

VIVE LE ROCK!

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TALENT IS

Amid the drug-addled stagnation, prog pomposity, and sub-Eurovision schmaltz **SPARKS found favour with many disenfranchised listeners. The music of all three rock, pop, and electronic, with Sparks cutting perhaps the quirkiest dash. Sparks' touchstone, hits its fiftieth anniversary this year. In celebration, Rich Davenport and behind Sparks' most successful long-player, and the chemistry**

BEGINNINGS

Inspired by the Kinks, Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd, and cult garage psych combo the Seeds, Californian brothers Russell (vocals) and Ron Mael (keyboards) made their first recordings in 1967 as Urban Renewal Project, before forming Halfnelson the following year, stabilising the line-up in 1971 with another pair of brothers, Earle (guitar) and Jim Mankey (bass), and drummer Harley Feinstein.

Halfnelson caught the attention of Todd Rundgren, whose intervention led to a deal with Bearsville Records. Their self-titled debut, produced by Rundgren, contained Wonder Girl a regional hit in California and Alabama. At the urging of their label, Halfnelson rebranded themselves as Sparks, a sibling-related pun inspired by the Marx brothers. The album would be reissued under their new name in July '72, with fresh cover art. 'A Woofer in Tweeter's Clothing' (1972), recorded with Electric Prunes vocalist James Lowe in the producer's chair, made little impact at home, but caused ripples across the pond. A well-received UK tour and appearance on The Old Grey Whistle Test prompted the Mael's to split with their bandmates and emigrate to London in 1973.

PUTTING THE BAND TOGETHER

Martin Gordon landed the gig after responding to the Mael's Melody Maker advert; 'Wanted - bass player for Sparks. Must be beard free and exciting.' Gordon, working as a technical author in

maritime engineering, and a veteran of several local hometown bands in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, offered both excitement and a complete absence of facial hair.

"At our first meeting, I had long hair," he recalls. "When nobody phoned back, I abandoned all hope of a career in the wacky world of pop, got my hair cut short, and covered myself in ashes. Weeks later the phone rang, inviting me to another meeting at which I mentioned that I would, under the right circumstances, or indeed any, be prepared to revise my position vis-à-vis the ashes."

In 1978, Buzzcocks released 'Another Music In a Different Kitchen', an album whose title describes the unconventional process by which Sparks's new line-up got acquainted, prior to actually playing their instruments. "[We met] in a kitchen in Croydon, belonging to their manager, who offered me a vodka and orange, which was rather charming," Gordon says. "We exchanged pleasantries and elaborate untruths, as you do in such circumstances. I was accompanied by a drummer acquaintance who kept stubbing out his fag on various bits of furniture, which I felt didn't go down too well. But I dazzled them with my knowledge of integrated inert gas systems in maritime engineering, and it all went swimmingly."

Guitarist Adrian Fisher (guitar) had played in Free bassist Andy Fraser's short-lived power trio Toby in 1971. Fisher's succinct guitar work on 'Kimono' prefigured the approach of many punk six-stringers.

"Ade's appeal was that his butch, bluesy tendencies balanced the, dare I say, somewhat twee material," Gordon explains. "The



AN ASSET

of the early '70s music scene, rare mavericks like David Bowie, Roxy Music and of these wild cards was sufficiently idiosyncratic as to be labelled glam rock, art classic third album 'Kimono My House', frequently cited as an essential proto-punk the band's former bassist Martin Gordon (later with Radio Stars) present the story of the one-off line-up that created it.

Americans were trying to confine his widdly tendencies, and the resulting musical tension had a beneficial impact on the combo's output. He played very melodically, and added a different dimension to what were sometimes fairly quotidian chord changes."

Fisher remained with the band for 'Propaganda' (1974), later joining former Patto vocalist Mike Patto's Boxer, then the Four Squares with fellow Sparks alumni Dinky Diamond, and his own replacement, Trevor White (later with Gordon's Radio Stars), before moving to Thailand. Interviewed there for BBC documentary *Expats* in 1999, Fisher said, "When I met the brothers, they weren't like they are now. Ron used to look like Frank Zappa - beard, long hair. He just turned up one day looking like Hitler, a 1920s playboy image." Fisher passed away in 2001, after a heart attack.

