

TIM SPARKS

Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Tim Sparks started picking out tunes by ear on an old Stella flat top during a bout of encephalitis that kept him out of school for a year. He taught himself to play the music he heard around him: traditional country blues and the gospel his grandmother played on piano in a small church in the Blue Ridge Mountains.



At age 14, Tim was nominated by a musically astute uncle 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 essence. Early influences were Doc Watson, Arthur Smith, and most importantly

Duck Baker, who opened up a 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. It was at this time **he arranged Carla Bley's composition "Jesus Maria" for Leo Kottke**. (Rio Nido's first two vinyl recordings have recently been re-issued on CD on the Japanese Vivid Sound Label.)

Sparks also found time to revive his interest in classical music, 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 that earned him the **National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship in Winfield, Kansas** in 1993.

A sojourn abroad inspired his interest in European and Mediterranean styles, particularly the music of the Balkans. Upon his return to Minnesota, Sparks immersed himself in the ethnic music scene, performing on Oud and Saz in Middle Eastern ensembles and playing guitar in Greek, Klezmer, and Sephardic groups. This work culminated 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 CD, *The Nutcracker Suite*, in 1993. **This recording was hailed by *Guitar Player Magazine* as "an exhilarating, odd-meter minefield inspired by Near Eastern music" and "an important recording from a gifted composer, arranger, and performer."** Two more releases followed on the Acoustic Music label, *Guitar Bazaar* (1997) and *One String Leads To Another* (1999).

Sparks' work **came to the attention of John Zorn**, the saxophonist, composer, and curator of Tzadik Records in New York and thereby led to a new cycle of compositions inspired by traditional Jewish melodies. *Neshamah* (1999) is a solo effort. *Tanz*, which garnered **Downbeat Magazine's highest praise, five stars**, in 2000 and *At the Rebbe's Table* (2002) include ensemble work. All three releases have been acclaimed by a broad spectrum of critics and listeners alike. Spring of 2003 saw the release of **Masada Guitars, featuring interpretations of John Zorn's music by Tim, Bill Frisell, and Marc Ribot**. In recent years, Sparks' musical focus has come full circle, returning to the country blues and classic jazz that served as a springboard for his worldwide guitar explorations. **He toured with Dolly Parton in 2005** and recorded *Roots, Rags and Blues* for Truefire/AGW.



Sparks released *Sidewalk Blues* on the Tonewood label in February 2009 and recorded *Little Princess* his fifth CD for Tzadik in New York City on February 19, 2009.

WHAT OTHERS SAY:

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 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

ARTICLE LINKS:

Jewish Berkshires article: http://www.jewishberkshires.org/local_includes/downloads/40594.pdf

Allmusic review of *Little Princess*: <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:dbfoxzw0ldje~T1>

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May 2010