

A Musical Life (1977–1998)

How Mark Hollis & Talk Talk Outsmarted The Music Industry

Prologue

“Before you play two notes, learn how to play one note, it’s as simple as that, really, and don’t play one note, unless you’ve got a reason to play it.”

- Mark Hollis, February 1998

Those were the words of a musician who had quite possibly the most fascinating career of anyone in the industry, from frontman of a band which lasted a grand total of one single, to frontman of a band lambasted as “Duran Duran clones” and ended up as frontman of a band sued by EMI for, in their words, *technical incompetence*. And still, seven years after Talk Talk imploded and twelve years after their last gig in Spain in September 1986, Mark Hollis’s musical philosophy persisted.

For a musician who had started out in the punk scene of the late 70s, this was quite an ironic moment; his career had come full circle, having emerged from a genre infamously devoid of compromise. As time went on, his sound would embrace that ideology and philosophy against the backdrop of the commercial, radio-ready sound of the eighties and nineties, during an era where labels dictated more than ever what we heard on the airwaves and populated the charts each week.

Over the course of just five albums, Hollis and his band, along with producer and unofficial member, Tim Friese-Greene, as well as many other contributors, managed to transmogrify their entire sonic palette, from synthesisers and electronic drums on their debut, to monolithic orchestral arrangements with a psychedelic and meditative articulation on their final album nearly a decade later, and as the band evolved, their goals and ideas got more and more ambitious.

“It’s My Life” introduced more complex song structures and exotic instrumentation, all while still straddling within the confines of new wave, while “The Colour of Spring” saw them do away with synths entirely, as the band turned to guitars, organs, and other more “organic” instruments, which came together as an artsy and often moody expression of rock and progressive pop, with hints of other genres thrown in for good measure. Their explorations came to a crescendo on their final two albums, most notably with Spirit of Eden in 1988 which finally completed Talk Talk’s reincarnation and subsequently gave rise to one of rock’s more experimental and cerebral sub-genres, post-rock.

But Spirit of Eden didn’t just invent a new genre, it had much more profound impacts and consequences, too, particularly for Talk Talk themselves, its release left their commercial legacy in a less than ideal state as critics and fans alike found themselves dumbfounded as to why a band like them would make a move as bold and as seemly out of the blue as this. Not only that, but they would also find themselves battling with EMI in court on multiple instances, from compilations being released without the consent of Hollis or the band, to a huge dispute over the recording and uncommercial nature of the album. These events ultimately saw Talk Talk let go from the label, or from a different perspective, wriggle free of their grasp, and the band were soon signed to Verve Records, where they went on to round out their discography in 1991, releasing one more album before pulling the plug on the band shortly afterwards, and rightly so.

But in order to comprehend how the band ended up in this unique scenario and how the repercussions of their later albums forever altered the careers of not only Talk Talk, but also Hollis himself, we must first look at the bigger picture, what happened in the lead-up to these two albums changing how music was consumed and also created is just as important to this saga as the albums themselves, everything from the first demos in 1981 to their final concert in 1986 contributed to this quite extraordinary tale, too.

This is the story of how Mark Hollis & Talk Talk silently changed the music world...

Chapter I

It's November of 1977, and Hollis's band at the time, The Reaction, have just been included on Beggars Banquet's punk compilation album "Streets" with a song titled "Talk Talk Talk Talk" and while it's nothing more than your typical punk take, it will eventually form an important part of this story, as you will see later. The Reaction consisted of Hollis on lead vocals, George Page on guitar, Bruce Douglas on bass, and Gino Williams on drums.

The following year, they released their first (And only) single "I Can't Resist" on Island Records, coupled with the B-side "I'm A Case" but beyond that and a few concerts, they didn't do much, punk was already losing momentum by the time The Reaction got their break, as the band that brought the UK scene to life, the Sex Pistols, imploded the previous year, due to internal tensions within the band made worse by both their recent lacklustre tour of America and Sid Vicious's worsening drug habits, the relatively negative perception of punk in the UK in general was also heavily stunting its growth, and within 18 months or so, The Reaction would be no more.

