

[Ray Davies: *Not Like Everybody Else*, Thomas M. Kitts, Routledge, 302 pages.]

## 44 Years of 3-Minute Poems

By Jesse Walker

WHEN THE KINKS recorded *The Village Green Preservation Society* in 1968, the north London quartet was not trying to create a commercial failure. Quite the opposite. But surely they must have realized that the year of the street riot was not a propitious time to greet the rock world with couplets like “We are the Office Block Persecution Affinity/God save little shops, china cups, and virginity.” They sang those lines with genuine enthusiasm, even if it’s a sure bet that no one in the band was a virgin at the time.

The song—the sprightly, catchy title track of a nearly perfect album—had been composed by Ray Davies, one of rock’s greatest lyricists. It was not a tribute to virginity so much as a tribute to the *idea* of virginity and of everything else praised in this romantic English anthem: village greens, the George Cross, strawberry jam, draught beer, “the old ways.” The record recalls a more rooted existence, but its list of artifacts worth saving draws on pop culture as much as pastoral life: “We are the Sherlock Holmes English Speaking Vernacular/ Help save Fu Manchu, Moriarty, and Dracula.” There is even a shout-out to Donald Duck, who’s about as English as Donald Trump.

The album sold less than 500,000 copies. Four years earlier, the Kinks had been one of the most popular bands in the West, climbing the American and British charts with two brash, loud rock songs, “You Really Got Me” and “All Day and All of the Night.” Indeed, as Thomas M. Kitts points out in this intelligent study, the Kinks “were ranked with the Rolling Stones, both only second to the Beatles.” There was an enormous stylis-

tic gap between the quiet nostalgia of *Village Green* and the Kinks’ earlier, noisy explosions of adolescent lust and frustration—and that contrast only begins to hint at the band’s range. In their first decade as a recording unit, the Kinks experimented with trad jazz, musical theater, Indian raga, and New Orleans funk. Above all, they delved into the English music-hall tradition, with its vaudevillian showmanship, singalong melodies, working-class sympathies, and epicene moments of burlesque.

The constant thread was a willful refusal to follow pop fashions. The Kinks were happy to *set* trends. The early singles paved the way for punk rock, heavy metal, and grunge, while the band’s later, quieter character studies (“Rosie Won’t You Please Come Home,” “Two Sisters,” “Autumn Almanac”) and satires of modern British life (“A Well Respected Man,” “Dedicated Follower of Fashion,” “Sunny Afternoon”) would have a strong impact on other English artists. Yet even when no one was imitating them, the Kinks kept doing their own thing, recording well-crafted but poor-selling LPs like *Village Green* and, in 1971, *Muswell Hillbillies*, a jazz- and country-flavored concept album about the injustice of urban renewal programs. By the mid-’70s, the band had evolved into a touring troupe that staged Brechtian rock musicals. There were plenty of rock operas in that era, but there was a big gulf between the bombast of *Tommy* or *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and Kinksian efforts like *Preservation*, a witty if tangled three-disc story about a socialist revolution that becomes a puritanical, totalitarian nightmare.

The group took another turn in 1976, when they signed with a new label, Arista, and tried to work within the genres that happened to be popular at the moment, from new wave to metallic hard rock. Davies even dabbled in disco. He was still drawn to the theater, but he generally expressed this interest outside the Kinks (co-writing the musicals *Chorus Girls* and *80 Days*) or channeled it into directing music videos. The band became enormously popular in

America again, though not in the UK. For the most part, the Kinks’ new records succeeded artistically as well as commercially, at least until they left Arista for MCA in the mid-’80s. In the ’90s they finally disbanded. Ray and his brother Dave—the group’s lead guitarist and an important architect of its sound—have since enjoyed low-profile but impressive solo careers.

*Muswell Hillbillies* is my favorite Kinks record, but *The Village Green Preservation Society* stands out for being so tenaciously removed from its time. Inspired by Dylan Thomas’s play *Under Milk Wood*, the album describes the colorful inhabitants of an unnamed English town. The title track, that toe-tapping ode to Donald Duck and virgins, presents itself as a love letter to the past, but the singer knew very well that the place he was romanticizing wasn’t lost so much as imaginary. Kitts quotes Davies’ description of the village as “a fantasy world that I can retreat to. ... It was my own Wizard of Oz land.”

Davies’ other retreat was a very real place: Muswell Hill, the London suburb where he was raised. The heart of the young Davies’ world was the front room of his family home. “After the pubs closed at 11:00 pm,” Kitts writes, Davies’ father “would invite his drinking cronies to join his extended family and children’s friends for an after-hours party in what would be the family’s overcrowded front room, which, in those largely pre-television days, held the family’s old upright piano, the most important piece of furniture in the Davies’s home, and a 78 r.p.m. wind-up gramophone.” The parties featured rowdy performances of pop hits and music-hall standards, with Davies’ father doing a drunken impersonation of Cab Calloway. As Kitts notes, “The influence of these parties on the Kinks, particularly the campy Kinks of the early to mid-1970s, is remarkable. Whether consciously or not, it seemed as if Ray was trying to recreate the Saturday night parties of his family’s home—complete with chaos, beer, and singalongs.”

