

Song Exploder
Sparks - This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us
Episode 211

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us" by SPARKS)

Russell: We're big, uh, cinema buffs, so I think we've always had this kind of rationale that in making pop songs, you're able to make the most elaborate movie in your own mind in a three-minute song.

Hrishikesh: That's Russell Mael. He and his brother Ron Mael are the legendary duo, Sparks, from Los Angeles. Over the last 50 years, they've released 25 albums. They've collaborated with Giorgio Moroder and Franz Ferdinand, and influenced bands like Joy Division, Faith No More, Björk, and countless others. There's a new documentary about them called *The Sparks Brothers* made by one of my favorite directors, Edgar Wright. His films include *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, *Baby Driver*, and *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*. The new documentary premiered at Sundance this year, and comes out in theaters this Friday, June 18th. Here's what Edgar Wright says in the intro of the film.

Edgar: Sparks. How did this glam rock anomaly become a band with a career spanning 5 decades? How can Ron and Russell Mael be successful, underrated, hugely influential and overlooked all at the same time? And where does one even start with 25 studio albums and nearly 500 songs?

Hrishikesh: We're gonna start with just one song. For this episode, Ron and Russell break down one of their hits, "This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us," which came out in 1974 and changed their career forever. The original tracks from their recording are long gone. But they re-recorded the song a while ago, and for the purposes of this discussion, you'll hear those isolated tracks. And in the end, you'll hear the original 1974 recording.

("This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us" by SPARKS)

Russell: I'm Russell Mael from Sparks.

Ron: Yeah, this is Ron Mael from Sparks.

(Music fades out)

Ron: We moved to England in 1973. But we had had two albums out in the States previously but they sold in a very slow fashion. We had played one show in the UK with the band that we had at the time, and Island Records really liked the song writing and they really liked the singing and thought if we assembled British musicians around us, that there was something there that they could push. So Russell and I just moved to England and there were no songs, so over a period of about six months I was writing and one of the songs that came up was “This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us.”

(Piano)

Russell: Ron had played me this song just on this upright piano. And I thought it was really striking. It sounded very classical, like a classical melody.

(Piano)

Ron: There weren't any lyrics for it at the time. We almost always have the music first and then add lyrics later, just because we don't want the music structure to be restricted by kind of a very formal, blocking out of the lyrics. We were trying to figure out something, because the song was kind of cinematic in a way. So, the Western cliché, “This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us,” I don't know, it just kind of came to mind.

Russell: Sometimes, there might be an initial lyric that he writes that, I think, maybe didn't match the tone of the melody and so I'll kindly request like I'm a movie studio, “we're going to need a rewrite on that, sir.”

Ron: I get notes.

Russell: But for “This Town,” because the song is so unorthodox, that lyric, I don't even know if I was able to judge whether that's a good lyric or a bad lyric, but it was such an interesting lyric. But then I was going, “how am I going to sing that?”

(A cappella vocals: “This town ain't big enough for the both of us”)

Ron: You know, it's a pretty big mouthful, “This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us.”

Russell: And that melody that he played on the right hand was exactly the melody that I sang. So, there's some vocal acrobatics to be able to, to have to sing that song.

(Third verse vocals along with piano: "Daily, except for Sunday / You dawdle in to the cafe where you meet her each day / Heartbeat, increasing heartbeat / As 20 cannibals have hold of you, they need their protein just like you do / This town ain't big enough for both of us")

Russell: A lot of it's really high, the singing. And at that time we didn't even consider things like transposing songs to a key that's more suitable for a singer. We just said, "Well, that's the key you wrote it in so you got to sing it in that key." And I think that helped to kind of dictate the style of the singing for that song, just via the melody that Ron had written.

(Fifth verse vocals along with piano: "You know that this town isn't big enough, not big enough for both of us / This town isn't big enough, not big enough for both of us / I ain't gonna leave")

Ron: We wanted to have the lyrics done when we were actually rehearsing with the band, because it changes the character of the song. So we gathered together a group of British musicians through various ads and we went into the studio first with the band and arranged the song.

(Guitar)

Russell: The guitar player was Adrian Fisher.

(Guitar)

Russell: The drummer was "Dinky" Diamond.

(Drums joins)

Russell: The bass player was Martin Gordon.

(Bass joins)

Ron: We wanted it to be a rock song even if the melody is kind of classically tinged.

