

SOUNDS FROM THE SMOKY MOUNTAINS: SPARKLEHORSE

BY MICHAEL D. AYERS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN ALLEN

Most photographs of Sparklehorse principal Mark Linkous show a man who seems solemn, gruff and a bit mysterious. In person, it's a different story. When we met this past summer at a lonely Mexican restaurant in Soho, temperatures had risen into the 90s, yet Linkous greeted me in a coat and tie, his signature cowboy hat adding inches to his already tall frame. But Linkous immediately took off his sunglasses and hat and extended his hand to greet me. His voice was soft, shy and shaky.

In the last decade, Sparklehorse has completed four albums and a slew of EPs, all to critical acclaim. Linkous is a musician's musician,

were done at Dave Fridmann's studio, near Buffalo. The first time I drove over to his studio, I thought it was near Woodstock. I then realized I had 15 more hours to drive.

SS: What was it like working with Danger Mouse?

ML: It was great. We just worked for a couple of weeks. He's got great instincts. The first conversation I had with him, I was trying to articulate what I was looking to do on this record. I had done a couple tours with Radiohead, and we all listen to the same electronic music: Autechre, Boards of Canada, Fennesz. When I heard *Amnesiac* and *Kid A*, I really knew where that was derived from. I wanted to make this new record, using some of that electronic stuff, but also wickedly strong pop songs. That idea is what we really strived for.

SS: How did you guys initially meet?

ML: I got *The Grey Album* sent to me. I called my manager and asked if he thought Danger Mouse would want to do something with me. Then one thing led to another. Plus, I was going through a real big Beatles phase. But a lot of the time between this album and the last, I couldn't work at all. I couldn't think straight. I was in a really bad depression, and couldn't write very well. I could come up with the songs and the melodies, but not the lyrics.

SS: Would you characterize it as writer's block?

ML: I think it was just a byproduct of a real severe depression and just being totally paralyzed, which debilitated the work and my ability to function in general.

SS: When did the songs start to materialize?

ML: Over the past few years, but mainly when Brian [Brian Joseph Burton, Danger Mouse] came down — that really helped get me out of the slump. I started to get excited about what music can be again. For a while there, I wasn't going to do it anymore. But these last couple years have gotten better. I thought people had moved on and forgotten about Sparklehorse. (ILLUSTRATED ON PAGE 107)

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having garnered the respect of Thom Yorke, Michael Stipe and Tom Waits. Linkous's latest studio album, *Dreamt for Light Years In the Belly of a Mountain* (Astralwerks), is in essence the return of Sparklehorse. In the five years it took to complete the record, Linkous moved from semi-rural Virginia to a very rural part of western North Carolina, where he tore down and then rebuilt his home studio.

Stop Smiling: You're living in North Carolina now?

