

God Saved the Kinks

Call to Worship

This reading is by Dave Davies:

Where are you going? I don't mind
I've killed *my* world, and I've killed *my* time
So where do I go, what will I see?
I see many people coming after me
So where are **you** going to? I don't mind
If I live too long I'm afraid I'll die!
So, I will follow you wherever you go
if your offered hand is still open to me
Strangers on this road we are on
But we are not two, we are one

Sermon Text

Many years ago, when I was an impressionable high schooler, there were but a few things that really captured my mental, rather than merely hormonal, attention.

First and foremost was a love of pop music. This was something I'd carried with me from a small town called Newton, Kansas, to Northern New Jersey. When I say "pop music," I mean mostly what got played on the top 40 AM radio station and what my siblings liked and purchased as records. Which was *mostly* rock music, but I was brought up with a significant dose of Motown soul as well.

I was born in 1958 and thus I was just old enough to have some idea of what was going on in 1964 with guitar combos, on the Ed Sullivan show, when Beatlemania screamed its presence on TV. A few years later when I was let loose on my own in a store, I'd stop at the local five and dime on Main Street and go through their racks of 7-inch vinyl singles. They always had the top 40 singles listed and available. I absorbed those top 40 lists with their artists, and their movement up and down, just as I memorized baseball statistics for a while.

Even in that Kansas trading post, thirty miles from Wichita, we could pull in an AM top 40 station and, importantly, also an FM station that played album tracks in the late 60s and early 70s. I absorbed everything on the radio that I could, and what I could afford to purchase, I listened to repeatedly. I'd buy the occasional single for a dollar; less often, I'd buy a whole album. Those'd sell for about five dollars.

I couldn't buy everything I wanted to hear, and of course it was down to the luck of the draw what I'd hear on the radio. In 1972 when we moved to New Jersey there was a lot more to hear on the radio, between the two album-rock stations, and the oldies station, and a couple of AM Top 40 stations.

Of course I couldn't own it all. But, starting in early 1973 I COULD afford to buy every issue of Rolling Stone. I'd buy a copy on the day it appeared at the corner newsstand and read it cover to cover. I was so rapt in my

attention that when Rolling Stone published paperback compilations of record reviews and interviews from earlier years, including 1970 and 1971, I bought *them* and read just about every page. And I'll admit I wasn't THAT discriminating, I fell prey to the appeal of my share of pretty lame bands now considered "classic rock".

Among the heavily hyped by the Rolling Stone critics was one band, the Kinks, appearing in these reviews. Now, before I came across them in print, I was only vaguely aware of the Kinks' existence. I might have heard a song or two of theirs on AM radio back in Kansas and, like most folks, I had heard "**Lola**." That remarkable single reached number 6 in the US; it also happened to be a very uplifting love song about a trans woman, but, that fascinating aspect is perhaps another sermon for another day. The point here is, in the early 70s, I hadn't heard much of the Kinks beyond a few hits.

But these printed Rolling Stone reviews of the Kinks' recorded material, and interviews with the Kinks' band leader Ray Davies, certainly piqued my curiosity. (For those who don't know, Ray Davies was the Kinks' primary singer and songwriter, but his younger brother Dave Davies was the original founder of the band, as well as its brilliant lead guitarist.)

I was pretty sure, based on all these raves, that the band's music must be worth a deeper listen. I dimly recalled those aforementioned earliest hits, which you might hear on the oldies stations. Those first hits, beginning in 1964, were competing with those of the Beatles during what was called the "British Invasion". The British Invasion included the Dave Clark Five, the Animals, the Rolling Stones and, after the Kinks, the Who.

The Who were among the first to acknowledge a deep debt to the Kinks, by the way, as do a bunch of other musicians who've come along since, like Ozzie Osbourne, Van Halen, Ace Freeley, the Pretenders, Blur, and Oasis, and many others.

As for the Kinks' first hits, some of you *might* know the biggest and most influential ones: there were so called "power chord" hits that are often cited as proto-metal or proto-punk, like "You Really Got Me" and "All Day and All

of the Night.” There were also the razor-sharp, snarky commentaries that expertly skewered the British upper classes like “Well Respected Man” and “Dedicated Follower of Fashion”. What you’d expect from young men who grew up in a working class London neighborhood.

But it turned out, according to Rolling Stone magazine, that there was a whole world of material **beyond** the earlier hits that came later. I was pretty sure it’d be great! But was it worth shelling out five bucks for an album to find out?

