

“WHAT ARE WE LIVING FOR?”

THE POVERTY OF “DEAD END STREET”

PART ONE: The Song

Ray Davies had skewered both the upper crusts of society with “A Well Respected Man” in September 1965 and the more materialistic members of his generation on “Dedicated Follower Of Fashion” in February 1966, firmly establishing The Kinks as a working-class band. The June release of “Sunny Afternoon” would continue in the same vein,¹ topping the UK charts and peaking at #14 in the United States, their last hit in the US until “Lola” in 1970. All three were pomposity-deflating anthems, but they were still delivered in a humorous manner. For their next single, Ray would direct his lyrical camera to the social class he proudly championed and represented.

Recorded a week before the release of the *Face To Face* album, “Dead End Street” marks a new chapter in the music of The Kinks. As their fame faded into obscurity in the United States due to the American Federation of Musicians ban, Ray’s lyrics shifted to a distinctly English flavor. This era from 1966 to 1970² has been dubbed the band’s “golden age,” resulting from the development of Ray’s songwriting beyond mere pop into his own quirky, distinctive style. The world of pop music was changing, as the Dylan-inspired Beatles raised the bar with *Rubber Soul* at the end of 1965. Ray himself was on a Dylan kick when he wrote “Sunny Afternoon,”

¹ According to a press release issue by the band on May 23, 1966, “Sunny Afternoon” was the third component of a trilogy of Kinks songs “about society.” Quoted in Doug Hinman, *All Day And All Of The Night: Day By Day Recordings, Concerts, And Broadcasts, 1961-1996* (London: Backbeat Books, 2004), 83.

² The end point is extremely debatable. I have seen writers extend it to 1971 (to include *Muswell Hillbillies*) and 1972. My choice is reflective of the 1972 two-LP compilation, *The Kink Kronikles*, which covers everything from “Sunny Afternoon” to their import-only swansong for Pye Records, the soundtrack to the film *Percy* (1971).

specifically “Maggie’s Farm” and the *Bringing It All Back Home* album.³⁴ *Rubber Soul* divided the first wave of British Invasion bands into two camps: those who could keep up with the changes and those who couldn’t. The Who and The Rolling Stones would be of the former along with The Kinks, as all three would make their first truly innovative⁵ recordings in 1966.

“Dead End Street” sounds like nothing The Kinks had done before. This is due to Ray’s insistence on re-recording it after being displeased by the result yielded from producer Shel Talmy. Talmy had refused to oversee a re-recording, considering what was already in the can a hit. When played the Ray-produced version the next day, Talmy could not tell any difference.⁶ A major omission from the original was an organ part by tour manager Bill Collins,⁷ which Ray described as being “not bleak enough for my taste.”⁸ Also removed was a French horn arrangement, replaced with a trombone. Additionally, the band’s re-recorded version is slower, giving it a more appropriate, brooding feel.⁹ The song features two bass parts, one recorded by Dave on a standard bass, and the other by John Dalton¹⁰ on a Danelectro bass.¹¹ Perhaps most famously used by John Entwistle on The Who’s early recordings, notably the solo runs on “My

³ Loraine Alterman, “Who Let The Kinks In?”, *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 18, 1969. Archived on Dave Emlen’s Unofficial Kinks Website, <http://www.kindakinks.net> (accessed 17 March 2009).

⁴ It should be qualified that Dylan’s influence was evident at least as early as “A Well Respected Man” in 1965.

⁵ This isn’t to say their first *important* recordings.

⁶ Thomas Kitts, *Ray Davies: Not Like Everybody Else* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 78.

⁷ Collins was also the manager of a group from Swansea, Wales called The Iveys, who would eventually be signed to The Beatles’ Apple Records in 1968 and be renamed Badfinger.

⁸ Ray Davies, *X-Ray: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (Woodstock: Overlook, 2007), 324.

⁹ The original version of the song can be heard on the 2008 boxed set *Picture Book*.

¹⁰ John Dalton had been drafted into the band after original bassist Peter Quaife was injured in a car accident in June 1966. In September, Quaife announced he would not be returning, making Dalton a permanent member of the group. Quaife eventually changed his mind and re-joined in November. When he left for good in March 1969, Dalton was again tapped to replace him. He remained with the band until 1976.

