

A man with dark, spiky hair, glasses, and a goatee is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking down and to the right. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

sparklehorse

Fearing Pop

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Words by Matt Fink Photos by Crackerfarm

though the stigma seems to be lifting—as producers such as Pharrell can make any former teenybopper sound forward thinking and innovative—making pop music can still be a frightening proposition for artists who are ingrained with the mindset that all good music must be difficult to be substantial. For Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous, this mindset produces an impulse to apologize for making a record that can be enjoyed on first listen, one that doesn't require any of the details of his rise to fame as a critically adored but deeply troubled artist. Recorded in fits and starts over five years, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* is the sound of a master craftsman wondering whether he can make a pop album, equally afraid of failure as he is of success.

"I almost called this record *Fear of Pop*," Linkous admits from a hotel room in New York City, soft spoken and polite on a warm July morning. "I don't know why, but it was especially apparent on *It's a Wonderful Life*—I didn't want any songs to have guitars on them or anything. It's been really hard since I began making records. It's hard for me to make pop songs that I imagine that I won't be embarrassed about in five years. That's the way I used to judge a lot of things. 'Is this still going to sound cool and intriguing to me a few years down the road?' I tried to let go of that a little on this one."

The final product certainly doesn't suffer from a lack of substance, and Linkous doesn't sound like a man struggling to hold himself together long enough to release an album whose continued delays threatened to wreck his career and bank account. Whether borrowing a line from the standard "You Are My Sunshine" for the sighing, Beatlesque pop of "Don't Take My Sunshine Away" or floating lazy melodies on a cushion of luminescent keyboards on "Knives of Summertime," he has made an album that is both confident and self-conscious. Even so,

Linkous spent the five years since his landmark *It's a Wonderful Life* thinking about things far more serious than music.

"Well...I got in a real...real bad headspace," he says, taking long, deliberate pauses between each word. "I just got really depressed for a long time and couldn't do anything. I couldn't work at all. I missed having the desire to do any of that. I missed it making me feel good, making music. I think I cried for three years, probably. That's why it took so long. I just couldn't work, and I became a real recluse. I never left the house."

Somewhat contradictorily, his response to those feelings was to move even farther away from civilization, from his home state of Virginia to the mountains of North Carolina.

"There had been lots of droughts, and they do clear-cutting there where they chop down all of the trees—it almost looks like a bomb hit. I just needed to get away from Virginia," he says, sounding uncertain as he describes a physical landscape that could be a metaphor for his frame of mind during that period. "I sort of ended up in North Carolina by accident. It's unlike Virginia in that it hasn't been populated. I think they only got electricity in the area in the '60s. There's a lot of unspoiled land and national forest that you're surrounded by. There's not a lot of old, old houses. It's on top of a mountain, really high up. I guess the reason that they call it the Smokey Mountains is that a lot of times the smoke, or the mist on the mountains, they look like little clouds, like the mountain is smoking. We live up so high that those clouds are sometimes under the house. Everything is named after a dead Indian there, unfortunately."

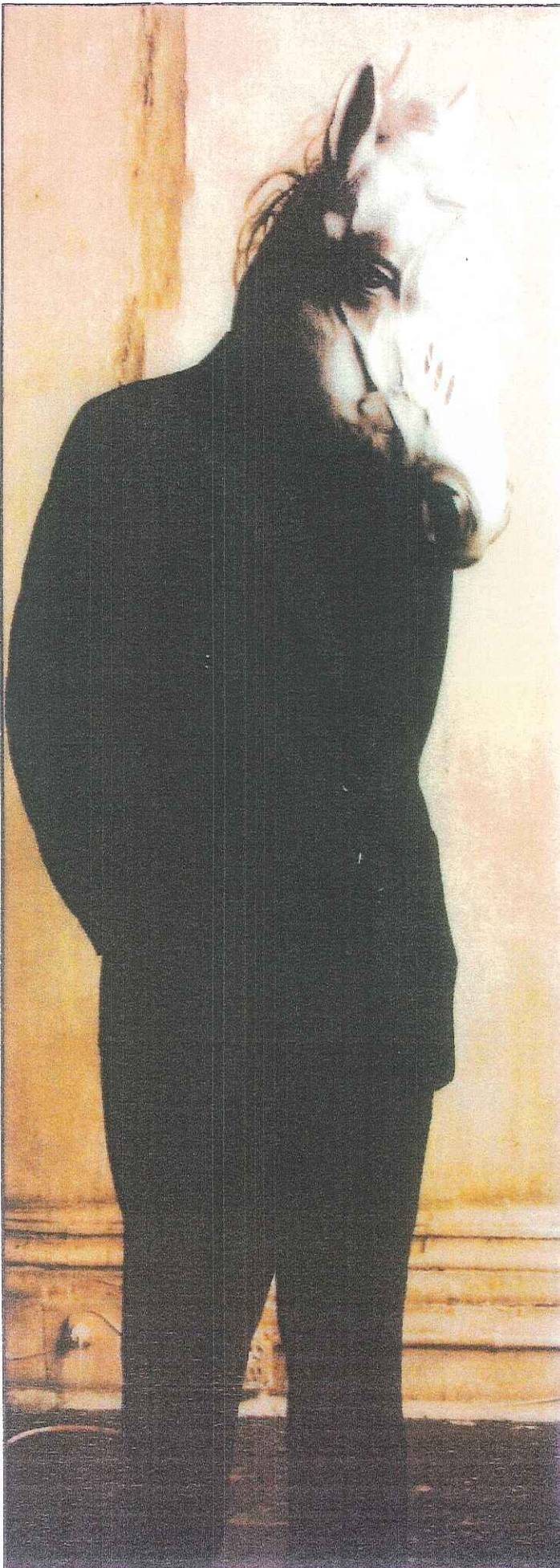
Scott Minor, a close friend and the only other full-time member of Sparklehorse, acknowledges that Linkous' fluctuating mental state contributed to the album's five-year gestation period. "I think he just feels bad," Minor says straightforwardly. "It's like having the flu and someone saying, 'Hey, go write a poem.' It's as simple as that. It's not debilitating in the long run. I don't think it's a confidence thing related to music, as the way that I perceive it. I've been with him through much more difficult periods than this, and they were

