

Interview: A Winged Victory For The Sullen

Adam Wiltzie and Dustin O'Halloran on their moving tribute to the late Mark Linkous

Words Jazz Monroe



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Adam Wiltzie and Dustin O'Halloran met in Bologna, Italy after a Sparklehorse gig and subsequently bonded over good music and better whiskey. Stars of the Lid founder Wiltzie, then playing with Mark Linkous' Sparklehorse, is currently settled in Brussels while composer O'Halloran (whose film credits include Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*) calls Berlin's historic Unter den Linden boulevard home, making the relationship one of pick'n'mix culture and enough half-necessary flights to dampen Thom Yorke's brow. "Real collaborations happen when you're in a room together and you get a feeling. You get a feeling from the other person and the music gets pulled in different directions," says Dustin, after enthusing that the pair's quest to find the perfect piano tone for each song sent them on a Holy Grail-like quest across Europe. Not that they're fussy or anything. The *Winged Victory* project began a few months before the untimely passing of Sparklehorse man Mark Linkous in March 2010, and their eponymous debut, a tribute of sorts, landed gracefully in record shops earlier in the month. We caught up with the pair to discuss the project, and its roots in a conversation about the impending decline of human existence.

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SP: *You met in Bologna. Tell me about that night, down to the most boring detail...*

A: Well, not to go in too deep about Linkous, but we'd just gotten to Italy. And Mark, he was a really amazing guy, but he was also a handful. He had a problem with his leg and he had a problem walking. And he was really tall and he was always falling over. Not because he was fucked up or anything — he was actually pretty much sober — but he had trouble walking because of an accident he had years ago. He was living with a lot of pain, and a couple of days earlier in Torino he'd fallen in the shower and *really* hurt himself, banged his face up really bad. So I was actually a little but worried about him, and there was this strange, I dunno, tension. There was this weird dark cloud hanging over us until we got to Bologna. But all of a sudden when we arrived, we had a really great show. And I just remember after the show, you know. I have trouble opening up to people, especially

Americans. And there was this American was backstage and I was like, what the hell's he doing here? (*Dustin laughs*) And he'd been talking to Christina, my ex at the time. And we this really funny conversation about travelling the world and passports, how not to get deported... And the day before, Christina had been in a used video store in Milan, and she'd bought *Marie Antoinette*, and I'd never seen it. So after the show, I didn't realise he was actually the guy who did the soundtrack. And Christina said, 'Oh, *that guy* did the piano score to this!'

I read an interview where you said you had 'stay(ed) up, drinking whiskey and talking about the decline of human existence.' I don't know how tongue in cheek that was...

A: It's not, it's true!

Fantastic, so what exactly were you grumbling about?

A: I don't know if there was one particular subject on the decline of humanity. We were both going through a lot of things in our lives, and sometimes when you meet someone new and you don't know each other at all, there's this feeling you have with people sometimes. You have this weird connection personally. We had so many coincidences in our lives at the time. Details in the women we were with and our backgrounds, so it was just like, 'Man, I feel like I've known this guy my whole life.' And suddenly the conversation turns in directions you could never really go with other people. We had this kinship.

