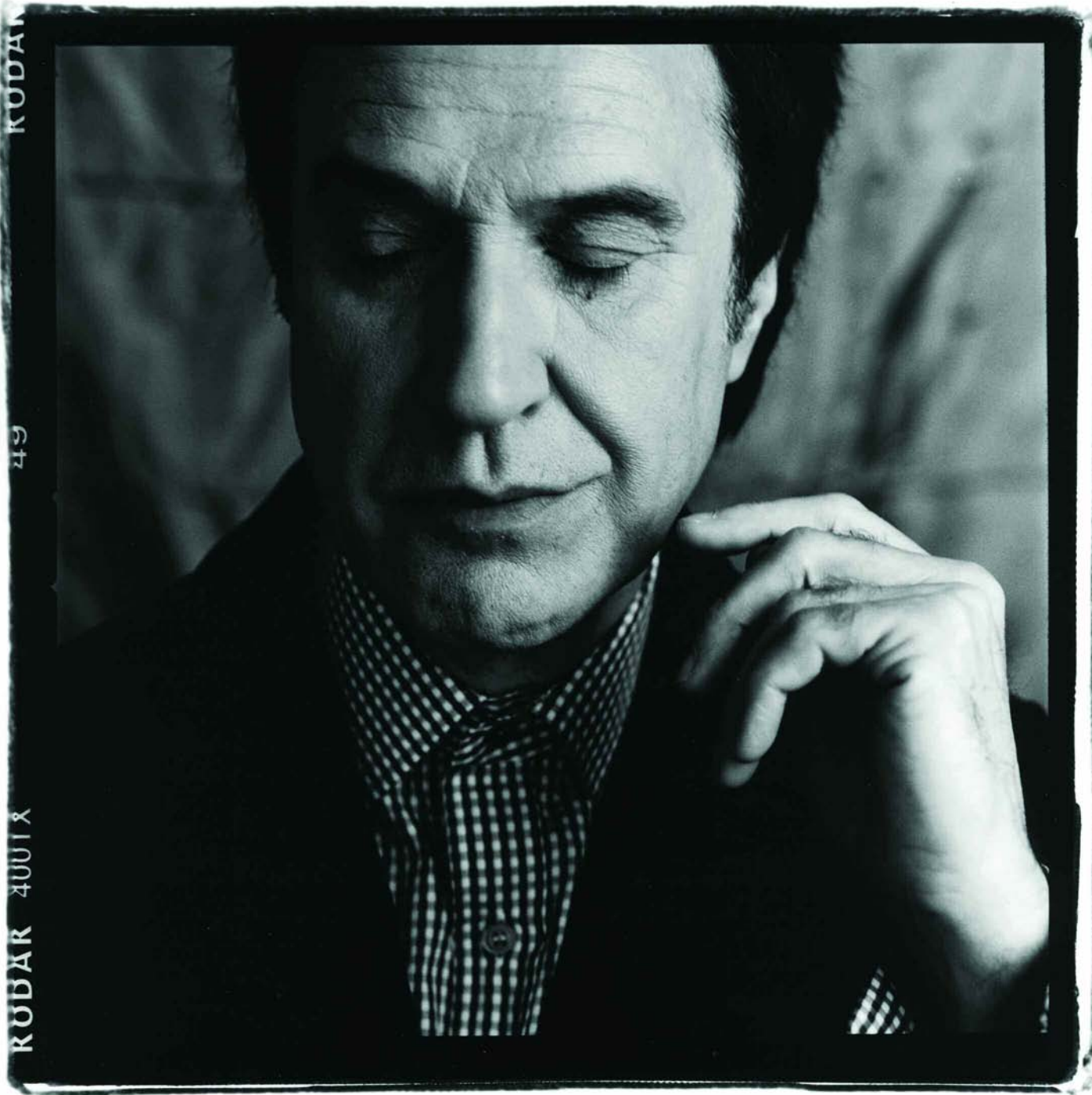


# Rebuilding **RAY DAVIES**

by Wes Orshoski

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**INTERVIEW**

**F**OR ANYONE WHO WAS LEFT a tad stunned and bewildered in 2004 by the news that Ray Davies had been shot during a mugging, know that the scenario sounds even more surreal when recounted by the singer himself. In fact, it sounds like something out of a John Grisham novel.