¹¹ Neville Marten and Jeff Hudson, *The Kinks* (London: Sanctuary, 2001), 82.

Generation,” the Danelectro has a distinct sound, described by Dave Davies as “twangy, kind of Duane Eddyish.”¹²

The song begins with the doubled bass parts playing the main riff and the somber trombone arrangement, casting a pallor tone suitable for the equally grim lyrics. Considering the topic, the satirical edge present on the previous three singles and most of the *Face To Face* album is gone, replaced with a first-person depiction of urban squalor. The instruments crescendo into the opening verse. The song’s narrator wakes to see his cracked ceiling while his kitchen faucet continues to leak. Jobless and virtually broke, the “Sunday joint”¹³ is not a traditional Sunday meal, but instead a spartan helping of bread and honey.

In the pre-chorus, Ray speaks for many when he asks, “What are we living for?” It is made clear later in the song that this is not a usage of the majestic plural, but instead for the narrator and his significant other. The question is desultorily answered by the next line: “Two-roomed apartment on the second floor.” The landlord knocks on the door, hoping for a rent payment from his tenants. Are they living day to day, hoping to earn enough to pay rent? Beyond voicing the laments of the impoverished, there is an existentialist nature to this question: is this what life is all about, a series of deadlines to be met and bills to be paid? In a line that could just as easily describe the largely middling success The Kinks would face for most of their career, the narrator adds that “We are strictly second class.” There is a dual meaning to this, making a statement about the class system in England (which is essentially a pyramid, based on economic and social standing) as well as the treatment Her Majesty’s government bestowed upon its less-fortunate denizens.

¹² Dave Davies, *Kink* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 100.

¹³ “Joint” is used here to describe a cut of meat. Furthermore, the Sunday joint is a large meal, exactly like the typical meat and potatoes Sunday dinner. Thus, to have “a Sunday joint of bread and honey” is a melancholy statement on the scarcity of food.

One particular incident of national renown, cited by both Kitts¹⁴ and Hinman¹⁵ as having a profound impact on Ray was the Aberfan mining disaster. A mountain of coal waste, soaked after several days of heavy rain, collapsed in a massive landslide which slid into the town. Worst of all, the landslide pummeled into a school, killing 116 children. The measly £500¹⁶ issued by the National Coal Board as compensation for each child killed was decreased following the foundation of a public disaster fund.¹⁷ The disaster occurred on October 21st, the same day the band commenced work on “Dead End Street.” The Aberfan Disaster Fund closed in January of 1967,¹⁸ two months after the single was released. Although the news of the disaster reached London that same day, its details and subsequent fallout would not be known for some time. Regardless, Ray has acknowledged the influence the Aberfan disaster had on him, a staggering example of bureaucratic insensitivity and indifference to those seemingly beneath their social class.¹⁹ This mindset of the government paying little mind to the lower classes would occur in parts of *The Village Green Preservation Society* (1968) and *Arthur, Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire* (1969) and dominate on *Muswell Hillbillies* (1971) and the *Preservation* saga (1973-4).

Ray cleverly ends the pre-chorus with the dangling “We don’t understand...” as Mick Avory leads the band into the chorus. The backing voices shout “Dead end!”, expressing the anger of their dire existence, while Ray finishes his sentence, speaking rather than singing, with “...why we should live on Dead End Street.” “Dead end!” is repeated twice more. The guitar

¹⁴ Kitts, 76-77.

¹⁵ Hinman, 91.

¹⁶ Kitts, 76-77.

¹⁷ About 1,400USD.

¹⁸ “The Aberfan Disaster Fund,” published on the Aberfan Disaster website, <http://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/politics/aberfan/adf.htm> (accessed March 17, 2009).