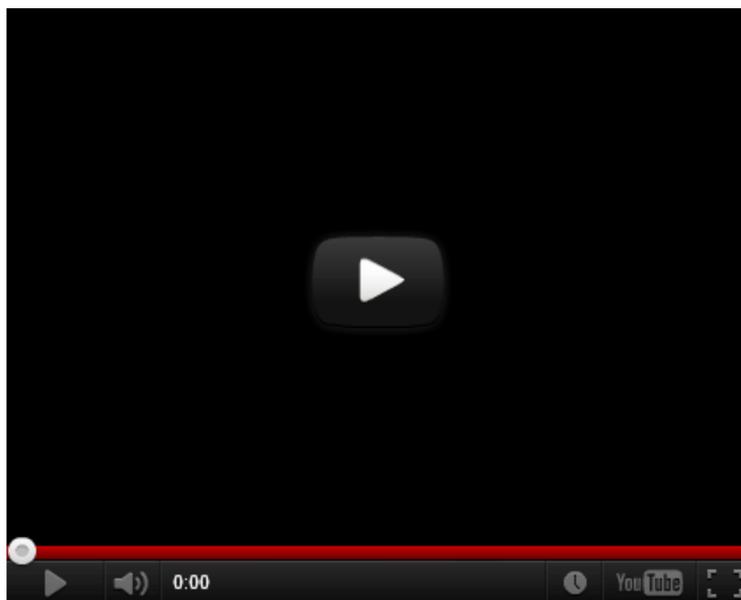
D: We were getting older so we decided it was time to start experimenting and buying good bottles of whiskey. So every time he came to Berlin or I came to Brussels, one of us would bring some new bottle of whiskey we'd discovered. And it inevitably opens up conversations about the decline of human existence. (*laughs*) But I think that's kind of a subject for us too, on this record. These are really strange times, for everybody. Everybody feels this, you know, sense that something is going to happen. And in some ways it's the most natural thing to happen and also there is this anxiety about it. And for us, there's something *in* the music, this feeling of ultimate peace but also of ultimate hopelessness.

The band name says it all, right.

A: 'Sullen' has many connotations. It doesn't just mean depressing, it actually means something that moves very slowly. So obviously my mother regarded me as a sullen boy when I was a kid, but sullen has many, many meanings and connotations. And yes, of course we did go around the loops many times about the band name. I was always very against just Winged Victory because it sounded like some Backstreet Boys cover band or something. So it just fit. As I've said many times I like coming up with dumb band names and this one worked well for me.

D: And we figured 2012 was coming up so this could be a nice soundtrack to the end of the world.

'Requiem For A Static King'



Can you tell me about the most beautiful place you went to record the album, or the one that sticks in the memory?

D: All of them had a pretty significant feel on the record. The first place we recorded was in the Grunewald Church in Berlin. I did a concert there, and the piano is one of the most beautiful sounding pianos. And as we were writing the pieces we realised we also needed a really large bass sound in the piano. And they have a Bösendorfer Imperial, which has one octave lower in the bass end. Which was built for a lot of Wagner pieces. And in this church it has tremendous bass, so that was the place we started. We did the sessions at night after the concerts, and we recorded all night into the morning. And as we were recording these pieces, we realised we wanted to have this natural decay, so you can really conceal the openness. And so many people are working on the computer, trying to recreate it. But when you do it in real spaces, it's just something that you feel. We wanted to make it a special record and going to these places is what made it happen.

How did you feel at the time, recording this emotional, powerful music in historical venues?

D: We pretty much poured our hearts out into this record. Getting the right take and emotional feel was always really important. There was one, 'A Symphony Pathétique', we took a long time to get that piano take. We went to Italy just to record that one piece on this one piano. That's how picky we were being. Because, we'd have the right take but we didn't have the right piano sound. And we wanted to make sure that both were combined and we really had this feeling. It was about the resonance and the emotion that went into playing it. But the tonality of the recording is also, I think, what transports the emotion, and that was equally as important to us as the take.

A: It was very satisfying, especially on that particular piece. These single notes, a lot of the time, were changing the whole course of the composition. That last session, we took these two notes out and it was like, 'Holy shit, what happened? I think we just did it!'. It was like discovering life on Mars or something. It was a really special moment when we finally got that take. 'Cause we'd worked on that one longer than any of the other songs, and it's kind of the beast on that record and it really shows.

I'll finish up by asking about the song 'Requiem For A Static King', which was "created in the memory of Mark Linkous' untimely passing"...

A: Yeah, Static King was his nickname, it was the name of his studio. And that's what everyone called him. He died some months after we started this, and when I came back from his funeral, it seemed more clear that I just wanted to give a gift or something to him. Because he was really such a big influence on my life. It's very sad for me to think about him because he was, God, he was such an amazing person and so many people will never know that. I hope they can feel how much he meant to me. I'll never forget him.

D: Yeah. Obviously I didn't know him like Adam did. But without him, this project wouldn't exist. That's more or less the catalyst for the existence of this music. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

A: If it wasn't for him we wouldn't be here talking to you today.