

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

Ignored at the time of its release, the quintessentially English *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* is Ray Davies' masterpiece. With the band reforming, **Steve Harnell** takes a rural excursion into BMG's latest Art Of The Album reissue...

Where once The Kinks were a perfect barometer of their times – the beat-boom urgency of *You Really Got Me* and tongue-in-cheek Carnaby Street dandyism of *Dedicated Follower Of Fashion* – their sixth album in just four years found the band, and most pertinently, songwriter Ray Davies, resolutely out of step with the zeitgeist.

The political turmoil of 1968, mirrored in The Rolling Stones' *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and *Street Fighting Man*, as well as The Beatles' late entry into activism with the visceral *Revolution*, was nowhere to be found on *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society*. Or at least not on a surface level.

For Ray, the album was an opportunity – at least temporarily, if his management would give him the chance – to bat away the hit-making expectations that weighed heavily on his shoulders. Speaking to *Uncut* in 2004, the songwriter explained: "I was angry. And I repressed the competitive instincts that had made me write hit singles. It wasn't 'I think I'm burned out, I can't be successful,' it was

"I'm deliberately not going to be successful this time. I'm not going to make *You Really Got Me Part III*. [The album] was a final stand for things to be swept away, ideals that can never be kept."

Still reeling from a four-year ban on The Kinks working in the US following an altercation while recording Dick Clark's *Where The Action Is* in 1965, by now Davies had turned his back on his primary Stateside musical and societal influences to concentrate on a quintessentially English outlook to his songwriting. He explained to *Esquire* magazine: "I knew I couldn't reach America or maybe even radio at the time. So I figured, why don't I just write about people I like and situations that I enjoy?"

Although there's an apparent easy-going positivity to much of the album's tone, it was created in uncertain times for The Kinks. With Dave Davies enjoying a successful concurrent solo career, brother Ray wanted to explore more esoteric side projects. It's thought *Village Green...* was originally intended as a solo album for the band's



main songwriter, but when 1967's *Something Else* LP limped to No.35 and 1968 single *Wonderboy* only reached No.36 on the UK singles chart – their first to peak outside the Top 20 – their management's crisis of confidence meant Ray's cache of *Village Green*-appropriate songs would become a full-band project in a bid to shore up the Kinks mothership. Package-tour disasters with *The Tremeloes* and *The Herd*, a slapdash jaunt around Swedish 'folk parks' and residencies at northern working-men's clubs meant that the band's public profile was on the wane. A big album was needed.

A KINK IN TIME

The resulting *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* finds Ray apparently mourning a lost world of innocence – but as is typical of his songwriting, it's not unequivocal. This is a complex record full of nuance and grey areas – part parody and part affectionate homage to a dying culture. When Damon Albarn tried to revisit Davies' English character sketches for *Parklife* and *The Great Escape*, they eventually descended

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into the sneering *Charmless Man* and Mr Robinson's *Quango*. Ray fared much better.

Kicking against the au courant trend of unequivocal support for political insurgency, his songs on *Village Green...* were a warning against such scorched-earth policies. The key to the message is found in the title track's chorus: "Preserving the old ways from being abused/ Protecting the new ways, for me and for you."

For Davies, there was merit in the old traditions; a new broom wasn't the sole answer to cure all of society's ills in 1968. Our complex relationship with the passing of time is at the heart of many songs here. *Do You Remember Walter*, based partly on Ray's own experiences of meeting up with an old friend once he'd found fame as a rock star, looks wistfully at what could have been and how they'd grown apart.

Two songs in particular seem remarkably prescient in our own social-media saturated era, where people curate their lives to present a superficial glossiness to the world at large. First, there's the "Picture book, of people with each other/ To prove they love each other, a long ago" (*Picture Book*) and the album closer, *People Take Pictures Of Each Other*: where they do so "just to prove that they really existed".



REISSUE VERSIONS

BMG's new Super Deluxe boxset comes with a picture book...

The Super Deluxe boxset of the album features a gatefold 2LP set with new stereo and mono remastered versions. Seven CDs also feature in the package, including Andrew Sandoval remasters from the original HD tape transfers plus bonus tracks, alternate versions and previously unreleased backing tracks. Three 7" singles (*Days*, *Starstruck* and *The Village Green Preservation Society*) will feature alongside a 52-page

hardback photobook with extensive sleevenotes, new band interviews and essays – including one by Pete Townshend – as well as unseen photos. Reproduced memorabilia includes posters, band signatures, a 1968 Bournemouth gig ticket, a Pye Records promo card and *Days* sheet music.

