area. There's a narrative to it which really worked for me. It made me realize I must have



Alcohol.

selfish wife's financial ambition.

500 25, Old St  
Butlington

Demon alcohol.

Sad memories I can't recall  
never thought that I would fall,  
a slave to demon alcohol.

Jim Blighan  
and blower

Here a sad and woe full story,  
of a middle class executive  
who enjoyed a life of prominent position  
but the pressures at the office  
and those socialite engagements  
~~put his nerves in quite a serious condition.~~  
and his selfish wife's financial ambition.

Then he got mixed up with a flusey  
and she turned him on to booz

Then he beat his wife and ended up  
in prison.

And it led him to a life of indignation

Served his sentence. Lost his job  
a bowl of soup at a salvation army mission  
drink sudden lag at some

known something then when I did it. Being in a band is difficult . . . I think if I'd approached it as a piece in its own right without the band, I'm not saying it'd be more successful; I can't say that it stands as a great band album . . . there are many aspects on the record that no other band could have played, certainly some of the weirder Eastern European-sounding tracks. Only The Kinks could have done that.

### **Do you like re-visiting the past?**

It's hell. The past is something you can't take back; it's wonderful. The joy of doing *Village Green*; it allowed me to interpret the songs. We didn't change any notes but the arrangements stretched and allowed the songs to breathe more, which was very rewarding for me.

### **Do you go back and listen to your own records?**

With songs I haven't done live for a long time, I just get the lyric sheet out and that tells me everything. It's interesting to note songs like 'Misfits' and 'Full Moon', how the songs thematically express themselves in a story-like narrative. I haven't sung 'Misfits' in years and it ends like it should end. The key phrases come out. Songs evolve over the years. 'Lola' writes its own arrangement; you just sing the song. It's always there. What I'm discovering is the value of doing things acoustically. If it works acoustically it will work with a big band. I never used to do that. When I was with The Kinks I always used to write songs that would suit them as an entity.

### **Can you recall the sentiment behind writing 'Lola'?**

It was about love, but not directly. The song was designed. I didn't show the words to the band. We just rehearsed it with the *la-la la-la Lo-la* chorus which came first. I had a one-year-old daughter at the time and she was singing along to it. But I was bothered by the arpeggio guitar at the beginning. I said, 'It's got to be a hit in the first three seconds.' Later I went back in the studio and took the phrase at the end of the verse, C C C C D E, and replayed it at the beginning to grab people's attention. I had a new Martin acoustic guitar which I tracked three times all slightly out of time to give it character. And then I put a National guitar on top of it.

### **What was the ambition at the turn of the Seventies behind creating more theatrical works like *Arthur*, *Preservations I and II*, *Soap Opera* or *Schoolboys In Disgrace*?**

The Who and The Kinks were both on a quest for the same destination but went about it in different ways. I did it with things like 'Shangri-La' and 'Australia', what people call the section songs: the thematic songs.



I was trying to set up the idea that songs could be playlets, small theatre pieces. To put them in a format so they could be treated as more than a three-minute pop song. I will always aspire to write the great three-minute song. I've not written it yet. 'You Really Got Me', 'All Day And All Of The Night' and 'Tired Of Waiting For You' came close. I just know there's more juice in the tank. Better performances. There's always a better song to sing.

**You once said 'Two Sisters' was like playing a chess game; a couple of more mediocre lines thrown in before the killer move *no longer jealous of her sister*. Similarly 'Wonderboy' is about the joy of life before the pay-off refrain *life is lonely*.**

That's true. I can pick up on something Jackson Browne said to me. We were doing 'Waterloo Sunset' on the collaborations album. He said, 'I don't need *no* friends?' He said it twice. I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'That's the most beautiful thing I've ever had to sing. It doesn't make sense on the page but when you put it with the music . . .' I hadn't thought about it that way. The melody takes the curse off the grammar fault. The choice of words, the way they're pronounced, sometimes gives an emotion that's unexpected. *Don't* is the killer word because it's not correct. Great lines are only great because of what precedes them, maybe sometimes when they happen after. That's why I've got complete reverence for Shakespeare as I've got older. When we did *Schoolboys In Disgrace* I had the great joy of doing a mock Shakespeare in the live show when the headmaster had to give a speech. It's so great to liberate yourself to writing out the colours and the words used. It wasn't very good but it was effective. I did it in a Richard Burton impersonation (*laughing*). Speaking of Burton, I got a copy of *Under Milk Wood* recently and I played it in the car to drive to Wales. Why not have some Dylan Thomas? The language of Polly Garter is beautiful: she says *what a nose, there's a conk!* She's a loose woman and she's talking to one of the lovers, just great words and humour. Going back to the original question, I like to suppress certain words. 'Two Sisters' is a good example. It's mundane. It's ordinary and then you get a key change and that's the secret: a note change with a crucial word. Sometimes it gets that serious. There's a song called 'Motorway': *Motorway food is the worst in the world, you've never eaten food like you've eaten on the motorway, motorway food is the worst in the world* that goes on and on and on, goes to a chorus and at the end of the song is what the song is about: *Mama oh mama, my dear Suzie Q, this message is sent just for you . . . my back really hurts, I never thought I'd travel so far to work*. It's saying different things. It's setting it up like a list song at the beginning then it goes to the real emotion near the end. I do that. I set things up

