

Rock Music has almost got itself into the same state that German music had been reduced to by the end of the nineteenth century. Richard Wagner and his disciples (remember *Lisztomania*?) had written ultra-tricky harmonies, endless flowing melodies, all written for gigantic orchestras. Musicians started to feel that nothing else could be done without some radical break from this tradition — and this is where Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartok and the rest come in.

Rock has led a very eclectic existence in the last ten years — its post-Pepper period. Everyone has just had such a wealth of styles and material to

borrow from or be influenced by. Faced with such temptations, Handel wouldn't have written one note of his own music.

Musicians today can borrow anything from mediaeval music (Gryphon) to Stravinsky (Alice Coltrane, Zappa), from Bach (Nice, Focus) to Bartok (Blood Sweat and Tears) or from Liszt (Rick Wakeman) to Wagner (Andy Mackay). Thus producing musical cocktails of varying degrees of potency.

The only 'original' thing that has eventuated recently seems to be punk-rock and even *that* is hardly innovation of a high order. Although one

can understand the premises behind its crudity, it is a crudity that is very limiting. Perhaps it is meant as something akin to Stravinsky's anti-romantic period. During these years Stravinsky wrote deliberately aggressive, dissonant and harsh music to escape from the lushness of some of his earlier ballet scores.

I'd swap a whole padded cell full of Strangers, Damned and Sex Pistols for one Sparks album. Now there's a clever group, Virginia.

Their first album just bristles with "production" and the second, *A Woofer in Tweeter's Clothing* has some lovely jokes, musical and otherwise: a frenetic electric version of the same "Do-re-mi" that made Julie Andrews notorious before she gained family approval as a continuing guest on the Alice Ghostley show. There's a little song about the Louvre, as well as one which advocates bashing your car into buses for a bit of the old group sex.

Sparks' third and fourth albums, produced in England, showed a much simpler approach, and they even started having popular singles, such as "Hasta Manana" (nothing to do with the Clearasil Quartet).

The 1975 album, *Indiscreet* showed the group slipping back to their earlier style, although the songs were far more catchy than their American releases. Musical styles range from classical chamber music approach ("Under the Table") through 1940's Big Band Jazz ("Looks Looks Looks") to a sort of country/Cajun-type number ("It ain't 1918").

The newest Sparks' album, *Big Beat*, shows the group facing the same problem that the punk groups are presumably trying to solve. That is, how to get your style stripped down so that it is not aesthetically flabby — a lean and economic musical approach.

The group still keep some of their characteristically twee lyrics. The rather tongue-in-cheek suggestiveness of "Big Boy" or "White Women", the song most likely to offend every liberal:

*I've tried most every package,  
From Peking to Berdoo  
I'm sticking with a brand name  
I'm sticking with you  
Because you're a white woman, so  
very fair.*

Or "Throw Her Away", the song next most likely to o.e.l.:

*Just like everything else in this world*

*Time wreaks havoc on every girl  
What do you do?*

*Throw her away and get a new one.*

Well, of course they're ironical, but irony is not always a sense that is well developed in yon armchair liberals. And irony is as much a part of Sparks' armoury as it is Randy Newman.

