

MARK HOLLIS

OR THE ART OF FADING AWAY

FREDERICK RAPILLY



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Warning:

This edition has been translated by the publisher of the book published in France, under the title “Mark Hollis, ou l’art de l’effacement”. He is by no means a professional translator, and has translated the text from French into English, which is not his original language. There are certainly errors of meaning... But this is until the book finds an Anglo-Saxon publisher who can magnify this text.

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MARK HOLLIS
OR THE ART OF FADING AWAY
Biography



“Before you play two notes in a row, learn to play one... It’s that simple, really. And don’t play a single note unless you have a good reason to play it...”

Mark Hollis

FOREWORD

The first thing I really remember about Talk Talk was a visual and tactile sensation, a simple 4 by 2,5 inches rectangular audio cassette with grooves on the edge that I spun in my hands and was about to listen to in my teenage bedroom after slipping it into the compartment of my little radio cassette. I don't know how I managed to get my hands on the first album of the band *The Party's Over in the* early 1980s in my little remote town of Vannes, in Brittany, France... But I had managed. Perhaps I had 'borrowed' it from a cousin, or a grown-up from school? But I don't think so. They didn't listen to that kind of music. Perhaps I had discovered it in the media room of the local library? The cassette was of course a recorded copy of the record, without the cover. On a piece of bluish, or rather light grey, Canson paper,

carefully cut with a cutter, I had meticulously transferred my fine handwriting, of which I was very proud, to a felt pen. There was this song with a more or less oriental synthetic melody that I had heard somewhere and I absolutely wanted to hear it again and again. Its title: “Mirror Man”. At the time, I was discovering what was known in France as new wave in magazines like *Best* and *Rock & Folk*. These bands were Simple Minds, The Cure, Duran Duran, Depeche Mode, New Order, Ultravox, The Human League, Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark. We used to swap records in junior high, then in high school. Later on, thanks to stays in Ireland and London, I immersed myself in Siouxsie & The Banshees and The Sisters Of Mercy. I don’t really remember the emotions I felt when I listened to the album *The Party’s Over*. Probably a mixture of melancholy and energy. But I do remember that whenever I was on the decks at the teenage parties we used to have in the garages of our parents’ houses, I would manage to play “Mirror Man”. I would jump up and down on the dance floor and twist my arms to the tune, hoping that a girl would notice me. And to be (a bit) clever, I waited until the end of the night, a little after midnight, to play “The Party’s Over” as the last song. I would then start singing the lyrics in a very rough English that I could barely understand: “*The party’s over / I never thought you’d stay / The love of laughter / My truth’s no longer sane...*”

When Xavier, my editor, asked me which band I’d like to write a book about, it was 2018, and I said “Talk Talk!” I’ve always loved their music, but what fascinates me is that Mark Hollis just decided to leave music one day. I’d love to go looking for him, not necessarily to find him, to flush him out, but to follow in his footsteps and try to understand his

trajectory. He reminds me of a French famous sailor like Bernard Moitessier, who, when he was announced as the winner of the first solo round-the-world race, decided to abandon the race to continue sailing. At his own pace.

It turned out that Xavier was a fan, even more than that, a zealous follower of *Spirit Of Eden* and *Laughing Stock*, and even more so of Mark Hollis' solo album. When I started thinking about this book, he was still alive. The announcement of his death on 25 February 2019 made us wonder, but very quickly we decided to go ahead. The aim was never to meet Mark Hollis, but to tell his story, and there were no other books known (except for the splendid collective publication *Spirit Of Talk Talk*) telling this story. It was not easy. Some of Mark's fans, fearing that their hero's image would be tarnished or that his private life would be explored in too much detail, turned into defenders of a besieged citadel, but this was never the purpose of this biography, which tries to do justice to all the protagonists of this adventure. Over the months, and despite the pandemic, I was able to reach and interview bassist Paul Webb, who was releasing the third Rustin Man album, then Simon Brenner, the first member of what was to become Talk Talk, then engineer Phill Brown. Drummer Lee Harris was not very forthcoming and did not respond to our requests. Tim Friese-Green, producer of the last three Talk Talk albums and Mark's privileged collaborator, let us know that he thought he had already said everything and invited us to refer to his past interviews. Fair enough. One of the nice surprises of this book is also to have obtained the agreement of the German photographer Frank Bauer to use one of his photos on the cover, a very symbolic portrait of Mark. "I was sent on assignment by the British magazine

