

the conversation

America, you really got me

Ray Davies tells **Will Hodgkinson** about being shot, depression and a love-hate affair with the US

A few minutes into our interview Ray Davies says: "I'm not a normal rock'n'roller." Frankly, I could have told him that. We're meeting to talk about *Americana*, the leader of the Kinks' book about his lifelong love/hate relationship with the United States. The arranged meeting place is a branch of Café Rouge in Highgate, near where he grew up in Muswell Hill, North London. As soon as he arrives, however, Davies decides he doesn't feel comfortable talking in a restaurant and suggests a more conducive spot: a park bench.

"It's a lonely profession," Davies reflects gloomily, as platoons of mums chatter happily nearby. "There's an element of dysfunction with the artist, otherwise you wouldn't bother. Some of my fans work on building sites, and I admire them. I wish I had the mindset to get up and work on a building site."

Since forming the Kinks in 1964 with his younger brother, Dave, the 69-year-old Davies has never really acted like a rock star. He still lives within a mile of where he grew up. He hasn't battled addictions to drugs, drink or sex. And he has not owned a house since his first marriage ended in 1973. "I wouldn't say I'm a free spirit, but I do need some guidance on how to be a permanent person," says Davies who, in his worn tweed jacket and jeans, looks as though he might have been better suited to a life in academia than rock. "I was always frightened by having the house and the garage and all the things that go with it. At

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the same time I don't want to be homeless. That's a big fear."

It's unlikely that the man who wrote *You Really Got Me*, *Waterloo Sunset*, *Lola* and so many other big hits for the Kinks will be reduced to rifling through bins any time soon, but that fear adds to the contradictions of someone whose lifelong obsession with America stands against the very British nature of his work. *Americana* is book-ended by two incidents that soured Davies's view of what had seemed to a boy growing up under rationing like the Promised Land. In 1965, at the height of the band's success, the American Federation of Musicians banned the Kinks from touring America, effectively killing off their chance of getting into the same league as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Then in 2004, by when Davies had re-established his love affair with American music and moved to New Orleans to work with local musicians, a mugger shot him in the leg. The book tries to reconcile the two events with his feelings for a country that seems to horrify as much as it fascinates him.

"I still can't work the place out," he says. "I don't think it's real, or at least it isn't real to me, and the overall take of the book is that America is a beast I've learnt to live with. It's about my search for belonging."

Davies grew up with six elder sisters and the three years' younger Dave. One of the sisters moved to Canada when he was a little boy, while the others regaled him with tales of wartime adventures with GI boyfriends. "America was the land of opportunity, the better place to go. I remember using the ration book to get 2oz of dolly mixtures and coming back home to read a letter from my sister in Canada, telling us how great it all was. A lot of people think of me as being typically English, but there's an underbelly of wanting to be there in the songs I've written."

Early Kinks albums displayed a love of American music, with their blend of Chuck Berry cover versions and R&B-influenced originals, but the band had a difficult relationship with the US from the start. When they arrived at Kennedy Airport in June 1965 for their first US tour, a customs officer looked at Davies' long hair and asked: "Are you a Beatle or a girl?" Davies replied: "I'm a girl, and so is my brother." The Kinks were held in customs for the next few hours and were almost sent home. They missed their press conference, putting paid to chances of a Beatles-style welcome from screaming fans.

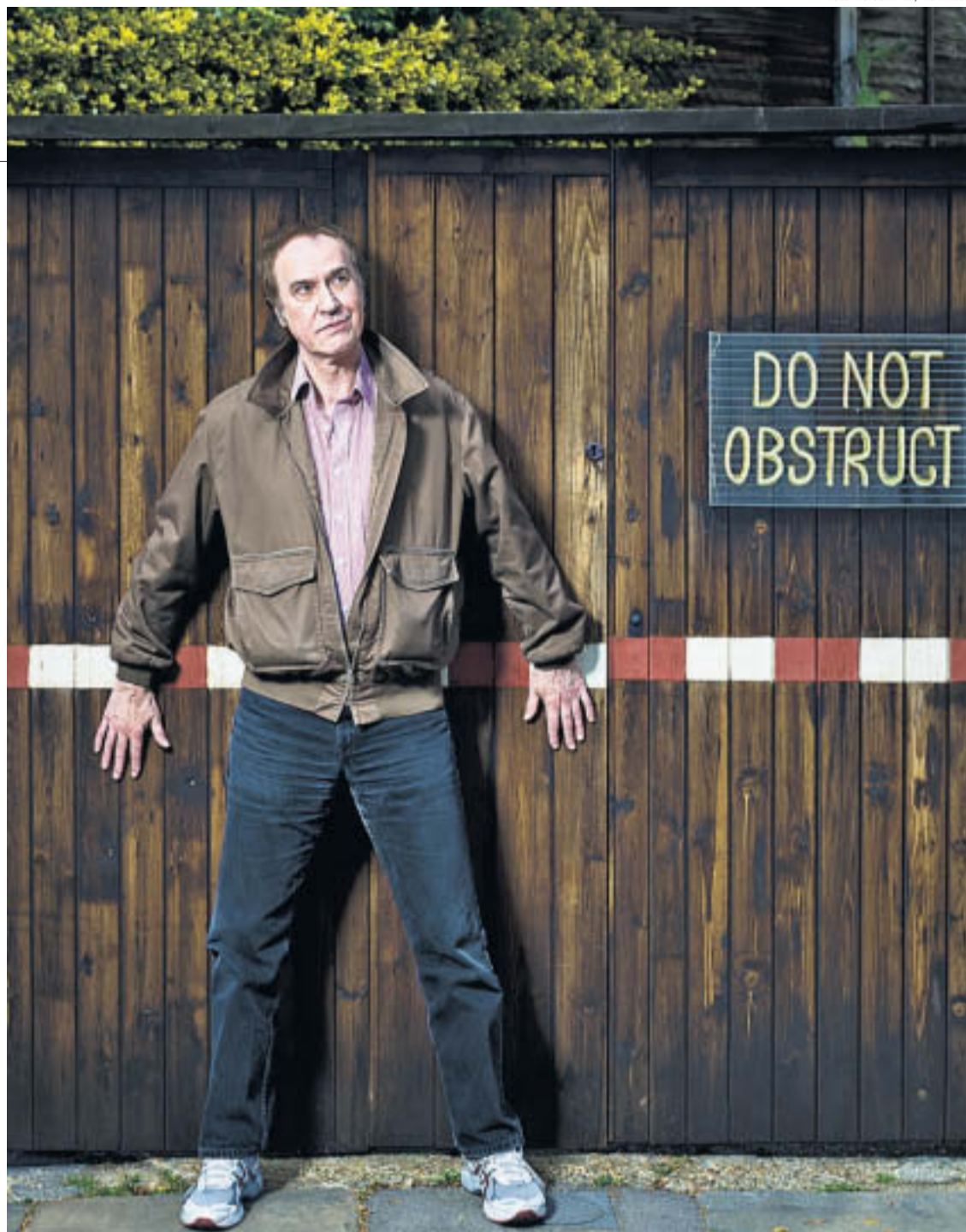
Things got worse. After a concert in Illinois a local promoter asked the band if they wanted to stay the night at his house. They turned down his offer, only to discover later that he was the serial killer John Wayne Gacy. While filming a spot on *The Dick Clark Show*, Davies punched a man who was taunting him about England falling to communists. The Kinks' co-managers were filing lawsuits against each other. Davies spent most of the tour in his hotel room, terrified of being shot at.

