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LIVE

Sparklehorse Shine In Concert

Singer/songwriter Mark Linkous took eclectic rock band from whisper to screech at packed Great American Music Hall show.

Senior Writer Gil Kaufman reports:

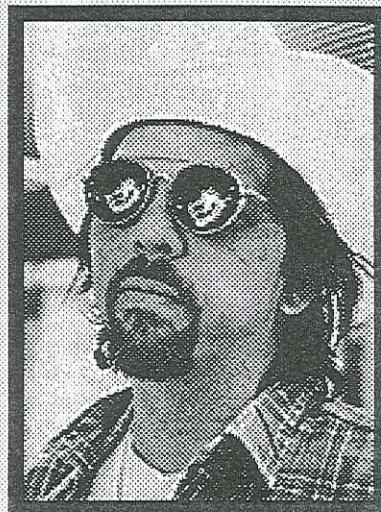
SAN FRANCISCO -- Rock audiences are not generally known for their calm reserve. But it was restraint, not raucousness, that moved Sparklehorse leader Mark Linkous to praise his fans during the eclectic band's Saturday night show here at the Great American Music Hall.

Near the end of the 70-minute set, the rangy Sparklehorse singer/songwriter had given the reverent patrons in the packed club a choice between the spare, haunting ballad "Saint Mary" and the turbulent, punk-rock tune "Pig" (RealAudio excerpt).

"[When I started out,] I just didn't really want people to hear me sing." -- Mark Linkous, Sparklehorse leader

"We haven't had a quiet enough audience to play this one so far, but you guys asked for it," Linkous said when the crowd opted for "Saint Mary."

Then, he led his band through the dirge-like tune (RealAudio excerpt) that was inspired by the British nurses who helped him recover from a nearly fatal 1996 drug overdose in London. At the Music Hall, the silence that punctuated Linkous' spectral falsetto singing was



Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous (pictured) was backed by ex-Camper Van Beethoven member Jonathan Segel.

Photo by Danny Clinch

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remarkable.

Given the yo-yo sonic range of Sparklehorse's recently released *Good Morning Spider*, it's not surprising that Linkous followed the gentle ballad with a teeth-gnashing, Pixies-like blast through "Pig." He seemed to delight in toying with his image as a brooding pop alchemist. Accordingly, the band's punk-rock thrashing looked and sounded worlds away from the Southern charm implied by Linkous' white cowboy hat and black suit coat.

As he does on his mostly self-recorded albums, the Virginia-bred Linkous made a virtue of mixing styles during the show. He juxtaposed his Southern gothic ballads with more caustic, uptempo numbers. During the latter, he sneered his vocals through a microphone that heavily distorted his voice.

His face nearly obscured by his hat, Linkous meandered onto the stage of the ornate, gilded room to open the show with the other-worldly "Spirit Ditch" from Sparklehorse's 1995 debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*. The dark, molasses-thick ballad segued into a sample-heavy version of "Painbirds" (RealAudio excerpt) from *Good Morning Spider*. It was enhanced by a combination of tinkling xylophone from former Camper Van Beethoven member Jonathan Segel and a fuzzed-out sample of an answering machine message.

For a group so rooted in earthy images of nature and what Linkous refers to as "all the critters crawling around on the ground," the singer made deft use of mechanical-sounding samples -- such as the looped drums and muted trumpet in the bittersweet "Painbirds" -- during the course of the show.

"All Night Home," a slow, funeral waltz, was one of the songs that featured drum loops; they allowed percussionist Scott Minor to come out from behind his set and play keyboards.

Slumped onto a couch backstage before the show, Linkous sported a worn, black Mazzy Star T-shirt, rumpled jeans and scuffed black motorcycle boots. When asked why he distorted his vocals so heavily in his songs, he said that he had mixed reasons.

"[When I started out,] I just didn't really want people to hear me sing," Linkous said as he tipped the ashes from a hand-rolled cigarette into the palm of his right hand. "But now, I just sort of like the texture."

The effect onstage can be startling. During the set's spirited rendition of "Hammering the Cramps," Linkous relied almost

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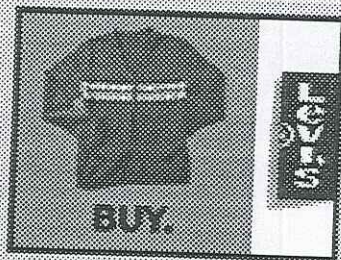
[Sparklehorse](#)

exclusively on the electronically treated vocals. His face was pinched into an almost pained expression as his insectoid voice rose above the din of clanging guitars. Similarly, the punk-rock tune "Happy Man" was a blur of fuzzed-out guitar, buzzing bee vocals and heavy-metal-style guitar solos for all of the two minutes it lasted.

Living up to his Camper Van Beethoven reputation as a jack-of-all-musical-trades, multi-instrumentalist Segel deftly jumped from guitar to keyboards to violin to a toy voice-distortion device during the course of the show. His status as valuable utility man was emphasized during an abbreviated version of the murky ballad "Sunshine," when he switched from calliope-like keyboards to violin as Linkous fooled with a sampler emulating distant thunder and whale calls.

Looking around as the disembodied sounds faded into the swirl of smoke from his cigarette, Linkous raised his arms above his head in a gesture of victory.

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