Norman 'Dinky' Diamond (drums) played with local bands in his native Aldershot prior to joining Sparks. Diamond remained with the group for 'Propaganda' (1974) and 'Indiscreet' (1975), before parting ways with the Maels on amicable terms. After the Four Squares, Diamond left the music industry. Tragically, after suffering years of antisocial behaviour from neighbours at his home in Sandhurst, Diamond took his own life in November, 2004.

"Dinky knew on which side his bread was buttered," Gordon opines. "He was perfectly aligned to such PR inanities as the British band being discovered in a London pub performing Sparks songs. Some raised a metaphorical, and indeed literal, eyebrow at this juvenile twaddle. Not Dinky." ►



SPARKS

Martin Gordon



◀ MAKING THE ALBUM

The material brought to rehearsals by Ron Mael differed from the finished tracks on 'Kimono...', Gordon reveals; "I was recently discussing this with a friend who plays cello in Barenboim's Staatskapelle orchestra in Berlin, explaining that a classical musician plays strictly what is written down, [but] in the world of pop one gets chord charts, but no parts. The skill lies in creating the parts. She found this rather hard to understand, but that's pretty much the way it often was. When there was a series of chords, you tried to find something in them, either melodically/harmonically or rhythmically, or you could just create stuff and see if it had legs. Sometimes it worked, as in 'This Town...', sometimes it didn't [see 'Complaints' below - VLR]."

The band's first rehearsal room was "...a dance studio in Clapham," Gordon remembers, a place where the band could be found "...admiring ourselves in the mirrored walls, and working on two or three tunes per day."

The unorthodox sounds Sparks were cooking up in rehearsals soon drew label attention.

"The manager turned up and said that Island Records were offering some kind of contract," says Gordon. "Adrian had form in this area, and got his lawyer involved. With the innocence of youth, I thought this was rather unnecessary. It just goes to show what I knew. But Ade eventually signed."

With producer Muff Winwood (ex-Spencer Davis Group, with brother Steve) appointed to helm their first Island album, Sparks "...moved to a worse, but more authentic King's Road rehearsal room, the Furniture Cave, and began to polish the stuff."

In 1974, with power cuts a regular occurrence, the new room was heated by an electric fire with only... "a single bar," Gordon shivers. "The rooms, being in the basement, were perpetually damp and I longed to be back in the dance studio where you could swan around in the warm."

Band banter at rehearsals took a typically quirky turn, thanks to Russell Mael's habit of "...photographically documenting Indian restaurants, for collective discussion at the following day's rehearsal," Gordon remembers. "I was never exactly sure what kind of response was required. I think I just said, 'Oh, I see, very nice' - a kind of portmanteau answer that I find fits the bill on such occasions."

'Kimono...' was created in three illustrious London studios.

"We recorded in the Who's Ramport Studios and Island Basing Street," Gordon recounts. "It was mixed at Air in Oxford Circus. I took a lot of trains from Hitchin."

Producer Muff Winwood was assisted by a stellar studio team, including Richard Digby-Smith (Free), and two fast-rising engineers. "We had a good team," Gordon enthuses, "with Diga (as he was known) taking care of the technical business and Muff commenting on... erm... other things. Diga suggested the gunshots of 'This Town', and helped me get a great bass sound. Tony Platt [later AC/DC] also recorded a couple of things and Bill Price [later Sex Pistols, the Clash] mixed it."

Adrian Fisher added some smoking solos to 'Kimono...' - literally. "Ade would refuse to put his cigarette out for a take," Gordon says, "sticking it on the guitar strings poking out of the headstock of his Les Paul. 'If it's good enough for Eric Clapton, it's good enough for me', he said. He was a teaboy at RSO [Cream's management], so he knew what he was talking about."

