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LARRY SPARKS

"40"

Rebel

Larry Sparks landed his first professional job as a guitarist for the Stanley Brothers in 1964; when Carter Stanley died in 1966, Sparks became lead singer for Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys, and by 1969, Sparks was leading his own band, the Lonesome Ramblers. Like Del McCoury (who served a similar apprenticeship with Bill Monroe) and J.D. Crowe (who did the same with Jimmy Martin), Sparks became a major figure of bluegrass music's second generation, a brilliant tenor with a bluesy edge. Yet he never got the same recognition as his peers.

To rectify that situation, Sparks last year recorded an album called "40" to mark his 40th anniversary in the bluegrass business. Much like "Saturday Night/Sunday Morning," Ralph Stanley's 1995 album of collaborations with various guest stars, "40" showcases Sparks with country-music stars such as Tom T. Hall, Rebecca Lynn Howard and the Whites, and with bluegrass stars such as Stanley, Paul Williams, Russell Moore, the Isaacs and the Marshall Family.

Alison Krauss and Dan Tyminski help Sparks reprise his biggest hit, "John Deere Tractor" (later covered by the Judds), and Vince Gill re-creates the close "brother" harmonies on the hard-swinging "Blues Stay Away From Me." But the album also features such terrific new songs as Marshal

Warwick's "1-800-DO-U-CARE" (a hard-country duet with Rhonda Vincent) and Carl Jackson's "Georgia Peaches" (a bluesy mountain duet with Andy Griggs), proving that Sparks is looking ahead at least as much as he is looking back.

Unlike most tribute albums, "40" maintains a consistency of sound because every track (except the instrumental "Carter's Blues") is dominated by Sparks's lead vocal, his guitar and a band that features such past and present Lonesome Ramblers as Ricky Skaggs, Stuart Duncan and son Larry D. Sparks. Producer Don Rigsby, himself a major third-generation star, keeps everything firmly in the Sparks style.

--*Geoffrey Himes*