

'Film is both utterly sincere and has a sense of humor'

Edgar Wright explores 'glam rock anomaly' Sparks in docu

By Lindsey Bahr

Ever heard of the band Sparks? If you haven't, you're not alone. If you have, it's not unlikely that they're one of your favorite bands. The pop rock duo formed by brothers Ron and Russell Mael has in their five-decade run gained a cult following of some seriously creative people, from Beck and Weird Al to Mike Myers and Amy Sherman-Palladino. And they are the subject of "The Sparks Brothers," a new documentary from filmmaker Edgar Wright that explores the question of how a band can be "successful, underrated, hugely influential and overlooked all at the same time." The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival Saturday night.

Wright has been a fan since he first saw them on Top of the Pops in 1979 at age five and said they "kept coming back into his life" in the pre-Internet age of music fandom. Over the years it grew into a bit of an obsession.

"At some point when you're a fan of a band like Sparks you become a sort of evangelist for them," Wright said.

He kept toying with the idea of a documentary, thinking that perhaps an overview was the thing that was holding them back from wider fame. Then in 2017 at a Sparks gig, director Phil Lord just told him to do it. That night he asked them if they would be open to the idea.

People had approached the Maels in the past about doing a docu-

mentary and they'd always had the same answer: No.

"We'd always been hesitant about the idea of having a documentary for Sparks," said Russell Mael. "We tend to feel that what we do via our music and the image you have of the band, the album cover artwork and seeing the band, the videos on television, that that speaks better than any document could speak about us."

Part of the allure of the band is the mystery surrounding them. They worried that a documentary would lessen that. A running misconception is that they're British. And their Wikipedia page is terrifically confusing. Jason Schwartzman in the documentary even says (mostly in jest) that he's not sure that he'll ever watch it because he doesn't want to learn too much about them. But the Maels were already fans of Wright's films, which include "Hot Fuzz" and "Shaun of the Dead."

Sensibilities

"It just seemed like it was meant to be," said Ron Mael. They knew that they were on the same wavelength and had similar sensibilities.

"I'm such a big fan of these guys, I couldn't let them down," Wright said.

Wright endeavored to make not just a documentary about Sparks, but to make it feel like a Sparks project as well. It is both utterly sincere and has a sense of humor.

"I'm very passionate about the subject matter and also can kind of

make fun of the music documentary at the same time," Wright said. "(It's) the sort of thing that Ron and Russell do brilliantly is like write these kind of very profound songs that are also kind of like sometimes seeming to sort of make fun of the art form at the same time."

Finding famous fans, like Flea, Patton Oswalt, Neil Gaiman and Fred Armisen, to be the talking heads in the documentary wasn't all that hard either. Some had already said they loved Sparks in the press and some Wright just assumed were fans.

"I was very rarely wrong," Wright laughed. "People were very willing to talk about it."

The documentary even provided an opportunity for a reunion. Todd Rundgren, who produced their first album, had not seen the brothers since 1972. When Rundgren came in to do his interview, Wright didn't tell him that the Maels were also there and did a full "This Is Your Life." He said if there's ever a DVD, he'll put it in the bonus materials.

"Most bands have a golden period and then there's like a slow, sometimes embarrassing trail off but Sparks were sort of like pushing it further and further and being more ambitious," Wright said. "They just seem to kind of fly against the trajectory of every other band that have been going that long."

The film does not yet have distribution, but is expected to sell Sundance which is currently underway virtually through Feb. 3. (AP)

Film

Variety



This image released by Bleecker Street shows Stanley Tucci, (left), and Colin Firth in a scene from 'Supernova.' (AP)

Film

'Maltese Falcon' returns to theaters at ripe age of 80

A slow burn of adoration in 'Supernova'

By Mark Kennedy

The actors Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth have been friends for 20 years and that is plainly evident watching them play longtime lovers in the wrenchingly beautiful film "Supernova."