like that and sometimes I come in with a punchline at the end. The classic example is from an album called *Everybody's In Showbiz* from the early Seventies. I played the album to the head of the record company and he said, 'Why's this album called *Everybody's In Showbiz*?' There's a song at the end called 'Celluloid Heroes' which is about six and a half minutes long but he sat there and he sat there and on the last few bars I sing *everybody's a dreamer and everybody's a star and everybody's in showbiz, it doesn't matter who you are*. He said, 'I get it, you set it up, I understand.' The man took the time to listen to it. Without that delay . . . punchlines are great if they come in straightaway: *She loves you yeah, yeah, yeah*, but sometimes they need a set-up. I like the song called 'Maximum Consumption' from that album. It's just making wordplay with menus.

### **How important is truth as a starting point to a lyrical idea?**

Oh, truth . . . well I'd say if I was looking at it as an assessment you can only write something if it's truthful to you, then you can believe it. Nothing can be honest if its premise is a lie. In fact there's a song I have about a compulsive liar. I've had it since I first started writing songs. It's a country song and I can't finish it. I wrote a lot of songs when I was living with my sister. Then when I joined the band I wrote a second bunch of songs. It's from then. I did a demo of it at home about four or five years ago. It's an exercise for me. I set myself impossible exercises to write songs about . . . to stretch. You've got to do a workout sometimes. It's like gymnasium exercises for your body: sometimes you need to work your brain out.

### **Do you believe you must hate something or have an element of cruelty to write from true emotion?**

There's a song called 'Mr Reporter', it's one of my minor songs. Dave and I both did versions of it. He actually says *I hate you, Mr Reporter* but I don't believe it, the word *hate*. Songs have to land. Musical songs land, they have a finish, a button. 'Hello Dolly' will have a button. The audience knows it's over. You've got to convey ideas. A good song we did on *Phobia* was called 'Hatred': *the only thing that lasts forever*. Dave and I as a duet, and that worked. But in 'Mr Reporter' the word was not set up. It's such a big word, 'hate'. I didn't really do my writing properly and the song didn't land as a result.

### **A curious thought: did having your brother in The Kinks offer you security or freedom to be more artistically expressive?**

When in doubt you . . . It was liberating to have him in the band. I did a song called 'Australia' years ago. I had to finish it really quickly; the back-track was down. I had *Opportunities are available in all walks of life*

*in Australia*, and I thought, I don't know what to write next. I wanted to make Dave laugh so I said *no one beats around the bush in Australia* and he laughed! That's what's great about bands rather than being singer-songwriters. You can try out things on the rest of the band and if it works for them then it's good enough for me. I went through a phase of not letting the band hear the lyrics until we'd done the back-track 'cause I thought they'd laugh or be disparaging towards me, so I kept them secret. 'Waterloo Sunset' was like that. I didn't want them to know what it was really about.

**Because of giving away something that's so personal to you?**

I don't know. I just didn't want them to play duff notes over it or do something to screw it up, and certainly with 'Wonderboy': please be realistic, what's that lyric all about?

**John Lennon said it was one of his favourite Kinks songs.**

*People strain their eyes to see, but I see you and you see me, and ain't that wonder?* Sometimes the metre of songs . . . good lines are thrown away. Like I just said that line, that's the way I'd like to sing it, but you can't in the confines of four 4/4 bars, usually. Sometimes I let the words dictate. I'm notorious for sticking in 3/4 and 2/4 bars on top of a rock song and going to a 9/8 bar. I've done that before, to the constant frustration and sometimes amusement of the musicians working with me. The words dictate the metre. The difference about writing then, it sounds cruel and harsh because I was young; now I'm more considered with writing.

**There's a beautiful song you wrote called 'Sweet Lady Genevieve' that has the lyrics *Once under a scarlet sky I told you never ending lies . . . I acted so slyly because you were acting so shy.***

Between that: *but they were the words of a drunken vagabond who knew very well he would break your heart before long. Oh forgive me, Genevieve.*

**Do you use characters to confront or disguise your own realities? 'Mirror Of Love' might be a similar example.**

I do use characters and that character is . . . as soon as the man starts speaking in 'Sweet Lady Genevieve' you don't trust him for one moment. Good character writing, I guess. 'Mirror of Love' is completely benign, it's innocent. It's a man looking in the mirror saying, 'You're not such a bad guy after all'; two different emotions entirely. It sets up a thought pattern with people.

**It's tempting to think the use of characters is a therapeutic device.**

Yeah, it is a disguise.