A single LP version of the release will be a stereo remaster from original high-definition tape transfers.

But the 'Village Green' – an amalgam of North London locations near Ray's childhood home in Fortis Green, Cherry Tree Woods and Highgate Woods – is not a perfect idyll. Outsider figures populate its fringes and are portrayed with an even hand by Davies, including the carefree and rebellious motorcyclist Johnny Thunder, and Monica (is she or isn't she a prostitute?). Tonally, the dark psychedelia of the Dave Davies-fronted *Wicked Annabella* is something of an anomaly on the album. This brooding tale of a witch feels as if it could have nestled into the grooves of the Stones' *Their Satanic Majesties Request* from the previous year.

Meanwhile, *Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains* finds Ray mourning the end of an era on Britain's railways – 1968 was the final time a mainline steam train ran in the UK. The

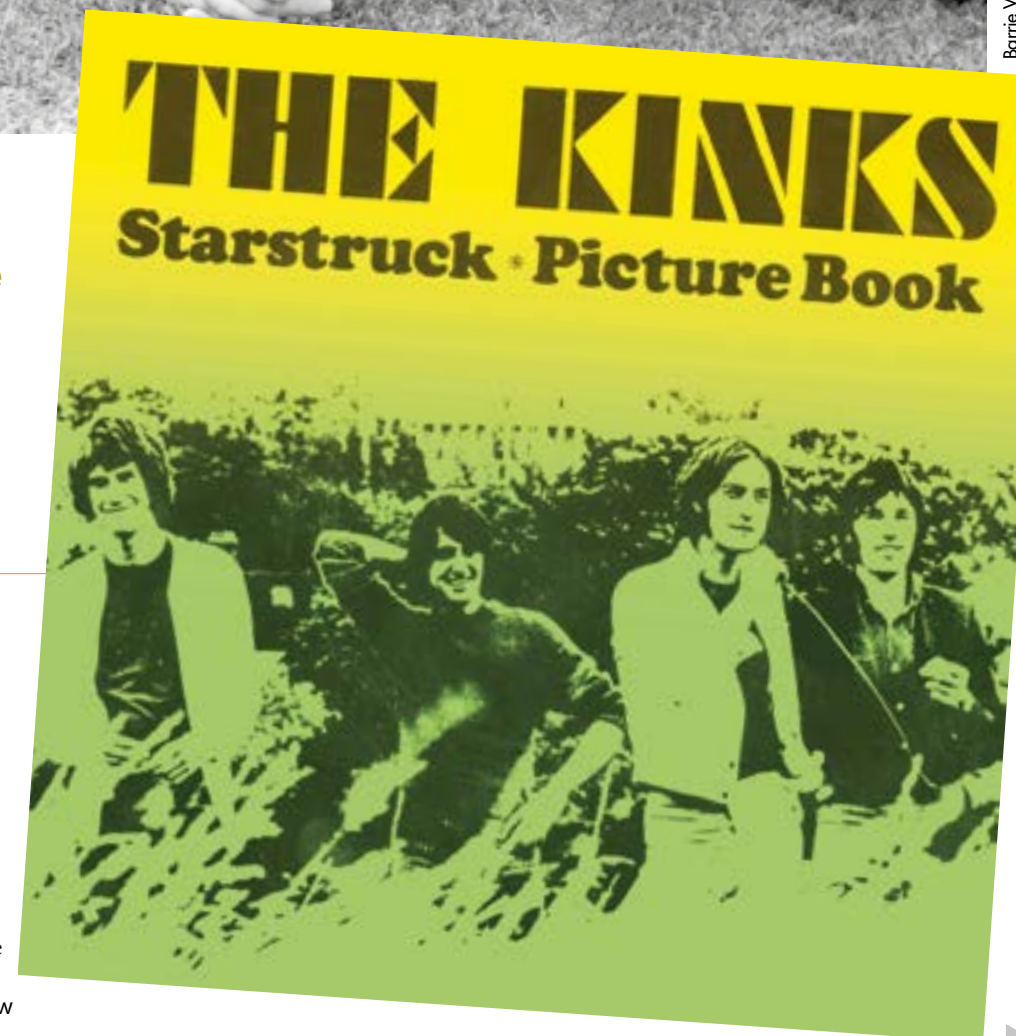


The Kinks got lost in the melee of arguably the greatest few months in rock history



