

1974 was of course the year that everyone got to hear about Sparks. A few people had already discovered and learnt to love them but to the vast majority of people Sparks did not exist until mid-March of that year when "This Town" began to get radio air play. For the rest of that year and then on into the next Sparks were a seemingly permanent presence on the radio, the television & in the music press.

But all of that nearly didn't happen. Only a year earlier the original all-American line-up of the band was signed to an American label who seemed unable to promote them. Faced with a stagnating career the band had effectively ceased to exist as a recording and performing act.

For this reason the period leading up to Sparks first real success is, I believe, one of the most interesting of their career. It is also one of the least well documented. In the following article I have attempted to piece together the events leading up to Ron & Russell's first fling with fame.

In this task I was greatly helped by Derek Paice, a long term Sparks fan who provided much vital information before and during the preparation of this piece. Any mistakes that there are in the finished version are however all my own. If anybody has anything further to add on anything contained in this article please write to Tony at the magazine's address.

Now, let us return to Spring of 1973.....

In the Spring of 1973 the second Sparks album, "Woofers in Tweeter's Clothing", came out and sold very few copies indeed. It had been recorded in late 1972 shortly before the band's tour of Europe. Sparks recorded label, Bearsville, seemed to have lost all interest in promoting or marketing them. "We were just a tax loss band. In 3 years we had only one single" (Russell, 1974).

It had all been so different a few months earlier. The band had finally started to get noticed after two years of trying - gaining press coverage and an appearance on the nationally syndicated television show "Dick Clark's American Bandstand". "Wonder Girl", the first album's single had also charted at no 92 in the national Cashbox chart.

Instead of building on this limited American success, Bearsville sent the band to Europe. This was a strange marketing ploy as the only way of buying Sparks records over here at that time was as expensive American imports.

Despite this the European trip was a long one, seemingly around the two month mark. They played many concerts in various countries during that time both as a support and headlining act. They also visited possibly as many as four different television studios to record promotional appearances. The most famous of these an edition of "The Old Grey Whistle Test" in Britain has almost certainly been wiped by the BBC.



However, one of these appearances does still exist and a tantalisingly brief clip of it was shown on German television only recently. It shows a band with a completely different chemistry and charisma to all future line-ups. Guitarist Earle Mankey is a far more prominent presence than any other future replacement would ever be. Both he and Ron seem to spend what little of "Wonder Girl" that we see the band mime to starring menacingly at Russell. Probably only at this point in the career of the band and never afterwards were Sparks ever a band in the usual sense of the word. All future members of the band were effectively hench men paid to do Ron & Russell's bidding.

All of this promotional activity was starting to pay off and a small cult following was beginning to form for the band. They had also gained a sympathetic road manager for the trip in the shape of John Hewlett a former member of one of Marc Bolan's early band - John's Children. This was an important development.

However, just as things began to look promising, Bearsville ordered the band back home just after Christmas 1972.

On returning, the band recorded a version of the stage favourite "I Like Girls" for a proposed single release but neither the band nor the record label were happy with what was committed to tape. The recording eventually turned up on the "Profile" compilation in 1991 and whilst this version is easily better than the version included four years later on "Big Beat" it is easy to see why they would be unhappy. The sound is very thin and the bass guitar can be barely heard.

The band was supposed to do a US tour as support to Todd Rundgren to coincide with the release of "Woofers" but that fell through. "On returning to the US we played the Whiskey-A-Go-Go once and had a high school lunch time concert in Los Angeles and that was it. So we thought, uh, I wonder if we're in the retirement stage." It was probably at this stage that the original American line up stagnated and effectively split up.

Ron & Russell could so easily have given it all up here. Countless other promising bands have floundered at similar low points in their career. Luckily, they had kept hold of Hewlett's phone number and so they got in touch with him back in England. He in turn arranged for them to come over.

"One problem before was that we thought our music wasn't presented in the proper way"

It's never really been made clear why the rest of the band never came over with them. One possible explanation is that Hewlett could not get the work permits for five Americans. In the early 1970's they were a lot harder to get hold of than they are now.

There is also the possibility that the Mankey brothers and Harley Feinstein would not have been interested in coming over to England again. In a June 1974 interview with Melody Maker Russell indicated that the other three had not enjoyed the original European trip. Remember they would have had no guarantee

REINFORCEMENTS

By
Richard
Banham

SPARKS
require
LEAD GUITARIST
Must be incredible looking
and an exciting, accomplished
guitarist
(Previous applicants need not apply)
Auditions:
Sat., October 6th
12 noon
at the Tunnel Rehearsal Studio
74 Gt. Suffolk St., S.E.1
(Bring guitar and look sharp)

of success and that all three of them had taken the opportunity caused by the lack of promotional activity to either get a job or return to full time further education.

Then again, it might have been that the Mael brothers did not want their old less dedicated colleagues along for the ride. In the same Melody Maker interview Ron said, "One problem before was that we thought our music wasn't presented in the proper way. And, we really had to find a way to present it in a way that was stronger." This might well have been a reference to those problems encountered in recording sessions like those for the aborted "I Like Girls".