The award-winning duo are like a well-worn sweater onscreen, comfortable and lived-in, showing the kind of tart affection people show when passion has given way to the slow burn of adoration.

In a scene early on in "Supernova," Tucci's character asks Firth's character how things are going. "It's fine for me," comes the steady reply. Tucci knows better: "Liar," he says, simply.

He's right because the film is about impending loss: Tucci's Tusker has early onset dementia and Firth's Sam is thrust into the position of watching the possibility of his love outlast his lover.

Writer-director Harry Macqueen's script is as spare and natural as the setting — England's Lake District, with its ancient stone walls and rolling misty green countryside. Dementia is never mentioned and referred to only obliquely, as in "the bloody thing."

The film opens with the couple in a motorhome revisiting places and people they enjoyed over the years. Tusker, an American novelist, is ostensibly finishing his latest book and the trip will end with Sam, a very English pianist, giving a concert.

Tusker's condition is apparent but subtle, a lost word here or difficulty putting on a shirt. He admits to being "a little confused" but he's a fiercely independent person and loss of control is clearly his worst fear.

"I'm becoming a passenger. And I'm not a passenger," he says at one point. At another: "I want to be remembered for who I was but not for who I'm about to become."

Firth's Sam tries to keep a stiff upper lip, ducking into the bathroom to compose himself when his emotions are overwhelming, camouflaging his tears by opening the taps. "Am I strong enough? Can I do it?" he asks.

The title comes from the fact that both men are amateur astronomers and is a reference to the nothingness that awaits everyone eventually — especially the void that now faces Tusker. It's a tiny story of two men that somehow adds up to all of us, like stardust.

There are lines that will stay with you. "You're not supposed to mourn someone while they're still alive," says Tusker. Sam later tries to frame their predicament in a cosmic sense: "It's not about fair. It's about love."

People suffering from dementia have been on film before — think Glenda Jackson in "Elizabeth Is Missing," Julie Christie in "Away From Her" and Julianne Moore in "Still Alice" — but this feels different.

"Supernova" portrays a 'couple' going through the disease but it transcends sexuality. Anyone in a long-term relationship will smile as Sam and Tusker good-naturedly bicker over bed space or the navigation system. Anyone will melt as Sam uses his lover's arm as a keyboard, kisses Tucci's head fondly or when their arms are wrapped around each other.

Explosion

The camera is often in the back seat watching the two in front navigate — in more ways than one — this new territory. Composer Keaton Henson's score is achingly sad, leaning into strings and wistful piano.

There are also silent moments that pack as much power as a stellar explosion. In one, Sam goes through Tusker's latest manuscript and sees as once bold, aggressive handwriting progressively gets messier and emptier, until there's a just a solitary, crossed-out word on the page.

If anything, this is a film that counsels us to hold onto and cherish the moments we have together — the parties, the walks, the meals, the quiet cuddles.

"Thanks," Sam says as they motor down a lane.

"For what?" asks Tusker.

"This," says Sam.

It's the same sentiment we offer to Macqueen — thanks for this.

"Supernova," a Bleecker Street release, is rated R for language and references to dementia and suicide. Running time: 93 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Danny Huston's first dog was an Airedale Terrier named Sam after Humphrey Bogart's "Maltese Falcon" character, Sam Spade. His father John Huston's debut may have been over 20 years old by the time Danny was born, but the film that helped de-

fine the noir genre and launch both his and Bogart's careers still factored heavily in his life from an early age.

Growing up in Ireland, one of his favorite memories was when his father would bring out the projector and they'd gather around to watch his films. "The Maltese Falcon" was always a highlight.

"It's like a good book," Huston said. "You find new things when you revisit it."

Now the film that no one believed in is celebrating its 80th anniversary. It's returning to theaterED through Fathom Events for a limited engagement last Wednesday.

"It's an important film to see if you love films and I think it stands the test of time. It's gripping in its speed but it's not reckless. And the lines! It had such memorable lines," Huston said. "The dialogue in 'Maltese Falcon' is action, pure action."