1979 would prove to be quite a surprisingly significant year as during this year, Hollis recorded many solo demos, ranging from slow and spacious (Crying In The Rain), to material aligned with the mod scene (Mirror Man), and a few of them in-between the two. For the musical landscape of 1979, these demos, with a little cleaning up and a more tidy mix, could have done reasonably well on the charts, as it would have been a good enough time to release them given how the industry looked at the time. However, the beginning of the following decade would usher in a new era of commercial music, as technology evolved, so did music, and the sound of the 80s would be mostly dominated by one instrument...

Gary Numan's 1979 breakout song "Are 'Friends' Electric?" was a landmark release as it became the first UK number one by a British band to feature a synthesiser as a main instrument, only a few years ago it was pretty rare to find one on a charting song, as before the mid 70s, synthesisers were pretty impractical to use on a commercial release, more often being relegated to the experimental side of music. Not only were they at the time absurdly huge, sometimes filling one side of a room, but the price of using one was often out of reach for most studios, costing well over \$10,000 in some cases, however, during the latter half of the decade, synthesisers became more compact, reliable, and most importantly, more affordable.

The increasing accessibility of synthesisers allowed acts to slowly but surely unlock a new arsenal of sounds that had been mostly exclusive to the wide world of experimental acts and some prog rock groups, it wasn't until the release of Kraftwerk's album "Autobahn" in 1974, that the potential of electronic instruments was finally realised, and they would ultimately go on to front the revolution that would see the rise of synthpop in the early 80s. In the UK, this new sound instantly found an audience, as the success of disco the previous decade had proved that dance music was not a fad, but the future, all of a sudden, there was a whole myriad of groups and artists who were embracing both new technology and new sounds, The Human League, Eurythmics, Yazoo, Depeche Mode, etc.

Anyway, back to Mark, this sudden stylistic shift within popular music now meant that his demos had lost most, if not all, of their potential success, which also meant that he had to go through the audacity of reworking all of his songs to stand any chance of getting a breakthrough, there was just one problem, he didn't have a band...

Chapter 2

Mark's older brother, Ed, had made a name for himself as being the manager of the punk and pub rock band Eddie and the Hot Rods (Ed being "Eddie"), who are mostly known for their 1977 minor hit, "Do Anything You Wanna Do". He also co-produced and provided lyrics for some of their songs and was a recognisable figure within the underground punk scene in London and the South East; so much so that in 1978 Island offered him the chance to run his own record label, which became the short-lived Speedball Records.

From the beginning, Ed was always willing to help his brother make it in the music world; after all, Ed was the reason Hollis became interested in the world of music in the first place, he introduced Mark to the music industry and encouraged him to pursue a career as a musician, he was also the co-writer and producer for "Talk Talk Talk Talk" as well as "I'm A Case" the B-side to their only single "I Can't Resist" which was also featured on one of Speedball's compilation tapes. So when the time eventually came for Mark to start looking for new musicians to work with, he already had a head start thanks to his brother's connections with Island Records, and it wouldn't be long until the

seeds of Talk Talk were planted...

About 40 miles east of London lies the coastal city of Southend-on-Sea, and rather than being awash with the punk angst that was the front and centre of London's underground music scene in the 70s, R&B had become the genre of choice for the local clubs. However, away from the scene's sweat and grease, were a young Paul Webb and Lee Harris, the rhythm section of reggae band Eskalator, Paul on bass, Lee on drums. The pair were more interested in Essex's wider club scene rather than their own city's far more localised R&B culture, and as a result never really fit in with the city's musical tastes.

Around the same time, Mark met Simon Brenner, a record store worker based in north west London. In an interview with The Guardian in 2019, Simon recalled the time when he first met his future bandmate. *"I met Mark when I was working in a record store in South End Green, north-west London. We were introduced to each other through a mutual bass-playing friend before the other two members, Paul Webb and Lee Harris, joined. We met in his flat in Muswell Hill, where he lived with his then girlfriend, Flick, and we listened to lots of records together, deciphering the details of everything from Carmina Burana to King Crimson and Bob Marley."*

Soon after, the pair would start writing music together, basing themselves in Island Music's offices, at first they were skeletal compositions, just melodies and chord structures, it wasn't until they were invited to the flat of prolific lyricist Don Black, who was most known for working with John Barry, the composer of the early James Bond themes, that their music really started to take shape. As the pair's songs developed and evolved, Don helped out with writing the lyrics, but Mark and Simon were still missing a few components.