The Wire, he says. We agreed to meet in a small park in West London (whose name I don't remember) and I remember he didn't want me to take the picture. He had almost convinced me not to. It wasn't out of vanity or a desire for control. I think he didn't want to be the centre of attention, and he felt uncomfortable. A discomfort that was tangible and felt genuine. So, after a bit of negotiation, I got his agreement to take some shots while he talked and looked away. Normally with anyone this kind of behaviour is a problem, but with Mark Hollis it was different. He was both sincere and kind, a friendly and genuine person, and I really wanted to please him. I think this photo worked and conveyed an image more in keeping with who he was as he began to retire from the music business." The image was originally published in *The Wire* in January 1998, accompanying a lengthy interview with journalist Rob Young. It was reproduced in one of the pages of the publication *Spirit Of Talk Talk*. This book was written after listening to all five Talk Talk albums and Mark Hollis' album over and over again, not forgetting the equally exciting Rustin Man, .O.rang and Heligoland records. For my part, I confess to having a soft spot for one song that I can play over and over again: "Life's What You Make It". Like a declaration of faith in oneself.

Frederick Rapilly, 28 December 2020

“I want to write stuff that people
will still be able to listen in ten
years’ time...”

Mark Hollis (*NME*, 1982)

(ALMOST) PUNKS

Londres, 1977. City, centre of the contemporary world? Capital of the known and unknown universe? For some, yes...

That year, Queen Elizabeth II, 51, celebrated her Silver Jubilee. The anniversary of her accession to the throne twenty-five years earlier. On 7 June, a million people flocked to The Mall, the tarmac avenue leading to Buckingham Palace, to watch her ride in the royal carriage. The equivalent of half a billion viewers around the world watched the event live on television.

The same day, a few miles away, on a river called the Thames... The Sex Pistols and some of their entourage are

arrested by British cops. Not as phlegmatic as their reputation. The band tried (unsuccessfully) to play or “massacre” their hit of the moment, “God Save The Queen”, on board a boat named... *Queen Elizabeth*. Punks if you like, but first of all obliged little princes of marketing! After a few slaps handed out generously by the men in uniform, a few punches and a few bruised noses, eleven people on the cruise spent the night in prison. Banned on the BBC, the song nevertheless reached number 2 in the sales charts and became the best-selling record of the time.

That same year, largely inspired by the ambient effervescence, the recently formed Beggars Banquet label released a compilation on vinyl called *Streets*. Seventeen tracks were included. The album cover is in black and white, illustrated with a cartoon. The kind that could be drawn by a gifted high school student given a fine felt-tip pen. On this cover, thirty or so characters with animal, bird and insect faces are clustered together. A tyrannosaurus and one or two boars, unless they are warthogs, stand out. The figures pile up on top of each other, threatening to collapse at any moment to the left. It is as if this motley crew, some of whose creatures wear rocker-style dark glasses, were about to invade London. First. Then, Great-Britain... And without a doubt, that is its intention. Like that of this brand new record label launched by the owners of several record shops. The slogan in English surrounded by nine little stars at the top of the album is clear: ‘*Select Highlights From Independent British Labels*’. On the back of the sleeve is a short, anonymous manifesto, an apparent declaration of war on the *mainstream* record industry: “1977 was the year when music left the concert halls and took to the streets; the year when rock music regained its energy

and fun; the year when the boards of the majors lost control. All of a sudden, everything became possible again.”

“*Select Highlights*”: the cream of the crop. The word ‘punk’ does not appear on the cover, but the visuals, the very DIY aesthetic (*Do It Yourself*), are two strong markers that refer to the emergence of this movement. And this goes as far as the Iroquois crests and the Doc Martens boots worn by some of the characters in the drawing. There are a number of clues here and there suggesting that these seventeen bands are ready to take over from the fury unleashed by the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Damned or the equally noisy Buzzcocks. The “second wave” of a musical movement, partly aesthetic - let’s not forget that! - and above all societal, which has not yet finished shaking, or even making England, the United Kingdom and its institutions tremble. Including the British Crown. Of these seventeen contenders, some will play an essential role in the history of a certain kind of music, post-punk, rock, gothic and indie-pop. The Art Attacks, featuring Robert Gotobed, future founder of The Wire, or The Nosebleeds, a Manchester band famous for having included among its members (and not all at the same time) Vini Reilly of the future The Durutti Column, Billy Duffy, soon to be the guitarist of The Cult and Steven Morrissey, a few years before creating The Smiths with Johnny Marr. Alongside the ‘*Brits*’, there were also the French guys from The Dogs, a soon to be famous band... In France. Amongst the youth in the street, one group proudly calls itself The Reaction. Two words. Four syllables. Short, simple, effective, with that article “The” that is so fashionable across the Channel (The Stranglers, The Vibrators, The Understones, The Slits, etc.).

