

Shine On

Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse is running the race his way.

by Amy Kiser

Back when Mark Linkous, the man behind Sparklehorse, was dirt poor, he would venture into the woods near his Virginia farmhouse and root around for pieces of old rusty tin. "I'd make whirligigs out of them or shoot them up with a shotgun and write, 'This was shot with a twelve-gauge shotgun at 3 p.m. on August 2 from ten feet away' on them and then try to sell it as folk art," he drawls. "And people would actually buy it. I'd take them into Charlottesville or Richmond, and I actually sold quite a few of them."

After inking a contract with Capitol Records five years ago, Linkous wound up with a far fatter budget than the one to which he'd grown accustomed, and the subsequent success of his 1995 debut, *vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*, meant that he no longer needed to patch together gewgaws for subsistence. But as demonstrated by *Good Morning Spider*, his sophomore offering, his scavenging days are not yet behind him. The CD was recorded at Static King, his one-room studio set in the middle of a field, and features songs hammered together using junk-store treasures and the occasional found object. "I do still search around for discarded things like plowing disks," Linkous says. "Sometimes plowing disks make really good high hats."

Linkous wound up on this idiosyncratic course only after rejecting the path most taken. Like so many small-town teens hypnotized by the mythic promises of the coastal metropolises, the soft-spoken musician, who'd played in punk bands during his Virginia high school days, lit out for New York City as soon as he graduated. "I ended up getting into a band with guys a little bit older than me and being more of a pop group, like a Flamin' Groovies kind of deal," he recalls. "Then the band moved from New York to Los Angeles and things got really bad out there, and we broke up. I was really disillusioned with the scene and traditional pop music, and I just started hating it."

The Tom Waits album *Swordfishtrombones*, which a friend gave him, became a lifeline of sorts--"and then somebody turned me on to Daniel Johnston and this totally homemade, field-recording documentary style," he says. "That really inspired me and sort of saved me. I just quit and moved back to Virginia and started playing traditional Irish music."

For a while, Linkous spent his time picking banjo in an all-acoustic group and setting the words of poet/mystic William Blake to music. Before long, though, he was writing off-kilter tunes of his own and enjoying the isolation of rural Fluvanna County, Virginia, in ways that he never had prior to experiencing tangled urban intrigue firsthand. "I think that's when I started doing really good music," he notes. "'Cause I just said fuck it to the whole thing and started doing four-track and eight-track recordings. And other musicians would pass them around."

Steve Wynn and David Lowery of Cracker eventually wound up with Linkous tapes, but it was the copy that reached the members of Radiohead that paid off most handsomely. The mega-selling Brits instantly cottoned to Linkous's charming creations, which are as odd and imperfectly matched as a buffet of casseroles at a Sunday potluck, and their endorsement promptly vaulted Sparklehorse into the big-label realm of money and exposure. When asked where he would be without Radiohead's support, he says, "I'm really not sure. I think there would probably be some sort of underground following, maybe similar to Vic Chesnutt's audience, but I guess it's helped having rock stars being into Sparklehorse."

The reference to Chesnutt makes sense. Like Linkous, Chesnutt is an eccentric Southern singer/songwriter who was raised from obscurity thanks to the praise of a platinum-selling act--in his case, R.E.M. And the comparisons don't end there. Both men suffered injuries that affected their legs, and while Linkous is no longer dependent on a wheelchair--as is Chesnutt, who was injured in a car wreck when he was a hard-drinking young man--it was touch-and-go for a while.

For Linkous, his health nightmare began when he was touring Europe in support of his first album. After ingesting a handful of pills--a deadly combo of antidepressants and recreational drugs--Linkous says, "I collapsed, and it ended up fucking me up real bad."

Complicating Linkous's condition was the fact that his legs were pinned underneath him for the twelve hours it took for him to be found, bringing about a phenomenon called "Saturday night syndrome." In such situations, the cutting off of circulation causes potassium to build up in the limb in question--and when the limb is straightened, the accumulated minerals race into the bloodstream and induce a heart attack. Linkous, who flatlined for several minutes, knows all too well how close he came to dying as a result. "They ended up having to do all these operations, because it was like a chain reaction: my body shutting down, my organs not working."

Seven surgeries and many weeks in a London hospital later, Linkous realized how lucky he had been to fall ill in a country with socialized medicine. "At the time, I didn't have health insurance," he points out. "If it had happened anywhere else, I would have been fucked forever." An added bonus was the revelation that his recording had made more of an impact on listeners than he

had previously understood. "By the third month, when I was coherent enough to know what was going on, my walls were just covered with letters from people. I didn't know that the album had helped so many people in a positive way."

