

*Acoustic fingerstyle guitarist Tim Sparks has always set himself apart from the pack of his peers. Rather than rely strictly on playing blues or age-old folk and bluegrass tunes, or even following in the well-worn paths of John Fahey, Peter Lang, and Robbie Basho, Sparks has followed his muse down into the corridors of musical and cultural history. While no one can dent the influence of great jazzmen on his playing, one can hear the sounds of saxophonists, pianists, and of course the sounds of Yiddish folk and popular music, klezmer among them. In 2000, Sparks recorded Tanz, his third album for John Zorn's Tzadik imprint. It was a departure from his previous two in that it wasn't a solo but a trio record. His partners on that musical journey were veteran bassist Greg Cohen and master percussionist Cyro Baptista. The set was brilliant and innovative, creating an entirely new perspective on Jewish music from the beginning of the 20th century to the commencement of the 21st. It contained a slew of traditional songs and also featured four tunes by the original klezmer legend, clarinetist and composer Naftule Brandwein. The same trio reconvened in 2002 for At the Rebbe's Table, for a similar program that also contained tunes by Brandwein. Seven long years later, this trio once more reunites to perform an entire program of his work, and the results are quite astonishing.*

*For starters, here are the group members playing together after all this time and being more emotionally and musically attuned to one another than ever before. Next there is Sparks' own playing, which was always jaw-dropping, but has risen to a such a level that now he's virtually in a league of his own. The way he combines so many different musical techniques and genres into his own idiosyncratic fingerstyle picking is not only technically remarkable, it's savvy and wildly creative at the same time. Check the way he weaves flamenco styles into Brandwein's take on a traditional Yiddish folk melody in "Der Yid in Jerusalem." Here, Baptista accents the Latin rhythms on claves and hand drums, and Sparks weaves Charlie Christian, Tal Farlow, and elements of Carlos Montoya into his playing of Brandwein's melody. The sprightly "Oh Daddy, That's Good" weaves some gorgeous modal and overtone playing into the melody, stretching the harmony to -- but never over -- the breaking point. The interplay between Cohen and Baptista is so delightfully sophisticated that all the listener can do is smile. The use of harmonics in "A Few Bowls Turkish" (sic) draws from the influence of guitarist Bert Jansch to further a series of modal interludes that flow into some gorgeous jazz playing on the changes by the composer. Highlighting these tracks doesn't mean that they are the album's finest moments at all. Virtually every one of these ten cuts is an example of how intuitive, sophisticated, and creative Sparks is, not only as a player and interpreter, but as an arranger so canny that the listener would think all of these songs were written in the current era. That said, Sparks never, ever compromises the sophistication or humor Brandwein put into his compositions. He reveres them deeply, and strives to make them live on as part of a lineage that has no use for musty audio museums, but would rather portray the music as a living, breathing, sassy, sexy thing that swaggers rather than stands still in the passage of time. Brilliant work and the best Sparks record to date.*