

Interview: Sparklehorse

Interview by Stephen M. Deusner

Mark Linkous speaks in a slow Virginia drawl that sounds sleepy, yet thoughtful. His is an odd cadence that often fades away at the ends of sentences, or bends upward to turn a casual observation into an uncertain question. There's a cautiousness behind it that seems at odds with the supreme confidence he projects on his four Sparklehorse albums. His 1995 debut, *vivadixiesubmarinetransmissions*, spawned the minor alt-radio hit "Someday I Will Treat You Good", which led to big tours opening for R.E.M. and Radiohead. But commercial success never came his way, and instead of a star, Linkous became something different and much more interesting: a cult figure.

During the tour for *vivadixie*, an accident involving a bad combination of drugs and liquor left him temporarily confined to a wheelchair. The experience inspired the exquisitely self-destructive *Good Morning Spider* in 1999, on which every song seems to decay and crumble. "Happy Man" could have been an easy hit, but Linkous swaddled the melody in radio static, as if the signal were emanating through a crappy car stereo on a long night drive, turning it into a statement of purpose from an artist as conflicted as he was creative. And when the chorus of "Happy Man" finally rose out of the muck, it sounded especially triumphant.

Now, five years after his higher-profile follow-up, 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life*, Linkous is rising out of the static and muck again with *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. By turns sad and hopeful, downcast and upbeat, it's a solid effort that almost wasn't: Battling drug addiction and depression, Linkous nearly shelved the recording, stopped playing live, and gave up music altogether. Through the intervention of friends and collaborators, not to mention a move from Virginia to rural North Carolina, Linkous put songs to tape and has resumed playing live. Speaking by phone, he expounded on making *Dreamt for Light Years* and plans for the future.

**Pitchfork:** Where are you right now?

Mark Linkous: I'm in London. I haven't played since we've been here. We're just playing some radio shows. We're playing in Bristol in a couple of days. We're going to Paris tomorrow to tape some television shows.

**Pitchfork:** Are you looking forward to playing shows again?

Mark: We did about seven in the states before we came over here. And I was kinda terrified to play again, to tour. But I'm really having a good time. My band is really great. It's an all-new band-- they just really got me covered. Most of the shows have been really good. I'm looking forward to playing over here. Our first gig is in Bristol and I've got a lot of friends there.

We're out till December. All over Europe. I think we might be going to Japan and Australia. And then I get home in December and do another record with Danger Mouse. Maybe after that some time. Next year I might do more American stuff.

**Pitchfork:** That's one of the things that caught me about the new album, the Danger Mouse collaboration. It's very well sequenced into the album. How did that come about?

Mark: Well, I'd quit working for a while and it started to get really difficult to live and pay the rent. So it was really getting down to the wire where I had to turn a record in. I had some stuff written that I didn't put on the last album, because they were just really pop songs. They felt like anachronisms on the last record. So I saved all these little pop songs.



I think people were trying to help me get out of this hole by sending me CDs and stuff-- musicians I might want to collaborate with. Usually I don't even listen to that stuff. I think my manager was the one that sent me *The Grey Album*, and it sat in a drawer for about three or four months. I finally listened to that and I really, really liked it. I'd been listening to a lot of later Beatles stuff in the past couple of years. There was a lot of stripped down hip-hop stuff that I liked. Especially the instrumentation. I don't know, I really got the *Grey Album* thing immediately. I didn't know anything about it-- who made it or anything. Found out [Danger Mouse] was a huge Sparklehorse fan. He came to my studio in North Carolina and we basically worked off tracks that I'd already recorded. He worked on four tracks on the album, and it gave me a little bit of confidence after we'd done some work together for a couple of weeks and some of the songs started to really come together. I think it helped me get out of a hole there for a while where I wasn't interested in recording any more.

**Pitchfork:** Do you have any plans for what this more in-depth collaboration will sound like? Have you written songs?

Mark: I'm writing right now. And there were a couple of songs that we worked on that were going to go on this Sparklehorse album but just didn't make it. 'Cause often I'll write songs in the wrong key, and I'll get all the tracks finished and go to sing it and I can't fuckin' sing it. There were a couple of songs that were just out of my range that we're going to have on the Dangerhorse record. We'll probably get a girl to sing them-- I think Nina [Persson] from the Cardigans will probably sing some of those songs.