Because doctors had to remove most of the muscles from his calves, Linkous will have to wear leg braces for the rest of his life—but he's not complaining. Not only can he walk, but he can also ride the vintage motorcycles he enjoys collecting and restoring. This hobby is largely financed by the Sparklehorse singles Capitol peddles, including the Good Morning Spider track "Sick of Goodbyes." He describes the tune as his least favorite on the new record and seems less than enthusiastic that it turned up on a March airing of the schmaltzy TV series *Felicity*; he didn't see the show, although he admits that the script "looked pretty sad." But, he says, "I have a garage full of motorcycles that need parts, so they can use them for whatever they want."

Despite the flippancy of this remark, Linkous has struggled with some of the obligations major labels exact from their signees. "I really have had problems with it. Say in Europe or England, when we do a television show, you're expected to play whatever single is working, which is usually the most obvious pop song—which isn't going to contribute anything positive to the music industry in the first place. I'd much rather contribute something a little more interesting and different. It's a silent conspiracy; it's bullshit, really. A lot of times I think I've sacrificed my integrity by getting in when I should have said, 'Just fuck it. I'm going to play what I want to play, or I won't play at all.'"

To Linkous's credit, the two Sparklehorse LPs stay true to this credo: They sound like demos a major label wouldn't tickle with a ten-footer. On *Good Morning Spider*, brief aural shards are randomly sandwiched between standard-length numbers, the production frequently sounds as rough as a cedar plank, and the dynamics range from scorched earth to hushed granny. This variety appeals to Linkous, who says, "I kind of like to imagine an album as a galaxy, and each song is a planet. Some of them are different, some of them rotate off-axis, some of them are stars imploding."

How did Linkous push such an inconsistently textured disc through Capitol's quality-control machine? "We kind of tricked them on this record," he explains. "Gary Gersh was the president of the company at the time, and he's a real good guy. We'd finished all our touring, and it was time to do the second record, and he kept asking, 'Who's the producer? Who's the producer?' until we just came back and said, 'Well, Mark produced it, and it's finished. Here it is.' So I was able to get away with producing it myself."

Despite his fondness for doing things himself, Linkous isn't a garrisoned island. He's currently conspiring via the postal service with Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood, who's putting some theremin on songs Linkous mailed to him, and role model Tom Waits. The collaboration with Waits sounds typically unconventional. "When I was in Memphis, I took a little four-track recorder—just as simple as you can get—and recorded," Linkous says. "There was an old fucked-up Mellotron and some pianos in there, so I recorded this waltz tune with the Mellotron on the four-track, took it home, added to it on my digital recorders, then bounced it back down to four-track." Once he was satisfied, he sent the tape and the four-track to Waits, who is making contributions of his own.

In the end, the cassette will come home to Static King, which used to be a room in Linkous's farmhouse before he moved it 33 miles down the road. While he says he wouldn't mind someday trekking to Easley's, a Memphis establishment where discs by Pavement, Guided by Voices, and Cat Power were cut, he appreciates the convenience of his primitive facility. "It's good being able to have your own little studio," he says. "You're not on the clock, so you can experiment. You can spend all day trying to get a good sound out of something and then go back the next day and erase it if it's shitty."

This sort of tinkering has helped Linkous establish his own sonic trademarks, including a predilection for creepily close vocals. "Yeah, I love that," he notes. "A lot of people say, 'It sounds like you're just whispering in my ear,' and that's exactly what I'm trying to do. Intimate is good. I'm probably one of the only musicians who hates reverb. When people record records, they put reverb on almost everything, and it makes it sound far away and like you're in a tunnel."

According to Linkous, his anti-reverb prejudice developed because he initially couldn't afford studio effects—and when he went without them, he learned to appreciate the breath and spittle a dry mic yields. A similar philosophy explains why he feels most comfortable in the relative isolation of the small hamlets where Sparklehorse was birthed rather than a music-industry center. "It's advantageous the majority of the time," he says. "If you're in L.A., you can't go down to the local music store and get a couple of rusty plowing disks."

"That's one thing I really admire about country people—their ability to improvise."

Sparklehorse, with Varnaline. 10 p.m. Sunday, April 11, Grog Shop, 1765 Coventry Road, Cleveland Heights, \$8, Ticketmaster 216-241-5555.