

Tim Sparks

Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 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 protege 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.

He 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.