¹⁹ Hinman, 91.

plays a descending pattern similar to “Sunny Afternoon.” Between each shout of the chant, Ray grows more overwhelmed as he first utters that “people are living on Dead End Street,” as if coming to terms with the fact that not only is this situation he’s in real, he’s also not alone. The final time, he seems to reluctantly submit to the reality: “I’m gonna die on Dead End Street.” As Ray repeats “Dead End Street” twice, the other singers reply “yeah!”, reinforcing Ray’s sense of resignation. Interestingly, on the original Talmy-produced version, they first sing “yeah!”, then “no!”, positing the likelihood of escape in a manner not unlike John Lennon’s “count me out, in” stance towards violence on the LP version of “Revolution.”

In stark contrast to the upper-class twit of “Sunny Afternoon,” who is content to enjoy his beer as his yacht, girl, and car are taken from him, the poverty-stricken couple of “Dead End Street” wake to a “cold and frosty morning.” The narrator asks his fair lady to “boil the tea and put some toast on”²⁰ before once again ponder the eternal question: “What are we living for?” A key line, explaining the trappings of life on the dole, comes with “No chance to emigrate / I’m deep in debt and now it’s much too late.” Any likelihood of escaping this cycle of barely getting by, with all money made seemingly going right back to debt and maintaining the cost living, is remote.²¹ In the final stanza of the pre-chorus, Ray speak-sings “We both want to work so hard / We can’t get the chance,” ably describing the gravity of their situation.

The second chorus features a slightly different set of responses from Ray to the backing voices call of “Dead end!”, each time respectively saying, “People are living on Dead End Street,” “People are dying on Dead End Street,” and “Gonna die on Dead End Street.” The second response reinforces the narrator’s sense of awareness that they are just two of many

²⁰ Curiously, the residents of *Preservation Act One* spend their morning “Biting toast and swallowing tea / ‘Cause breakfast special’s on the air...” on “Daylight”.

²¹ Compare this to “In A Foreign Land” on 1978’s *Misfits*, where the protagonist is able to escape his ball and chain of debt for life anew in a third world country, “A land of bananas and sand.”

living in desperate times. A short instrumental break follows, where Dave's bass line plays the song's main riff, while Dalton's Danelectro keeps time with straight quarter notes. Handclaps on the two and four provide a sense of collectivism, as if his neighbors are joining in his lament while the trombone plays its sullen melody, building up into a third chorus. Most of the song is a mix of melodrama and pathos, but the ending is surprisingly upbeat. The forlorn trombone which evokes gray skies and bleak tenement slums throughout most of the song becomes a jazzy solo during the song's fade, the defiant shouts of "Yeah!" lower to a *sotto voce*, and Ray's singing calms from his hopeless refrain of the song's title to a mellow *Sprechstimme*. The trombone was played by John Matthews,²² who was recruited from a nearby pub, and according to Ray "recorded a perfect solo in one take" with time to spare for another pint before the pub closed.²³

Kitts explains the jarringly happy ending "recalls something from a music hall...with choral shouts fading into a soft shoe"²⁴ – one can almost imagine a tap routine in a stage presentation of the song – and that the music itself connotes what Dave calls "an underlying sense of hope."²⁵ This message of endurance of the working class, no matter what the bigwigs up at the top throw their way, would come back again and again in Ray's work throughout the next decade on *Lola Versus Powerman And The Money-Go-Round*,²⁶ *Muswell Hillbillies*,²⁷ *Preservation Act Two*,²⁸ and *Misfits*.²⁹ "Dead End Street" has proven to be a groundbreaking song for The Kinks musically, as well: the horn-driven elements would come back (for better or

²² Hinman, 93. His name may have been John Marshall.

²³ *X-Ray*, 325.

²⁴ Kitts, 76.

²⁵ *Kink*, 100.

²⁶ "Gotta be proud and stand up straight / Let people see I ain't nobody's slave," "Got To Be Free."

²⁷ "They're trying to build a computerized community / But they'll never make a zombie out of me," "Muswell Hillbilly."

²⁸ "Men like you will always come and go, but the people will go on forever," "Flash's Dream (The Final Elbow)."

²⁹ "Get Up."

for worse, depending on the listener), as the band hired a trio of trumpet, saxophone/woodwinds, and trombone/tuba from 1971 to 1977.

