

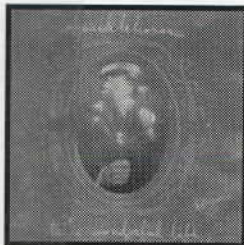
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UNDER



RADAR

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Sparklehorse: It's a Wonderful Life (Capitol)

What an interesting story Sparklehorse has. Believe it or not, six years ago front man, Mark Linkous, almost died while touring in London. Combining Valium with anti-depressants caused Mark to pass out pinning his legs underneath him. When he woke up some fourteen hours later, the blood had been cut off for so long that they almost had to amputate and left him in a wheel chair for some time.

It's A Wonderful Life seems like it is finally the light at the end of the tunnel for Linkous. There is a sort of hopefulness that hasn't been present in past Sparklehorse albums. Beauty has always been in Linkous' lyrics, but now the picture is much clearer. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that this is his first sober album.

This subtle, low-fi backwoods blues album is laced with vocal support by such greats as The Cardigan's Nina Persson ("Gold Day"), P.J. Harvey ("Eyepennies" and "Plano Fire"), and Tom Waits ("Dog Door").

Effortlessly beautiful. **9 blips out of 10**

By Wendy Lynch

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Sparklehorse

Due: TBA

Although it's admittedly a much-maligned yet dam-near meaningless classification in the contemporary era, the art of pop music seems to be nearing another golden age. With teen-pop having gone into hibernation and the constant crossbreeding of hip-hop and traditional pop nomenclature producing many interesting amalgams and hybrids, our post-everything musical climate has ostensibly cleared the way for the next revelation. And as introspective and carefully realized as was his arguable classic, 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life*, Mark Linkous is doing the one thing that we couldn't have predicted: he's making a pop album.

"I want it to not be so subtle, and I want to sing a little louder and not be so fucking whispery all the time," he says of his forthcoming release in a voice that barely registers more than a whisper itself. "Therefore, some of the songs that I've been writing have been more pop, and that really kind of frightened me a little bit. But we went on tour with The Flaming Lips and ... we did a tour opening for R.E.M. in stadiums and played these pop-rock songs. And there were people in the audience, who were really Sparklehorse fans, and I kind of quizzed them on the songs and they really liked them. It's just a matter of getting them to stick to tape and not be stupid... Pop songs are hard," he finishes, almost as a profoundly understated afterthought.

Having used the last few years to travel the world, record an album with outsider music genius Daniel Johnston (for whom he is currently compiling a tribute album with contributions from Tom Waits, Beck, and Bright Eyes), and occasionally to play brief, unannounced sets before The Flaming Lips, it seems that the one thing he hasn't made time for is the follow-up to his most critically-acclaimed release. After all, according to published reports, wasn't this album supposed to be out as early as 2003? "I know," Linkous shudders as if I'm scolding him when asked about the pre-emptive reports. "It was never far along. Just like the rumor that I was dead for a few days. They were all untrue."

What is true is that, given the rather elas-

tic connotations that a word like "pop" can have, it's altogether probable that Mr. Linkous has a slightly different interpretation than your average Top 40 listener. In his mind, at least, he is only returning to territory that he has already visited. "There were a lot of pop songs on the first record," he says of the woefully brilliant *Vivadxiesubmarinetransmissionpilot*, "and I always loved Big Star and stuff like that. But it is a challenge to make it not be embarrassing. I don't know why I have such a fear of the pop thing, but it can so easily be mediocre, and there's so much mediocrity out there. It's not so bad as it used to be. I think with bands like Granddaddy and Flaming Lips and Fennesz things are changing."

Whatever the case, Linkous' musical acumen is of the rare kind, both timeless and eerily prescient, yet endlessly malleable and responsive to change, leaving any fears that an injection of the pop aesthetic could water down Linkous' strangely effecting work unfounded. If anything, the musical directness and emotional vulnerability of the form provides a particular challenge to a songwriter of his ilk. "Yeah, some of these pop songs are love songs," he admits. "And some of them are about my best friend, my first girlfriend, dying. It's hard to ... I've never been really good at literal lyrics. It has always been easier to be abstract and try to be poetic in a hick way. And some of the songs now, they're not so abstract. I tried to make this one about my friend dying sort of be like 'He Stopped Loving Her Today,' the George Jones song. It's hard..."

And while he seemingly has little trouble finding kindred spirits in his artistic endeavors, his smile is almost perceptible over the phone when he explains the contributions of experimental pop auteur Christian Fennesz to the impending Sparklehorse record. Still, Linkous' restless muses seem unlikely to stop on any one shade of the pop stratum.

"One of my goals for this record, other than getting Christian Fennesz, was to do a duet with Ralph Stanley," he says, giving no impression that he has considered just how loudly bringing together an experimental

soundscape and a bluegrass legend under the umbrella of a pop album speaks to the unclassifiable essence of his music. "He's sort of a distant relative," he says of the 77-year-old master of mountain soul, speaking with a careful reverence. "I've been up to his house. He's from where all my family is from. I don't know if I could sing on the same track as him. I might have Beth Gibbons sing on something. That would probably be the only other person on the record."

Though he admits that his meticulous nature in the studio nearly precludes him from collaborating extensively with other artists on Sparklehorse albums—with an attempt to make a more band-oriented record already abandoned—he reveals that a few "Guided By Voices-type things" were recorded with Flaming Lips' drummer Steven Drozd. "I don't know what it is. Some people will play things, and it's just not the Sparklehorse sound, and I don't know how to deal with it. Usually, I'm so scared of hurting people's feelings that I won't say anything, but I know that in the end it's going to be my finger on the mixer. But instead of doing that and wasting dough and everything, I figured I'd bring it all down here to Carolina and do it myself."

Having gone through a period of self-described debilitating depression that led him to doubt that he'd ever record again ("Just makes you immobile, and time is just a vortex"), his restlessness led him back to his southern roots. "I moved down here from Virginia," he explains, saying that his new locale is so secluded that he has to drive into town to pick up his mail and that he occasionally can't reach his studio because of bears blocking the road. "I've been having kind of a hard time the last few years, and I basically went away and ended up in North Carolina," he says of his search for peace of mind. "And I ended up by this creek, and I could smell the water and earth, and it rained almost every day in this little valley that the Indians used to populate, and I just decided that I'm going to stay here. And that's where I am."

By Matt Fink