**Pitchfork:** What role does collaboration play in your creative process?

Mark: I don't know if it's like a necessity or maybe it's just something that happens. It wasn't planned that way, it just came out that way. A lot of stuff on the new record I played alone at home and mixed there, and I like that aspect of it. That aspect of it reminds me of *vivadixie* a little bit because I did everything myself. The thing with Danger Mouse-- that just kinda happened. If I had just let it sit in a drawer and never listened to it, it would just never happen. I just happened to pick it up. It's not a plan. I don't have songs I specifically want to collaborate with other people on. For the Dangerhorse thing, I do want to have guest vocalists and friends on there, like hip-hop records have. That's going to be some obvious collaboration. I'd like to get some of my friends to appear on that.

And then I'm doing another collaboration with Christian Fennesz. He's a laptop musician from Austria. He's a guitar player, too. Just a great musician. He does this pretty abstract electronic music. I really like a lot of that stuff-- Oval, Microstoria, and Matmos-- and Christian's my favorite. He did a landmark record three or four years ago called *Endless Summer* that's just a really, really great album. I did a thing in Geneva with Christian where it was me and my drummer, and my drummer also had his laptop. We met in Geneva and camped out in this old printing press museum for about 10 days and just made music. Then we did a performance in Geneva and then one in Paris, and that was it. Definitely in the next year we're going to get together and do a proper album. I would like to bring whatever pop thing that I can bring into his electronic world, try to do something that hasn't really been done yet.

**Pitchfork:** Can you tell me about the role visuals play in your music, specifically about the album cover?

Mark: Well, the first album was pretty easy because I did all the artwork and took all the photographs with an old Polaroid land camera. And after that, after I stopped doing all the artwork, it seemed to get more and more difficult, somehow not really as representative of the music as I would want it to be. On the new album, I did an in-store about four or five years ago at Fingerprints in California, and that image [from the *Dreamt for Light Years* cover] was a poster ad. And I've loved that image from the first time I



saw it, and I just knew that was going to be the cover of the next album. Robert Pokorny is the artist. He really has a great sense of realizing imagery from the music he listens to. I can't really describe anything about that image that represents anything specific in the music, but it just really seems to fit to me.

**Pitchfork:** I've read that making this record took you a long time and you almost shelved it at one point. What is it like living with these songs for so long? Did they evolve, or were they fixed?

Mark: They did evolve. The mixes kept changing. Like I had written "Shade and Honey"-- that's maybe four or five years old. That had been available over the Internet, but I remixed it for the album. And "Ghost in the Sky"-- there was a weird version of that floating around. I remixed that. So I think one of the reasons like I said before, I had these pop songs that didn't fit on *It's a Wonderful Life*, so I saved those for this record. I guess it's a contradiction that the album was so hard to make-- all this depression and stuff-- and I end up making this poppy record. I mean, it's poppy to me.

I think I do judge songs sometimes if I think that in five years they might sound dated or not. The rest, they're just really written for me-- what I want them to be and what I can imagine them being in my head. Sometimes they're just like images of film in my head. Or smells. It's kinda hard to articulate the inspiration behind it. I think it's keeping the lyrics poetic and vague enough where people can interpret them to their own lives, and I've talked to people after gigs who say that this song or that record really helped them through a bad time. That really means a lot to me. That's one thing that's always been really important and rewarding to me-- when people tell me that my music has helped them, that it's been therapeutic in a good way.

**Pitchfork:** There's almost a eulogistic quality to a lot of these songs, like there's someone specific you're talking to or about who's gone. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Mark: I can some of them, I can't other ones because it would hurt some people's feelings. A lot of people around me have died in the last five years. That's what literally inspired some of the songs. I guess that's it. Yes, they are eulogistic because people actually died. Close friends. My first girl that I really was crazy about and was best friends with for ages. My granny who raised me. Some other people.

