

The Rock's Backpages Flashback: A Mark Linkous Interview

By Joss Hutton (1997) | Rock's Backpages – Mon, Mar 8, 2010 1:58 PM EST

The awful news that Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous took his own life on Saturday takes us back to this personal and revealing interview from the UK's Bucketful Of Brains. Joss Hutton met Mark in London, just after the release of Sparklehorse's extraordinary first album.--Barney Hoskyns, Editorial Director, Rock's Backpages

You've probably read quite a lot in the music press--over the past six months or so--about Sparklehorse's songwriter, guitarist and vocalist Mark Linkous:

How he took a valium-induced tumble in a London hotel bathroom during January 1996, cutting off the circulation to his legs, which necessitated an extended stay in St. Mary's hospital, London. That the "American Gothic" music that he makes is full of "self-loathing." How he lives in the middle of Virginia--presumably in a "Spirit Ditch." That he sits in a wheelchair and sings country songs about horses. About the drugs and the decadence.



Well, all the above--in true sensationalist style--is part of the story but still kind of an insult to the man--if taken as gospel, that is. Anyone inspired to seek out any of Sparklehorse's releases--in search of a quick vicarious thrill--must have been left totally perplexed.

You see, dear reader, Mark Linkous's music is too damn heartfelt and soulful to be placed in any pigeonhole (dreamed up by musically ignorant, angle-hungry hacks) reserved for the latest recipient of the kooky/strange/drug-addled/next Brian Wilson/tortured artist/lo-fi genius mantle. His beguiling synthesis of pop and country styles is simply too special to categorize. Suffice to say, we at **Bucketful of Brains** consider Mark's releases to be the most fascinating of the year.

As the **BoB** team was privileged and delighted to discover--at London's Garage back in September--the intimate, textured sound of the studio recordings translate surprisingly well into a live setting. Mark's vocals and guitar playing are even more expressive when bolstered by his crack touring band. The artful re-arrangements of album tracks and some wonderful new material held us all spellbound. Whatta night! A return engagement--at London's Union Chapel--in November, supporting the vastly overrated Mazzy Star, has just left us with a craving for more.

It was late one Tuesday night when I got a call from Mark--who was comfortably settled in his Remo Bluffs, Virginia home, sipping cocktails with his wife Teresa -- and we shot the breeze a while. What came over the strongest during the course of our conversation was his sly, gentle sense of humor and his love of the finer things in life. So, hunker down with your favorite beverage, slip on a copy of **Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot** and enjoy the ride....

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Did you see much of London after you got out of hospital?

No--not really--I didn't have time. As soon as I got out of hospital, we flew home.

What did you do to while away the hours in St. Mary's? My A&R guy got me a T.V. with a VCR built into it. My wife would go down to Blockbuster, rent videos and the nurses would sorta creep in and watch stuff with me. It was good but kinda hard 'cause Teresa would rent **Mr. Bean** videos and they would make me laugh so hard that it was painful to watch 'em.

What other British comedy do you enjoy?

Well, definitely the old Monty Python stuff. Do you remember his series called **Ripping Yarns**? I love Michael Palin.

How did you enjoy your last trip to London?

It was great, the best time I've ever had touring.

I understand that you didn't really enjoy the gig at the Garage?

Well, I was really nervous about that gig and I think I had one too many cocktails. [Sniggers] My voice wasn't very good. There was such a good turnout at Manchester, that I was afraid...

Of what?

I dunno, just afraid--I guess because there had been so much press and stuff. I think that by not wanting to disappoint people I tried to relax just a little bit too much. If I have one too many drinks -- I mean, I don't drink very much--my voice just doesn't act right.

How are you feeling now?

I'm trying to relax a little bit, been working on some motorcycles.

What was the first thing you did when you got back to the States?

I rode my motorcycle (sniggers).

What sort of bikes have you got? Are you into old stuff like Indians?

I'm really into Italian bikes--I've got two early '70s Moto-Guzzi's--but I'd like to have an Indian. I saw some guys at a bike show a couple of months ago. Two old guys were on Indians that looked as if they'd just been hauled out of a barn or jerked through a field--I like 'em when they're all f**ked-up. I'm not into the Harley thing--\$10-20 thousand dollars to be a rebel (laughs).

What sort of stuff do you have on your farm? Do you grow your own vegetables?

Nah, we just have some horses and a bunch of dogs. I have an old truck to haul firewood in--I used to cut all my own wood.

So you lead a pretty rural existence?

Yeah, definitely. We live in the middle of nowhere. Actually, they do sell crack not far from where we live. They're are a lot of poor black people that live around here--sorta leftovers from the plantation era.

What did you think of that issue of *BoB* that we slipped you at the Garage gig?

I didn't know it was still around! A long time ago, when I worked at Dutch East India distribution in New York, I used to always steal it. I remember that there were some Soft Boys articles in there...