Their song starts directly on an energetic drum kit, and lasts barely 2 minutes and 20 seconds. High speed train before its time. As if time was running out. An absolute emergency. The guy behind the microphone gives the impression of spitting, sputtering his words. Angry! Yes! The drummer drums, the bassist is a pillar, and the guitarist flays his strings as if he doesn't give a damn about getting his fingers bloody. The song seems to be recorded in fast-forward and is called "Talk Talk Talk Talk". The man belching into his microphone is Mark Hollis. His voice, so characteristic, both tormented and already melancholic, is recognisable from the first listen. This is the first recorded trace of the man who was to become the leader of the band Talk Talk a few years later. At that time, the other members of The Reaction were George Page (guitar), Bruce Douglas (bass) and Gino P. Williams (drums). They spent 2 hours and 30 minutes in the studio. And they paid about £50, a lot of money for kids at the time, to record this song. All their savings. "We were thrilled to be in a recording studio in the limited time available, says Mark. I remember that time very well. We still had jobs. What little we earned went to sessions in tiny studios."

A few months later, in June 1978, when Britain was stunned by the news of the biggest bankruptcy in its history with the collapse of the Stern Group (£118 million gone up in smoke at the time), The Reaction released its first single. It is even shorter (2 minutes and 10 seconds). It is produced by Ed Hollis, Mark's older brother. The title of the track? "I Can't Resist". Alas, unless it's for the best, given the rest of the story, the charts and the public remain unmoved. And not just a little. Yet the song did not go completely unnoticed. In the United States, a certain George Gimarc, a prominent disc

jockey and radio programmer at the head of the weekly *Punk & New Wave* show on *KNTU*, noticed the irritated rhyme. He compares the energy of the song to the early days of bands like The Hollies and The Who. But a good review is not enough to launch a career. Not this time. After a few gigs in Leeds, Manchester and at London's Marquee, The Reaction broke up the following year to general indifference - an indifference shared by its own singer - since Mark Hollis, in his future interviews at the start of Talk Talk, would never mention his past musical experiences. Disco already reigned supreme, and after the Bee Gees' "Night Fever", it was the emollient ballad "Shadow Dancing" by the ultra-lacquered Andy Gibb that took over the airwaves in the summer of 1978. The buxom man made his way onto the television screens with the *Top Of The Pops* show on *BBC One* every Thursday night, presented by Jimmy Saville.

Does the strong-willed Mark Hollis ever imagine that one day he too will top the charts and be invited to perform on the same show in a hurry, forcing himself to fly across the Atlantic? An episode that will lead to some funny adventures. Does this thought even cross his mind? Maybe... But then again, he'd have to have television. But as The Reaction breaks up, all that seems to matter to this slightly gangly young man, five feet tall, the top of his forehead hidden by a thick fringe, is writing songs. Over and over again. Mark is 23, soon to be 24. Life goes on. Some time earlier, disappointed, he also dropped out of school. He had been vaguely studying child psychology at Sussex University for just over a year ("I thought when I decided to do it that it would be a fascinating subject to study, but most of the time it wasn't up to what I expected."). Mark then took a series of odd jobs,

including being a lab technician, which he eventually gave up as well, to get into what he was passionate about: music. Before the emergence of punk, Mark Hollis admits lucidly, “I could never have imagined getting a record deal. But with punk, it became: if you think you can play music, then you can play.”

Mark was born on 4 January 1955 in Tottenham, a district in North London. The future leader of Talk Talk doesn't talk much about his childhood and adolescence. Not much to say about it. Except that he has few friends and already spends his time singing. He has two brothers. The older one, Eddie Hollis, or rather Ed as everyone calls him, becomes his mentor. Or sort of. This older brother has a lot of nerve, good people skills and good taste, and he is in charge of Eddie and The Hot Rods, among other bands. An energetic pub rock band from Canvey Island (at the mouth of the Thames), formed in 1975. The band eventually moved to London. The 'Eddie' in the name had nothing to do with Ed Hollis, and the real Eddie had already left the band when they began to make a name for themselves by playing alternating gigs with AC/DC at the Marquee Club. In the summer of 1977, the quartet made a splash in the UK Top Ten with the half-glam, half-punk track 'Do Anything You Wanna Do', co-written and produced by Ed Hollis. Considered as protopunks or big brothers very close to the “*No Future*” movement, the members of Eddie and The Hot Rods mostly like to play loud and fast rock songs. The crests, safety pins and fans spitting on them, they leave to the Sex Pistols and other punk bands. It's not really the cup of tea of these bawling, no-frills Englishmen. Yet Joe Strummer of the Clash admits that the first time he saw the word 'punk' attached to a band, it was next

