



PREVIEWS

The Sparks Brothers

+ Q&A with director Edgar Wright

There aren't many bands who arrive at their 50th anniversary on a creative roll, still luring in new generations of fans, making Top 10 albums, and doing so by releasing music every bit as challenging and inventive as their earliest recordings. In fact, there is precisely one: Sparks.

Ron and Russell Mael are rock's original Odd Couple, as inscrutable as they are fascinating. Never content to rest on their laurels or follow musical trends, they have achieved commercial success only intermittently, and almost despite themselves. Edgar Wright's music documentary *The Sparks Brothers* captures the art-pop pioneers at an improbable late career high, as well as recounting the story of how they got there, asking why they aren't as celebrated as they deserve to be, and finding out how they became your favourite band's favourite band.

'If you want to look at Ron and Russell, you have to look at them through one prism. And that prism is cinema.' (Alex Kapranos, Franz Ferdinand)

'We can communicate in non-verbal ways, just by having worked together for so long.' (Ron Mael, Sparks)

A certain ineffable mystique surrounds fraternal partnerships in the arts. In film, from the Lumières through the Boultings, the Coens and beyond, the exact division of labour between a pair of brothers is typically opaque to outsiders. In rock music, however, the sibling dynamic is often fractious and frictive, and plays out as a very public psychodrama.

In both regards, Sparks are arguably more of a cinematic duo than a musical one. For more than 50 years, Ron and Russell Mael have steadily released innovative, influential and, occasionally, successful records. Their private lives are kept private, and they've never fallen out nor broken up. Like every great directorial duo, they appear to complement one another like the parts of a Swiss watch, but no-one has ever provided significant insight into what makes the enigmatic brothers tick. Until *The Sparks Brothers*.

Their music, too, is inherently cinematic: the Maels, who began making music while studying film at UCLA under the influence of Bergman and the Nouvelle Vague, create songs that present themselves as a three-minute elevator pitch for a romantic drama or a black comedy. They often use such meta-narrative cinematic techniques as whipping away the wizard's curtain and breaking the fourth wall. Ron compares their fractured sense of narrative to walking in halfway through a film, and figuring out what's going on (something he and Russell frequently did as children). They are also, literally, filmmakers, albeit perennially-thwarted ones: projects with Jacques Tati and Tim Burton didn't make it to screen (though *Annette*, a collaboration with Leos Carax, is currently awaiting release). Somehow, despite all the celluloid in their DNA, there has never been a Sparks film. Until *The Sparks Brothers*.

Meanwhile, lifelong Sparks fan Edgar Wright, the English director known for the 'Three Flavours Cornetto Trilogy' of *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*, cult sitcom *Spaced*, action rom-com *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* and, most recently, getaway movie *Baby Driver*, has always used

popular music as an integral element of his filmmaking, but has never made a music documentary. Until *The Sparks Brothers*.

Every serious music fan knows Sparks, at least a little. But no music fan truly knows the Mael Brothers, beyond the basics of the pretty-boy singer being Russell and the deadpan keyboardist with the intimidating stare and the Chaplin/Hitler moustache being Ron. They never appear to write autobiographically (though this film may change your mind about that, somewhat), their ‘real’ selves are always shielded by smoke and mirrors, and – as the post-credits sequence shows us – behind masks. Masks which, in *The Sparks Brothers*, are finally torn off.

Edgar Wright’s film takes us from their childhood in California to their present status as elder statesmen of art-rock, but this isn’t a film which follows the traditional rock-doc arc of rise and fall. Expressed in graph form, Sparks’ career would resemble the ECG reading of a patient with chronic hypertension, or a seismometer somewhere near the San Andreas fault: a perpetual sequence of spikes and slumps (in terms of popularity, if not musical quality).

Born in the post-war baby boom and raised on rock’n’roll and Hollywood in equal measure, Ron and Russell Mael began making music in the late 60’s under the name Urban Renewal Project, then Halfnelson. Initially viewed by the industry as unsignable oddballs, their sensibilities out of kilter with the prevailing trend for psychedelia, the Maels appeared to be heading nowhere until Todd Rundgren took them under his wing. Changing their name again to Sparks, they began to gain traction in the early 70’s after moving to the UK, where ‘This Town Ain’t Big Enough for Both of Us,’ a hysterical Spaghetti Western in the form of a pop song, became their breakthrough hit in 1974, following a startling performance on Britain’s long-running, immensely popular BBC music program *Top of the Pops* which prompted John Lennon to phone Ringo Starr to incredulously gasp ‘You won’t believe what’s on the television: Marc Bolan is doing a song with Adolf Hitler!’

Teen hysteria ensued, but it was short-lived. Always reluctant to stay in one style for too long, Sparks lost much of their new audience by pivoting away from panic-stricken art-glam on the *Indiscreet* album, which instead drew upon 1920s Charleston and 1940s big bands more than the world of rock’n’roll. Attempts to batter down the doors of the American market with the harder sound of *Big Beat* failed, but Sparks struck gold again by hooking up with electro-disco producer Giorgio Moroder for 1979’s *Number One in Heaven*, a landmark album which set the template for every synth duo of the 1980s.

Whenever Sparks seemed to be fading away in one territory, they’d suddenly pop up in another. In France, for example, where ‘When I’m with You’ reached No.1 in 1981. Or back home in America, where the early 80s saw them become staples of KROQ radio and music television, even headlining the Hollywood Bowl. Or in Germany, where the elegant, elegiac single ‘When Do I Get To Sing “My Way”?’ hit the Top 10 and won them awards in 1994.

At times, the mismatch between their perceived ascendancy and actual financial security became stark: in the film, Ron recalls a supermarket cashier being excited at serving the two guys she’d seen on *American Bandstand* the night before, only to have to call for assistance over the Tannoy when the Maels produced food stamps to pay for their shopping.

