



Out of the woods...

ON LOCATION Leaving the wilds of Virginia, Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous has made the album of his career. Keith Cameron met him down on the farm. Picture: Danny Clinch.

BEHIND AN 1850s VIRGINIA FARMHOUSE SITS STATIC King, the recording studio where Mark Linkous made the first two Sparklehorse albums. We are not looking at the most luxurious facility in the world. In fact, it's by no means unfair to say Static King is a small wooden shack that's been filled with recording equipment. Until quite recently, it was also home to a spider.

"How big? *Real* big," Mark nods gravely, holding up his palm by way of illustration. "Poisonous too, I think." After several days' vain quest, Mark eventually cornered his eight-legged adversary and set it free deep in the woods. End of story, he thought. One week later, Static King resounded to the patter of myriad baby arachnid feet. Mark Linkous had himself a serious infestation problem.

"Well," chuckles Mark, "I could hardly ask Polly and Nina to come out here and risk getting spider-bitten. Even I don't like spiders too much."

So it was that Mark Linkous went to Polly Jean Harvey and Nina Persson, in Barcelona and New York respectively, to record their vocal contributions to *It's A Wonderful Life*, the new Sparklehorse album, and the first to be made beyond his Virginia backyard. Officially, Mark lives in Dillwyn, a dusty 'town' one hour's drive west of Richmond, the state capital, that barely registers more than a pin-prick on even the most detailed maps of the USA.

In actual fact, he lives miles from Dillwyn, at the end of a long wooded drive, surrounded by fauna and flora of many exotic stripes, shapes and sounds. At the Sparklehorse homestead we also meet four dogs, two cats, two horses and Teresa, Mark's wife. Oh, and we should not forget the toad with whom Mark's collection of motorcycles share the garage.

"And this is a metropolis compared to where I'm from and where Teresa's from. It's *down* there. Yeah, people come here and say how quiet it is. I'm just used to it. If you equate it with music, I think with things being this quiet, other things seem more apparent."

In spite of an episodic gestation process at various locations and involving outside collaborators, *It's A Wonderful Life* is actually the least schizophrenic, most cohesive album Linkous has made, rife with the sensual bucolic mysticism redolent of friends and kindred spirits Granddaddy and Mercury Rev.

"There's a sense of peacefulness in the content," agrees Mark, nursing a White Russian on the porch, as the family of frogs in his swimming pool chorus merrily to the star-strewn midnight sky.

"I was talking to Jason [Lyde, Granddaddy] about how recording's our jobs, and just how much pleasure it was to maybe sit on the porch and play guitar and have the sound reverberate, go off into wherever, and eventually evaporate. Beautiful. Just not have any expectations. I was trying to get back to that again."

In the pines, Mark Linkous suffers for the photographers art.