very creative periods. He was in actual physical pain, like in the late '90s when he was touring in a wheelchair." Linkous accidentally overdosed and nearly died during the tour for 1995's *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionpilot*. "He was battling a lot more then than he is now," Minor continues. "I guess it's the other thing with being a writer, that you want the well to stay there, and sometimes you're going to hit a plateau or some period where you feel you're not getting anywhere. But there was a lot more getting done than either of us realized, particularly Mark. There were a lot of times when he'd listen to something and say, 'Man, I hate it!' And it was brilliant."

Sessions recorded with super-producer Dave Fridmann were scrapped and parts recorded in Linkous' own home studio were discarded later. His own worst critic, Linkous' perfectionism kept him second-guessing whether he had created anything of lasting value. What was left of the album was in serious danger of permanently slipping into the realm of rumor and speculation, leaving Linkous to fall into a Brian Wilson-like rut, a troubled genius with a suspected great album that no one had ever heard in finished form. But unlike Wilson, who waited over 30 years to deliver his long lost *Smile*, Linkous had a friend on speed dial, Brian Burton of Danger Mouse and Gnarls Barkley fame, who knew just what his album needed.

"I forget how we actually connected," Linkous says, acknowledging that he has a notoriously poor memory for dates and chronological order. "I got *The Grey Album* and just loved it. I didn't know it was famous at all. I thought it was just this obscure thing that someone did. I started asking around, and I asked my manager, 'Who's this Danger Mouse band?' And I found out who he was, and I don't know how, but we ended up talking, and he was a Sparklehorse fan. And I started describing to him what I had envisioned in my head—this record being electronic with proper pop construction with choruses—and he was really down with that. It kind of got me out of the slump that I'd dug myself in for awhile."

Using his exceptional ability to mix and match samples and rhythms, Burton



poured over the rudiments that Linkous had been struggling to align and discovered the spark the erstwhile author failed to see in them. "Brian, on a different level, has a really great ear for taking elements from rhythm tracks or drum machine tracks that I'd have for these songs, some with guitars but no vocals—sometimes just humming a melody," Linkous explains. "But sometimes he'd take a guitar track or a string track from a totally different song, put it in a different key, stretch it out, filter it, burn it, and put it in a totally different place in a different song that I never would have anticipated or thought would have worked. He's really great at that—just grabbing elements from different places and making them within a standard pop context."

Though Minor is quick to point out that Linkous should be given the lion's share of the credit for the album, he concurs that Burton played an essential role in keeping Linkous motivated to finish an unapologetic pop album. "I guess there are certain things that [I'm] really good at, like it or not, and doing what Brian does is not one of them," Minor admits. "Not that we were trying to do that, but we were looking for this really elusive thing, and we tried to get really excited about it, but we'd listen to it later and say, 'Oh, that sounds so pedestrian!' It just didn't fit right. It rejuvenated us. We were really trying to do something that neither of us really had the wherewithal to pull off the way we wanted to have it sound. And he jumped in and did it in his sleep. It just clicked like that. I guess there were four tracks that he sprinkled his dust on, and I think they are real stand-outs. Those two are going to do some stuff together which is going to be real cool."

Though a *Danger Mouse/Sparklehorse* (*Danger Horse? Sparkle Mouse?*) release remains purely in the realm of fantasy, Linkous has confirmed his first non-*Sparklehorse* project. "I did this thing with Fennesz over in Geneva," Linkous says of his 2003 appearance at *Batie Festival*, sounding excited as he discusses the Austrian electronic auteur who appears on *Dreamt for Years* and is the creator of one of Linkous' favorite records, 2001's seminal *Endless Summer*.

"I'm a big fan of his, and the last time that I was playing in Geneva, there was this festival schedule laying around the dressing room, and it seemed like a really great art festival. On the musical end of it, they would pair up two different types of artists for a cross pollination of styles thing that they do. Later that night, I was just sitting out by the railroad tracks chilling, and this guy approached me, and it turned out to be the curator of the music part of the festival, and he asked me if I wanted to be involved with it sometime. I told him that I'd love to be involved with Christian Fennesz or Oval, someone like that. And he got it together. He knew Christian, and Christian turned out to be a *Sparklehorse* fan. So we did it. Myself and Scott and Christian stayed at a printing press museum where we rehearsed for ten days in Geneva, and we did a gig, and then we went to Paris and did a gig in an art space. And that was it. It was really fun. It was me playing guitar and singing and a laptop on either side and [Minor on] a drum kit. I think we're going to do a record proper before too long."

Whatever the case, it appears that Linkous is about to embark on a new era of personal creativity, one where he leaves the seclusion of his mountain home to collaborate with like-minded artists, where he relaxes his perfectionism in favor of more spontaneous work habits, and where he's no longer afraid of pop music. "That's the whole trick, to make it something that you're proud of—aesthetically and lyrically in every way but still be cool pop songs," he says, seemingly having reached a sense of uneasy closure on the issue. "Maybe they'll even get played on the radio or something."