“Dead End Street” was paired with “Big Black Smoke” as its b-side and was released on November 18th in the UK, where it went to #5, and November 30th in the US, where it dismally peaked at #72.³⁰ As the band reluctantly bid their American audience farewell, they ventured into one of their most creative (and now universally praised) period, their next string of singles consisting of “Mr. Pleasant,” “Waterloo Sunset,” the Dave Davies solo single “Death Of A Clown,” “Autumn Almanac,” another Dave solo single (“Susannah’s Still Alive”), “Days,” “Plastic Man,” “Victoria,” and “Lola.”³¹ Their four subsequent albums, *Something Else*, *The Village Green Preservation Society*, *Arthur, Or The Decline And Fall Of The British Empire*, and *Lola Versus Powerman And The Money-Go-Round* showcase the band operating on all cylinders, while both Ray and Dave turn in a consistently fabulous batch of songs.

They may not have had America as a viable market, but this worked as an advantage for Ray, who focused on the positive, saying years later that “If we had stayed in America, I wouldn’t have had the nice roll of English songs.”³² This made for a fantastic back-catalogue with which the American audiences could play catch-up post “Lola” and *The Kink Kronikles*, further cementing their cult following in the early 1970’s.

PART TWO: The Promotional Film

Since the birth of MTV in 1981, there have been many claimants to the title of the inventor of the music video. from The Monkees to Richard Lester’s two Beatles movies (*A Hard*

³⁰ “The Kinks’ Chart Positions,” Dave Emlen’s Unofficial Kinks Website, <http://www.kindakinks.net> (accessed March 18th, 2009).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Quoted in Kitts, 83.

Day's Night and *Help!*) to the performances in Elvis' numerous motion pictures.³³ Dave Davies makes a similar claim about the promotional film for "Dead End Street" in the soon-to-be released documentary *Dave Davies: Mystical Journey*.³⁴ Though the true "first" music video is a hotly debated subject, "Dead End Street" is a pioneering work in the music video medium, in that it wasn't a lip-synched performance of the tune; it instead featured a brief narrative featuring the band.

The filming took place in the Camden district of North London on November 14th, 1966, the same day a press release was issued announcing Peter Quaipe's return to the band.³⁵ Shot on black and white film, the "Dead End Street" promo reflects two major influences: Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein and the British New Wave dramas, dubbed kitchen sink realism. Ray discovered Eisenstein and other outstanding foreign filmmakers while in art college, saying he would constantly draw "sketches of faces and camera angles in the style of Eisenstein."³⁶ Sergei Eisenstein was one of the first masters of the compositional nature of cinema, using the editing process to create visual juxtapositions (which he called "intellectual montage"³⁷) and convey meaning to the audience. Another of Eisenstein's practices was typage, where nonprofessional actors were cast based on the visual resemblance to their character.

The British New Wave was a group of directors in the late 1950's and early 1960's inspired by the French New Wave, shot on location and often avoiding the casting of

³³ From a technical standpoint, they're all wrong in some capacity. Musical shorts first appeared in the mid-1920's. Nevertheless, The Monkees and Lester's work were crucial elements in the development of the modern, free-form music video, wherein the visual focus is not on a straight-ahead performance by the musicians. It's a very tricky debate, akin to pinning down the "first" rock and roll record.

³⁴ Clip from *Mystical Journey*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9ZW2YsxrIU> (accessed March 19th, 2009).

³⁵ Hinman, 91-92.

³⁶ Kitts, 23.

³⁷ Sergei Eisenstein, translated by Jay Leyda, *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 82.

professional actors. Kitchen sink realism was a subset of the British New Wave, dramatic portrayals of the working class. Kitts considers the kitchen sink pictures “a kind of prologue to the 1960’s, making the working class not only objects of curiosity and sympathy, but also chic...” and that they “opened the way for rock music and artists like The Beatles, Rolling Stones, and The Kinks.”³⁸ The film certainly presents an empathetic portrait of life in a working-class environment, and is indicative of the *cinéma vérité*³⁹ styling of the New Wave movements.

