

Mark Linkous lives in the clouds, high above a valley filled with rattlesnakes and old American pickup trucks. Coffee cup in hand, he sits on the porch with his black-and-tan coonhound, staring out at the leafy green topography that extends far into the distance. His home, like others that dot the ridges of North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains, is tucked in neatly among patches of honeysuckle, bee balm, and black-eyed Susan. When the wind is high, the clouds speed through the hollow below like rolling waves of grayish blue cotton.

Here, his thoughts drift to memories past—some good, some not. Late nights hunting for heroin in downtown Los Angeles, or scuffing the streets of Little Italy with a lemon ice in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other, one of his favorite things to do in the whole wide world. Then came 9/11, and his days were spent simply waiting for night to come. Weeks turned into months, months turned into years. Linkous worked on a few things here and there—records with Daniel Johnston, the Cardigans' Nina Persson, and Austrian laptop alchemist Chris Fennesz—but he produced nothing under the Sparklehorse name. His withdrawal toed the line between intrigue and obsolescence.

"There's a big difference between solitude and loneliness," he admits. "When I lived in Los Angeles, I thought it was the loneliest place in the world, but solitude can be a good thing. I know of the last five years, three were spent in the depths of a fucking vortex of depression. There's nothing good about that."

Tuning out can be easy—and very necessary—for some, but it often comes at a price. When you forget about the world, sooner or later you begin to wonder whether or not the world has forgotten about you.

Mark Linkous comes from a long line of Southwestern Virginia deep miners. Up until three years ago, his father still hauled coal. As a teenager, Linkous rode his dirtbike out to strip-mining jobs on the mountain. When he was done, he'd walk alone in the woods for hours. He didn't have an affinity for hillbilly life, nor did he have any rock-'n'-roll aspirations. *The Johnny Cash Show* changed all that. Cash's dark, magnetic intrigue took Linkous' imagination farther than any motorcycle could, and unlocked a world of charm, defiance, melancholy, and romance.

The first Sparklehorse record, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, was released in the United States in August of 1995. Recorded in a rented farmhouse in Brems Bluff, Virginia, *Vivadixie* was a shadow box of front-porch ballads and rusted rock that referenced Shakespeare and Neil Young with equal eloquence. Linkous was a backwoods E. E. Cummings, whose poetry flowed sweet and thick like sorghum. The album was a critical success despite its soft sales, and Radiohead invited Sparklehorse to support them on the European leg of their OK Computer tour. It was an appropriate pairing and one of many keen musical endorsements that Radiohead would come to make. The tour, however, was short-lived.

Soon after arriving in London, Linkous suffered a serious accident. A mix of prescription antidepressants, Valium, and booze caused him to pass out with his legs bent beneath his body for fourteen hours. When the paramedics arrived and straightened him out, a lethal buildup of potassium traveled straight to his heart, sending him into cardiac arrest. He was lifeless for two minutes before the medics revived him. The ramifications were severe, and he'll wear a brace around his ankle for the rest of his life. It's a miracle he can walk at all.

After three months in the hospital and multiple surgeries, Linkous, in various stages of physical and mental disrepair, started performing again. The music began to polarize. His voice—delicate and whimsical one minute, dirty and clamorous the next—was weighted down with heartache and yearning. *Good Morning Spider* was a gilded scrap heap of tape loops and sonic confessionals. It's Sparklehorse's most sublime work, and it's incredibly hard to listen to. "He don't get out much these days, but I wouldn't call him lazy," sings Linkous on "Ghost of His Smile." You can hear his smirk through the speakers. *It's A Wonderful Life*, a much more polished record, was the last he released before gradually descending into his vortex in the fall of 2001. His signal began to fade, but people were still tuned into the transmission. >

SPARKLEHORSE

MARK LINKOUS BEAMS HIS COUNTRY GRAMMAR TRANSMISSION FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP.

From the notorious success of *The Grey Album* and his work with Gorillaz to the irresistible appeal of Gnarl Barkley, Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton is music's most mercurial figure of the last three years. Burton's boundless creativity and ability to subtly inoculate the pop medium with a subversive mixture of brooding samples and uptempo rhythms—especially on *Demon Days* tracks like "Dirty Harry" and "DARE"—was something Linkous admired. When Linkous invited him up to the mountains to record, Burton happily obliged.

"I really wanted to make a pop record that sounded as wicked and informed by electronic stuff as *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, but have really great choruses and really strong pop songs," says Linkous of his latest album, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. Burton sifted through the multi-track recordings, pulling choruses from one song and riffs from another, twisting them together and reinserting them—backward—into another track. .

"Like Jimi Hendrix on a laptop," he laughs. "It just amazed me."

Burton coproduced a third of the music on *Light Years*, but every song is unmistakably Sparklehorse. Static clings to his Beatles-esque melodies on the upbeat "Don't Take My Sunshine Away," while the evening recession "Morning Hollow" flickers with harmoniums and vibraphones like a candlelight fighting to stay aflame. The familiar imagery remains—insects, ghosts, stonewashed Americana—but the morose undertones have faded. For the first time in a long time, there's light at the end of the tunnel.

"*Magnetic waves gave birth / I was the one who loved you most / But you can't put your arms around a ghost,*" he sings on "Some Sweet Day," in a proud statement of survival. The sentiment continues on "Mountains," when Linkous murmurs, "*I know your hearts are heavy as mountains, but we're going to go back home one day.*" Despite his crushing losses, he is a man who has tapped a new well of self-preservation and creativity. The ten-minute instrumental title track, heavily influenced by Gavin Bryars' 1971 masterpiece "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet," closes out the album with a reverent, hypnotic refrain.

"I've always been drawn to the sound that I imagine satellites might make," says Linkous, his voice trailing off. "It's also reminiscent of the sound of the morphine pump when I was in the hospital. When the little beep went off, I could press the button and get more morphine."

Those thoughts will never be far from recollection, and new memories—some good, some not—have a habit of forming. He has sordid nightmares about his good friend Bryan Harvey, of the band House of Freaks, who was murdered, along with his wife and two daughters, in the basement of their home in Richmond, Virginia, last New Year's Day. Linkous still erases his unused multi-tracks for fear that one day, long after he's left this world, someone will want to put his unfinished business on display for the general population. Now Linkous is ready to tour again, and he'll most likely find out that no one's forgotten about him.

"I'm really looking forward to it," he admits. "I'm also anticipating it with terror. I'm trying to break a habit I've had for a long time when I've gone on tour. In order for me to not lose it and come unglued, I'd have to block out the applause, and I think I missed a lot over the years. I just want it to make me feel good." X