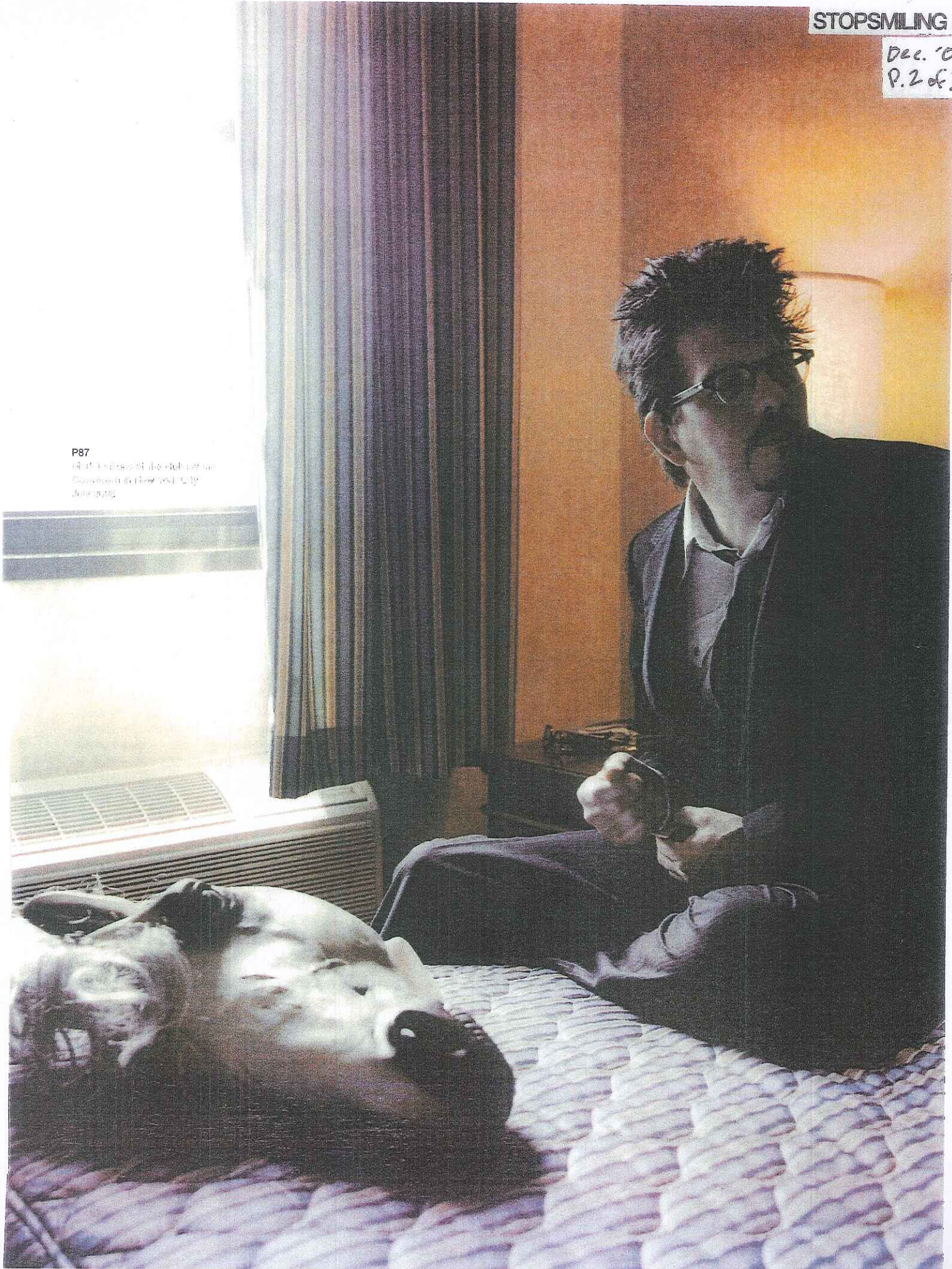
Mark Linkous: Yes, near the Tennessee border. About 10 to 15 miles from the Georgia border. Near a small town in the Smoky Mountains.

SS: Did you record all of *Light Years* down there?

ML: A lot of the songs I did alone in the studio, and I did a lot of the vocals and the guitars down there. A few songs on the record

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SS: How'd you end up on Astralwerks?

ML: When I handed the new record in to Capitol, I didn't hear from them for a long time, so I was like, "Oh, great."

SS: What's a long time?

ML: A month, at least. I was thinking, I guess I'm getting dropped. I didn't know what the deal was. I hadn't put a record out in so long, it became a dire financial hardship. So that was really nerve-racking, not knowing if this record was going to come out or not. Finally, my manager said that people at Capitol thought that it would be better for everyone if it came out on Astralwerks. [Astralwerks and Capitol are both subsidiaries of EMI.] They assured me it would be a great thing, and when we had meetings — I have never had eight or 10 people in a room so enthusiastic about my work. It's really inspiring that everyone is happy.

SS: Does the new record have a specific focal point?

ML: I don't think it's different from the other records, in that it deals with a lot of mortality and love. I guess there's some more interest in love gone bad at times. I was doing so bad, and a lot of people died around me.

SS: It's a rather long album title.

ML: It's somewhat random in that old William S. Burroughs cut-and-paste method.

SS: Does "place" ever impact your songwriting?

ML: Yes. Not communicating daily with people, but being surrounded by dogs, rattlesnakes and the occasional black bear helps. So does smelling the earth from the rain and the smoke on the Smoky Mountains.

SS: Your lyrics are literary at times. Do you read a lot?

ML: Not so much these days. I seem to have read all that my favorite writers have written: Breece D'J Pancake, early Cormac McCarthy when he lived in the South.

SS: Does creating music feel like work for you?

ML: One of the reasons it took so long to complete this album was that I enjoyed the creating but didn't enjoy the recording of what I had created. The work of preserving and documenting the creation, I felt, corrupted it.

SS: Growing up, what did you envision yourself doing?

ML: Professional motorcycle racer, until I saw Johnny Cash on television, holding his guitar and wearing a black suit.