The Kinks (l to r): Bassist Pete Quaife, lead guitarist Dave Davies, Ray Davies and drummer Mick Avory

Barrie Wentzell



GOLDEN ERA

Much has been made of the album's commercial failure, but when you see what it was up against, that's hardly surprising. Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* hit stores at the end of October, The Beatles aka 'The White Album' was released on exactly the same day as *Village Green* (22 November 1968), and The Rolling Stones returned on 6 December with *Beggars Banquet*.

No wonder The Kinks got lost in the melee of arguably the greatest few months in rock history. The Pretty Things' seminal *S.F. Sorrow* was dealt a similar fate.

song itself riffs off *Smokestack Lightning* and borrows the first few bars of Willie Dixon's *Spoonful*. But Davies' deliberately childish lyrical references to 'choo choo' and 'puffer' trains manage to subvert this traditional track. The striking *Big Sky* was written by Davies on the balcony of the Carlton Hotel in Cannes, a more grandly philosophical piece than much of what surrounds it.

Delivered by Ray doing his best Burt Lancaster impression – he later told Rolling Stone he always dreamt of the imposing actor voicing the song – this is a warning against

self-absorption and seemingly tells us that our place in this world is inconsequential, as George Harrison had earlier put it: "Life goes on within you and without you."

The oldest track, *Village Green* was started a full two years before the album eventually hit the shelves. It's reminiscent of that short-lived baroque pop movement that included the Stones' *Lady Jane*. Ray's defiantly anti-hit outlook on the album is also emphasised on *Phenomenal Cat*, which could almost pass for a children's TV show theme, and the olde-worlde Max Miller music-hall homage of *All Of My Friends Were There*.

TRACKLISTING

1. *The Village Green Preservation Society*
2. *Do You Remember Walter*
3. *Picture Book*
4. *Johnny Thunder*
5. *Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains*
6. *Big Sky*
7. *Sitting By The Riverside*
8. *Animal Farm*
9. *Village Green*
10. *Starstruck*
11. *Phenomenal Cat*
12. *All Of My Friends Were There*
13. *Wicked Annabella*
14. *Monica*
15. *People Take Pictures Of Each Other*



Although it didn't possess a hit single and failed to chart, Village Green... went on to be the band's biggest-selling album

Part of the album's commercial failure was also self-inflicted. The record was originally scheduled for a 27 September release date, which would have given them plenty of daylight between the returning Beatles and Stones. But Ray halted production of the 12-track album at the last minute, believing it was still shy of its overall concept. Record label Pye vetoed an ambitious 18- or 20-track budget-priced double-vinyl version of the LP, but a compromise was reached. *Days* and *Mr. Songbird* were removed from the original 12-track incarnation (early title *Four Well Respected Gentlemen*) and replaced with five new songs. The delay, though, meant a direct face-off with *'The White Album'* on the record-store racks of UK shops (the 12-track version with the original sequence was released in various European territories and New Zealand).

GLOBAL VILLAGE

Although it didn't possess a hit single and failed to chart, *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society* went on to be the

band's biggest-selling album. Ignored in its homeland, the album took on an unexpected life of its own across the Atlantic.

"The peace movement took the album up, when it eventually came out in America. They thought it was anti-Vietnam. Americans interpreted it as being something that Americans could cherish. In a

misconceived way, they took it as theirs," Ray told *Uncut*.

Ironically, *Village Green* has now become the kind of artefact the LP simultaneously celebrates and parodies. Ray's bittersweet relationship with the record has ebbed and flowed since its release. For many years, he was puzzled by the reverence with which it was treated. But in line with the general consensus that it represents his apogee as a songwriter, he even performed it in its entirety at the Royal Festival Hall in London in 2011 with the Crouch End Festival Chorus choir, to much critical acclaim.

Dave Davies ruefully remembers it "was obscure the week it came out" and Ray famously dubs the LP "the most successful failure of all time." It's taken us a while to catch on to the charms of *Village Green*... but the irony of such a backward-looking record being so ahead of its time should be lost on no one. ●