Sparks began the new millennium in rejuvenated form, 2002's critically-acclaimed, quasi-classical synth opus *Lil' Beethoven* setting the tone for a prolific run of albums which would culminate with the Maels hitting the UK Top 10 twice with *Hippopotamus* (2017) and *A Steady Drip, Drip, Drip* (2020). Even by Sparks standards, the 21st century saw the duo exploring their artistic freedom in new and challenging ways. In 2008, they launched *Exotic Creatures of the Deep* with a series of shows in London in which they played all 21 of their albums on consecutive nights, obliging Ron, Russell and their band to learn almost 300 songs. In 2009 they premiered their first opera, *The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman*, on Swedish radio. In 2015, they fully merged with another band, Franz Ferdinand, for *FFS*: a project which began with Ron sending the Scottish band the wryly-titled 'Collaborations Don't Work.'

All of this is covered in *The Sparks Brothers*. But as well as relating the narrative, Wright does to the documentary what the Maels do to the pop song, disregarding the rules and playing with the form. *The Sparks Brothers* is as genre-promiscuous as Sparks' discography itself, using Wright's trademark superfast edits and several styles of animation to push things along, as well as the more traditional use of archive clips and talking heads.

Those talking heads include noted Sparks admirers and collaborators such as Beck, Vince Clarke and Andy Bell of Erasure, Chris Difford of Squeeze, Alex Kapranos of Franz Ferdinand, Nick Rhodes and John Taylor of Duran Duran, Stephen Morris and Gillian Gilbert of New Order, Nick Heyward, Björk, Flea from Red Hot Chili Peppers, Bernard Butler, Martyn Ware of The Human League/Heaven 17, Roddy Bottum of Faith No More, Jane Wiedlin of The Go-Go's, Steve Jones of Sex Pistols, 'Weird Al' Yankovic, Mike Myers, Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth, as well as producers such as Todd Rundgren, Muff Winwood, Tony Visconti, Giorgio Moroder and James Lowe, and several Sparks band members past and present.

The archival material unearths many seldom-seen, or never-seen treasures, from childhood home movies, to a Mother's Day card written by Russell, to a glimpse of the Maels in the audience at *The Big TNT Show* in 1966, to Ron falling off his stool during the recording of 'Something for the Girl with Everything.'

Perhaps the most touching section, though, is Wright's own footage of the modern-day Mael brothers going about their repetitive and mundane daily routines, recalling the famous Gustave Flaubert dictum, 'Be ordinary and bourgeois in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.'

That violently original work is mirrored immaculately by *The Sparks Brothers*.

Production notes

THE SPARKS BROTHERS

Directed by: Edgar Wright
©: MRC II Distribution Company LP
a Complete Fiction production
Presented by: Focus Features
In association with: MRC
Produced by: Nira Park, Edgar Wright, George Hencken, Laura Richardson
Archive Producer: Kate Griffiths
Line Producer: Serena Kennedy
Post Production Supervisor - Delivery: Rachael Havercroft
Researchers: Holly Gorne, Mike Griffiths
Archive Consultant: Neil Storey
Archive Researcher: Tess McNally-Watson
Director of Photography: Jake Polonsky
Visual Effects: Robin Doelly

Stop Motion Animations Created & Designed by: Joseph Wallace
Editor: Paul Trewartha
Titles: Matt Curtis
Music Supervisor: Gary Welch
Re-recording Mixer: Nigel Heath
Digital Intermediate by: Technicolor Production Services London

With

Ron Mael
Russell Mael

UK/USA 2021
135 mins

Courtesy of Universal Pictures

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: The Sparks Brothers + Q&A with director Edgar Wright

Tue 3 Aug 19:45

BFI & Radio Times Television Festival presents:

TV Preview: The North Water + Q&A with director

Andrew Haigh and cast

Wed 4 Aug 18:15

The Alan Whicker Centenary:

Welcome to Whicker’s World + intro

Sat 7 Aug 14:30

The Alan Whicker Centenary:

The Life and Legacy of Alan Whicker

Sat 7 Aug 17:40

Preview: I’m Your Man (Ich bin dein Mensch)

+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Maria Schrader

Mon 9 Aug 17:50

BFI & Radio Times Television Festival presents:

TV Preview: Vigil + Q&A with cast and creatives

Mon 23 Aug 18:10

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Limbo Continues from Jul

The Most Beautiful Boy in the World Continues from Jul

Now, Voyager From Fri 6 Aug

The Sparks Brothers From Fri 6 Aug

The Story of a Three Day Pass From Sat 7 Aug

CODA From Fri 13 Aug

Censor From Fri 20 Aug

Souad From Fri 27 Aug

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Seniors’ Free Matinee: Personal Services

+ intro and Q&A with author, Graham Rinaldi

Mon 9 Aug 14:00

Projecting the Archive: The Blue Lagoon

+ intro by actor Susan Stranks (young Emmeline)

Tue 10 Aug 18:00

Member Picks: Almost Famous

Thu 12 Aug 17:45

Silent Cinema: The Wit and Wisdom of A.A. Milne

+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator

Sun 15 Aug 12:40

DVD Launch: Great Noises That Fill the Air: Music, Poetry and Performance on Film

Mon 16 Aug 17:50

S.O.U.L. Fest 2021

Fri 20-Sun 22 Aug

Experimenta: Thundercrack!

+ intro by Jane Giles, author of ‘Scala Cinema 1987-1993

Sat 21 Aug 17:00

Relaxed Screening: Stand Clear of the Closing Doors

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview:

Souad + pre-recorded Q&A with director Ayten Amin

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Terror Vision: Dr Terror’s House of Horrors

Thu 26 Aug 20:40

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