So after gaining an easily acquired release from Bearsville and American manager Herb Cohen, both of whom were probably glad to get rid of an act they couldn't do anything for, Ron & Russell jetted over to England to begin the second phase of their career.

On arrival in England, Hewlett initially put the two of them up in his house before they began to rent a small flat in Clapham Junction where Ron would later write "This Town" (Trivia fans and trainspotters would probably like to know that they did not remain long in Clapham, departing shortly afterwards to a flat in a converted Victorian mansion in leafy Beckenham. Can anyone confirm or deny whether this was a block called Haddon Hall where a pre fame Bowie lived until about a year previously?)

Virtually as soon as they arrived Ron & Russ got themselves signed to Island by top A&R man Muff Winwood. He had been mightily impressed that Sparks already had a fan club and had greatly enjoyed the early fan club newsletters. He'd probably also hopefully been impressed by the quality of Ron's new songs.

Whilst they were able to record a handful of demos with session men it was obvious that the two Maels were going to need to recruit a new band. This task would turn out to be a long and arduous one.

Ron & Russ had four essential criteria for potential band members. These were:

- 1) LOOKS DECENT
- 2) PLAYS DECENT
- 3) HAS A DECENT PERSONALITY
- 4) LIKES SPARKS ENOUGH TO DO IT WITH GUSTO

With the idea of finding people who fitted that description an advert was placed in the infamous "Musicians Wanted" classified ads section of Melody Maker in the July 21st 1973 issue.

It is at this point that tracing how the various members were recruited becomes difficult. In 1974, in the first flush of success, Russell said of the rehearsals, "Oh there are so many stories floating around about that. I mean we held some auditions and most of those who attended, well they just weren't civilised.... Some of them had beards y'know. Eventually, we picked out three and talked to them but soon realised they couldn't play their instruments."

At the same time he also said "Finally John (Hewlett) heard of a band who played in a pub and did some of our songs. They weren't very good as it turned out, but the drummer was interesting. And that

Major Recording Label
Artists
SPARKS
require
DRUMMER
Must be an exciting, inventive
drummer with a really good
face that isn't covered with a
beard.
(Previous applicants need not apply)
Auditions:
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13
12 noon
at the
TUNNEL REHEARSAL STUDIO
74 Gt. Suffolk St., S.E.1
(Bring sticks only)

drummer was Dinky Diamond. Then we found the bass and guitar through private sources like the people from Island and so on."

This is quite simply not true. The first and in fact the only recruit from the original July/August auditions was bass player Martin Gordon a student of Hitchin College with no known Island connections. However in mid-1974 Ron & Russell had just got rid of Gordon and weren't about to admit that he had been their first recruit.

"One day I came across an ad in the classified section of Melody Maker. It stated that Sparks were looking for a guitarist. I couldn't believe it"

In early October a second bout of rehearsals were advertised in Melody Maker. On October 6th Ron, Russ and Hewlett hired the Tunnel Rehearsal studios to audition potential lead guitarists.

Derek Paice saw the advert in Melody Maker that week and went along. Derek continues

"One day I came across an ad in the classified section of Melody Maker. It stated that Sparks were looking for a guitarist. I couldn't believe it. They were going to be auditioning in London on a Saturday afternoon. By that time I was working as a driver for a firm of builders in London and I finished at mid-day which would give me just enough time to get to Southwark. I didn't know if it was my Sparks, but there was only one way to find out. I turned up at the Tunnel rehearsal studios and there was a short queue of people outside. At the head of the queue were Ron & Russell.

Ron still had his long hair and was leaning elegantly against the outside wall of the studio. It was such an occasion for me that I was almost overcome. But, do you know that feeling when in the presence of someone you really admire? When you either clam up and can't think of anything to say at all or you just become really excited and just start babbling. Your brain says. "Whoa! Slow down. You're talking rubbish!" Well, unfortunately, I seem to be one of the latter types. All credit to them, Ron & Russell were the epitome of politeness and made it seem they were actually pleased to meet a fan. During our conversation a person with pencil lines where his eyebrows should have been kept bouncing about like an A.A.Milne character and trying to join in the conversation and answer the questions I had been putting to Ron & Russell. This was Martin Gordon and it turned out that he lived in Hitchin which was very close to where I lived and that he had just been appointed Sparks' new bass player.

We talked about what had been happening to them during the past few months and why they were auditioning in London. They also invited me into the audition.

I had just enough decency not to go into the studio itself with them, when the place was finally unlocked, but I did stay in the green room and talked with some of the candidates. It was an interesting collection of people. Everyone seemed to have an image of some sort. I distinctly remember three of them. The most striking was a thin man with very long dark hair dressed in purple velvet and, I think, satin. He was wearing eye make-up and looked quite lovely! One young lad with short fair hair was dressed like a train spotter and looked like someone I went to school with. I found a spot on the floor near the most together and normal looking applicant. We talked for a bit and he explained he had been working until fairly recently with an outfit called Toby with Andy Fraser who used to play with Free. The train spotter was the first to go in. I presume Island Records had arranged for a bass player and a drummer, because none of Sparks seemed to play that day. They listened to the applicants. The session musicians struck up and eventually settled into a groove which reminded me of that two chord sequence at the end of "Whippings and Apologies". The train spotter had a brave go but he was not very fluent.