to the name Eddie and The Hot Rods. So Mark Hollis had a front row seat to the punk explosion. He enjoys it. He overcame his apparent shyness to get in touch with the musicians that his elder brother hung out with: “When the bands came to play, I managed to get to know them and talk about the backstage of the pop business. “In a black and white photo taken at Canvey Island, Mark appears, youthful, arms raised, looking playful in the middle of the band Eddie and The Hot Rods. He is standing with his brother Ed, and a dozen or so fans. As well as other musicians, such as Dr. Feelgood’s John B. Sparks and members of The Kursaal Flyers, who enjoyed the intoxicating success of reaching number 14 in the *charts* in November 1976 with the song “Little Does She Know”. Not quite anyone...

On the advice of Ed, who strongly encouraged him to do so, Mark began to listen to other styles of music. He became interested in jazz artists like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Miles Davis. But also bands that were not or no longer really appreciated by the hipsters of the time, nor by rock critics, such as King Crimson or Pink Floyd. More soaring than edgy. “Eddie listened to a phenomenal number of records, says Mark. He had an incredible collection. When I was ten years old, he started getting me to listen to stuff like Traffic, the Doors, that sort of thing, and then Pink Floyd, and one thing led to another, old blues stuff like Howlin’ Wolf. And then Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, in a “Listen to this too” kind of way and he’d play me Carl Orff and Shostakovich. Pretty intense guys. I followed that path.” Mark also participated in a recording supervised by his brother for Beggars Banquet. He can be heard, or rather guessed, in the backing vocals of “The Golden Years”, a very honest orchestral pop single released

in February 1979, recorded by an artist known as Johnny G., with Steve Lillywhite, future producer of Ultravox, Big Country, Psychedelic Furs and The Rolling Stones, on bass. A record distributed in a brochure, entitled *The New Singles*, but which went unnoticed. While Talk Talk was not yet a record, not even a draft, the band's first keyboardist, Simon Brenner, recalled long moments spent in the flat Mark shared with his then-girlfriend, Flick (Felicity Mary Costello, who would become his wife and the mother of their children). The location is in North London, in Muswell Hill. The area where The Kinks originated. Concentrated and passionate, the two young men listened to albums at length to spot sequences that interested them and to dissect them. A drum solo, a piano motif, a guitar riff: "We listened to Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* as well as reggae stuff with Bob Marley & The Wailers." Since *The Reaction*, which has only released one single, Mark still has an outstanding contract signed as an artist with Island. He met Simon, a tall, cute brunet with a studied haircut, in a record shop where he works. The boy was in a small band called The Hubber Parker Band. He has a Wurlitzer piano, characteristic of the Supertramp sound, and a Jazz Chorus amp. The duo hit it off, and decided to work on Mark's early material. "Clearly, we had in mind to do something together, Simon recalls. At least that's how I saw it. It was the beginning of a band... I don't think, or at least I don't remember Mark ever talking to me about going solo. "They rehearse in a studio, a large windowless room, which usually hosts Bob Marley & The Wailers or a group that will soon have its moment of glory: The Dexys Midnight Runners. Motivated but musically limited, Mark and Simon soon realised that they needed help to get their ideas off the ground. This time, it was Ed Hollis who told them about two very

young but solid musicians he had spotted during a recording session: Paul Webb and Lee Harris. These kids are barely 19 years old. The first is a bass player, the second a drummer. And they play in a reggae band called Eskalator. For the first meeting between the two duos, Paul and Lee's dads act as chaperones. They even set up their sons' drum kit and amps. The rehearsal goes well. The boys do the trick. "In my memory, says Simon, they were very quiet and really shy. But above all they were very quiet. Right away, though, something happened... "At the time, there was still talk of working together to record Mark's songs, but as the sessions progressed, a subtle chemistry developed between the four musicians who began to improvise. Whose idea was it? Mark? Or Simon? Anyway... So they turn off the lights, find their feet in the dark and jam for hours, jazz-style." When we started working on these demos, Mark told *NME* magazine in 1982, we had no intention of forming a band. I really saw it as a thing to be published, but after a few days it was clear that it worked because we were a band. It's not like we were stuck together by a management company. "It took Mark less than a week to realise this, to come to terms with it, and above all to announce to the other three, who had become his acolytes: 'We are a band'". And the band's name is Talk Talk? No, not quite. The foursome called themselves, for a short time, by a rather enigmatic name: 300 Cubs.

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