



# Porch Songs

LUCKY FOR THOSE LAZY SUNDAYS, SPARKLEHORSE'S LONESOME QUAVER IS WAY, WAY OFF THE CHARTS

BY RJ SMITH

**A** GUY LIVES IN A VAN BY the Pacific Ocean. Man, he hates his life. He feels there is little to keep his feet attached to the ground, and he contemplates walking out the car door and striding straight for the breakers. The Santa Monica radio station plays a song by Tom Waits, and suddenly he's breathing the sea air through his open mouth. He is stunned. And—this would be the typical thing to say here—his life is changed by the magic of the moment. Not really, though. The thing of it is, that Tom Waits song was just one of a hundred details in a day that only seemed pivotal

years later. Still, it's the song that he remembers a decade down the road, and it's Waits's music he returns to even today, when he describes the moment he heeded that Walk/Don't Walk sign in his head and got the hell out of Los Angeles.

He wanted to be in a rock band, and thought this was the place. But the late '80s were the heyday of hair bands, and in L.A. back then even the punk rockers wanted to be in hair bands and he was an arty kid from Virginia and what could he have been thinking? After that morning he packed his car and drove in the opposite direction of the Pacific. And when he returned to the coal town that was his birthplace, he got a group together.

That must be why Mark Linkous, the man who formed the band Sparklehorse, savors radio noise so much. The fuzzy, crackly static of idle transmitters weaves in and out of all three CDs Sparklehorse has made. The noise rises above the glimmering melodies, the country-rock song structures, and threatens to erase them. He writes direct, elemental rock songs that get so tangled up in interference and the buzz of a border radio tower that the noise and the beauty are inseparable. His music is a tribute to the radio, from a guy who had his life changed by one.

Nowadays Sparklehorse gets played on the radio—at least by the likes of the college station that kept him on the beach. Nowadays he gets Tom Waits to record with him. *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capitol), Sparklehorse's new album, includes "Dog Door," a song as weather-beaten as anything Waits sings on his own CDs. Nowadays people like Waits, PJ Harvey, and the Cardigans' Nina Persson are fans of his and appear on *It's a Wonderful Life*.

All of which is swell but not nearly as swell as the fact that *It's a Wonderful Life* exists. Because this is Linkous's third album on a major label, and he hasn't exactly been a fixture on MTV, hasn't sung the National Anthem at the NBA All-Star game, hasn't had a feud with Eminem. He is capable of sensuous, languid music that evokes a dozen anachronistic experiences at once, but producing hits seems beyond his broadcast range. Some musicians are so talented they make listeners pull off the road and sit there in awe of what's coming out of the radio. Some musicians are even so gifted they can make a record company executive remember why they got into the business in the first place—to bring records like this one into the world. Here it is. Who can say if there'll be a fourth?

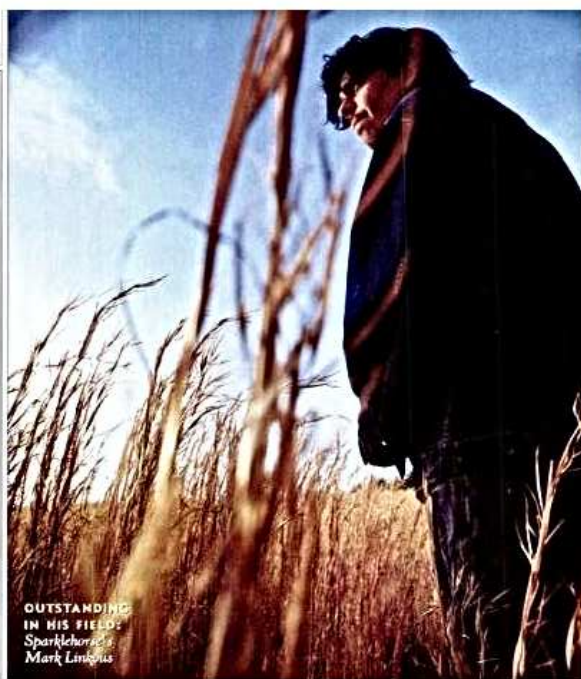
Linkous sings in a high, lonesome quaver; it's a Neil Young voice, a voice pushed past hoping for ecstasy, mercy, rest, and that's come to represent all the things it can't seem to find in the world. His voice arrives from outside the city limits, touched by his Virginia roots. What's rural about Linkous isn't so much his accent or the fiddle and Sunday-service organ that anchor the music. This is crazy rural, like a front yard strewn with generators, car parts, and stuff from an army surplus store. Wires flow among all the junk; there is an electrical hum. You drive past and wonder how somebody can live like that, but stop the car. Get out. There's more alive on these grounds than you can possibly guess.

