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The world according to Ray Davies

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Kinks founder and storyteller to play the Ogden Theater

By **Peter Jones**

Published: 03.16.10

For someone who pioneered the fuzz-toned, two-chord guitar riff, Ray Davies is a man with broad musical interests. Over the decades, the 65-year-old Kinks founder has ventured into everything from rock operas and dance-hall music to American country and folk.

A decade ago, Davies' penchant for diversity was tested when he was commissioned to write an original choral piece. That led the songwriter to consider the choral potential within some of the Kinks' classic material.

Hearing "All Day and All of the Night" with its signature riff transposed for a classical choir on Davies's latest solo CD should come as little surprise to aficionados, according to Davies.

"Diversity is key to the Kinks," he said. "We always tried new things. We weren't afraid to fail or experiment."

"The Kinks Choral Collection," a 15-song CD set sampling the band's catalogue, was recorded last year with back-up vocals from the Crouch End Festival Chorus, one of the more acclaimed of England's larger choirs.

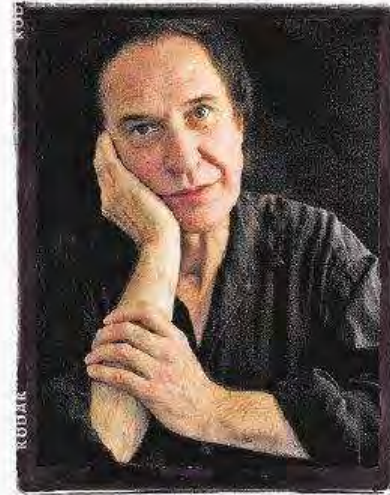
"I wanted it to have familiarity. I didn't want it to be completely off the board," Davies said. "But I didn't want it to be simplistic. So it was a balancing act. What it is is a choral representation of Kinks songs, rather than an attempt to be classical."

Davies will perform music from the CD, without the chorus, on March 20 at the Ogden Theater in Denver. The chief Kink will open the show with an acoustic set before plugging in for Kinks rockers with the Los Angeles-based band, The 88.

"I think the key to good songs is they can be played in any arena, whether it be classical, rock or acoustic," Davies said.

The Kinks began life more modestly, in London's Muswell Hill neighborhood — as one of hundreds of London R&B bands that tried to distinguish themselves in the early 1960s. Davies [pronounced Dav-iz] was a frustrated art student when he co-founded the Kinks with his younger brother, Dave.

Originally called the Ravens, the band failed to impress at first with its standard-issue blues-rock. It was not until the Kinks revved up the fuzz-toned volume on their third single — the raucous "You Really Got Me" — that audiences took notice of the oddly named quartet.



Kinks founder Ray Davies plays the Ogden Theater, Colfax Avenue and Ogden Street in Denver on March 20. Courtesy photo

The Kinks' breakthrough hit was well ahead of its time in 1964, four years before the term "heavy metal" would enter the lexicon. The raw, almost savage guitar riff was rougher than anything being produced at the time by the Who, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles or any of the Kinks' British contemporaries.

"When the song came out, people said they'd never heard anything like it," Davies recalled. "I'm not sure whether or not that was a compliment. But there was an edge that made it totally unique."

It was not just the Kinks' sound that set the band apart. The group's name — predating punk rock by some 15 years — would raise the eyebrows of promoters and marquee managers.

"People weren't threatened by the name, the Kinks, but they didn't know what to expect," Davies said with some bemusement. "It wasn't user-friendly."

Just as the Kinks were gaining hard-earned momentum in the United States, the group was mysteriously banned — by someone or something — from re-entering the country. It remains a mystery, even to Davies, as to exactly why the Kinks were kept at bay during some of the most prosperous years of the '60s British Invasion.

"I think there was a union problem, agency problems, management problems, and they all came back on the shoulders of the band," Davies said. "I still don't know to this day what happened. But it was hard to maintain a career."

As a result, the Kinks were banished from such iconic late-'60s music festivals as Woodstock and Monterey Pop, where Brits like the Who and Joe Cocker would make career-defining performances. Unable to play in the world's largest market, the Kinks entered their most creative — though not financially rewarding — periods.

Between 1968 and 1975, Davies composed more than 10 ambitious, distinctly British concept albums and rock operas. Unlike the Who's "Tommy" or the untold number of progressive or "pomp rock" works that followed, Davies' narratives were mostly unpretentious stories about working-class life in Britain.

Davies' wry humor and simple storytelling on such albums as "Soap Opera," "Muswell Hillbillies" and "Schoolboys in Disgrace" were more akin to British sitcoms than a Pink Floyd existential crisis.

"Because we couldn't tour America, I decided to write more English-sounding songs," Davies said.

Even when the themes got more serious on "Arthur (or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)" and "Preservation," a three-act opera about a political coup d'état, Davies tried to keep the pretense under control.

"It's definitely not 'pomp rock,'" he said. "'Preservation' was quite serious. In fact, it's very contemporary now, but it was done in a more humorous style. That's why the Kinks retained their cult following."

The quirky title song from "Lola Vs. Powerman and the Money-Go-Round" was a surprise hit in 1970 — and more controversial for its reference to Coca-Cola than for its cross-dressing subject.

At the urging of Arista Records, Davies eventually abandoned his penchant for overt rock operas, though Kinks' albums continued to wrestle with themes that ranged from commercialism to mid-life crises.

Davies later turned the Kinks story, itself, into a conceptual solo work with 1998's "The Storyteller" CD and tour, a career-spanning narrative and concert performance that inspired VH-1's "Storyteller" series.

His latest single, "Postcard From London," is an autobiographical story of lost love, appropriately recorded as a duet with his ex-girlfriend, Chrissie Hynde, lead singer of the Pretenders.

Davies' recent "Americana," in part, pieces together the story of the Kinks late-'60s U.S.

estrangement.

But will the the nearly half-century conceptual story that is the Kinks, itself, continue with more sequels?

Davies is noncommittal. He has new material for the band, but is awaiting on a call from his brother.

"It's not officially over until Dave says he doesn't want to continue," Davies said. "It's not ruled out yet."

If you go

Ray Davies will perform March 20 at 7:30 p.m. at the Ogden Theater, 935 E. Colfax Ave. in Denver.

Tickets are \$35-\$65 and available at tickethorse.com.

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