

SPIDERS FROM

SPARKLEHORSE's Mark Linkous died for his art. Literally. But now he's cheered up (nearly) and bringing his glitter-loving noise to these shores once again

MEMORIES

Web Write: JENNIFER NINE
Spiderwoman: LILI WILDE

THE first thing you notice about Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous as he walks across the hotel lobby is just that: he's walking. In fact, he's hardly limping.

And if your last good look at the boy from Brenig Bluff, Virginia, was a few years back, you'd be as pleased by this turn of events as you will be when you hear the huge, masterful "Good Morning Spider", the beautiful/ugly intensity of which makes it Sparklehorse's "OK Computer" to its predecessor's "The Bends". From a venomously nightmarish, guitar-squalling "Pig", to the lovingly hymnal "Hundreds Of Sparrows", it's a wonder-filled, life-affirming world of rabbits and junebugs and stars, guitars and sparkling keyboards, and it's ace.

Meanwhile, it's hard not to stare at Linkous, remembering how, in the wake of the band's 1996 debut "Vivadixiesubmarine-transmissionplot" and the start of a mutual-admiration friendship with Radiohead, bad things rained down. A freak, jet-lagged accident left the Sparklehorse singer/guitarist clinically dead for two minutes and wheelchair-bound for six months. Defiantly still touring, the Linkous of two years ago had a drawn, thin face, hidden under a cowboy hat and sunglasses. Propped up onstage in a chair, he looked as weary as the very weariest of his own hallucinatory country-pop masterpieces.

THIS morning, he looks like a different man: a much-needed stone heavier, younger, and smiling. Earlier, he lay sprawled on a bed covered with symbolic detritus from "Good Morning Spider" — flowers, a bible, a doll, assorted bugs and a dead rabbit. And now, nursing a hangover after a night enjoying Idlewild and escaping Gomez in "the grumpy old geezer section" at the Shepherd's Bush Empire — "I asked my manager if it would be really *rude* to run up and smash one of Gomez's guitars," Mark jokes — he looks healthier than most musicians at 10am.

And more optimistic, especially given that the very first review "Good Morning Spider" received was a thumbs down. When the band sent off the album to Parlophone, the CD plant's quality control department rang to say there was something terribly wrong with the master tape. It sounded, well, *weird*.

Linkous laughs out loud as he tells the story. "Yeah, they said it was defective. We got a big kick out of that!"

Quality control boffins aside, even a casual listen to Sparklehorse suggests that sonic weirdness, or "f***ed-up pop" as a concept, is what they do. And not just musically, either. From the hallucinatory "St Mary", written for a nurse who looked after him in hospital, to the skewed, despairing cries of "The Chaos Of The Galaxy", Linkous the lyricist doesn't blink at ugliness.

"I've always been afraid any critical attention I get is because of my misfortune," Mark confesses, forgetting that "Viva..." was warmly received months before he was hospitalised. "Somebody wrote that I had a history that Nick Cave would die to have..."

"Of course everybody has morbid curiosity, so do I. Like the times I've turned people onto Daniel Johnston," he illustrates, referring to the idiosyncratic Austin singer-songwriter whose "Hey Joe" Sparklehorse cover on "Good Morning Spider". "And I have to be conscious of not blurring out that he's in a mental institution — 'Yeah, he sets cops on fire.' Or if I tell someone about Vic Chesnutt

"Somebody wrote that I had a history that Nick Cave would die to have" — Mark Linkous

IREM-championed Athens folkie), of not saying, 'Yeah, he's in a wheelchair, he's a paraplegic.'

"Vic was so supportive," he adds. "When I was in the hospital he'd call and say, you know, I know things suck. When I got home, I looked at all the cards and letters sent to me in hospital, because I didn't really remember any of them. And I read Vic's, which he wrote to Teresa [Linkous' wife]. And he was so honest and blunt, he said: 'It's gonna be awful, he's gonna hate it, he's going to be screaming and ripping his tubes out, but he'll get over it.' Sometimes, I feel guilty because I'm pretty much better, you know, I'm walking again and he's not. And he never will..."

