

FFS (UK / USA)

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Collaborations, as FFS would have us believe on their debut album, don't work. You start off deferential, and strangely reverential – and eventually, you'll need the Dalai Lama to mediate, between all the patronising, agonising, navel-gazing and differences in work ethic. So when Los Angeles duo Sparks and Glasgow-based quartet Franz Ferdinand decided to record together, it was a flawed and potentially disastrous idea, right? FFS, you couldn't be more wrong! Not only is 'Collaborations Don't Work' one of the star attractions of the self-titled record that sprang from their collective loins but 'FFS' is also one of the strongest albums of either bands' career.

The love of artful corkscrew pop that created a mutual appreciation society kicks off with the lead single 'Johnny Delusional' and its soon-come successor 'Call Girl', though the hooks driving 'Police Encounters', 'So Desu Ne' and 'Piss Off' are no less fabulous and merciless. This dynamic thrill is countered by the subtler charms of 'Dictator's Son' and 'Little Guy From The Suburbs', the haughtier 'The Power Couple' and 'Collaborations Don't Work' itself, a multi-tiered quasi-musical that shows off the compositional ambition and savvy humour that defines 'FFS'.

Moreover, there might be recognisable sonic devices that identify the provenance of these works (for starters, there are few more recognisable instruments than Sparks vocalist Russell Mael), FFS' happy marriage doesn't truly sound like either band, but a striking and fascinating mutation.

"The real motivation was to make something new, not 'Franz featuring Russell Mael', or 'Sparks with Franz Ferdinand backing them'," declares FF frontman Alex Kapranos, whose intertwining lead vocals with Russell is another of the record's principal thrills, like a male version of the Abba approach. "As we started sending songs back and forth, I noticed I was writing from my idea of a Sparks perspective, and what they sent struck us as how they think Franz Ferdinand sounds. That gave everyone something new to work with."

"You can't chart what is Sparks and what is Franz Ferdinand," Russell's keyboard-pounding brother Ron suggests. "I think each band unconsciously relinquished a little of who they were in order to enter new territory, to accept your sensibility might be changed in some way. We were all willing to let our guard down."

The seed of FFS was unwittingly kindled at the start of the Nineties, when Kapranos discovered Sparks' triumphant 1974 single 'Amateur Hour', the second single taken from their epochal 'Kimono My House' album. "It totally blew me away," he recalls. "What kind of universe had I discovered? I hunted down Sparks' back catalogue and found I really liked their contemporary music too."

When Kapranos joined forces with guitarist Nick McCarthy, bassist Bob Hardy and drummer Paul Thomson as Franz Ferdinand, they attempted two covers, one being 'Achoo' from Sparks' 1974 album 'Propaganda'. "A lot of bands find their sound by learning how to play other people's songs," he says. "So Sparks were quite a formative influence on us."

When Franz' single 'Take Me Out' and self-titled album were Top Three UK hits, word got back to the Maels that this new sensation were big Sparks fans. "We thought 'Take Me Out' was pretty cool,

and wouldn't it be nice to say hello when they came to Los Angeles?" recalls Russell. "We met and decided then it would be great to do something. We put forward a couple demos, one was 'Piss Off'. But they got swept up by everything, and it didn't happen."

Kapranos: "We had such love and respect for their music. 'Piss Off' was a great song, but we didn't have the opportunity, it was an insanely busy time for us."

Fast forward to 2013 and Sparks and Franz Ferdinand are both about to play Coachella. On the day of Sparks' warm-up show in San Francisco, Kapranos was in the city trying to locate a dentist when he heard a voice behind him: "Alex, is that you?" It was Ron and Russell. They invited us down to see them play that night. We said hello after, and all agreed we should try and make it happen. So Nick and I got the music to 'Police Encounters' together and sent it over, and then Ron sent 'Collaborations Don't Work'..."

The near-seven minute opus was, Ron says, "a big sonic defence mechanism. We'd written 'Piss Off' a lot earlier, but this one was written specifically for the collaboration, to see if the Franz guys were OK about the mindset. It's the most complex on the album, and not verse-chorus."

Kapranos: "We thought, those guys have a pretty good sense of humour to send that as their first idea! So we added a section rebutting Ron's lyric, thinking they'd either see the funny side or wouldn't speak to us again. It led to an intense flurry of activity, and before we knew it, we had all these songs, which then took on different characters once we were recording."

Produced by John Congleton (St Vincent, Angel Olsen, David Byrne..) at London's RAK Studios, the album 'FFS' only took 15 days to complete, followed by an equally swift mixing session at Congleton's Dallas studio. "We approached it the way bands do with their first record," says Kapranos. "We had the songs first, rehearsed them and then recorded it all together, in a room. So no hanging around or fanning about."

Russell: "Musically and lyrically, it really was a collaborative process. Meshed together, we think it sounds really special."

Different tracks feature different degrees of collaboration, but the end result is pure FFS. "You might think 'Call Girl' was one of ours, or that 'So Desu Ne' was theirs," Kapranos notes. "Actually, neither of us would have made any of the songs like that on our own."

Kimono-era Sparks fans will recognise how 'FFS' restores some of their old 'pop rock' DNA, having been more recently exploring more experimental-expansive avenues such as the musical 'The Seduction Of Ingmar Bergman'. This streamlined beast is no one-off studio project either, but something that both camps are committing to through 2015, starting with some festival appearances and headline shows. There was a stage ice-breaker in February when Kapranos joined Russell and Ron to perform 'When Do I Get To Sing "My Way"' at the duo's 'Kimono My House' anniversary shows at LA's Ace Theatre.

"I know these FFS shows are going to be so good," he says. "Both Russell and I have an element of the show-off to us, and I could feel that coming out. It feels very natural on stage together."

FFS shows will also feature a handful of cherry-picked Sparks and Franz Ferdinand songs too. "We told the guys, we're happy doing any Sparks songs they want - we have a nineteen-album jump on them to start with!" says Russell. "It's exciting for both bands' fans to see us in a new configuration with new material for a new entity."

So in the right hands, collaborations DO work, and beautifully, "The biggest danger of collaboration," Ron concludes, "is that it gets predictable, and that large egos can clash. But none of that happened. It was the opposite. The strength of the two bands is bigger than the sum of the parts."