

*"I lay down in the grass
and let the insects do their thing
on me."*

- 'Sunshine', *Good Morning Spider*

(THE MAN WHO DREAMT FOR LIGHTYEARS IN THE BELLY OF A MOUNTAIN)

Sparklehorse

fig. 17

A Tale by S. Gabriel "Gus" Gay | Photography by Tim Saccenti | Layout by sctas

Before we even begin to discuss Mark Linkous' decade-plus career as Sparklehorse, I apologize in advance for his 2 day press outing. "Oh, it's all part of the job," Mark calmly replies, "I'm sure there are some critics out there who just can't wait to rag on Sparklehorse". Mister Linkous is in New York City at the beginning of a crippling heat wave in late July to inform the willing of his anticipated new LP, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*. An album five years in the making, it features collaborations from previous contributor Tom Waits, Mark's own siblings (brother Matt & Linkous' sister-in-law) and a new set of dexterous hands belonging to one Brian Burton - or, to the masses - Danger Mouse.

Fear not keepers of the Painbird Society - *Dreamt For Light Years* is as much a Sparklehorse album as our waiting and wanting minds could ever, well, dream of receiving.

Did you ever hear the one about the man who was never fit to be bothered by suit and tie execs looking for that "radio hit", and made the personal step down from a major label [Capitol] to their more spirited summer home [Astralwerks]? *This is it*. When an artist with Linkous' creative capacity has a clear vision and optimistically cultivates it to keep his integrity intact, we should all be thankful. ["I don't like work--no man does, but I like what is in the work, the chance to find yourself."

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.]

One of the many great things about Mark Linkous' Sparklehorse is that his introduction to us ["Homecoming Queen", *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, Capitol - 1995] - in just over the opening minute - quotes Shakespeare [*King Richard III*], speaks of horses and burns up a batch of sparklers to prevent their decay. At that very moment, an eternal relationship between the listener and Sparklehorse is kindled - and Linkous has always lived up to his imaginative first impression.

*"dreamed I was born on a mountain on the Moon,
where nothing grows or ever rots.
I dreamed that I had me a daughter
who was magnificent as a horse."*

fig. 19

- 'Comfort Me', *It's A Wonderful Life*

So very nice to meet you too, Sir. May we hear some more...

1998 saw the second long player from Sparklehorse in *Good Morning Spider* – an album that held secrets to the lives of insects, the night sky, kamikaze hummingbirds, hundreds of sparrows and, fittingly, horses. This was the defining album of survival Linkous admits was his “most accomplished” outing to date. Recorded almost entirely by Mark at his home in Virginia, *GMS* found Linkous at the dawn of a new life.

2001 ushered in the release of Sparklehorse’s third proper LP, *It’s A Wonderful Life*. With this masterpiece, Linkous and his friends [joined by Tom Waits & Nina Persson, amongst others] introduced a ghost of the sky, the king of nails, witches returning to their sticky tree knots and a sea of teeth. *Wonderful Life* secured a top spot in *Mojo*’s Top Album’s list for 2001, where they – along with many of us – deemed the album “sensational”.

*“There will come a time gigantic
waves will crush the junk that I have saved
when the moon explodes or floats away
I’ll lose the souvenirs I made.”*

“Sunshine”, Good Morning Spider

Over the next five years, Linkous would offer his skilled hands in producing a number of projects including Nina Persson’s *A CAMP* & a tribute to Daniel Johnston where the Flaming Lips joined Linkous to reconstruct Johnston’s “Go”. Los Angeles would also have a walk-on role for Mark and his songwriting, as 2003’s *Laurel Canyon* featured renditions of the classic “Someday I Will Treat You Good” [from 1995’s *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*] and the previously unreleased song “Shade & Honey” [a standout on *Dreamt For Light Years*]. “I’ve never seen the movie”, adds Mark. “I just happened to be in LA and they asked me to come down to the set. I was really interested in meeting Frances McDormand and giving her a Sparklehorse cd so that I could say there was an album of mine in the Coen’s house. And when I went down there and met her to give her a cd, they just put me in the scene – totally unexpected”.

fig. 9

*“Will my pony recognize my voice
in Hell?
Will he still be blind,
or do they go by smell?”*

“More Yellow Birds”, It’s A Wonderful Life

Linkous also brings mention to events that redirected each of our lives: September 11th, 2001. “After *It’s A Wonderful Life* was released, then 9/11 happened and all the shit with the Bush administration – I just thought that music seemed futile - just really insignificant. I lost a lot of motivation, and got really depressed for a long time, which is why I guess it took so long to make this album. I just didn’t work for a long time”.