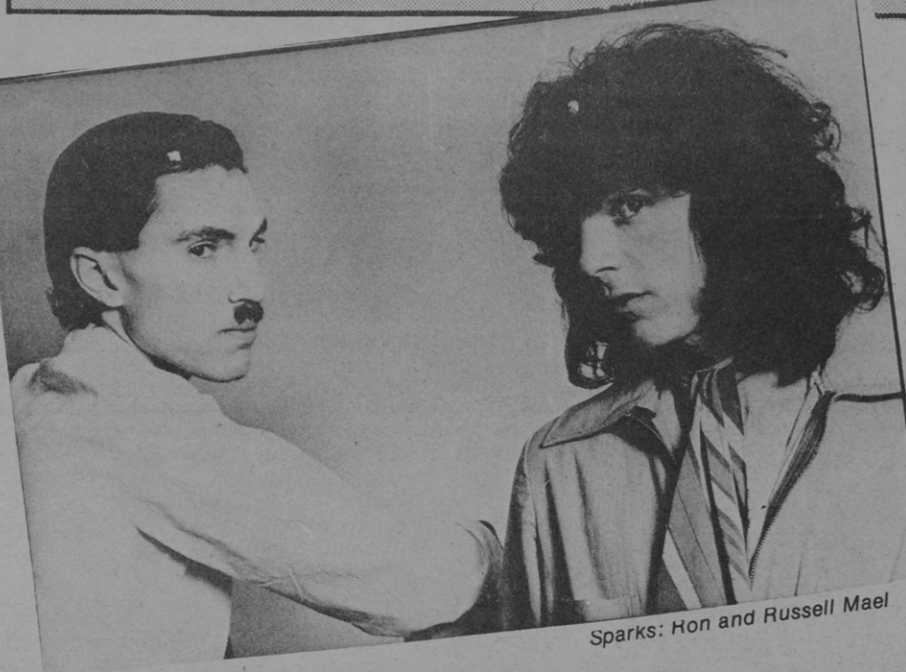
Musically, the songs in *Big Beat* are stripped to essentials. They just use a straight rock group in all except one song, and any other influences (e.g. the Spanish touches in "Confusion") do not get out of control within this basic group sound.

But the reason for Spark's success is the care they take with the *sound*. Music has textural qualities like painting, and these qualities are very much tied up with the quality of the sound. There is variety, or attack and respite if you wish. Not just noise non-stop for three minutes at a time.

We tend to classify rock music by its sound, talking of the Tamla-Motown sound, the Philadelphia sound and so on. Sound equals style. Therefore a limited sound such as that of Punk rock must mean a limited style. My God, buy a copy of *Big Beat* before it's too late.

William Dart

# MAKING SPARKS FLY



Sparks: Ron and Russell Mael



## Arts Festival Music

It was a bit like a dumbbell: weighty at both ends, with a thin stretch in the middle.

The music programme of the National Festival of the Arts opened with Jazz. Colin Hemmingsen held the fort for two hours, in workshop, persuading his audience that Jazz is not dead, that it is alive and well and living with a funky drummer.

The audience for the Jazz concert that night took the Jazz-lives message to heart, and they stamped and they cheered and they whistled for more. The Golden Horn Big Band co-operated by playing with full enthusiasm. It's good to see an entire horn section jiving, clicking fingers, swaying hips and mouthing rhythms. Showbiz razzamatazz, but kind of exciting. The 1860 Band appear by contrast a little timeworn, but with the aid

of Hemmingsen's alto, they too worked up a good lather.

However the highlight of the Jazz concert came as an utter surprise, with Palmerston North band **Earthborn**. An intriguing collection of people, including farm boy bass player, Turkish drummer and eccentric pianist, Earthborn are as exciting a N.Z. prospect as I've heard in a long while. I only hope that they, and their tasteful and inventive repertoire, get more exposure in the future.

With the exception of **Hello Sailor**, who played at times brilliantly to unappreciative audiences, and **Living Force**, the middle of the week sagged. I suppose that with both these bands bringing albums out soon, prospects on the local market are buoyant. What is more disturbing, particularly in relation to Hello Sailor's reception was New Zealand rock'n'roll's green eyed monster: regionalism. There is just too much division between Auckland's and Wellington's music scenes, let alone between the North and South Islands.

At the tail end of festivities were scheduled the big names. The **Bert Jansch** — **John Martyn** concert was filled to the point of mass suffocation. Bert Jansch came on sporting an alcoholic barrier between the co-ordinating parts of brain and hands. So much for an erstwhile folk-guitar hero. Martyn on the other hand, downed a third of a large bottle of rum on stage, smoked half a joint, and thereby oiled his components nicely. Martyn is a captivating performer, whether he plays his role as the world's only heavy metal acoustic guitarist, or whether he sings the blues. Drunkard, stand up comic, musician extraordinaire, John Martyn executes things in style and that was a nice way to round off.

Bruce Belsham.

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