The promo film begins with a shot of an alleyway, punctuated by an arched walkway. Four figures are approaching in the distance, revealed to be The Kinks as the camera zooms in. They are dressed as undertakers, toting a coffin above their heads. In a dramatically angled close-up, Ray knocks on an apartment door. Ray is shown in a medium close-up in the next shot as the door is shown opening from the inside, with a stern and humorless look on his face. The film cuts to Dave, dressed as a widow – and barring his sideburns a fairly convincing one⁴⁰ – and nodding. The undertakers lug the coffin into the apartment, Quaipe slamming the door behind him.

A montage of photos depicting scenes of poverty in the slums of London is shown over the chorus. Being still photos, the lack of motion is thrown off-kilter by the use of zooms into select photos, synched with the shouts of “Dead end!”. During the “Yeah!” response of the chorus, Quaipe and Ray are shown in separate shots mouthing the word as the camera quickly zooms in on their faces. Once the second verse starts the undertakers are shown moving the coffin up a steep flight of stairs, cutting to an Eisenstein-inspired shot of Dave as the crying

³⁸ Kitts, 24.

³⁹ French for “cinema of truth,” this aesthetic originated to describe nonfictional documentaries, but is now also applicable to fictional portrayals of everyday life.

⁴⁰ Dave appearing as a convincing woman is hardly an isolated incident: on page 167 of *Kink*, Dave recounts a story in which he and a lady friend cross-dressed, flirting with the long-suffering Mick Avory until Dave revealed himself – by way of *revealing* himself – to the aloof drummer.

widow, which pans down to a pair of shoes. The shot cuts to a pair of bare feet – those of the deceased – sticking out from under a blanket. In shot from the point of view of the corpse, The Kinks stand above him, immediately followed by a series of close-ups of the band: Ray and Mick nod, Dave is shown sporting a cherubic smile, while Pete is lit from below, casting a sinister shadow over his face. Dave (as the widow) puts the shoes on her dead husband's feet before the second chorus.

As before, the chorus features a photo montage once again; Dave and Mick deliver the “Yeah!” line this time. During the instrumental break, Pete, as a mustachioed, nose-picking landlord, raps on an old lady's door (played by Ray, a considerably homelier woman than Dave) as his assistants (Dave and Mick, the latter donning a comically large mustache) wait by the garden gate. During the final chorus, the undertakers set their now-occupied casket down for a smoke break. The corpse⁴¹ rises and leaps out of the coffin, to the surprised horror of the undertakers. A comical chase ensues, ending as the dead man vanishes into a wall, leaving the four undertakers baffled. From the jubilant escape of what we can infer isn't really the dead body but his ghost, death is shown as a sweet release from a depressing life in squalor. In dying, he is truly free. Had he not disappeared into the wall, another interpretation that could have been derived from this was that the man faked his own death to dodge any and all debts.

Not surprisingly, the BBC opted out of airing the promo film. Though it was most likely rejected due to it showing a side of society the powers that be didn't want shown, the BBC's official reasons were attributed to the “distasteful” handling of the subject of death.⁴² It was aired

⁴¹ The corpse was played by roadie Stan Whitley, who along with Dave and John Dalton sang back-up vocals on “Dead End Street.” Hinman, 92-93.

⁴² Kitts, 78.

on the European continent in the early months of 1967.⁴³ Though far more insensitive images have since been broadcast in music videos, it certainly was shocking for its time. Death was apparently a sensitive subject at the BBC: even three years later, the cast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* had to cajole the censors at the BBC to perform a sketch involving cannibalistic undertakers. It was only permitted if the audience was shown reacting negatively to it. The troupe happily compromised.⁴⁴

The promo film is a bleak depiction of everyday life, with an ending that suits the shift in mood at the song's coda. One of the great features of The Kinks' music is the one-two punch of pathos and humor, however black the comedy can sometimes be. This trait is presented perfectly here. Unfortunately, future promotional clips would not be as bold, though seeing keyboardist John Gosling romp around in a gorilla costume during the film for 1970's "Apeman" is a real treat. Still, "Dead End Street" stands as a premonition for both the band's musical direction and Ray's role as the band's in-house auteur, as would respectively be displayed on the subsequent albums and in the music videos made later in their career, post-1981.

⁴³ Hinman, 92.

⁴⁴ Kim "Howard" Johnson, *Monty Python: The First 280 Years* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 147-148.