At this stage, Hollis was already approaching his late 20s, having turned 26 around the time he and Brenner met, and was still struggling to make his ambitions come to fruition, however, this new partnership would allow him to at least attempt to give his infant music career a much needed boost following The Reaction's demise three years prior. Sure, Hollis now had someone new to work with, but he wanted to get the most of this partnership, and this would include expanding it into a more band-like project.

Also around the same time, Paul and Lee had recording sessions with Ed, around the same location where Mark and Simon were doing their own. During these sessions, Ed brought up his brother's demos, and asked if the two could meet up with him, just to help him out, sometime after this, the two would cross paths with Hollis. The recruitment of Webb and Harris were the final pieces of the puzzle for Hollis to get his musical journey back up and running, and so, with a new lineup now assembled, Mark was now finally able to give it another try, the Reaction was a starting point, albeit a small one, but now he could finally take another step forward.

A new addition in terms of instruments would come in the form of keyboards, which were played by Brenner, there are some articles which have mentioned that the keys were brought in to cut down on studio costs, mainly from Hollis himself, but this has never been fully confirmed nor denied. Either way, this would be how Mark's new group would sound, for the time being, at least. With all the resources now acquired, Hollis and the rest got straight to work. Originally, there was no intention of this actually turning into a proper band, as Hollis stated so in a 1998 interview, *"This is where Ed comes in again - he took some tapes I'd done to Island Music, looking towards a publishing deal, and that's when he got Lee and Paul to come in and work with me. Simon came in by another means, and in that first week of rehearsing and demoing we actually started writing stuff together as a band. Although all of us were from very different musical backgrounds in terms of taste, there was a definite unity in the type of direction we wanted to go towards, So after that it was "let's call this a band"*

It was soon clear that the four worked great together, and their varied upbringings in the world of music seemed to greatly add to their chemistry, Hollis was fresh out of the punk scene, Paul and Lee were from a reggae band, and Simon added a more futuristic sound to the group with his synthesisers, it was a real melting pot of talent, and one that wouldn't go unnoticed for long, as the group would soon find out...

Chapter 3

Soon after Mark settled in with his new bandmates, Jimmy Miller, who at one point had worked with the Rolling Stones and now was at Island Records, approached the fledgling band with the idea of making demos with him, and at last Hollis had an opportunity to get his music out into the wider world. Recording for said demos took place throughout June 1981, these recordings were pretty significant as they were the first major sessions Talk Talk were involved in as a band, and they turned out to be quite productive as they came out of it with three songs, all of them reworked versions of songs from Mark's catalogue of solo work.

"Talk Talk Talk Talk" became just "Talk Talk" and was the one that went through the most changes, firstly, the lyrics were altered slightly, and second, the instrumentation was also redone, with Brenner's keyboards and piano solo replacing the nauseatingly overdriven and somewhat muddy guitars from the 1977 demo, thus removing most traces of its punk sentiment. "Mirror Man" was the second of the three, this one went through similar changes, however, this one was more of a stylistic change rather than a complete overhaul, the original demo from 1979 had more of a mod rock sound, akin to that of The Jam. Once again, Brenner's synths replaced the guitars and the skittering drum groove was simplified to a more traditional backbeat, with the tempo also reduced somewhat. "Candy" was the one that changed the least, the only notable ones being that it was now in a lower key and the song structure had some slight alterations made to it, and just like the other two songs, synths replaced the guitars.

For now that was about it for recording, and they spent the next couple months doing small shows mostly in London clubs, a "mini-tour" so to speak. On November 5th 1981, Talk Talk would debut three new songs, premiering on an evening performance on BBC Radio 1, hosted by David "Kid" Jensen, in what was their first ever radio appearance. Aside from the already recorded "Talk Talk" the three songs that debuted alongside it on that night were "It's So Serious", "Magic Moments" (which would later be reworked into "Today" a year later), and Renée, a slow ballad that was also a reworking of a Hollis solo demo.

