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Mark Doyle

The Kinks: Songs of the Semi-Detached (Reaktion, 2020)

Review by Patrick Glen, University of Leeds, p.glen@leeds.ac.uk

Mark Doyle's *Songs of the Semi-Detached* is a humanistic rather than hagiographical analysis of the Kinks that situates the band and their music within its historical, social and geographical contexts. It aims to give the reader a resource that might benefit their 'appreciation' of the Kinks music that was released between 1962 and 1973 (rather than their later singles and albums that finished with *Phobia* in 1993). The Kinks were a highly popular and influential English rock band based in London and led by Ray and Dave Davies. Due to disagreements with US promoters and labels, the group never quite had the international success of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Who, however they remain one of the most listened to and fondly remembered bands of the time. As the Kinks were more or less stranded in Britain, this has led to a notion that the Kinks represented Englishness in their music more so than their peers did. Doyle adds nuance to this view arguing that the Kinks 'variety of Englishness never quite aligned with the dominant (that is upper and middle class) artistic and intellectual traditions of England.'¹ Instead, he offers a perceptive reading of how the Davies' class experiences, worldview and song writing was interlinked. Doing so Doyle illustrates how Ray Davies—the band's main songwriter—negotiated his identity and social position in music as he moved through working and middle class spaces; Doyle explains how Davies made sense of the world he inhabited and reminisced about (sometimes mythologising) the working class he left.

Doyle explains that the book's contribution to writing on the Kinks comes from how he avoids the biographical or musicological approaches taken by other authors. Doyle refers to his alternative approach as 'historically informed rock criticism'.² In spite of Doyle's clearly insightful analysis, the interpretive jumps of music journalism have often been criticised; Philip Tagg once commented that rock criticism can 'degenerate into exegetic guesswork and "reading between the lines"'.³ I have personally written a book that, in part, seeks to uncover the social and economic forces that underpinned the production of music press texts and how this results in specific registers, interpretive approaches and blind spots in analysis around class, race and gender.⁴ Doyle largely avoids these pitfalls, but there are times—particularly when making links between Davies' work and the English literary canon—where the use of slightly more empirical evidence to inform the impression of Ray Davies' worldview might have strengthened Doyle's arguments.

The first chapter is a fascinating passage through the places and people that shaped Ray and Dave Davies' early lives in working class Holloway and middle class Fortis Green. Scholars of post-1945 British social history will certainly be drawn to Doyle's thought-provoking reading of the 'historical circumstances' that led to the Kinks attachment to English working class and African American culture. Making links to classic texts of British cultural studies and sociology such as Wilmot and Young's work on kinship and Richard Hoggart's *the Uses of Literacy*, Doyle explains how the Davies family's vibrant and welcoming social life turned up noses in their new middle class neighbourhood. This is folded into the band's early musical practice convincingly and fulfilled the

¹ Mark Doyle, *The Kinks: Songs of the Semi-Detached* (Reaktion, 2020), 14.

² Doyle, *The Kinks*, 9

³ Philip Tagg, 'Analysing popular music: theory, method and practice.' *Popular Music* 2 (1982), 42.

⁴ Patrick Glen, *Youth and Permissive Social Change in British Music Papers, 1967–1983*. London: Palgrave Macmillan (2019).

book's aim to enriching my enjoyment of the Kinks' music. However, this chapter is where, first, claims about the Kinks' Englishness and, secondly, whether this can be extrapolated to make broader claims about 'Englishness' become a little questionable. The Davies brother's father was Welsh-Irish and their mother's origin is not mentioned (I searched for her birth certificate in the official records and its absence suggests that she was born outside of Britain or adopted); the brothers were born into a cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic part of London; and their music taste was profoundly shaped by interactions with their sister and her Irish husband. This prompted me to ask, is Doyle analysing the slippery subject of English identity or that of a distinct London culture *or* migrants to England who were subsumed into the English working class but retained values and practices of other ethnic cultures? Furthermore, how and to what extents are Londoners or newcomers permitted to be 'English' by those who hold the power to construct and perpetuate dominant understandings of English culture? At times, Ray Davies voyeuristic song writing seems like an outsider trying to make sense of the middle class English.