- Linkous, masked, in the studio.

fig. 15

Linkous now resides atop a mountain in the dense Southern Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina with his wife Theresa. This location, home of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, encompasses over 800 square miles and remains ninety-five percent naturally forested. This, in part, influenced much of the content on the appropriately named *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*. "We lived on this 200-year old plantation in Virginia. There was so much clearcutting in that area - and droughts. One of the trade offs about North Carolina is that it hasn't been populated as much as Virginia has - there's a lot of wild land with the National Forest." *Dreamt* becomes the debut release for Mark on Astralwerks, a subsidiary of Capitol Records - home to each of the three US releases thus far. For fans, this looks like an unconventional shift for an artist as appreciated as Linkous. "It was a very amicable move. I think everyone just realized it was best for Sparklehorse this time around. I like so many of the other bands on the label. [Capitol] have been pretty good to me as far as leaving me alone to, basically, do what I do."

What Mark "does" is purely a technique he can call his own. From the gasoline horseys who took us away on *Vivadixie*, the painbirds of *Good Morning Spider* through to that big old bear (born with honey in his hair) on *Dreamt For Light Years*, each release brings tales of the greenest lands, the thickest of woodlands and the sacred stories of survival whispered throughout.

"It happens with every record. I'm not aware of it as a substantial theme on the things I record", Mark adds. "But the move from Virginia down here to North Carolina - this area is just so beautiful and mountainous. It would rain and the sun would come out and you can just smell the Earth. There are creeks and rivers everywhere. We live on top of this mountain and it's so high your ears start popping halfway up. There's bears up there - I got trapped in the house one day by a bear. My dog's been bitten twice by rattlesnakes". Yes - the dog survived. This is, after all, a *wonderful* life.

Throughout my half hour talk with Mark, he seemed somewhat careful of the words he chose when replying to my childlike questions. Between the moments of contemplative silence, he was most candid when speaking of his environment or trying to remember the name of the band responsible for "Hang on Loosely" [later pegged as .38 Special]. There is undoubtedly a veil of mystery (some may call it a casual darkness) masking the man responsible for many of our favorite anthems. Like a solitary creature compelled to keeping the steadily shrinking forests nurtured and lush, it seems that Linkous would much rather burrow into the confines of his mountainous home, creating the sweetest music ever heard, as opposed to answering the call of these beasts known as "man".



THE GOLDHEART MOUNTAINTOP QUEEN DIRECTORY

A FIELD GUIDE TO SPARKLEHORSE



Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot, Capitol [1995] : *"As slow and quiet as decomposing buzzards, or as loud and energized as a backfiring Bugatti"*. That's what *NME* had to say about Mark's debut album whose thirty-four letter title seemed to hint at a nod to Tom Wait's 1983 album *Swordfishtrombone* [more clues lie far beneath the title alone]. *Viva* begins with "Homecoming Queen", one of the finest moments in the Sparklehorse catalog and still a perfect choice for live performance closer. Certainly a magnificent view into the somber land of Sparklehorse ["Spirit Ditch", "Sad & Beautiful World"], Linkous also got his marvelous invention off the ground with radio-safe anthems like "Someday I Will Treat You Good" and "Rainmaker". *Hint at greatness*: "We were both standing in your mother's living room sweating up a storm in that terrible month of June and the sweat rolled down your cheek and into your mouth" - 'Most Beautiful Widow In Town'



Good Morning Spider, Capitol [1998] : Pure sonic gold. Distant radio static picking fights with a wurlitzer, a weeping Epiphone and a drum machine - and they each take honors. "Saint Mary" would be Linkous' personal view of his homesick hospital stay in London stay after his deadly mixture of painkillers, sedatives and alcohol. Again, there was room for stomping on *GMS*, and "Pig" along with "Cruel Sun" sang the album electric. In what was shaping up to be defining Sparklehorse fashion, when the tempo did drop - you were tempted to climb into the hole with it. "Painbirds", "Sunshine" and the aforementioned "Saint Mary" each did their best at luring the listener into the dense thicket of Linkous' waking dream state. *Hint at greatness*: "in the bloody elevator going to the bright theater now come on boys please let me taste the clean dirt in my lungs and moss on my back" - 'Saint Mary'