His voice trails off quietly. "And yeah, I do sometimes feel that I give too much away in interviews. And it seems like a lot of press, if you've ever talked about drug problems in the past, whenever you see the blurb, it's always something like 'He breathes pain fumes out of a bag!...' He laughs again, a little sadly. "And I'm scared of kids reading anything about that, and thinking if they liked Sparklehorse, they'd have to delve into that kind of shit themselves."

"Anyway, there's a lot of things that I can't articulate to *anybody*, even Teresa," he continues. "I don't know why, but sometimes I wonder if I keep so much bottled up so that I have ammunition to do this [songwriting], so that I have the resources for this, and so she doesn't get a lot of what I should be saying to her."

"But I can say it with a guitar, put it into a song, and be way more eloquent than I can talking to anyone."

THE end results — "Pig", for instance, with its "I want to be a shiny new baby with a spongy brain," — can be pretty strong, but not very pretty stuff.

"Yeah, but that's the way I feel. As a songwriter, you try to turn those ugly feelings into something positive, try and make it relevant to other people," he insists, unblinking.

It's hard not to draw comparisons to Thom Yorke.

Linkous makes a modestly doubtful noise. "His lyrics are so beautiful and genuinely... I don't even know the word for it. But that's all part of life: some of it's disturbing. And it takes a lot to try to find the pretty things in the ugliness."

"You know," he adds suddenly, "I think a lot of people think Thom is ugly. You know, his eye is kinda odd, and his face can look a bit scrunched up. It's weird. Our favourite part of the human body is the eyes, because you can see through them what's in the person, and even in the one eye you can see of Thom's, you can tell he's beautiful."

"A lot of times I worry that I use all this stuff to create an occupation out of it."

Mark: he's rabbit mad...

Not that I'm being melodramatic or insincere, but that I'm using what's inside me to make a living at it, make a business out of it. I worry that people think, 'I wish he'd just stop bellyaching.' Which is where 'Pig' came from, about wishing I could be one of those simple people who just go to work and come home and watch TV and be content."

STILL, many lyricists have bellyached much more with substantially less cause.

When you were in a wheelchair, did you wonder if you were ever going to get better? Mark Linkous downs his final cup of coffee in one gulp. "Nah, I just wanted to be able to ride a motorcycle again. That's really what I was scared of."

You must be ready for another spin by now. "Oh yeah," he laughs. "Actually, I was back out riding a motorcycle when I was still in a wheelchair..."

Just follow the sound of revving engines. Mark Linkous is already sitting on all the horsepower he needs.

Double A-sided single 'Painbirds'/Maria's Little Elbows' is out now on Parlophone. 'Good Morning Spider' follows on July 20

WILD HORSES

Sparklehorse and Mark Linkous rarities worth lassoing:

DANCING HOODS:

"12 Jealous Roses" and "Hallelujah Anyway" (Relativity, 1985 and 1988) Hard-to-find albums by Linkous' first band.

SUSANNAH HOPFS:

"Susannah Hopfs" (Polygram, 1996) Mark Linkous contributes guitar, banjo and three co-written songs to poutsome ex-Bangle's solo LP.

SPARKLEHORSE:

"Chords I've Known" (Capitol/Slow River, 1996) Must-have five-track import includes hallucinatory, hilarious "Dead Opera Star": ("There is a dead opera star floating in the great dismal swamp/And he was wearing a dress with watermelons in it/And he stuffed his bra with Spanish moss")

VARIOUS ARTISTS:

"Sweet Relief II: The Gravity Of The Situation" (Sony, 1996) Charity album for Victoria Williams, of cover songs written by Vic Chesnutt. Sparklehorse do up "West Of Rome" in fine style.

VARIOUS ARTISTS:

"Come Again" (EMI, 1997) Includes now-famous collaboration between Sparklehorse and Thom Yorke on Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here".