The songs on *It's a Wonderful Life* are populated by folks used to making do and who have been scarred by having to fend for themselves. There's the guy in "Little Fat Baby," who was laughed at by the "city slickers" but whom Linkous observes from a sympathetic distance. There's the woman in "Comfort Me," who puts rocks in her pockets and walks into the lake. Linkous sings in her voice, of a body finally coming to rest: "I dreamed I was born on a mountain on the moon / Where nothing grows or ever rots / I dreamed that I had me a daughter / Who was magnificent as a horse."

His songs sound like a secret transmission from the 1930s that bounced around the heavens for years before it was picked up by satellite. The songs sound remote, but they communicate as warmly and as richly as music made by a natural-born artist sitting on his front porch, strumming and rocking.

**A**ROUND THE TIME SPARKLEHORSE FORMED in the mid '90s, rock bands seemed sterile, capable only, or mostly, of played-out brick-and-mortar music. There was the sense that every trick hiding in electric guitars had been wrung out, and that three-chords-and-an-attitude was recycling itself into pulp. Beyond that, the idea of being in a rock band had once seemed an acceptable route to fame and fame itself an acceptable goal. But after grunge rock—the last great movement of guitar bands—imploded, after Kurt Cobain freaked out in the spotlight and shot himself in 1994, being in a big rock band seemed like something less than glorious. It seemed like death. Smashing Pumpkins tried to rescue the rock star in the next few years. But they, too, have imploded in a way less horrible though no less final than Nirvana's: their front man, Billy Corgan, was last seen serenading Bozo the Clown on a Chicago television station.

Sparklehorse's 1995 debut, *Vinadixie*, was a near-perfect record and an even less likely triumph: a CD that sounds better now than it did at the time of its release. Then it seemed to have drifted in from some unincorporated area



OUTSTANDING IN HIS FIELD: Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous

outside the county line; today it seems central. *Vinadixie* (as most people call it) helped establish a model for bands looking for new things to do with rock. With keyboards that sound like guitars and guitars that sound like dreams, everything seems melted, wary. The recent records by Radiohead (including this year's terrific *Amnesiac*)—a rock band that lives high on the charts even as it scorns the idea of the rock band—were clearly shaped by that first Sparklehorse album. Thom Yorke, Radiohead's singer, returned the favor when he sang on Sparklehorse's 1999 *Good Morning Spider*. It isn't the only band to have been influenced: Granddaddy last year released *The Sophtware Slump*, a woozy, soulful CD that tapped into the same noise and hooky guitars that Linkous hears in his head.

It takes a considerable smart aleck to name his album *It's a Wonderful Life*—and an even bigger one to mean it. Linkous isn't smugly invoking the sentimentality of everybody's favorite Christmas movie; the new CD is shot through with tenderness and sympathy, and though you can't really call him sunny, he's never been so reflective, so pacific. It's quite a change. After recording *Vinadixie*, Linkous overdosed on Valium and antidepressants, passing out for 14 hours with his legs folded beneath him. That triggered a heart attack and left his legs paralyzed for the next year. He toured behind his debut by playing shows in a wheelchair. *Good Morning Spider* was, unsurprisingly, concerned with pain, with loss of control.

Now he sounds relaxed, matter-of-fact about the strangeness of the world. And it is strange: He has revitalized the rock band, bounced back to stand on his own two legs, and—oh yeah—released one of the best records of the year. There are no hits lurking on this one, either. It's a wonderful life. Linkous takes the good with the bad and makes do with what he finds in the yard. So fish something out of the cooler, pull up a lawn chair, and let's ponder the kudzu climbing over the garden gnome. It grows on you.