

I have to remind myself to always be on the lookout for good stuff, so that I don't get consumed by bad stuff,' mumbles Mark Linkous, in his barely audible southern drawl. 'And that's certainly a better pay-off. It's better than waking up in the morning and going, "Well, I'm not dead!"' A gentle smile spreads across his face—Linkous has had more than his fair share of 'bad stuff' and come much, much closer than most to not waking up at all.

It's almost five years since we last spoke. Linkous was in Seattle, on tour promoting his band Sparklehorse's debut album, 'Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot' and—showing astonishing physical and spiritual determination—was performing from a wheelchair, calves bound with straps to keep his feet straight, guitar cradled in his lap. After a show in London in January 1996, knocked out by tranquillisers and his regular prescription anti-depressant, Linkous fell awkwardly in his hotel room, where he lay unconscious for 14 hours, legs pinned beneath him. He subsequently spent three months in hospital and had nine operations on his legs, which have some permanent damage. He's long since out of the wheelchair and

has moved way beyond that dark and doubt-filled time, but the trauma did jump-start Linkous's positivity. In Seattle, he ruefully admitted to having always been a glass-half-empty guy. I wonder how his glass looks now, five years on.

'I think it's slowly getting fuller,' Linkous says. 'Or at least, staying where it is. This might sound corny, but that's part of what the new album is about—trying every day to see something good, no matter how microscopic, so that at the end of the day you can say, "I'm glad I saw that ant building a nest: I'm glad I saw that little Spanish girl smile at me on the street." I try and remind myself that most of the time, it's a good day to be around.'

Sparklehorse's latest (third) album is called 'It's a Wonderful Life' and Linkous means it. Here are 12 touchingly hopeful songs somehow cocooned from the rudeness of twenty-first-century life, creating a separate reality of 'fiery pianos washed up on a foggy coast' and 'the toothless kiss of skeletons and summer hail', a dozen knock-you-sideways, sensually organic tunes whose phantasmagoric otherness is rooted in Linkous's rural existence.

He grew up in the hills of south-west Virginia, the product of an nth-generation coal mining family


and now lives 45 minutes outside Richmond, on seven acres with his wife, a studio and a load of animals'. Linkous happily admits that the world of Sparklehorse is a sanctuary from the brutalities of contemporary life and that he's a romantic at heart.

'I'm not really very happy with the way things are now,' he says simply, lighting the first of several rollies. 'Some comedian was joking about how back in the Civil War, when guys used to write to their sweethearts, their letters would be really poetic: "My darlin', the morning fog rises on your breasts", or whatever, whereas in the Gulf War the letters would have said, "Hey, Stella, don't fuck anybody while I'm gone!" I know that in America everyone's so desensitised—to everything—and it seems more full-on and violent there. And crude, in a way. I'm sometimes amazed at the brutality of the language that's used, not in the Martin Scorsese sense, but in the "Clerks" sense. I found that movie really violent and offensive, because I guess I'm just not used to blatant, sexual discussions. Maybe it's because I grew up in a small, rural community, but people never really spoke that way.'

Linkous is Sparklehorse, essentially, but 'It's a Wonderful Life' sees him inviting guests on board

Becoming mates with Tom Waits or overcoming a crippling injury—whichever way you look at it, Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse has a lot to be happy about, including the alt.country pioneers' latest album 'It's a Wonderful Life'.

Interview **Sharon O'Connell** Photograph **Eva Vermandel**

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SHINE ON

for the first time. And they're a stellar bunch—Tom Waits, Polly Harvey, The Cardigans' Nina Persson, Adrian Utley from Portishead, John Parish, plus Joan Wasser of Those Bastard Souls add to the cracked fragility of songs or help kick ass, according to their talents. 'None of it was really planned,' Linkous claims. 'Joan came down to the studio in Brooklyn one day and said, "I've just seen Nina on the street and she says to say hello. Why don't you call her?" So, I called her straight away and said, "Why don't you come on down here and sing?" She turned up a half hour later and was right in there. Her voice is just great; on "Apple Bed" she sounds like Emmylou Harris.'

So, what was it that made you invite Polly Harvey on board? 'She's just so... ballsy,' Linkous struggles to find the right word. "'To Bring You My Love" is such a great record and at the time I was listening to it a lot, it seemed like all the girl singers I was hearing were just whispery and frail.'

And Tom Waits, who does his inimitable thing on the groovily gritty 'Dog Door'? 'I heard that he had the first album,' Linkous explains, 'and his kids took it—either because they were sick of hearing it or because they liked it, I never found out—

and so I sent him another copy, with a little letter. And then, sometime later, we started talking on the telephone. He was familiar with all these southern writers I was into and I'd run out of writers to read, so he'd recommend a book and it was always great.

'Y'know, Sparklehorse probably wouldn't exist if it weren't for him,' Linkous continues. 'When the band moved to Los Angeles at the end of the '80s, everything fell apart. I ended up living in a fucking van by the beach, listening to the radio and one day I heard this music. Tom Waits was doing a guest spot for Radio KCRW and was playing "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet", the tune he did with Gavin Bryars. At that point, I was ready to give up on music and walk into the fucking ocean and that song literally saved me. So, sitting next to him on the couch, eating home-made pizza with him, doing some recording and having him say, "How'd you like that, Mark?"—it was like a movie.'

Listeners who slung Sparklehorse in the drawer marked 'alt. country' from the off may be surprised to hear that Linkous longs to record an album of ambient electronica. But it's really not that surprising—alongside the sweet, back-porch swing, the tangy, southern twang and pine-scented melan-

cholia, Linkous's tunes have always been peppered with fizz, crackle and buzz, the ambient static that is the urban equivalent of birdsong.

'I like the clicky, electronic stuff that sounds like it's coming from satellites,' ponders Linkous. 'It's like baby computers talking to each other. I didn't know there were so many specific genres in that kind of music and so I asked Scott [Minor, Sparklehorse member] what all that particular shit is called and he tells me it's called "glitch". So, I'm into glitch! I still listen to pop music,' Linkous hastens to add, 'and I love bands like Grandaddy, but I would also love to have a platinum laptop and just sit on the couch and make electronic records.'

It's a nice idea, but Linkous won't get the chance to put his feet up for a while yet. Tomorrow he's off to Bristol, to lend a hand on Beth Gibbons of Portishead's solo project. And back home, a cable channel has just given him and a bunch of independent film-makers an hour's air time to match images with each of the tracks from the new album. Looks like Linkous might need to keep a close eye on the brim of that glass. ●

'It's a Wonderful Life' is out on Parlophone on June 11.

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