Yeah, and stuff like the Dream Syndicate. Your guitarist, Paul, said you knew the guys from Gutterball?

Yeah, Bob [Rupe] played bass on my album. He's in Cracker now, with Johnny [Hott]--the drummer--who was in House Of Freaks.

What, musically, did you do before Sparklehorse? You've been quoted as saying that George Jones is your favorite singer...

Well, I wanted to be in a punk rock band--as soon as I heard the Sex Pistols--but, yeah, he's always been my favorite singer. Even when I was into punk rock, I never completely abandoned my "country roots."

Did you listen to country stuff when you were growing up?

Yeah, [Johnny Cash](#), [George Jones](#) and bluegrass music was all around that part of Virginia. [The Stanley Brothers](#), who are actually distant relatives of mine, are from Faith County, which is very rural and way back in the mountains--it's coal mining country. Have you ever seen *Coal Miner's Daughter*? Well, that was filmed where I'm from.

It's strange that you mentioned such disparate influences 'cause there's two very different sides to your music--pop and country. How do you explain it--a split personality?

Well, after [the Sex Pistols](#) I got a little bored with punk and got into [Big Star](#) and Alex Chilton's stuff, early [Cheap Trick](#) and all that. When people started saying that my album sounds country I was quite surprised. It's not obvious to me. It's not a conscious effort at all.

What modern bands do you enjoy?

Well, I like [Guided By Voices](#) and Granddaddy, they're real good. Do you like [Pavement](#)? Some of their stuff I really love. I went to see them and thought to myself that there's a fine line between genius and boredom!

Paul Watson, your touring guitarist, said that your lyrics had quite a "literary feel" to them. Are you influenced more by other lyrics or by authors?

Mostly by books. I definitely steal lines here and there...

Did you steal the line from "Spirit Ditch" that goes, "horse-laughter is dragging pianos to the ocean", from a Louis Bunuel film?

Yeah, I think that image is from *Un Chien Andalou*.

What other films or film makers do you admire?

I definitely love all Hitchcock's stuff, like *Rear Window*, *The Lady Vanishes* and *Vertigo*--I'm starting to watch a load of those again. I like the Coen brothers' stuff, like *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona* (laughs)--they're my favorites. I kinda liked *Reservoir Dogs* when I saw it but now, I don't know, I just really hate Quentin Tarantino.

Yeah, I hope he doesn't get his claws into something really good, like any of Eddie Bunker's books, 'cause he'd really make a mess of it.

Oh, I could definitely see that happening. I just loaned one of Eddie Bunker's books out to someone--he's great.

I think that, fellow Virginian, writer Pinkney Benedict has a similar feel to yourself. You've referred to him in interviews, are you friends?

I'm just a big fan of his. A friend of mine lives in Louisburgh, where he has a dairy farm, --I knew that much about him. So, I was in a hardware store there and I thought, "what the f**k,"--his name was in the book, I called the number and he answered the phone.

What did you say to him?

I said, "Well, I didn't really expect you to answer the phone. I'm just a big fan, I've read all your books and I need more stuff to read. I've run out of authors, could you recommend any?" He mentioned Bob Hannah, who I didn't think was as good as Pinkney, and a guy--who's dead now--called D.J. Pancake, who's really great.

What about Raymond Carver or Charles Bukowski?

I've never read any Carver but Bukowski was pretty much the first author I read. I used to not read at all but one of my ex-girlfriends had a huge library. I think she was a little smarter than I was--she would read Celine--and she recommended that I read Bukowski. Eventually I got a little bored with him. I think Cormac McCarthy is probably my favourite writer now, especially his earlier stuff, like *Child Of God* and *Outer Dark*--which freaked me out so much. I didn't know anyone else who had read it so I gave it to my friend David Lowery. He finally read it and called me from France, he had just finished it, and was all freaked out!

Which is, I guess, the best reaction you can hope for.

Definitely!

Staying on a literary theme, how did you come to appropriate the Fugs' version of William Blake's poem "London"?

[Laughs] I heard it through one of the guys in my band. Some of the Fugs were local guys. Well, Toby Benny, who I think wrote the chords and everything, was...

It sounds like the Everly Brothers--that close harmony thing--and it's got a great trumpet solo too.

Yeah, that's really nice. I'm surprised that you have that, it's fairly rare.

I picked it up at a car boot sale--I guess what you'd call a swap meet.

Wow! [Laughs]

What's the set up of your home studio like? The album sounds really coherent--I couldn't even tell that there was a drum machine on some tracks until it was pointed out to me.

Even drummers don't! I credited "Al Esis" as a human in a band bio and lot of people didn't even notice! I've already finished four or five songs for the next album, right here at home. I think I'm gonna do most of it here. I've got a digital eight track set-up and some cool old amplifiers.

Are you gonna go for more orchestration?

I'm thinking more like a "special electric string section"! [Laughs] Scott Fitzsimmons, who played stand-up bass on tour, is an excellent string arranger and writer.