"If I knew the exact reason for the American ban I would have written about it, but it was down to a mix of bad luck and bad behaviour," Davies says. The impact British music had on America was political and the British Invasion was a real threat. It wasn't just about teenyboppers screaming at the Beatles. American musicians were worried about their jobs.

The experience threw Davies into a deep depression that has returned intermittently ever since. And while he remains talkative on the bench, there's a feeling that despair is never too far away.

"When the ban came I was kind of glad because it meant I didn't have to go to America again, but in commercial terms it was devastating," he says. "Without the ban we would have been on the treadmill, making tons of money and playing at — what was that big festival? Woodstock. By staying here we retained some humility, whereas I saw my contemporaries get... not pompous exactly, but overblown."

Stuck in Britain, Davies developed masterpieces such as 1968's *The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society*,



WELL-RESPECTED MAN
Ray Davies; below, with the Kinks in the 1960s, second from left



'When I'm writing, I get animated. With writer's block, my entire system siezes up. I can hardly move'

which eulogised everything from strawberry jam to Tudor houses at a time when other bands were singing about dropping out of society and killing their mothers. He was developing an observational song-writing style that has been much copied, never matched. *Lola*, based on the time the Kinks' first manager danced with a beautiful girl in a Paris nightclub, only to go back to her hotel and discover that she was a he, is one of the best pop songs ever written.

Americana features a quote about Davies from Travis Davis, a trumpeter and bar owner from New Orleans. "Some singers are like actors," Davis said. "They're no good without the lines. Without lines to express the way you feel, you run away." Is that true? "Travis is entirely right. When I'm writing in full flow, I get animated. I walk and run a lot. With writer's block, the entire system seizes up. My body literally gets blocked. I can hardly move."

In January 2004, Davies could hardly move for a different reason. He was walking through the New Orleans French Quarter with a woman he refers to as JJ when a man approached them. "His strange, shuffling walk, full of urban attitude, seemed out of place," Davies writes. The man grabbed JJ's bag, Davies chased him. The mugger stopped, turned around, and shot him before jumping into a getaway car. Davies still walks with a limp.

"The thing that played in my mind was: 'This guy isn't going to just take the money,'" says Davies. "There was nobody else in the street, and he had that look in his eye that said he might just kill us. It was bad luck, but bad luck rides with you. You spill your coffee and the next thing you know someone's shooting at you. At the time I didn't think the shooting changed

me, but now I realise it did. It was delayed shock. Going back over it put me through a lot of unhappiness."

There is little in *Americana* about the American Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, with whom Davies has a daughter, and there's little on his brother Dave, with whom he has a famously fractious relationship. Did he avoid writing about them for fear of emotional or legal ramifications? "It would have been remiss of me to write about America and not mention Chris," he replies, "but I wanted to do it in the most delicate way possible because the problems of our relationship were nothing to do with us; they were problems I had anyway. And the thing with my brother is so deep that I couldn't begin to go into it. He went and did his thing, I did mine, and the closest we got was in the studio."

Our park bench interview ends with some reflections on where Ray Davies, as British as they come but forever dreaming of an America that exists only in his imagination, fits in to the musical landscape.

"I'm not a great singer. I'm a fair to middling guitar player. But songs have a place in my psyche and I can't just walk away from them," he says. "I'm a creative. If I had a business card it would say: Ray Davies, *Creative Spirit*."

"Then he gets up from the bench and says, with the sensitivity of a damaged soul, 'Thank you for being understanding.'" *Americana: The Kinks, the Road and the Perfect Riff* by Ray Davies is published by Virgin Books on October 3 at £18.99. To order it for £17.09 inc p&p, call 0845 2712134. Ray Davies is at *The Times Cheltenham Literature Festival* (0844 8808094) on Oct 6. cheltenhamfestivals.com/literature