These live sets proved to be quite a success, and soon, they caught the attention of record label EMI, they had just seen success with Duran Duran's debut album, and their hit "Girls On Film" was charting highly, and they had helped give rise to the New Romantics alongside Spandau Ballet, so naturally, they had ambitions to integrate Talk Talk into that movement, which would make them

plenty of money given that new wave was taking hold in Britain, they saw a golden opportunity to boost their profits with this up and coming group, and just like Duran Duran, they had talent and looks that could earn millions.

As a result, Colin Thurston, the producer for Duran Duran's debut (and the follow-up), was called in to work on what would eventually become the band's first album,

At last, in February 1982, Mirror Man was released as Talk Talk's first single, and as anticipated, it didn't do much on the charts, they were barely a year into their lifespan after all, however two months later, their next single "Talk Talk" fared much better, reaching number 52 in the UK charts, and even managed to barely crack the US Top 100, so already they were showing some promise, but they weren't quite there just yet, Today was released as the third single from their upcoming album in June, and

The band's name, while sharing the same name as their second single, was nothing short of a simplistic yet clever notion that Mark relayed during an interview with Noise Magazine that same year. *"They happened at virtually the same time. We went through the dictionary, had novels out, all that stuff, but the reason we ended up with it was firstly I like the idea of having a track that has the same name as the band. I'm not sure about having tracks that are considered your anthems 'cos with time you wanna develop further on, but I do sort of like the idea. It's really instant, I think, and it doesn't categorise us. Also you can't abbreviate it - that's something I've got a personal hang-up about!"*

Chapter 4: The Party's Over

Chapter 5: Tim Friese-Greene becomes their producer

Chapter 6: It's My Life

Chapter 7 & 8: The Colour Of Spring

Chapter 9, 10 & 11: Spirit of Eden + 1989 Court Case

After the success of *The Colour of Spring* and the exciting but tortuous 1986 tour, the band decided to end live performances, partly because the songs were becoming more difficult to reproduce live and the band was going through a time when they wanted to take a step further and concentrate on producing the music they had always wanted to make. In particular Mark commented that while touring and live shows had certainly always been a very satisfying exercise and something he had valued highly in his career, at this point it had become something that was taking a heavy toll on him both physically and mentally, and he needed a real break.

The period between the band's last concerts and the release of *Spirit of Eden* is mysterious and revealing, one of those special moments in music history when artists focused on doing what they truly wanted to do given complete freedom and defied industry conventions in the process, which led to conflicts with their record label afterwards.

The sessions for the album took place at Wessex Studios and were characterized by a deep experimentation, namely through a free improvisation that was having an increasingly strong importance in the sound design of their music. In addition, the working environment became more and more concentrated and full of abstraction in the music, as it is said that the recording was done mostly in pitch darkness with lamps and psychedelic light projectors that gave the environment a feeling of being completely immersed in the music.

While the label hoped for a new album as successful as the previous one was, Tim Friese Greene and Mark worked in the opposite direction: inaccessible structures that although solid, their patterns were austere, but arranged so that every element in the mix seemed alive, unpredictable, capricious, like life itself. His working philosophy was to record basic tracks over which he recorded, often one on one, numerous musicians who were asked to play what they wanted, what they felt. These recordings were long and after each one they would select some part that they felt would fit the track. In this way, there is an almost absolute spontaneity, like a magic garden, a collage of seemingly unconnected textures that appear and disappear and that, although they give a much less "consistent" form at first glance than their previous work, actually present a much richer experience. These kinds of sonic adventures were not at all commonplace at the time, and almost harkened back to periods like the late '60s and early '70s, when bold fusion between rock, jazz and classical music was not off the beaten track. However, Talk Talk went even further, combining other

styles such as ambient music or the essence of folk music like gospel or blues, with the heartfelt feelings that these entail.

Chapter 12, 13: Laughing Stock + Split

Chapter 14 (Epilogue): Projects post-TT & death of Mark Hollis