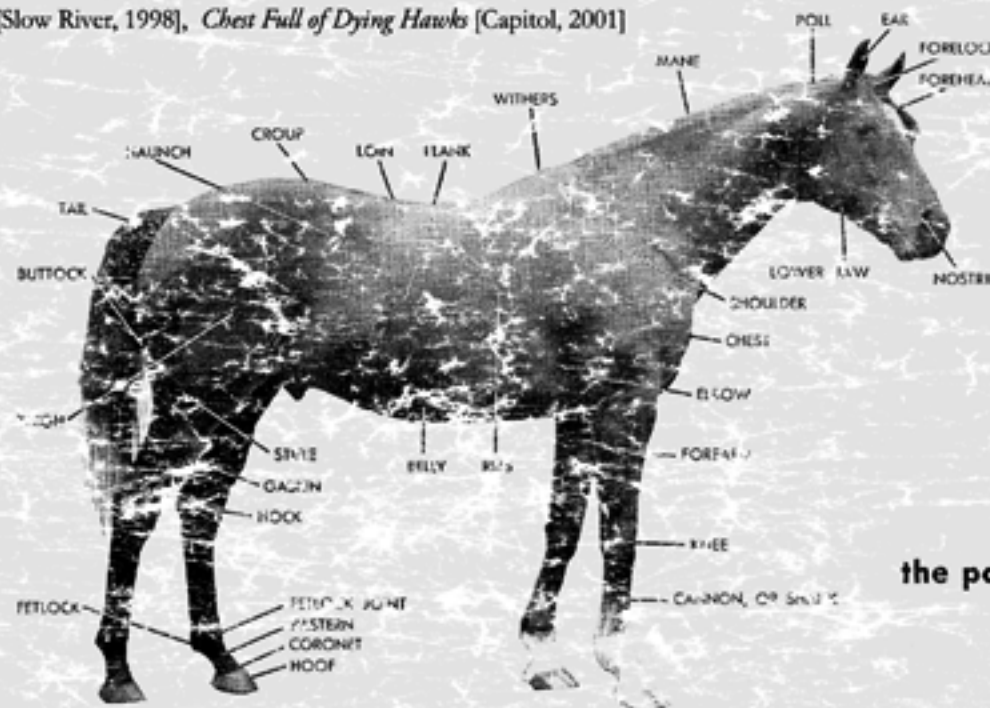


It's A Wonderful Life, Capitol [2001] : After playing "nearly everything" on *Good Morning Spider*, Linkous decided to enlist a few notable friends in the music community to help with his third LP. Joined by Tom Waits, Nina Persson & Polly Jean Harvey, *It's A Wonderful Life* did satisfy a favorable number of fans - selling almost 150,000 copies outside of North America alone. The classic theme of nature and her wildlife was as abundant as ever on *Wonderful Life* - as crows, wolves, birds, dogs and roosters each received a leading role throughout. Imagery was never something Linkous was running dry on, and with lines like "can you taste the crush of a sunset's dying blush?" we could all retire in honest arms. *Hint at greatness*: "I will return here one day and dig up my bones from the clay. I buried nails and strings and hair and that old tooth I believe was a bear's" - 'Eye Pennies'



Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain, Astralwerks [2006] : Eleven years in and Linkous' sparsely-oiled machine can still transport the working man's psyche to much higher places. Previously featured works like "Shade and Honey" [from the motion picture *Laurel Canyon*] and "Morning Hollow" [a bonus track on *It's A Wonderful Life*] get their welcome addition on an official release, as newly penned material [the gorgeous "Return To Me" and Danger Mouse-produced "Getting It Wrong"] show the Sparklehorse method of songwriting is well in place. *Proof of greatness*: Every second of *Dreamt*. This gentle man has a skill none can match, though many have made disheartening attempts at scaling the terrain. Should there still be a whisper of doubt in any listener's mind - I would say that grey area may be blocked from the fruits Sparklehorse generously offers.

Extra Mile: *Chords I've Known* [Slow River, 1998], *Chest Full of Dying Hawks* [Capitol, 2001]



the parts of a horse