Fellow Island artists Mott The Hoople were also in AIR Studios as Sparks mixed 'Kimono'. "I bowled into Mott's sessions at AIR," Gordon recalls. "They were overdubbing 'Roll Away the Stone'. Having seen Mott many times at the Leys in Letchworth, I was chuffed to meet them on a more even playing field. Bassist Pete Watts gave me a tip on how to keep the bass prominent in the mix. I'm not sure I knew what he was talking about, but I made sure to pass this tip to Bill Price, much to his understandable irritation."

Mott returned the favour, boosting Sparks' morale. "Ian and Buffin came over to our room, took a listen, and gave 'Here In Heaven' a firm thumbs-up," Gordon notes.

During recording, secret auditions were held to replace Adrian Fisher. "This is a very odd story, which I had forgotten about until I rediscovered my diary from 1974," Gordon confesses. "We left the rehearsal room at the end of the day, then the four of us returned secretly and conducted guitar auditions late into the evening. Nobody had come up to Adrian's level, so the idea of dumping Adrian, which had been discussed for over a month, was in turn itself dumped. I'm somewhat ashamed to admit that I was part of this deceitful affair."

THE SONGS

Martin Gordon's thoughts on Kimono's songs and B-sides...

'This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both Of Us' - "My riff and middle eight. Oh, well."

'Amateur Hour' - "Overdubbed and DI'd Fender Precision bass."

'Falling In Love With Myself Again' - "Should have had more guitar in the mix."

'Here In Heaven' - "Good stuff."

'Thank God It's Not Christmas' - "Nicely proggy."

'Talent Is An Asset' - "Twee but butch at the same time. Or was it the other way round?"

'Complaints' - "My ending was offed, that would be my complaint."

'In My Family' - "Turgid."

'Equator' - "Too long and slow, as the actress said to the bishop."

And the B-sides...

'Barbecue' - "Nice bass."

'Lost and Found' - "A bit strained, I always thought."

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

'This Town...' gave Sparks a hit single in the UK (number 2), and across mainland Europe, aided by a promotional video. "The promo was shot at Beaulieu Motor Museum," Gordon recalls, "as was Russell Mael, by me. What fun! It was only acting, though."

After World War II, rumours circulated that Hitler was still alive and on the run. TV executives in France may well have believed the rumours, as the 'This Town...' video was banned by one channel there, due to Ron's resemblance to Adolf, possibly for fear that ageing resistance fighters who saw it might take up arms once again if French tour dates were announced.

The band's collective hairdressing requirements were catered for by "...the socialite Gavin Hodge and his Gotama salon in the King's Road," Gordon says. "We would be plied with champagne as we were being snipped. Some took advantage of this, mentioning no names. Adrian, on one occasion, attacked a hairdresser. I didn't note the reason why, but I have my suspicions."

The album cover's literal interpretation of the title featured actors Michi Hirota and Kuniko Okamura from Japan's Red Buddha Theatre, performing at London's Roundhouse at the time.

AND THE HITS KEEP COMING...

Second single, 'Amateur Hour', hit number 7 in the UK, also cracking the top 20 in Ireland and Germany.

Released on May 1st, 1974, 'Kimono...' charted at number 4 in the UK, number 10 in Holland, and number 22 in Australia.

'Kimono My House', is a pun on Rosemary Clooney's 1951 hit Come On-a My House, written in 1939 by Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Saroyan and his cousin Ross Bagdasarian, aka Dave Seville, creator of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

'Kimono...' wasn't the only influential proto-punk album released in May 1974, with Bowie's 'Diamond Dogs' and the New York Dolls' 'Too Much Too Soon' issued later that month.

'Kimono's success would not be repeated on the Maels' US home turf, peaking at number 101 on the Billboard album chart, though follow-up 'Propaganda' gave them their highest US placing later that year, hitting number 63.

'Kimono...' bagged Sparks their first and only Gold record, achieved in the UK. 'Propaganda' also went Silver here.

Martin Gordon's gold disc "...mysteriously went missing for 40 years," after which he was "...graciously offered the opportunity to buy it back," he reveals. "It cost me £127, plus VAT, in about 2014. This was only the first of a tsunami of gold records awarded to the band in future years. What's that you say? Really? Well, well, well..."