“It was a classic position he took—two hands on the gun, just slightly crouched. He took careful aim,” Davies says, remembering the shooter’s reaction after the ex-Kinks leader decided to chase

after him, while still reeling from a blow to the head. His memories of all this—especially what happened next—comes with a self-deprecating chuckle, as he explains that, in true action hero form, he dove out of the path of the bullet. It was that decision, he reckons, that saved him from further harm: “It may have hit an artery, and artery damage is the thing that is really critical.”

Lucky for Davies, the 20-something who leapt out of a Pontiac and stole his girlfriend’s purse on the edge of New Orleans’ famously

# Ray Davies

seedy French Quarter that night did indeed miss an artery. However, in addition to ripping through his leg, that bullet triggered a series of medical nightmares for the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, who after being admitted as a John Doe (his identification and wallet were in the purse), would eventually break his leg while trying to stand before he had fully healed. After that, he experienced another scare when doctors thought they discovered a heart irregularity.

**A**LMOST FULLY RECOVERED, Davies has of course put all this—or at least portions of it—into song. If on the very day of the shooting he was seriously considering a permanent move to New Orleans—lured by both a new love and the hope of siphoning some inspiration from the city’s rich musical heritage—if he was also looking for characters to trigger song ideas, he found plenty, some without having to get out of his hospital bed.

One of the characters inhabiting his new solo disc, *Working Man’s Café*, is an orderly he met while recovering, an older black woman who would hum-sing the gospel of Mahalia Jackson to him while whisking in and out of his room with food trays. She helped to inspire “Morphine Song,” one of the funnier moments on the album. Stumbling along via a wobbly, loosey goosey rhythm, the track is the very sound of Davies’ hospital stay as it recounts the personalities and emotions swirling around his recovery room in both melody and words: “Nelson and Starr/He’s got ten grandkids, she’s the third missus/He grooves around intensive care strutting his stuff/He’s got a perfect mullet hanging down his back/And Starr walks in, gives a little wiggle, makes old Nelson grin/He tucks me in, touches my feet/Hey buddy, you know you got a slow heartbeat?”

“Because I had this problem with my heart,” Davies says, “I was actually really scared, especially after what happened, and the police coming in the room and wanting me to identify people. So I was recovering from morphine, on the drip and all that, and I asked a nurse for a notepad, and it had the seal of Louisiana on it. I wrote the lyrics to that and I didn’t change a word.”

Prior to the shooting, Davies had been traveling between New Orleans and England, soaking up the culture, and enjoying bike rides around the city. Another *Working Man’s Café* track, “Imaginary Man,” developed after his discharge from the hospital, after he began riding around the city again, simultaneously joyriding and rehabilitating his leg.

“Before I got shot, I would ride in the worst possible places, and I felt safe—if anything happened, I could just pedal away. Afterward, I was extra cautious. While I was recovering, I cycled into the French Quarter and went to Preservation Hall, where I saw my reflection. I thought, ‘This is what I’ve come to.’ Sometimes you don’t notice yourself, like when you’re looking in the mirror every day shaving. But when I looked at myself then, after what had happened, and as I began

thinking about how far away I was from home, I thought, ‘Are you *really* doing this? Do you *really* want to do this to yourself? Do you *really* want to come here?’” In the lyrics, he talks about not being able to recognize himself in that “momentary” glance.

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NOW 63, DAVIES IS BACK AT HOME in England, staying in “our old office” in north London. A self-described nomad, he’s considering a move to Ireland, where his daughter lives. “England’s great, but I’m getting a little bit concerned with the way the country is going: There is nowhere you can escape to if you don’t like the politics and the media. I’d like to find somewhere I could just write and relax, and London’s a very tough place to relax. And it’s *really* expensive. My friend Alex Chilton once said he went to London and it cost him \$20 just to turn around, which is about right.”

That kind of transient attitude toward life—that desire to move elsewhere to escape something or someone—forms the core of another new song, “The Real World,” which is as much about Davies himself, as it is a study of the desperate, determined and maybe lost souls he met in New Orleans.

While he’s back home in London, some writers have begun to dub the new album, his third solo release since the dissolution of The Kinks in 1996, his “American” record. “If they want to call it that, it’s fine, but it only came about because I wrote a lot of the songs while I was touring there.”

