From thunder and lightning to 'Smokestack Lightnin". 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' was a very late addition to *TKATVGPS* and evidence suggests it was probably the last song to be composed for the album. Like 'Big Sky', it was recorded in October 1968, after the cancellation of the original twelve-track edition. In several respects, the song is uncharacteristic of the album as a whole — its R&B derivation, its live-sounding performance and its four-minute length are all atypical[13]

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[13]No other song on *TKATVGPS* exceeds three minutes, let alone four.

— but in another it is the quintessence of Davies' writing for this project. On a LP full of deceptively acidic songs, 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' may well be the most corrosive of them all.

The Kinks, in common with many of the pop era's finest groups, emerged from the Rhythm and Blues boom of the early sixties. Among the most totemic R&B favourites was a sinister, sensual half-shuffle called 'Smokestack Lightnin" by Chester Burnett a.k.a. The Howlin' Wolf. By 1963, the song was a staple of every self-respecting British R&B band's act. The High Numbers performed 'Smokestack Lightnin" at their unsuccessful Abbey Road audition in October 1964. In Southampton, there was even a group called The Howlin' Wolves (later to change their name and find brief fame as reluctant psychedelic nabobs Simon Dupree and the Big Sound).

It may be nearly fifty years old, but the original 'Smokestack Lightnin" is a jawdropping record, a despatch from some sweltering, moonlit chamber, sung with the kind of elemental, roaring fervour that only Don Van Vliet, alias Captain Beefheart, has ever seemed able to match. In comparison, recorded British beat boom versions of the song tend to be either long on fretwork and short on menace (The Yardbirds) or well intentioned but hopelessly callow (Manfred Mann).

By late 1963, Howlin' Wolf's original recording of 'Smokestack Lightnin" was in such demand that Pye issued it as the lead track of a moderately successful EP. Six months later — around the time The Kinks were fighting with the same label to get 'You Really Got Me' rerecorded with more power and atmosphere — the company issued 'Smokestack Lightnin" again, this time as a single. Howlin' Wolf, six foot three and nearly three hundred pounds, made a memorable appearance as the surprise guest on BBC TV's *Jukebox Jury*, where he towered over the suddenly quaking members of a panel who had just voted his greatest hit a 'Miss'.

By mid-1965 however, the R&B scene was in decline as pop proliferated and groups increasingly came under pressure, often from their own management, to compete with The Beatles and write their own pop-orientated material. Out went the repertoire. In *X-Ray*, Davies recounts Hal Carter's advice to the Kinks about tailoring their stage act: "Cut out that 'Smokestack Lightning' number. You're not doing yourselves and anybody else any favours by playing that."[lxx] Meanwhile, The High Numbers, now with a new name and a record deal, were changing their tune(s). "The Who are having serious doubts about the state of R&B," their manager Kit Lambert told *Disc*. "Now the LP material [for *My Generation*] will consist of hard pop. They've finished with 'Smokestack Lightning'."[lxxi]

So in 1968, by basing 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' on an instantly recognisable riff from four or five years earlier, Ray Davies was blowing the whistle both on himself and his R&B contemporaries. There are jokes and allusions to 'Smokestack Lightnin'", and the scene in general, scattered throughout the song. Like Howlin' Wolf's original track and subsequent covers of it, 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' chugs along in E major. At 2.21, Ray Davies can distantly be heard emitting a scrawny falsetto howl, more afghan hound than wolf. From 3.41 to 3.44, The Kinks double the tempo for two bars, Pete Quaife leaping an octave to play a distinctly Chuck Berry-like bass line. In the third verse there is a lyrical allusion to 'Train Kept A-Rollin'", recorded by The Yardbirds and famously performed by the Jeff Beck / Jimmy Page line-up of the group in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966).[14] And throughout, there is Ray, huffing and puffing away on the harmonica — double-tracked in places: how else do you blow lead and rhythm simultaneously? — like it was 1963 again and The Kinks were back in the pubs and youth clubs of Muswell Hill and East Finchley.