(Guitar along with drums and bass)

Ron: It was really difficult for them because I didn't ever really think that when I was writing it. I had no consideration for either vocalists or guitarists or anybody else. I just was writing.

Russell: The melody that the right hand of Ron on the keyboard, that [sings melody].

(Piano)

Russell: That line became adopted by the guitar player.

(Guitar)

Ron: The song is so strict that what they could do was limited but they did an incredible job.

(Guitar)

(First verse vocals: "Zoo time is she and you time / The mammals are your favorite type, and you want her tonight / Heartbeat, increasing heartbeat / You hear the thunder of stampeding rhinos, elephants and tacky tigers / This town ain't big enough for the both of us")

Ron: Each of the separate verses is kind of a little vignette and a moment of passion and hope for a guy. And then it kind of escalates into this overly dramatic situation where, what began as just shyness or something in the encounter, becomes something magnified to a cinematic area with the lyrics like just going to the zoo and then it becomes something much more dramatic. And that kind of thing happens in each of the verses.

(Second verse vocals along with piano and bass: "Flying, domestic flying / And when the stewardess is near do not show any fear / Heartbeat, increasing heartbeat / You are a khaki-colored bombardier, it's Hiroshima that you're nearing / This town ain't big enough for the both of us")

Ron: I think it's just the leap from the everyday into kind of like a hyper-emotional, cinematic area, and especially with regard to a romantic situation.

Russell: "Flying, domestic flying / And when the stewardess is near, do not show any fear / Heartbeat, increasing heartbeat / You are a khaki-colored bombardier / It's Hiroshima that you're nearing"

Ron: The protagonist of the song is on just some simple flight and he has some kind of fantasy about the stewardess, and then in his own mind, it kind of becomes him being a pilot, at the moment of the bombing in World War II, you know. I've written lyrics in the past where, at the moment they seem appropriate and nowadays, I just wonder what got into me at the time.

(Fourth verse vocals: "Heartbeat, increasing heartbeat / The rain is pouring on the foreign town, the bullets cannot cut you down / This town ain't big enough for the both of us")

Ron: There was a time where we were actually considering having a different, clichéd movie tagline at the end of each one, but we decided to go play it safe. And so it was "This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us" every single time. There was one other controversial decision making moment, which sounds really trivial, but the gunshot in the song,

(Gunshot)

Ron: it was whether adding a gunshot is really tacky or whether that's kind of cool. And so we decided, "Well, it might be a little tacky, but it is kind of cool." But it was finding one that didn't sound like a bad sound effect. We had access to the BBC sound library, which is unbelievable. And so they found a gunshot that was the perfect one for the song.

(Gunshot along with guitar)

Ron: The decision of whether something is tacky in a bad way or cool, usually just because of our nature, if it's debating whether it should be in or shouldn't be in, we decide to go with it in and we'll take the consequences.

Russell: We were so happy that we had Muff Winwood produce that song. Because he, Muff was the bass player of The Spencer Davis Group with his illustrious brother Stevie Winwood. So for us being anglophiles this was a dream come true to be working with Muff Winwood.

Ron: And so, Muff came to the studio and we played him a lot of the material that we had but he was particularly struck by this song. And we always kind of thought of it as being too weird for a featured song on the album. But he wanted to be bold about the whole thing. And so—

Russell: The weird song is the single, and we got on *Top of the Pops* after that, and the song became a big hit.

(Piano)

Ron: So after having two albums that did nothing in the U.S., our dream of becoming a UK band was actually fulfilled primarily through that one song at the time.

Russell: We didn't realize, I don't think, what that ultimately would mean that the reaction would be so intense. So it was, it was a real shock, but an amazingly happy shock.

(Piano)

Ron: You kind of think back what would have happened if this hadn't happened and it's like, there wouldn't be an Edgar Wright documentary, you know, it's like unbelievable. You kind of can't go back and think about those "what-if's," it's just the way it turned out was incredibly fortunate.

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us," by Sparks, in its entirety.

("This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us" by Sparks)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/sparks to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "This Town Ain't Big Enough for Both of Us," and you can watch the trailer for the new documentary, *The Sparks Brothers*. Special thanks on this episode to Edgar Wright and Nera Park.

This episode was made by me with editing help from Teeny Lieberon and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