Bargain bins to the rescue! See, on Friday evenings, my family—at this point, Mum, Dad, kid sister and me—would typically have a very modest dinner out. Afterward we’d typically stop by a local discount store to shop for about an hour afterwards. This store was kind of a proto-version of Marshall’s, maybe a smaller version of K-mart. And along with the clothing and other merchandise, this store had what record buyers, including myself, used to refer to as the “cut-out bin.” A show of hands—does anyone here remember cut-out albums?

That was what we called lps that didn’t sell in their original release. “Cut-outs.” These were returned by record stores to the record company for credit. They’d have a corner of the cardboard album cover mutilated by a drill or a saw blade so they could be clearly identified as such.

These vinyl albums were usually resold, typically at lower tier retail outlets, for well under half price. When I was shopping in 1974, they were usually just a dollar ninety-nine.

I think you know what I stumbled upon. The motherlode. Four Kinks albums happened to be available at this reduced price in these bins. ALL four of them were packed with tracks that I found compelling.

To the point where I would hear a tune like “This Time Tomorrow” or “Get Back in the Line” or “Twentieth Century Man” or “I’m Not Like Everybody Else” or “Sweet Lady Genevieve” and say, perhaps after the fourth time through, “HOW IS IT THAT **EVERYBODY** DOESN’T KNOW THIS MUSIC??? IT’S UNFAIR!!! THIS STUFF IS BRILLIANT!!!

To which I now say to my impressionable 16 year old self: “Welcome to the **cult**! You are now officially a **weirdo** who feels he has to evangelize on behalf of some professional musicians who, turns out, *do* have a record contract and who are, actually, doing quite well for themselves! They have plenty of gigs lined up, and they *will* mount an incredible comeback here in the US. But go out there and be their unpaid publicist! And listen to other weird stuff that doesn’t sell well. There’s a good lad.”

Now in fairness to myself, it wasn’t really JUST the Kinks that’d set me on this path toward seeking out musical acts with what seemed like just a cult following, that weren’t getting any radio airplay. A high school pal of mine during sophomore year was a big Frank Zappa fan, and I’d managed to accumulate a ridiculous number of Frank's albums because I was convinced that this was worthwhile stuff. Kinda! I mean, if you know Zappa, you KNOW the guy is quite deliberately difficult as often as not.

Zappa more or less forced you to accept that nothing he recorded would ever really unfold conventionally. Forget verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus; if you got that, one of those components would probably detour into some freeform jazz or modern classical piece before returning. **If** it returned... and with Frank? Man, you just never knew.

The Kinks, though! THESE GUYS, this band, they wrote amazing songs! That you could sing, or hum, at least: These tracks were hook-laden gems that got burned into your brain.

So naturally I bought a guitar and amp and found friends and we had a *high school* rock band... oh, wait, no I didn’t. Who was going to **pay** for all that? Did I mention I was reduced to scouring the bargain bins? I wasn’t made of money.

No, instead of buying the pricey hardware and banging out chords with friends in a basement, *just* yet, I was going to continue my high school years wandering forth in search of new, interesting stuff. Glam rock was happening, and that meant Bowie, Roxy Music, Eno, Lou Reed, and T. Rex

ascendant. That music was plenty weird and it attracted high school friends that I made, who listened to these acts' mid-70s output with me.

So it was, in the summer of 1976 when a friend and I were old enough to legally venture into a seedy bar with a PA and a small stage and a jukebox on the then-impoverished Lower East Side of New York.

Spurred on by a glowing writeup in the *Village Voice* by a fella named James Wolcott, I had heard about an unsigned band, still a trio at the time, called Talking Heads. And hence we knew they were playing regularly at CBGB. That legendary club was just starting to attract a lot curiosity seekers like us.

Talking Heads were not like anything I'd ever heard. They were just off-kilter enough, while keeping just enough hooks, to hook me. There was something lovably nerdy and brittle about how David, Tina, and Chris presented themselves in their button down shirts and nice clean jeans or even slacks, and workmanlike, serviceable musical hardware. This was about the farthest thing from overwrought, preening, stupid, sexist, macho hard-rockers as one could get.

Was it... punk? In '76 and '77, we were all still collectively deciding what that word even meant. I think we still are!

Yeah, after that experience, it would turn out that there would be, playing at that same Lower East Side joint, any number of acts that went on to become legendary but who didn't yet have major record contracts like Television or Blondie, or those who did but who just weren't getting airplay like the Ramones, or newcomers like the Damned or the Police.

I somehow found the time to check out live acts there several times a week, while attending college full time, working part time to pay for tuition and this live-music habit.