"This was a case of the idea coming before the song," Ray Davies told *Melody Maker* when the album was

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[14]For copyright reasons, the song was quickly rewritten on the film's set as 'Stroll On'.

released. "Again, like the 'Walter' song it's really about not having anything in common with people. Everybody wanted to know about steam trains a couple of years ago, but they don't any more. It's about me being the last of the renegades. All my friends are middle class now. They've all stopped playing in clubs. They've all made money and have happy faces. Oddly enough I never did like steam trains much."[lxxii]

The correlation of steam trains and R&B in 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' is inspired, both in its witty juxtaposition of such distinctly English and American archetypes, and in the hesitancy it expresses on behalf of its author. Look, Davies says, you, we, loved this music but there is something increasingly ridiculous and misplaced about our love — an English middle class, middle-aged 'Smokestack Lightnin" is about as authentically bluesy as the Titfield Thunderbolt. I am the last renegade; how absurd that is.

Accordingly, on record the track hovers between paying homage to the R&B sound and spoofing it. Although The Kinks play it straight, some aptly locomotive touches have been added to the arrangement. The group locks into the well-worn groove, picking up speed (and handclaps) as they go. After throwing some ascending chords onto the fire (2.56 to 3.05), they race through the song's final minute, grinding to a halt with

a final puff of smoke from Mick Avory's cymbals and kick drum.

It should be too contrived for words; what prevents it from collapsing into novelty is, once again, Davies' lyric, and the despair that runs just beneath its surface jocularity and pride. Like Johnny Thunder, the Last of the Steam-Powered Trains is a rebel, a survivor, who has avoided becoming bourgeois and grey like his friends. Sweat and blood, soot and scum. But such freedom comes at a cost. He is kept in a museum; preservation is driving him mad. By the time he composed the song, Ray Davies had been writing Village Green material for two years, and 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' reiterates its central dilemmas with wit and assurance. How do you reconcile your past and present? How do you stop the weight of experience from dragging you under? How do you keep rollin' when all you want to do is stop?

Reports of the death of British R&B would prove to be greatly exaggerated. In the same month that The Kinks cut 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains', thereby bringing to a close the protracted sessions for *TKATVGPS*, south of the river at Olympic Studios in Barnes, Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page's new group was recording its debut LP. In a mere thirty-six hours, the irresistible force of Led Zeppelin remade rhythm

and blues as hard rock and, in doing so, invented the 1970s. The first song the group ever played together was 'Train Kept A-Rollin".

'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' became a fixture of The Kinks' live act when they returned to America in October 1969; at the Boston Tea Party on the 23rd it was their opening number. Tapes reveal that the record's ironies and nuances have all been ditched in favour of some fully-fledged and unfortunate Zep-like noodling. The song has become the sort of blues workout Davies originally sought to lampoon. By the end of the tour, on the stage of the Fillmore West, San Francisco, it stretches to seven tedious minutes; at the same venue a year later it has swollen to a mind-numbing eleven. Ray bellows the words, jumbling and repeating the lyrics; Dave gives full rein to his incipient guitar heroics. "I was walking in a field one day," yells Dave Davies at one point, bafflingly, "and I happened to look up at the sky. And man, you know what I saw? I SAW AN ALBATROSS!!!" Cue seven minutes of maximum heaviosity (and boredom). It must have sounded great if you were stoned, or one of the musicians, or both.

Coincidentally, Bay Area extemporisers The Grateful Dead regularly featured 'Smokestack Lightnin" in their interminable concerts. It would be nice to think that The Kinks' "coals to Newcastle" live performances of 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' in San Fran-

cisco were extending the song's satirical reach; in fact they were just playing to the long-haired, droopy-lidded gallery. By chance, the song fitted the back-to-rock-basics mood of the times.

One last thought: in its acknowledgement of pop's inevitable greying, 'Last Of The Steam-Powered Trains' has proved to be gloriously predictive. Magazines like *Mojo* and *Classic Rock*, with their emphasis on classicism and authenticity — even iconoclastic movements like punk and techno are now revered for their classicism and authenticity — are like museums of rock music, with figures like Ray Davies and albums like *TKATVGPS* their prize exhibits.

Big Sky

Ray Davies wrote the immortal 'Big Sky' on the balcony of the Carlton Hotel in Cannes. "I spent an evening with all these people doing deals," he said. "The next morning at the Carlton Hotel I watched the sun come up and I looked at them all down there, all going out to do their deals. That's where I got the "Big Sky looking down on all the people" line. It started from there."[lxxiii] In his liner notes for *This Is Where I Belong*, Davies says he watched the sun set, not rise: whatever, the combination of the awe-inspiring skies above the Mediterranean and the businessmen below in their suits and