These conceptual questions about Englishness do not, however, profoundly detract from the scholarly value and general enjoyment that this book brings. Chapter Two delves deeper into the dissonance between the Davies and their increasingly middle class world alongside methodical song analysis—drawing parallels with British New Wave cinema—to expose how Ray Davies 'poked fun at the British class system' and 'questioned the narrative of Sixties Progress'.⁵ However, I disagree that Davies' incredulity was, as Doyle puts it, was 'scorn for the very culture that made him'; instead it might have been that Davies' links to the working class world gave him insight into the extent to which access to the putative liberal freedoms granted to some during the 1960s were governed by material and cultural circumstances.⁶

Chapter Three and Four explores the themes of nostalgia in the songs of Ray Davies between 1967 and 1971. In July 1968, Davies—'betraying his class'—moved for 15 months from Borehamwood, a small town in London's affluent commuter belt. This change of scenery and encounters (or lack thereof) with the upper middle class, Doyle argues, shaped the musical (mostly lyrical) approach underpinning the albums *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* and *Arthur (Or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)*. At times, some of the cultural parallels—Mancunian staples such as the painter L.S. Lowry and soap opera *Coronation Street*—seem a stretch. However, Doyle is on safer ground in when contrasting Ray Davies approach with poets Larkin and Betjeman, charting the influence of Dylan Thomas's radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954) and Pop Art, as well as noting that Davies' nostalgia was distinct from Enoch Powell's racist and colonial English nationalism. Chapter Four concentrates on *Arthur* and closely considers themes such as suburban 'neuroses' and 'loneliness' which, Doyle rightly argues, was skewered by Ray Davies with 'anti-establishment British humour'.⁷

Having finished analysing and contextualising Davies' tale of Arthur Morgan—a socially mobile conservative who Doyle explains 'swallowed the ruling ideology ... in exchange for a small measure of material comfort', Chapter Five moves on to how the Kinks described 'resistors and rebels' in the albums *Lola vs Powerman* (1970) and *Muswell Hillbillies* (1971).⁸ Doyle explains that the focus and tone of these albums are an aspect of the band's 'ongoing war with the upper class' (although one might argue the middle class as well).⁹ This chapter sets the scene for this change in

⁵ Doyle, *The Kinks*, 73.

⁶ Doyle, *The Kinks*, 74.

⁷ Doyle, *The Kinks*, 135.

⁸ Doyle, *The Kinks*, 166.

⁹ Doyle, *The Kinks*, 175.

lyrical content by referring to the armed conflict in the north of Ireland, economic stagnation and labour conflict. One of the books' strengths is how it explains musical practice through painting a vivid picture of the historical, geographical, social and cultural contexts in Britain during the post-1945 period. However, the some of the narratives of British history used as context—narratives such as the 'affluent society' and seductive accounts of sixties social change followed by a stark decline in the early-1970s—are presented as uncontested although they have been questioned (or at least understood in more complicated ways) in scholarship from the last two decades. The book could have benefitted from engaging with or adding to these historiographical debates.

Songs of the Semi-Detached is an absorbing book that will certainly find an audience. It could have great value for undergraduate students studying post-1945 British popular music (perhaps alongside Keith Gildart's article on the Kinks' negotiations of social class) and those studying approaches to music journalism.¹⁰ Fans of the Kinks and other artists who were too 'semi-detached from pop's foolishness' (songwriters like Nikki Sudden, Paul Westerberg and Alex Chilton— the latter being Ray Davies' neighbour during an early-00s stay in New Orleans) will find the analysis of Ray Davies' social position and cultural references interesting. As Doyle intended, the book can reinvigorate or prompt interest in the band's music.

¹⁰ Keith Gildart, "From 'Dead End Streets' to 'Shangri Las': Negotiating Social Class and Post-War Politics with Ray Davies and the Kinks." *Contemporary British History* 26: 3 (2012), 273–298.