I was also earning enough to be able to buy a cheap guitar, a very loud amp, and a fuzzbox. This happened a year after walking into CBGB. And I

formed a pretty terrible basement band with some friends who were also learning to play and sing.

But, enthusiasm mattered more than competence.

And by the second summer we were trying to gig out, we weren't THAT terrible.

We covered the Kinks, starting with a pretty dreadful version of "All Day and All of the Night."

Years later, though, our band got a lot better. And we got more ambitious, playing solid versions of "Where Have All The Good Times Gone" and a heartbreakingly beautiful anthem called "Shangri-La."

Did anyone listening really take note of the band we were covering? Probably not in real time. But maybe someone heard it and put two and two together if he or she happened upon the records whence they came, some time later.

Because of course, the Kinks *didn't* just languish in the bargain bin, where I'd found them in 1974. They'd been knocked down before. The Kinks endured a three year ban from touring in the US from beginning in 1965. When they were allowed to return to the states in 1969, their American record label unleashed a publicity campaign called—want to guess what they called it? It was called "GOD SAVE THE KINKS."

And they played the rock halls like Fillmore East and West, toured the States incessantly, had a top ten hit with the aforementioned "Lola," before releasing three rock opera albums that just didn't quite find an audience between 1973 and 1975.

But, they did get back on track commercially beginning the following year with songs like "Sleepwalker" and "Low Budget" and "Superman" and "Do it Again", and their last genuine hit, "Come Dancing", which, like "Lola", managed to hit Number 6 on the US charts.

Which is going back to - yikes - 1983. If I had to hazard a guess, that'd be some time before at least a third of you, maybe half of you, in front of me were born.

Me? I didn't love their later stuff so much, but I was, as one says, "happy **for** them." And it was good, clean fun to see Ray Davies starring in a very funny video for the single "Come Dancing" on MTV.

I *could* just end this sermon here and say "so for every wacky, weird thing any of **you** decided was special, you're blessed! Go in peace and enjoy the week!"

But, as promised, I must cover the connection from the Kinks fandom, to my current belief system as a Unitarian Universalist.

Worldwide there are maybe eight hundred thousand people who self-identify as Unitarian Universalist. We've been around, as a denomination since 1961, but for real, since the time of this nation's founding, we've been either "Unitarian" or "Universalist".

And in ALL THAT TIME, when at first great things membership-wise for Unitarians were predicted by no less an individual than Thomas Jefferson, who believed that we were going to rock this world once people had a chance to hear our message...where do we stand in the Religious Top 40? Yeah, not very high.

I was able to dig out a top religious affiliation list from the [Public Religion Research Institute](#), going back to 2020, that had us ranked number 16, under Hindu, here in the States.

Doing a search of worldwide faiths, I was bedazzled by certain groups claiming many scores of millions, and yet we UUs, we're down here seemingly at the bottom of the dogpile, yelping for attention with our miserable eight hundred thousand. Worldwide!

Does it matter? Is bigger better? Or are we proud of our cult-band status?

Well... what do you think *I* thought, back in 2004 when I told my wife, “y’know, our daughter is getting asked in pre-school ‘where do you go to church?’ And I’d actually had a very pleasant church experience, as a kid, myself, so maybe we should try a church here in Georgia to our liking?”

“And honey, I took the Belief dot net quiz and found out I’m something like 99 percent Unitarian Universalist, which beats out 96 percent Quaker and 95 percent United Church of Christ!”

I *said* something like that. I *thought* “these are probably my people. They’re not just liberals, but fellow weirdos. **Octagonal** pegs, not willing to be forced into square or round holes.”

So I might go so far as to say, UU *is* the cut-out bin of religious believers. You might get it; you might not. It’s ok if you don’t!

But if you’re willing to spend an amount of time in a UU service that is remarkably similar to how long one might expect a long-playing record to last - forty-five minutes, say? An hour at the outside (that’d be a double-album’s length, I guess)?

If you can hang with us and maybe hear something that OUGHT to be a hit, that isn’t?

Welcome to the cutout bin. The cult band. Heck, let’s embrace it since some religious extremists have deemed us UUs as such anyway - the cult!

So: *Did God save the Kinks?* There’s no question in my mind.

God most certainly **did**.

Benediction

The following words are from Raymond Douglas Davies:

Here's wishing you the bluest sky
Hoping something better comes tomorrow
Hoping all the verses rhyme
And the very best of choruses too
To follow all your doubt and sadness
I know that better things are on the way

Go in peace, and enjoy the week.