

Wake Up America!

Sparks Special on the Airwaves (Fabio's Show)

Thurs Jan 30, 2003 12 -3pm WFMU.org

Some might think of **Sparks** as *that band from the 70s* and others might think of them as *that band from the 80s*. They might try to remember the name of their hit song, but they won't remember the title. Or it's possible they never heard of **Sparks**. That's if you live in America. But if they live in England, Germany, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Australia or Japan then they might know **Sparks** as *that new band with the whacky lyrics*. The titles of the **Sparks** songs alone are clever enough to demand attention. Under the name **Sparks** Ron and Russel Mael have been churning out eclectic quirky pop songs with long titles since the late 60s - and they are still at it.

They premiered their masterpiece **Lil' Beethoven** at the Royal Festival Hall in London on October 18, 2002 and I was there (along with many notable music dignitaries for the brother's heavily anticipated return to the stage). My guest appearance on WFMU airwaves gave a first hand report of that show and the songs on **Lil' Beethoven** their new CD which they played live with great fanfare —from track 1 to track 9 — in the same order as on the CD. As a guest on DJ Fabio's *Irritainment Through Failure* I played unreleased outtakes from vintage **Sparks** LPs from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, pre-vintaged demos for Half Nelson (their original band name) going back to the psychedelic 60s, promotional radio advertisements for marketing the **Sparks** brand, and lo-fi recordings I covertly recorded of applause and banter from between the songs during their show at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Unbelievably, when they do make it into the charts (not in America of course), people still think they're a new band!

"Stop Me If You've Heard This Before" — Ron & Russel Mael

I think we made minor radiophonic broadcast history with the ***Sparks Special*** on WFMU . Has there ever been a radio station in the US or possibly in the whole world that devoted 3 hours to exclusively listening and talking about Sparks? I doubt it.

"I Don't Even Know, What I Don't Even Know" from Those Mysteries — Ron & Russel Mael

On the ***Sparks Special*** on WFMU I played selections from **Lil' Beethoven**, unreleased outtakes from vintage **Sparks** LPs from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, pre-vintages demo recordings from before **Half Nelson** going back to the psychedelic 60s, promotional radio advertisements for marketing **Sparks**, and live lo-fi recordings of the gaps between their songs at their concert at the Royal Festival Hall in London in 2002. On the air I suggested the hypothesis that I may be *the biggest Sparks fan in New York City* and possibly the world. Not wanting to offend anyone, I will already state that I could be wrong about this. (but I don't think so.)

Sparks - My Story

I first heard **Sparks** on the radio when **Propaganda** came out in the early seventies. I heard the title track and “*At Home At Work At Play*” on the radio and ran out to buy it the next day. Then I bought **Kimono My House** and **A Woofer in A Tweeters Clothing**. In 1974 or maybe 75 **Sparks** played at the local community college in my hometown in Pennsylvania. I was there with my camera and shot black & white photos which I developed and printed and I still have to this day. I continued buying their records whenever they were released. I saw them again at The Tower Theater in Philadelphia sometime in the late 70s. I liked everything I heard although sometimes it took a while to appreciate some of their records at first. Like a good wine they got better with time.

In 1982 I met Michael Zodorozny (from the legendary band **Crash Course In Science**) and we formed a band called **KMZ**. Michael was the first person I knew who shared my enthusiasm for **Sparks**. **KMZ** performed at the Pyramid Club in New York City in the early 80s. Michael played distorted keyboards and we sang and made noise over distorted rhythms, sequencers, homemade electronics, screechy violin and more noise. We wore costumes and makeup and projected slides onto sets designed for us by Greg Reeves, each show had a unique varied theme. When **KMZ** played at the Love Club in Philadelphia we did covers of “*This Town Ain’t Big Enough For The Both of Us*” and “*Amateur Hour*” from **Kimono My House** — played back-to-back — just like on the album. I saw **Sparks** at the Ritz in New York City in the middle around 1985 and I remember being totally amused at the end when Russell came out for final encore with a stuffed animal and sang a ballad with it. Also around this time I saw **Sparks** at Jones Beach opening up for Rick Springfield. It was hilarious because the audience was mostly young girls, many of them accompanied by their mothers. Ron came out in front of his keyboard and awkwardly performed a strip tease (down to boxer shorts!). Cracked me up!