Actually, he was terrible. After he had finished, Russell came out and looking around the room said, "Has he gone?" When we said that he had Russell said something like, "If there is anyone here who can't play any better than that, you don't need to stay!"

I had to get my lorry back to the depot, so I left the audition after two or three more had gone in. I can't remember clearly, but there seemed to be several more applicants to go. It was later that I found out that I had spent that afternoon with Adrian Fisher who, of course got the job....."



Peter Oxendale, who having joined Sparks after the recording of the Kimono album, only rehearsed with Sparks and never recorded or played in front of an audience with the band.

It is highly probable that Fisher was a recruit found through island connections. After all, he had been in the new band of an ex-member of Free who were, of course, signed to island. It also appears likely that he was actively "head hunted" by Hewlett prior to the October auditions but that had initially turned down the request.

Asked a second time, however, he changed his mind and went along. In a Melody Maker band profile in July 1974 Fisher said "It fitted in straight away. In an hour we did "hasta Manana" and "This Town" and they were perfect and it sounded great and we thought, "Well what have we been doing for the last few years."

That is really a true description of events of October 6th then Derek must be kicking himself that he did not stick around a bit longer.

They now had a bass player and guitarist so all they needed was a drummer. For that reason a further audition was arranged for the following Saturday, again at the Tunnel. Russell's statement earlier indicated that the drummers position had been filled first. If that was the case, why were they still advertising that position when all of the others had already been filled?

"Well what have we been doing for the last few years."

Perhaps they had already tested Diamond and were hoping to get someone better. Apparently, the story about him being in a band that did cover versions of early Sparks songs is true. Dinky had seen Sparks on The Old Grey Whistle Test in 1972 - "I happened to like a couple of things they did and I thought the ideas were good and I just got the rest of the band to do them." (Melody Maker 13/7/74). According to Diamond, Hewlett saw his band playing and put him and the Mael's together.

So, maybe Russell's statement isn't that incorrect. Perhaps Dinky Diamond was the first potential member that they found but they kept him waiting while they rehearsed other potentially better drummers. If that is the case then it is ironic that he was the longest surviving of the three original English members.



Martin Gordon - who despite impersonating an AA Milne character and later claiming to have invented Sparks was only letting his enthusiasm run away with him. After all, he only wanted to be a radio star.

Whatever, by mid-October the band that would play on "Kimono My House" was complete. It had taken approximately four months for Ron & Russell to assemble the new band. Then they entered Rampport studios with Winwood, wearing his producer's hat, to record the new album.

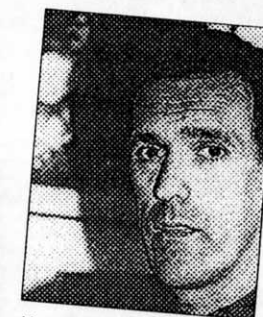
By February the sessions were finished and the band needed to begin to rehearse for live concerts. It was decided at this stage that they needed a second keyboard player to flesh out the sound and so Melody Maker's small ads section was used again. The successful applicant was Peter Oxendale who, for some unknown reason, insisted on having the prefix "Sir" added to the front of his name.

This new six man line up never got to play a note on stage, though.

Rehearsals were by all



A picture of the six piece Sparks who toured in June 1974 and later recorded the "Propaganda" album. Adrian Fisher prophetically distanced himself from the rest of the group during this picture and cruelly had his picture missing from the back cover of the "Propaganda" album. (He was in fact ordered by Ron to dress as the garage forecourt attendant and the photo was unfortunately taken while he checked the oil of the car in which the Mael's were bound and gagged. This story is unconfirmed, as is the rumour that Martin Gordon was driving the car!)



Muff Winwood - head of Island A&R who signed Sparks and went on to produce both the "Kimono My House" and "Propaganda" albums.

accounts very tense. It would seem that both Gordon and Oxendale wanted more of the limelight than either Ron or

Russ were prepared to give them. They were both therefore sacked in early May.

This left the band with something of a problem as they had a UK tour booked starting in just over a month's time. These dates were obviously very important as they were first to be undertaken by the newly successful band.

Hewlett acted quickly. He had another band on his books that was going nowhere fast- Jook. From them he recruited both Trevor White as a second guitarist and Ian Hampton on the bass. This new line-up then successfully completed the band's first tour before embarking on the sessions that would lead to the "Propaganda" album.

Even here, problems arose. Fisher was sacked shortly after the sessions began. Apparently he spent far too much time being "tired and emotional" instead of contributing to the tracks being recorded. This problem had already been noted on at least one date of the first UK Tour.

It was this new line-up that would continue for the next eighteen months until Ron & Russell returned to the States and began to work with sessions musicians.