

Dark Night Of The Soul: Danger Mouse interview



The excitement on the internet was palpable when word first surfaced that the producer and former **Gnarls Barkley** member **Brian Burton** a.k.a. **Danger Mouse** might be teaming up with the creative force behind the lo-fi, melodic, ethereal pop creations of **Sparklehorse**- **Mark Linkous**.

It piqued even further when word got out film director **David Lynch** was creating visuals for the collaboration and that **Wayne Coyne** of The Flaming Lips was involved as well as folks like **Vic Chesnutt**, **Gruff Rhys** and **Iggy Pop**.

A tentative schedule for release in spring 2009 boded well and the 'Sparklemouse/Dangerhorse' project was given a proper name, **Dark Night Of The Soul**. Then, unfortunately, a hurdle was hit - a legal hurdle that meant 2009 saw the somewhat under promoted trickling out of the **Dark Night Of The Soul** book containing a blank cdr and the instruction "For Legal Reasons, enclosed CD-R contains no music. Use it as you will." a direct nod to the fact that the album had by then leaked onto the internet.

Things then went quiet until early 2010 when it was announced the legal obstacles had been overcome and the project would finally see a full and proper release. Sadly though the news came just weeks before **Mark Linkous** would end his life, passing away in March 2010, meaning the official full release would be dedicated to both his and contributor **Vic Chesnutt's** memory following the latter's own suicide at Christmas 2009.

It casts a shadow no doubt, but cannot detract from the beauty and fragility of the music and the success of a project that was as creatively ambitious as it was beset with obstacles.

In this previously unpublished interview, which was the first Brian gave about the project following Linkous' passing, we spoke to Danger Mouse about how he first discovered the music of Sparklehorse and the project's inception, creation and final fruition as well as about working with both **Mark Linkous** and **David Lynch**.

Q: Hi Brian

Dangermouse: Hey

Q: How are you doing?

DM: Pretty good, pretty good... just relaxing.

Q: Whereabouts are you today?

DM: I'm in Seattle just now.

Q: How's the Broken Bells tour going?

DM: Pretty good so far.

Q: Firstly then, you must be quite happy that the album's finally getting a proper release without the cdr?

DM: Yeah, yeah it'll be cool with all the packaging and a regular release. It's definitely the way I wanted it to be.

Q: What were the legal issues that had held it up?

DM: Uh, I can't talk about it, I'm not allowed to - lawyers and everything {laughs}

Q: Ok, no worries, can we talk about how you first heard about Mark Linkous, long before the project first came about?

DM: I worked in a record store and a college radio station in Athens, Georgia so there was always stuff you hear, and I heard It's A Wonderful Life when it first came out. I heard it was his third record so I went back and got really into the others as well right around that time.

Q: Did that record connect with you right away?

DM: I was pretty instantly into it because he had a really unique feel to what he was doing. I loved all the distortion, the kind of... sad and beautiful aspect but then this heavy overly-distorted static-y sound it had. The songwriting was always really good too.

Q: It's nice how it flips from the likes of Piano Fire - which is about two minutes of distortion - to Eyepennies, the longer sweeping ballad with beautiful imagery...

DM: Yeah, Piano Fire might be... yeah that might be my favourite song on that album. It's great.

Q: In the past would it be fair to say you've tended to work by a sort of album-by-album basis with people and that's your preferred way of working usually?

DM: In the past yeah, that was the way I liked to do things. With Sparklehorse though, with Mark the first time we worked together it wasn't for a whole album it was just for some songs on his fourth album [Dreamt For Light Years in The Belly of The Mountain]. We had just met and he just wanted to mess around. I wanted to learn from him so I was willing to try but that lead to us writing and recording together for the whole **Dark Night Of The Soul** album.

Q: Was that because you enjoyed working with each other so much on a personal level or was it because you both got something much bigger musically? What was the driving force?

DM: {Pauses} I think it was personality, we got to become good friends so we were looking for an excuse to hang out and make music together but the process was always a little difficult for us, not in a bad way. It took us a long time to get stuff we agreed on. Mark really takes his time and I usually work faster so I had to change a bit. I know it sounds corny but it was worth the difficult nature of making the album to get something we thought would be unique to do.

Q: How did that work? Was it a case of you both there working together or did you send things back and forward till you were happy?

DM: No, we didn't send anything back and forth. Mark came out to my place with ideas he had, some stuff started with ideas I had and we would help each other finish. Some we came up with together. There were a couple of things Mark [took] back and worked on, he had his own studio. But for the most part it was done in my place in LA.

Q: In terms of being in the studio, you're both already known for your own production styles and techniques, what did you learn from him?

DM: I guess certain techniques. I don't want to get into too many details but the way he got certain sounds and feels on guitar. And just overall subtle stylistic things that I don't pay much attention to now but if I needed to I could probably source back to him.

Q: What was he like to work with? He seemed like he'd have a good sense of humour so it's hard to imagine if he's methodical or if he was spontaneous once he was in the studio?

DM: He tended to work on stuff for a while. He'd be really into getting the right sound, he'd spend hours and hours. He was into gear and knew a whole lot more than I did about the 'engineering of sound'. I definitely learned to be patient. But as far as sense of humour, he was a pleasure to be around for sure. The actual recording, we didn't butt heads so much, it was just it took a while for us both to be satisfied but we knew we were gonna get there. We liked the ideas we had... [but] we didn't know what the album was gonna sound like, who was gonna be singing, we didn't really know.

Q: So it was kind of like finding a groove working together, then getting an idea of the bigger project and the direction it was headed in?