It makes enough sense, though. Beyond New Orleans’ sizeable inspiration, the disc drops myriad references to stateside places (Michigan, Toledo, Cleveland), people and events (Mardi Gras). What’s more, most of the album was cut in Nashville with Steve Earle producer Ray Kennedy, and the deluxe edition includes a DVD titled *Americana: A Work in Progress*. It’s a

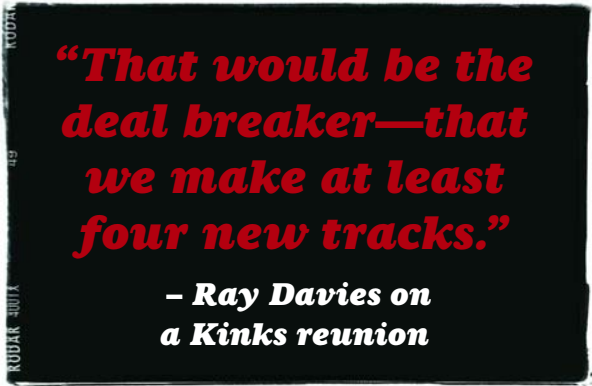
road diary shot by Davies himself as he toured the U.S. in the days and weeks following 9/11. At the start of the doc, he talks about hitting a wall in terms of writing about England, its people and places, and how he was/is searching for new inspiration elsewhere.

“[As you get older], you have to discover people and characters,” he says. “You don’t dry up [as a songwriter], but you need that constant surge of inspiration to keep wanting to do it. I remember when I made ‘Lola,’ I had a sound in my head that I wanted, and I thought, ‘I think I’ve got to have a toy to make this work,’ and I bought an old Dobro guitar and a Martin guitar. I call them toys, but they’re really fantastic instruments that inspired me to write a whole album. It takes something as simple as that.”

Be it in an intriguing personality or a sound from an old instrument, Davies is hopeful that he and brother Dave will stumble upon such inspiration en route to writing a new batch of Kinks songs—not that they necessarily need to go outside of the traumatic experiences of their recent lives for song fodder.

In June 2004, as Ray was back home in England regaining strength in his leg, Dave suffered a stroke in the offices of the BBC in London,





while there to promote a new solo album. During a more than two-month stay in the hospital, Dave at one point turned to his famous rival brother and said, “I saw that you had a broken leg and you survived that, but I’ll never survive this.” It’s an anecdote Ray relays matter-of-factly, without emotion—as he discusses everything.

Dave’s health is improving, though, which leaves Ray optimistic that they could potentially reform The Kinks for a tour. “I really loved it when he came and stayed with me for a bit [after his stroke]. He and his girlfriend and I had meals together. I felt safe when he was in the house, knowing that he was okay.

“Ours is a very intense relationship. It’s not like The Dorsey Brothers, where they’ll get together at the end of the movie [*The Fabulous Dorseys*], and it’s all fun. It’s not quite that—yet. But I’m trying to make him—encourage him—to do something creative and work together again at some point.

“You can’t explain the rivalry, and it’s weird, because we were in the same job together. But I never had a ‘brother’ relationship with him, because I lived for a lot of my early years with my sister, and he lived at home. It was a situation where I was more comfortable with her. But Dave and I, it’s a strange, strange dynamic. We get along really well, but we do have friction, but somehow we get it out of our system. It terrifies people when it’s happening, but we get through it.”

If the brothers can and do reunite as songwriters, a full-blown reunion is pretty much a given. Says Ray, “I speak to [drummer] Mick Avory and [bassist Peter] Quaife, the originals, and I think the different incarnations of The Kinks would be good to actually get together. They’ve all contributed over the years. They would like to do it, and, as I say, Dave’s getting a lot better. It’s a case of, ‘When you’re ready, let’s get together and see if there’s any *new* music we can do, because I really do believe that you should try to do something new. That would be the deal breaker—that we make at least four new tracks.”

Ray, by the way, is pondering all this while still jet-lagged and sleepy after dropping into New York to perform—with little shut-eye—at the annual Tibet House benefit concert, where he drew rave reviews for his own set, and for leading an ensemble that included Suffjan Stevens, Band of Horses and Television’s Tom Verlaine through a show-closing “All Day and All of the Night.”

“We arrived at 4:30 in the morning, and didn’t get much sleep and had to rehearse with other people, but it was a charge. It’s always a charge. I get into a special space when I go out there and play—and I don’t get sick of playing the old songs. Onstage, I don’t feel like a different person, but maybe I come to life in a complete form. It’s a more complete version of me.” ★