Did I mention I am also a big fan of John Cage? Yes, and he’s also from LA. Anyway, time went by and as I got more involved in abstract noise and experimental music I slowly forgot about **Sparks**. In 1986 I started a record label for experimental music (Generations Unlimited) and opened a sound art gallery (Generator) which featured experimental music, folk noise and sound artists. During this time I got very far from pop n’rock. In 1990 when I moved the Generator from the East Village to Chelsea I sold off a large portion of my personal record collection. While sorting through all pop and rock records that I collected from the 70’s and 80’s. When I came across my **Sparks** albums I instinctively put them directly into the *Keeper Pile*. I couldn’t get rid of a single one. This purging of records happened several times in my life. Another time I remember putting on a **Sparks** record that I hadn’t heard in several years as I considered getting rid of it but as soon as the needle hit the groove I was immediately reminded that these priceless gems of songs instantly put a smile on my face. So despite being completely immersed in experimental music for years and losing interest in popular music I found that I still adored my **Sparks** collection. Plus the album covers were entertaining by themselves!

In 1992 after closing the Generator I spent time in the Pocono Mountains. During this

sabbatical I was living without a stereo and experiencing “Silence”, the kind John Cage spoke about. After about a year of listening without a stereo one day I spontaneously bought home an 8-Track player and a box of tapes that I acquired at a local yard sale for nearly nothing. Seventies rock came surging back into my life. I became an 8-Track enthusiast and entered 8 Track Heaven by recording **8 Track Magic**, an endearing recording of a damaged 8 Track tape that played once then died. I channeled “The Four Stages of The 8 Track Mind” and submitted it to the zine called *8 Track Mind*. Soon I found myself wanting to hear **Sparks** again, this time on 8 Track. Not seeing Sparks on 8 Tracks in my local Salvation Army or at yard sales I put out a request for them in *8 Track Mind*. I was contacted by a few people who wrote to me saying that they owned **Sparks** on 8 Track but they couldn’t part with them – which of course I understood very well. Eventually I did receive several **Sparks** 8 Tracks in the mail from people who apparently understood how much I liked **Sparks** and how much I wanted to hear Sparks on 8 Track for which I was very grateful - even if some of them didn’t play.

In 1994 I started A.T.M.O.T.W. (Art is Throwing Money Out The Window) by releasing “*The Sound of Lamination*”, a 7-inch record (on blue vinyl) using the last money left to me from John Cage’s generous donations to the Generator Sound Art Gallery. Inspired by a dream it was a total pleasure for me to release this record because it was so far out from the mainstream. It was even far out for the experimental music world – kind of outside of alternative culture as well. Very outside. It was almost conceptual. On the record jacket I thanked the people who inspired me including **John Cage** and **Sparks**. I was amused and wondered if **Sparks** and **John Cage** were ever so near each other in the same sentence before “*The Sound of Lamination*”.

In 1996 I struggled through a depressed winter. While sorting through old boxes of papers, journals and other crap and found an old copy of the *Official Sparks Fan Club* newsletter which I had subscribed to in the early 80s. It made me wonder what ever happened to **Sparks**. Did the fan club still exist? Were **Sparks** still making music? I wrote to Mary Martin (The *Official Sparks Fan Club* secretary) and got an immediate response and news of a new **Sparks** music on the horizon. Soon I received a notice in the mail for a trivia contest by Logic Records promoting a new **Sparks** CD! Yes a new **Sparks** CD! I was thrilled. I faxed in the correct answer (Q. What was the name of the band before they became **Sparks A. Half Nelson**) and I won! A seven inch single called “*When Do I get To Sing My Way*” arrived with news of an upcoming new **Sparks** CD. I fell in love with this new **Sparks** song! When I put the record on all my troubles seemed so far away. I’ll never forget the feeling of just standing in front of the speakers and smiling while listening to that record. I’m not one for repeat playing but I played that song over and over and over again. It was a soothing mental massage. I didn’t need therapy. I didn’t need anything. I just needed to listen to more **Sparks**. I began rounding out my collection. Most of my **Sparks** records had been in storage but with renewed interest I got them all out and played one after the other. **Sparks** records made me smile and brought me out of a gloomy mood. I played “*When Do I get To Sing My Way*” everyday on my way out the door to help chase away demons. “*When Do I get To Sing My Way*” was like my own “*Number One Song in Heaven*”! It echoed in my head and kept me in good spirits for most of the day. I’d give myself another fix of

it when I got home to make sure. I was cured! Well, at least it really did help me get through many hard days. I immediately bought the new CD **Gratuitous Sax and Senseless Violins** as soon as it was released. **Gratuitous Sax and Senseless Violins** was the first new CD from **Sparks** in years. I bought some merchandise from The *Official Sparks Fan Club* and even voluntarily redesigned the Official **Sparks** Merchandise Order Form to place my order. It was very therapeutic typing in all the **Sparks** merchandise and it gave me more time to appreciate **Sparks**. I was sold on **Sparks** though I guess I had already been sold on them for decades. Maybe I was re-sold.