DM: Yeah.

Q: I read that you both had a list of singers that you wanted to add to the project, who did you each choose?

DM: It was more or less we said we wanted these people we knew. I put down Jason Lytle [Granddaddy], Iggy Pop, Suzanne and James Mercer. Then he put Nina [Persson, formerly of The Cardigans] and we both thought about Wayne Coyne. I wanted to ask Gruff [Rhys], I was friends with him. It turned out there were a lot of people we knew and they all just kinda fitted together. We just went after it.

Q: In terms of getting the collaborator's contributions, did you send tracks back and forth or did they drop into the studio?

DM: Some of them were done by sending files back and forth because people have their own ways of recording, and there were people all over the world. It was different for each person, I went to Iggy, I went to Frank Black - some of 'em came to Mark or me.

Q: A lot of arranging...

DM: It was! One was in Miami, one was in Oregon... it took a long time to do this album but it was worth it.

Q: When did you start it roughly?

DM: Roughly in 2006... when the Sparklehorse album came out. We had demos from the recording of his album that we knew we were gonna use for a different project so that was probably the beginning.

Q: When you approached the guests, what was the sort of pitch or brief you gave them along with the track they sang on? Or was it just musical ideas at that stage?

DM: Some people we gave a few tracks to and said, 'Do you have any ideas on these?' Some we sent vocal melodies to, some stuff we didn't at all - it just depended on the person and the song.

Q: Did you give them any lyrics or was that all of their own making?

DM: No, that was all their thing. That was interesting because a lot of the lyrics overlap as far as themes but we didn't tell them what we wanted. We just gave them to them and saw what they came up with.

Q: It must've been tricky trying to make something cohesive with so many variables compared to a normal band project. Thirteen tracks with a huge number of different vocalists, but it seems to work and each contributor is instantly recognisable, nobody loses their identity. What would you credit that to?

DM: I don't know. I imagine having done almost all the music first there was an overall feel there directing them where to go vocally and the results seemed to have worked out... I think they worked out, I guess you did too. It is daunting. Originally we were maybe gonna get three or four people to do songs and make it more cohesive but we couldn't pass up the idea of trying out some people just to give it a shot. Nobody was paid, no contracts, everything was just "Do you wanna try this. It may or may not work?" Y'know, nobody had a gun to their head or was expecting any huge payout. They did it because they wanted to try it out, so there was never any pressure for us to use everything we had.

Q: And the visual aspect, was that something you had the idea for? I believe you were a fan of David Lynch already.

DM: Yeah, pretty much. We were close to finishing. I felt there was cohesiveness but that it would benefit from a visual element so, he was the person I figured would work. I knew Mark was a really huge fan, so I didn't tell him, I didn't want him to get his hopes up. I sent [Lynch] some music and talked to him about it. He was really into the idea and we decided to do it as stills as opposed to videos. We thought stills would be really cool and then the idea of doing a gallery, so it worked out.

Q: Was Mark quite excited when you told him then?

DM: {Smiling} Oh... he couldn't believe me at all! He's the biggest Lynch fan I think I know, and I'm obviously a big fan but I knew Mark was gonna be really, really excited. When I told him he was... he called me back and asked, "I don't mean to be rude, but are you bullshitting me?". {Smiling} I'm like "No, man!" I said "He's gonna do something - I don't know what yet but he's into it - he's in". He was ecstatic.

Q: It must have been amazing to be such fans and for him to come on board like that.

DM: Oh, yeah... it was great. I remember we did the gallery show in LA and it was as happy as I've seen [Mark]. He said it was [one of the] best days of his life... I mean he was so, so excited about it.

Q: Really...

DM: Yeah, it was really good to see that. It was bittersweet. We were bummed because the album wasn't coming out with it. But the gallery itself, and people hearing the music... it was really on our mind that we pulled off this whole project. We were really excited, I know Mark was really happy.

Q: Were you surprised to get the songs aswell from Lynch in the end, including the title track? Did he tell you that was something he really wanted to do?

DM: When I talked to him he joked about singing on it. I'd seen Inland Empire and heard the music. When I realised he'd done some of the cool songs I bought them on iTunes and thought he would really fit. So Mark and I went back and put some music together. One song was an existing one and what became the title track was put together mostly by Mark for David. We had given him a few to choose from but those two were the ideas he was into. When we got Dark Night Of The Soul back we were floored, we loved it and he said, "I did try this other one but I'm not sure, I think it's cool." I thought it was great. We were thinking of using it as a B-side but we liked it too much so we put it on the album. That was Star Eyes.

Q: Film work, scoring... would you ever see yourself collaborating on something bigger [with him] further down the line maybe?

DM: I don't know, I mean. I don't know. I think luckily, we've both had a really positive experience with this and it's both still somewhat ongoing, he lives down the street and we'll know each other for a while so who knows, but, yeah, who knows? It's possible.

Q: What are your favourites of his film work?

DM: Em, I don't really like picking favourites but I recently watched Mullholland Drive again and I love that film.

Q: Are you totally sure of what happens in it now?

DM: {Smiling} Nooo, that's not completely necessary. I live in LA so the way it's done in Hollywood and everything I just love the feel of it.

Dark Night Of The Soul is out now.

Visit the [Dark Night Of The Soul website](#).

(Coming shortly) Enter to [win a copy of the Ltd. deluxe double vinyl boxed set](#).

[Buy a copy of Dark Night Of The Soul](#).

Interview: Andy Thomson.

Subbed: Eve Barlow.

2:54 PM | 19/08/2010