Were the songs on the last album written chronologically?

No, some of the songs were 10 years old, like "Someday I Will Treat You Good," and some were written the night before they were recorded, like "Cow" and "Weird Sisters."

Where did you get the idea of the Dictaphone solo on "Spirit Ditch"?

I'd left that space open on the song--for some kind of solo--and I didn't wanna do a guitar solo. I was bored so I called home --to check my messages--and my mom had left that message.

Do you still use the same tape on stage?

Yeah, I still have that but I think it's died. I'll have to get another.

Are you worried about the second album syndrome?

Yeah, I am worried about it actually (chuckles). I've saved some of the straighter, more "poppy" songs for the second album but I don't know if I like 'em any more...

Has your label got a release window scheduled for you yet?

Yeah! Parlophone have been really smart with my records, they really have their shit together. The guy who runs the label and me agreed that we'll release a song called "Pain Birds" as a single before the next album.

Didn't you play that at the Garage gig?

Yeah, we usually always play it. I think the recording is really good--kinda getting into a low-down style--like a military beat. I dunno--it's kinda hard to describe--I think it sounds very interesting to me. I judge a lotta things like; is it gonna sound cool in five years?

So Parlophone isn't really intruding too much.

No, they haven't been pushy at all about my next record. The only thing is that they decide on which songs should be released as singles. I think that--a lotta the time--record companies will go for songs with the "mass consumption" factor--which has proven to be successful in the past--and that just creates a whole f**kin' dogma about what's heard and what people are even exposed to. I would love to hear "Spirit Ditch" on the radio y'know--by any band. If I heard a song like that on the radio it would make me go "what?"

Is your recording technique meticulous or closer to, what Jim Dickinson calls, the "happy accident" approach?

There was definitely a lot of that--the whole serendipity factor was very prevalent on the album. Just little things, like on that "Ballad of A Cold Lost Marble"--the instrumental thing.

There are found sounds all over the album. Where do you get them from?

Records--or I record them myself. That particular song; I asked my guitar player to come in and do some kinda Fred Frith-type sh*t on it. He went to go plug into this teeny-tiny amplifier that I used to sing through a lot--it's actually like one of the first micro guitar amplifiers--I guess it was dying. As soon as he plugged in it started making that "raaargh, raaargh" sound. I said, "don't touch the strings."

I think that your stage sound is quite different to the records--are you happy with it?

I usually hate live recordings--stage recordings. It's just weird--the whole accident thing comes in again--we did a Mark Radcliffe show and even though they had a plush, professional recording studio I don't think that it came out very well.

Did you find the British press's attitude towards you kind of strange? I thought that you were portrayed very much as a victim--with regard to your accident--rather than the focus being squarely on your music.

The British press always seem to mention it. I liked that the *NME* capitalized it--like, "The Accident." Everyone has a morbid curiosity and it seems like so many publications are intrigued by the drugs involved--the decadence. I'm guilty of the same thing y'know. In the early '80s I was a big fan of Daniel Johnston and I'd play somebody some of his stuff and say, "Yeah, he's in a mental institution."

What do you think when people paint you as a weird guy who lives out in the middle of nowhere and use terms like "American Gothic" to describe your music?

[Laughs] Well, it doesn't seem odd to me. I've lived in New York and Los Angeles--I don't wanna live in the cities anymore. Privacy is real important to me--I don't like to be disturbed and I don't wanna disturb other people. It's nice to be able to sit out on the porch.

Can you deal with being surrounded by lots of people?

Well, I've kinda had fainting spells before--like at our one and only show in Los Angeles. Afterwards there were supposed to be record company people to meet me and--they were supposed to come in one at a time--it was just a swarm of people. It turned out to be a hundred people at least and I just sorta passed out.

So, have you played all over the States?

Yeah, unfortunately. The thing is that--when you're only appreciated in two cities in the States, New York and Los Angeles and they're 3,000 miles apart--everywhere else they think that you're pretty much a weirdo or something.

What does your family think of your music?

I don't think that they really understand it. My brother is in a band called Spike The Dog--they sorta remind me of early [Camper Van Beethoven](#) or early [Fairport Convention](#)--it's pretty cool stuff!

Favorite Books:

Child Of God — Cormac McCarthy

Outer Dark — Cormac McCarthy

The Stories Of... — D.J. Pancake

The Wars Of Heaven — Richard Curry

Dogs Of God — Pinkney Benedict

Favorite Beverages:

"Insanely chocolatey milkshakes"

Lemonade

Double Capuccino

Guinness Extra Stout

Maybe it's too soon to say--but I'll wager that the body of work that he's released so far is the start of something really special. If he can withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous publicity and maintain his personal equilibrium--messing about with motorbikes and horses on his farm and recording with his friends--then he could run as long as, ooh, Johnny Cash or George Jones. S**t, that's something to look forward to.