Dinky Diamond Adrian Fisher
Ron Mael Russell Mael Martin Gordon

SPARKS



Sparks decided to recruit an additional keyboard player for the 'Kimono...' tour. One of the candidates auditioning would later join the Bee Gees, another band of brothers, also famous for high-pitched singing.

"This would be Blue Weaver," Gordon reveals. "He told me that he was joining Mott, so quite why he showed up I don't know. A nice guy, we would meet again on the Hunter-Ronson tour of 1975 [with Jet]."

The gig went to Peter Oxendale, later with Gordon's post-Sparks outfit, Jet.

Martin Gordon's departure from Sparks occurred as the band rehearsed for the Kimono... tour. Read all about it...

"Something had happened in rehearsal with which I was not happy, I can't recall what," he reflects. "To show my displeasure, I decided to read the newspaper while we were playing. I made sure that it didn't affect the performance by only turning the pages during legato notes when I had a hand free anyway. I remember [the Maels] looking daggers at me. I felt I'd made my point. Clearly, I made it very strongly - I was sacked."

LEGACY AND LATER YEARS

Gordon subsequently formed Jet, tagged by the media as a "glam supergroup," alongside former John's Children members Andy Ellison (vocals) and Chris Townson (drums), guitarist Davy O'List (ex-Roxy Music) and Peter Oxendale. In 1976, after a strategic shift to less voluminous trousers, they re-emerged as Radio Stars, creating a stir on the punk-era live-scene with a combination of Gordon's hi-octane, earworm tunes, and Ellison's death-defying stunts. Gordon subsequently worked as a producer and session musician with artists as diverse as the Rolling Stones and Kylie Minogue.

"The best thing I've done in recent years," he ventures, "apart from my recordings with the marvellous Swede Pelle Almgren, was working with the Ensemble Modern, playing with them on a Zappa tune and being asked to conduct them through one of their own pieces in the Gambia. Someone's got to do it."

Gordon encountered each of his former Sparks bandmates in later years.

"I met Dinky at a London music-biz drinking club a few years later, he was working in A&R for some label," he remembers. "When Ade was in Thailand, we hooked up again. We reminisced, and he told me that his revised contract said that if he left the band of his own accord, he would incur royalty reductions, so he had to get himself sacked to get the full royalty rate on his two albums. He was obviously successful."

"In 1977, I arranged to meet Russell Mael for a drink in the

Roebuck [early Sex Pistols hangout]," he continues, "and gave him the first Radio Stars album. Ron, Russell and I all met in 1994 after their Shepherd's Bush gig, when my efforts to discuss 'issues' were brushed off. This led to my review of the show in the following month's Mojo, described by some people as 'snarky'."

'Kimono...' has been cited as influential by Sex Pistol Steve Jones, Morrissey, and Alex James, as Martin Gordon discovered while playing keyboards for Blur. "In the dressing room [after] our gig in Kentish Town," he says, "Alex somehow determined (probably from my less-than-expert keyboard playing) that I was a bass player, and it then emerged that I had played on 'Kimono...' He was rather perturbed that I hadn't made this known beforehand. I had to eventually extricate myself to get the night bus back to Hackney before the sun came up. At least it wasn't far."

Ron and Russell Mael have steered Sparks through the decades to a latter-day renaissance in the UK, with each of their last three albums charting at number 7.

At fifty years distance, Martin Gordon feels that 'Kimono My House' still sounds... "Pretty good. The good songs hold up, and the ones which I felt were a bit dodgy still sound that way. But on the whole, it's a fine piece of work. And it was my first outing into the world of show-biz. I'm pleased that it's withstood the test of time."

Gordon's latest album, 'Greatest Sh!ts' (2023), has attracted attention from an unexpected source, thanks to the innovative technique of writing songs based on the speeches of various politicians (referred to in the title). "Having just delivered my first academic paper (on metric analysis of speech) at the University of Art in Zurich in April," he says, "I'm pursuing a new compositional technique. Inspired, if that's the right word, by the utterances of dumpy would-be despots, I'm collecting enraging material to use as a basis. More on the website! (Martingordon.de)." **NR**

FILMING THE
'KIMONO' VIDEO