Huston loves talking about his father, who gave him advice and unforgettable experiences along the way. When he was a teenager, his father brought him along to Morocco for the shoot of "The Man Who Would Be King" with Sean Connery and Michael Caine.

And when Huston himself was thinking about directing, his father told him to treat every scene as if it's the most important and to never feel bashful about asking family for help. John Huston reminded him that he'd even called on his own father for "The Maltese Falcon." Walter Huston famously appears in a cameo role as the man who delivers the falcon.

The film's legend has only grown and the prop itself has become one of the most valuable pieces of movie memorabilia.

"I have a falcon but it's not real," Huston laughed. Danny Huston never got to meet Bogart, who died a few years before he was born, but he knew that it was a great loss for his father.

"They were great friends and larked about a lot, much to Katharine Hepburn's horror. But they loved each other deeply," he said. "The camera sees things that the naked eye doesn't and with Bogart, the camera found an incredible nobility."

Danny Huston said that his father got to enjoy his own legacy during his long life — he died in 1987 at age 81 — but that he likely wouldn't have believed that 80 years later the film would still be a topic of discussion. (AP)

Features

ARABIC TIMES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2021

NEW YORK: A small painting by Sandro Botticelli sold at Sotheby's in New York for \$92.2 million, an auction record for the Renaissance master.

The work, "Young Man Holding a Roundel," from about 1475, depicts a young nobleman holding a round painting of a saint. It is one of just three portraits in private hands by the artist best known for "The Birth of Venus" and "Primavera."

"This is not only an exceptional painting, it is also the epitome of beauty, and of a moment when so much of our Western civilization began," said Christopher Apostle, head of Sotheby's Old Masters Painting department in New York. "Today's result is a fitting tribute, both to the painting itself and all that it represents."

The seller was the estate of the late real estate billionaire Sheldon Solow, who bought the work at Christie's in 1982 for £810,000, or just over \$1 million.

Two bidders competed for the painting at livestreamed auction. Sotheby's did not disclose the identity of the buyer.

Sotheby's exhibited "Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Roundel" in London, Dubai, Los Angeles and New York ahead of Thursday's sale. The price, which included the auction house's fees, was the highest price paid for an old master work since Leonardo da Vinci's "Salvator Mundi" sold for \$450 million in 2017. (AP)

NEW YORK: ABC News President James Goldston has said that he will leave the network at the end of March, after seven years of leading the news division.

The low-profile Goldston leaves at a time ABC's flagship newscasts, "World News Tonight" and "Good Morning America," are both leading its rivals in the ratings.

"I've always assumed that after this extraordinary election cycle, which we've covered at a full sprint for four years, it would be time for a change," Goldston said in a note to staff members. "After a great deal of reflection over the last few months, I'm ready for a new adventure."

His departure adds to the list of top jobs that need to be filled at major news organizations, includ-

ing The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times.

During his tenure, the network purchased the FiveThirtyEight blog, took over "The View" from ABC's entertainment division and launched a more aggressive online offering, ABC News Live.

Goldston's decision to install David Muir as "World News Tonight" anchor paid dividends as



Muir



Goldston

the show now dominates the evening news ratings, often reaching 10 million viewers a night.

One low point came last year when a Goldston deputy in charge of talent relations was forced out after an investigation revealed she had made racially insensitive comments.

Peter Rice, chairman of general entertainment content for ABC

parent Walt Disney Co, praised Goldston for his work, particularly during the pandemic and 2020's political upheaval.

"As a leader he is a calming force in the chaos of perpetual news, remaining both thoughtful and strategic while also maintaining his much appreciated wit," Rice said in a memo to staff.

Rice said he's appointing five

ABC News executives to run the division as a search commences for a new leader: Derek Medina, Michael Corn, Almin Karamehmedovic, Wendy Fisher and Marie Nelson.

His first job in broadcast journalism was at the BBC where he began on programmes including The Money Programme, Newsnight and Panorama. (Agencies)