



Tim Sparks' long journey to the 1993 National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship, and beyond, began modestly in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when he started picking out tunes by ear on an old Stella flat top. He was given his first guitar when a bout of encephalitis kept him out of school for a year, and the music he heard around him was traditional country blues, and the gospel his grandmother played on piano in a small church in the Blue Ridge mountains, so that's what he taught himself to play.

A musically-astute uncle heard him one day, and amazed that he had come so far on his own, nominated him for a scholarship at the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts. There he studied the classics with Segovia protegee Jesus Silva, while continuing to play all kinds of music, increasingly turning to classic jazz for inspiration. He adapted compositions by Jelly Roll Morton, Scott Joplin, and Fats Waller to the guitar, frequently reducing piano arrangements to their spare essence. Early influences were Doc Watson, Arthur Smith and, most importantly, Duck Baker, who opened up an horizon of possibilities for fingerstyle guitar.

After a stint on the road with a Chicago-based rhythm and blues band, Sparks arrived in Minnesota, where he soon established himself as a journeyman guitarist and session player. While recording three albums with the seminal vocal jazz ensemble Rio Nido, Sparks also became proficient in jazz styles from Brazilian to Be Bop, which brought him several regional music awards including Best Acoustic Guitarist, Best Latin Jazz guitarist, and Best Jazz Guitarist. Important models in this period were Kenny Burrell, Wes Montgomery, and fingerstylists Lenny Breau and Ed Bickert. Two Minnesota guitarists with whom he shared a lot of ideas and inspiration were National Fingerstyle Champ Pat Donohue and plectrum ace Dean Magraw. It was at this time that he arranged Carla Bley's composition "Jesus Maria" for Leo Kottke.

He also found the time to revive his interest in the classics, adapting Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* to the guitar, a work that has been cited as a significant contribution to solo guitar literature. For Sparks it was a labor of love, which earned him the fingerstyle guitar championship in Winfield, Kansas.

A sojourn abroad inspired an interest in European and Mediterranean styles, particularly the music of the Balkans, culminating in the recording of Sparks' *Balkan Dreams Suite*, a remarkable collection of odd-meter guitar arrangements.



Many of the *Balkan Dreams* compositions were recorded on Tim's debut solo guitar CD, *The Nutcracker Suite*. The recording was cited by *Guitar Player Magazine* as, "An exhilarating, odd-meter minefield inspired by Near Eastern music. An important recording from a gifted composer, arranger and performer." Two more releases followed on the Acoustic Guitar label; *Guitar Bazaar* and *One String Leads to Another*.

In recent years, Sparks was a featured performer with *Crossing Borders* at the Bethlehem International Music Festival in July of 1995 and has received two Arts Fellowships to pursue ethno-musicological studies. He spent one fall studying Fado and Portuguese Guitar in Lisbon.

Three CDs have appeared on the Tzadik label featuring Tim's renditions of Jewish music. *Neshamah* was a completely solo effort while *Tanz* and *At the Rebbe's Table* included ensemble work. All three releases have been critically acclaimed from a broad spectrum of critics and listeners alike. This spring saw the release of *Masada Guitars* featuring interpretations of John Zorn's music by Tim, Bill Frisell and Marc Ribot.

*Guitar Player Magazine* - "an important recording from a gifted composer, arranger and performer".  
*Berlin Morning Post* - "Sparks shows his tremendous versatility moving between jazz and the classics."

*Dirty Linen Magazine* - "A major contribution to the world of guitar transcriptions...Sparks is an extraordinary guitarist"

*Guitar Player Magazine* - "Fresh, exotic, and totally cool."

*Acoustic Guitar Magazine* - "Sparks' musical goulash is spiced with Celtic, blues, and jazz flavors for a truly unique work. The effect is exotic, rich, and sensuous."

"You can hear Tim Sparks think. He plays by choice not habit: ideas not licks. I've heard him do this on guitars so badly intonated, they wouldn't make a good ashtray; the same guitars - I remember a piece called *Blues on Bartok Street* - are guitars in Tim's hands. Beautiful. I'm Tim Sparks' biggest fan. His stuff is very difficult to play but it doesn't sound difficult. I think that's real musicianship. He's really one of the best musicians I know." - Leo Kottke