In theory, there is a wide gap between the camp aesthetic, with its love of artifice and role-playing, and the traditionalist outlook, with its focus on the permanent things. Yet the Kinks at their campiest were the Kinks at their most rooted. Susan Sontag famously wrote that the camp worldview “sees everything in quotation marks.” Davies does too: “Everybody’s a dreamer, and everybody’s a star/And everybody’s in showbiz, it doesn’t matter who you are,” he sang in “Celluloid Heroes.” But usually he’s yelling for someone to tear those quotation marks down, even as he suspects that life as a quotation might have its own numb pleasures (“I wish my life was a nonstop Hollywood movie show/A fantasy world of celluloid villains and heroes/Because celluloid heroes never feel any pain/And celluloid heroes never really die”).

Davies—one of the few pop figures with a strong cult following among both gays and conservatives—does not simply combine camp with traditionalism. He is at once the alienated individualist and the communitarian populist, a man who praises both the misfit and the ordinary rituals that everybody enjoys (“I like my football on a Saturday/Roast beef on Sundays, all right/I go to Blackpool for my holidays/Sit in the open sunlight”). *Village Green*, like *Under Milk Wood*, wove those strands together by populating Davies’s village with eccentrics; by celebrating their individuality, he celebrated their small community as well. *Muswell Hillbillies* is a darker album, but it takes the same approach, mixing songs about the bizarre characters on Muswell Hill with angry jeremiads at the authorities that bulldoze homes and neighborhoods.

Politically, this outlook translates into an intense distrust both for large corporations and for the state. Like many rock stars, Davies has written songs attacking venal Big Business. Unlike most rock stars, he has written songs attacking domestic government bureaucracies (“I was born in a welfare state/Ruled by bureaucracy/Controlled

by civil servants/And people dressed in gray”). And he may, depending on how you interpret Neil Young’s “Union Man,” be the only rocker ever to devote a song to attacking unions. Davies doesn’t dislike organized labor *per se*, but he had a bad experience with a printers’ union in his teens, and in the mid-’60s his band was barred from touring America for several years because the musicians’ union refused to issue the required work permits. He retaliated with 1970’s “Get Back in Line”: “But that union man’s got such a hold on me/He’s the man who decides if I live or I die, if I starve or I eat/Then he walks up to me and the sun begins to shine/And he walks right back and I know that I’ve got to get back in the line.”

There are several books about the Kinks already, but these are mostly written by rock journalists. Kitts, by contrast, is a professor of literature at St. John’s University in New York. He gives Davies’s lyrics serious scrutiny without neglecting to consider the ways they are amplified, undercut, or elaborated by the music. He also looks beyond Davies’s recorded output to consider the singer’s experiments in film, fiction, and theater. I have my occasional disagreements with his conclusions, but that is inevitable. The depth and breadth of the study are worlds away from the typical pop-star biography and more in line with the other academic work Routledge publishes.

That said, one strength of Davies’ best work is that it *is* pop, even when it’s resolutely ignoring the rest of the pop universe. “The Village Green Preservation Society” may be the most un-1968 song of 1968. It is also one of the most infectious recordings of the last 40 years. Davies could have been a full-time filmmaker, poet, or novelist; we should be grateful that he chose to do most of his work within the confines of the three-minute pop song instead. ■

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[*Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism*, Victoria Clark, Yale University Press, 331 pages]

## Cheering for Doomsday

By Doug Bandow

AMERICANS LIKE TO THINK of themselves as *sui generis*, and Christian Zionism is an important aspect of American exceptionalism. The U.S. is unique in its unwavering support for the state of Israel—not just Israel’s right to exist but also to expand into Arab lands.

That Jewish Americans lobby the U.S. government to back Israel is no surprise. But the Jewish community is no monolith. Many Jewish Americans fear that Israel’s policies undermine its future as both Jewish and democratic.

Few such doubts bedevil Christian Zionists. Journalist Victoria Clark opens *Allies for Armageddon* with a vignette from a tour of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, topped by the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam’s most recognizable sites. As Clark admired the ancient building, a Colorado dentist remarked, “I wish someone would move things along here—like, just blow this place up!” A financial consultant from Nevada, quickly glancing around to check that no Muslim guard was in earshot, agreed: “Yeah, why not blow it all sky-high? We’re Americans! We like to start anew!”

While not all Christian Zionists are determined to trigger Armageddon, most seem willfully oblivious to the practical consequences of their views. Their support for the most extreme Israeli demands is “pouring more fuel on the flames of the dispute that lies at the heart of the Muslim world’s sense of grievance against the West,” writes Clark. But Christian Zionists believe theology trumps reality. God insists on absolute U.S. government backing for Israel.

Only in America, one is tempted to say, but Christian Zionism was born in