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Mark Hollis, Leader of '80s Band Talk Talk, Is Dead

Mark Hollis of Talk Talk in 1986. The success of the group's second album, "It's My Life," gave Mr. Hollis and the rest of the band free rein to experiment.

Rob Verhorst/Redferns, via Getty Images

By [Daniel E. Slotnik](#)

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Mark Hollis, the frontman for the British band Talk Talk, which had synth-pop hits in the early 1980s before veering into a more experimental sound that influenced a generation of musicians, has died.

Mr. Hollis, about whom personal details are scarce, was widely reported to have been 64.

A [Facebook page](#) devoted to the group confirmed the death, citing Keith Aspden, Mr. Hollis's former manager, but provided no further details.

Talk Talk was formed in London in 1981, when new wave and synth-pop groups like A Flock of Seagulls and Duran Duran were beginning to receive heavy airplay. Talk Talk's biggest hits, among them "[It's My Life](#)" and "[Such a Shame](#)," were typical of the style: buoyant songs built on catchy, danceable beats and Mr. Hollis's plaintive lyrics.

The band at first consisted of Mr. Hollis on vocals, guitar and piano, Lee Harris on drums, Paul Webb on bass and Simon Brenner on keyboards. Mr. Brenner left after the group released its first album, "The Party's Over," on EMI in 1982, and Tim Friese-Greene became the band's producer and unofficial fourth member.

Talk Talk toured with Duran Duran and broadened its American audience with videos on MTV. But its songs never quite attained the mainstream popularity of other synth-pop groups. "It's My Life," the group's highest-charting single in America, peaked at No. 31 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1984.

The success of the album, also titled "It's My Life," that featured that song gave Talk Talk free rein to experiment.

On its next albums, "[The Colour of Spring](#)" (1986) and "[Spirit of Eden](#)" (1988), the band drifted away from synth-pop into music that defied easy description. The languid songs on "Spirit of Eden" included elements of free jazz, blues, contemporary classical, industrial and ambient music as well as rock, with Mr. Hollis's quavering vocals floating over it all. Later critics hailed the album as a precursor of post-rock, which became widespread in the 1990s.

In a [video interview](#), Mr. Hollis said of "Spirit of Eden": "Everyone who comes and plays on this album is given absolute freedom, has no direction at all in

what they play.” He added, “And then you assemble an arrangement from that so you end up with something which is very tightly constrained.”

The new sound was groundbreaking, and some critics were enthusiastic about it, but it was far from the marketable pop that EMI wanted, and the label eventually dropped the band. Talk Talk released another album, “[Laughing Stock](#)” (1991), on Polydor, then disbanded.

Mr. Hollis largely receded from view after that. His last album was “[Mark Hollis](#)” (1998), an intimate, mostly acoustic offering that ended with nearly two minutes of silence.

Nigel Reeve, a record executive and friend of Mr. Hollis’s, told [The Guardian in 2012](#) that Mr. Hollis had no regrets about walking away from his rock star life. “In all the conversations I have with him, he says: ‘I did it. Full stop.’ He got to where he wanted to go,” Mr. Reeve said.

Talk Talk’s influence outlasted the band: Aspects of its sound are echoed in music by groups like Radiohead and Sigur Rós. No Doubt reached No. 5 on the Billboard chart in 2004 with a cover of “[It’s My Life](#),” and Sean Carey of the popular indie group Bon Iver described Mr. Hollis as “a hero of ours.”

Mr. Hollis said little about his past, but the [music website Pitchfork](#) and other outlets reported that he was born in London in 1955. No information about his survivors was available.

By most accounts he studied to become a child psychologist, then worked as a laboratory technician. His brother Ed, a disc jockey who managed punk groups, helped Mark get the attention of record labels after Mark formed a short-lived band called the Reaction in the 1970s.

The group broke up when Mr. Hollis met the musicians who would join him as Talk Talk.

Correction: Feb. 28, 2019

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of a picture caption with this obituary referred incorrectly to Talk Talk’s album “It’s My Life.” It was the group’s second album, not its first.

Jack Begg contributed research.

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