In April of 1996 I was in a bar in Vienna at 3 am after a long night of laminating. The DJ played "*The Ghost of Liberace*" from **Gratuitous Sax and Senseless Violins**. I was surprised and elated to hear **Sparks** in public! I last time I heard **Sparks** in a bar was at Dicks in the East Village sometime in the 80s. I approached the DJ and asked him if he liked **Sparks**. I found out he was the owner of the bar as well as the DJ and he was either very drunk or he didn't understand me or maybe he was just as blissed out on hearing **Sparks** as I was because he just smiled and nodded his head. I said *very emphatically*, "**We - like - Sparks**". He nodded and smiled some more. We made meaningful eye contact for a long moment. I was so thrilled to be able to say "**We like Sparks**", because in the avant-garde circles I tend to spin in I rarely meet a soul who loves **Sparks**. If I'm lucky it would be "Yeah, *I LIKE Sparks*". Most people never heard of them or occasionally someone says maybe they remember one song from many years ago.

That's why I proposed to do the 2-hour radio show about **Sparks** on WFMU in 2003. Actually I began proposing in several years before but it wasn't until 2003 that I finally convinced DJ Fabio to invite me on the air with my **Sparks** collection. I have been a guest on WFMU before, but I usually had something to do with contemporary music, noise, electronic music and things like that. Fabio laughed when I told him I wanted to do a total **Sparks** show—he thought I was joking! I brought it up several times and at one point he told me he thought Sparks was a mindless excuse for a pop band. Of course then I knew he knew almost nothing about **Sparks** and that I just had to do this show. Fabio was one of those people who thought they had one LP out in the 70's and then maybe another disco record in the 80s and he vaguely remembered liking one song a long time ago. He didn't know they had 20 records out in illustrious career as pop stars. And each one on a different record label! Imagine! I knew he needed a **Sparks** re-education. So I told him I would blow his mind if he let me on his show. I'd prove that **Sparks** was one of the most clever and imaginative pop/rock bands from the States, so clever in fact that despite having over 18 records released, many on major labels, most people still haven't heard of them. Hardly anybody even knows they are from the the States.!

Well it took a few years to convince Fabio of **Sparks** super potential as a subject for his show. When I found out there was going to be a **Sparks-o-Rama** conference I thought I would try again. I organized a gathering of people at Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg to watch 12 hours of **Sparks** videos to coincide with the **Sparks-o-Rama** conference taking place in LA so thought this would be the perfect time to have the **Sparks Special** on WFMU. I told him I would

persist until he said yes and that I wouldn't do any other shows until he let me do a **Sparks Special**. Because he had a lot of respect for me in the past and had bought priceless records from me at Generator, and because I was unbelievably persistent, he finally consented.

I was pleased to find WFMU already had seven **Sparks** albums in their collection when I visited their library. But no one I met at the station had any idea that **Sparks** still existed, let alone that they were about to make a major comeback as tours were announced for Europe, Australia and Japan. We invited **Sparks** fans to call us on the show and I think we received 2 calls from people who actually knew about **Sparks**. One was from the Madeline who was an organizer of the **Sparks-o-Rama** conference and the other was from Frank, a gentleman who ONLY owns records by **Sparks!** Incidentally, he is now married to Madeline. The **Sparks** show on WFMU turned a lot of heads and opened a lot of ears to **Sparks** for people who had previously had no idea that **Sparks** existed or that they had been so prolific and brilliant for so many years.

And now fast forward to the year 2007. Since the **Sparks Special** on WFMU there has been a sequel to the **Sparks** show on Fabio's show, two **Sparks** tribute CDs — one by their fans (including 2 tracks from me) and another by **Sparks** themselves—several new **Sparks** CDs on several new labels, a **Sparks** concert in New York City at Summer Stage, a BBC special about **Sparks** and more. Today I can safely say **Sparks** are played consistently on WFMU and are known by most of the DJs at the station.

So it is with great enthusiasm that I say I love **Sparks**. They continue to make me happy.

Visit the Sparks Web Site www.allSparks.com