

The Kinks' "Come Dancing", a Bittersweet Call to the Land of Nostalgia

I have a collection of three CDs I made some years ago. This is not a "Whose Line" skit, but there are about 400 songs on those three CDs (in terrible-quality mp3 format, of course). Still, it's a great collection for me because most of those songs are from the 1980s, aka, the decade where I matured musically, physically and somewhat mentally. I'm not saying that my musical tastes and preferences were fully developed by 1989, but by then I was well on my way to becoming an opinionated jerk – ahem, an informed critic.

For example, I had already arrived at two important conclusions before 1990 rolled around. One, I was certain that there would never be a better musical combination than Rock and Rap. Two, I was adamant that the Rolling Stones were far superior in quality and more highly enjoyable to listen to than the Beatles. I was all of 18 at the time.

Although number one has been proven as slightly less than true (thank you, Metallica and Lou Reed – wink, nudge), I still stand by number two. But that's not really fair to the Beatles, is it? They broke up in 1970 when the Stones were truly just hitting their stride. I mean, the Stones have videos on YouTube right now featuring vibrant (if old) music that they played and recorded in 2016 with 3/5 of their core starting lineup intact. The surviving Stones are ageless (not wrinkleless, just ageless) freaking wonders!

Believe it or not, that last paragraph brings us back to the 1980s. How? Well, there are quite a few Englishmen bobbing about who would have you believe that both the Beatles and Stones are nothing but drooling wankers not fit to carry the blood pudding crumbs of the band known as The Kinks. The Kinks were contemporaries of those "other two" bands and started hotter out of the gate (musically, at least) than either with the blistering stings of "You Really Got Me" and "All Day and All of the Night", the enveloping malaise of "So Tired" and the gerund noun of "Several Other" hits. After fading away from the public ear during the mid-to-late 1970s, The Kinks came back in a big way with the 1983/84 (see, 1980s) worldwide smash "Come Dancing".

As most of these tales go, "Come Dancing" barely made it out of the blocks. The song wasn't well liked by record label boss Clive Davis, of whom you may have heard. Clive pushed for another song to be the lead single from the band's forthcoming 1983 album *State of Confusion*. Oddly enough, that song featured the title, "Don't Forget to Dance". Indeed, the initial British release of "Come Dancing" was met with a resounding yawn despite the track presenting a peppy exploration of Britain's past dance hall days craze ("Dance Hall Days" by Wang Chung wouldn't come out until 1984).

So, despite the song's initial lack of success, despite the Englishness of the subject matter and despite Ray Davies himself trying to sound like the most English bloke you've ever heard on record, Clive approved a video shoot for the song and its subsequent release to the American market. Awash in the second British Pop invasion thanks to the popularity of bands like Duran Duran, Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Wham!, America was already relaxed, supine and ready to accept 7", 10" and even 12" versions of The Kinks' "Come Dancing". And dance we did, the song's compact yet elegant intro was soon overtaken by a bouncy beat and lilting keyboard strokes perfect for stepping out.

Ray's lyrics set up enough of a stir without the video, which was in near-constant rotation on MTV (Music Television – yes, that's what it actually stands for) at the time. Regard: "They put a parking lot on a piece of land / When the supermarket used to stand / Before that they put up a bowling alley / On the site that used to be the local palais / That's where the big bands used to come and play / My sister went there on a Saturday [CHORUS] Come dancing / All her boyfriends used to come and call / Why not come dancing, it's only natural?"

Aside from not knowing what the fuck a "palais" was, I was hooked by those lyrics. Please note here that in "Come Dancing", it was obvious even then to a young snotmuffin like myself that Ray Davies was handing out non-specific yet sympathetic imagery. "Hey, remember that place where that thing used to be? Yeah, that was awesome when we used to dance (and drink and love) there." At the time, that sounded very cool to me because about the only place in my dead-ass town you could listen and dance to secular music was...in your own home; or maybe once a year at school if

everyone behaved and didn't act like total dipshits before the Spring dance (I'm looking at you, Tim and Richard). Unless one was lucky enough to know Kevin Bacon or maybe even that head-bobber Kenny Loggins, there weren't a lot of entertainment options for small-town folk. So, by tapping into his own childhood experiences, Ray unknowingly opened the floodgates for a sympathetic response from an entire nation of horny, dance-hungry teenagers.

The rest of the lyrics do a suitably good job of selling that piece of nostalgia Ray established in the first verse and chorus. Ray's sister went dancing a lot, and she was a tease. Her dates became frustrated when their amorous advances were unrequited. Ray's mother worried herself about her daughter and her habits and stayed up late to yell about it (even though the mother probably did the same things in her youth). At last, the young lady gives in and plants a kiss on her hapless gentleman before the mother nags her away from him and inside the house.

Flash forward; now, the palais is gone. Ray's vision of the past is crushed; his sister is heartbroken over the loss, but life carries on. Despite, or perhaps because of her teasing ways, Ray's sister now lives on an estate (with her presumed husband), while Ray plays in a band. His sister has her own grown daughters, and she now plays the part her mother carried out so long ago. But Ray knows that if only he asked, his sister would shed those years and once again go dance...given half the chance.

Predictably, after "Come Dancing" found fertile footing in American soil, it was given another chance in its homeland, where it nearly cracked the Top 10. Although I don't recall it at all, that other Kinks "Dance" song apparently charted in both countries, as well, though not as highly. To declining interest, the band would continue releasing albums until 1994's *To the Bone*. Still, that's a good 10 years after "Come Dancing" sparked them back into public consciousness; if not for that, they surely would have faded from it long before 1994.

Meanwhile, back in '83/'84, "Come Dancing" touched me because there seemed something in it more deep than those non-specific lyrics. And although the calliope-esque keys and raucous horns were brimming with joyful motion and displaying a happy attitude, there was also a layer of wistful melancholy stretching throughout. As I've grown older, I've indeed felt more closely that "Come Dancing" is the familiar cry out for those "better" times and places where youth was recklessly yet enjoyably wasted on the young. It's a wonderful song because it can evoke such feelings of joy, remembrance, desire and loss within its brief dance.

And, as I learned recently, there was a real-life equivalent of that brief dance. Ray Davies did have an older sister who used to go out dancing at the Palais and many other places. And though she lived across the pond with a reportedly abusive husband, Ray's sister, Rene, would return to England for special occasions. One such occasion was young Ray's 13th birthday celebration, where she gifted him with a lovely Spanish guitar. Away from home and perhaps herself yearning for happier times, Rene went out dancing. She never returned. Rene had a heart attack while dancing on the ballroom floor of London's Lyceum Theatre.

And in just under four minutes of recorded words and music, Ray Davies managed to bring his dear sister's memory back to life. "Come dancing / Come on sister, have yourself a ball / Don't be afraid to come dancing / It's only natural."