

Here Comes The Painbird



A Talk with

Sparklehorse's

Mark Linkous

Way out in **Dilwyn, Va.**, there's a guy who has a farm. In a barn on his farm he labors over dreamy expressionist ballads and machine-gun-tough rock anthems that have been alternately compared to great Surrealist paintings and obscure French art films. The guy is **Mark Linkous**. His band / one-man-recording project is **Sparklehorse**. Revered as one of contemporary rock's true visionaries in Europe, where Sparklehorse's second full-length disc *Good Morning Spider*, has been proclaimed

(like his startling 1996 debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*) a stone-cold masterpiece, Linkous & Co. often can't get arrested here at home. The man himself took some time between distorting casio beats to chat with *Grip*'s own **Don Harrison** about *Good Morning Spider*'s belated domestic U.S. release on **Capitol** , the importance of having a savvy manager, and his own recent , scary, brush with death.

Grip Monthly: Hey, listen, you want to do this later? Sounds like you 're recording.

Mark Linkous: No, I need to take a break anyway.

Grip: A brain break?

Linkous: Yeah (laughs). I'm doing another Daniel Johnston cover and I'm trying to sample some of his original piano parts. But his tempo is kinda . . . weird.

Grip: You might want to make the tempo your own. Are you a friend of his?

Linkous: Yeah, over the telephone. My mom is friends with Mabel, his mom. For years and years I wanted to collaborate with (Johnston) and had been warned by people how 'crazy' he was supposed to be. So I got my mom to call over to his house and her and Mabel became real good friends (as a result).

Grip: That's cool. Your Mom as Advance Man.

Linkous: Yeah.

Grip: Have you ever collaborated with him?

Linkous: No, not yet. He moved. He used to live in West Virginia but now he's moved to Austin. I cover his "Hey Joe" on *Good Morning Spider*.

Grip: Your studio is in a horse field, right? What kind of equipment do you have set up in your recording barn?

Linkous: I have a 16-track Hi-8 machine. Super cheap sampler, \$300 sampler. Casio samples are all over too. The rhythm parts to "Hey Joe" are a distorted casio.

Grip: I don't want to dwell on this, but how have you been since your accident (Linkous passed out in a U.K. hotel room and injured his legs severely)?

Linkous: Well, I have to wear braces on my legs. Essentially I lost my calf muscles because, when I passed out, I had my legs under me. All I remember is waking up in the hospital with tubes running out of me and I ended up being there (in Europe) for three months. I passed out with my legs up under me, my circulation was cut and all the potassium that is built up in the limbs has been cut off. So, when they straighten your limbs out all that potassium that's built up goes to your heart and you have a heart attack. So, yeah, that happened to me and they tell me I flatlined for a few minutes. I don't remember.

Grip: Have you recuperated well since then?

Linkous: Yeah. I'm not in a wheelchair. I'm doing a lot better.

Grip: When you perform, do you generally sit down.

Linkous: I used to but I stand now.

Grip: What would be a typical day for you out in Dilwyn? Would you record all day or do you just go in when you have a project?

Linkous: Well, this is the first time that I've ever had a building away from my house (to record in) so I've been out here almost every day since it got built. Usually I would spend my days working on motorcycles or something.

Grip: Have you lived in Dilwyn long?

Linkous: No. I lived in Bremono Bluff for seven years and just bought this farmhouse here about three months ago.

Grip: What was it about Dilwyn... did you just like the area?

Linkous: We didn't particularly like the county 'cause they do a lot of Clear Cutting. But I just happened to find out about this house in the middle of a big pine forest.

Grip: Secluded?

Linkous: Ah, you can just barely see one neighbor

Grip: What's it like living there? Are you into the life?

Linkous: (Chuckles) Oh yeah, I'm really into hanging out at Southern States, y'know. There's a Quickie Mart kind of place and all the old guys go there and have breakfast.

Grip: Do you ever take your tapes down there and say, 'hey guys, what you think of this mix?'

Linkous: No. I try to keep it very low-key.

Grip: You admittedly have an unusual recording setup. Has Capitol Records ever put pressure on you to normalize yourself— go for the Big Producer in an expensive studio or whatever?

Linkous: That's always been. . . even with this album. The most obvious pop songs were chosen (by them) as singles and you are expected to perform those songs on television shows, which was a bit of a problem. I would've much rather performed something more fresh and different— like "Rainmaker." On the new record, I have a very smart manager and A&R guy and we basically 'tricked' the label. The president was asking who the producer is and we were, um, the record is done. And we put it out (in the U.K.) really fast and they didn't fuck with it.

The only thing is: everyone (at Capitol) was screaming that "Happy Man" should be the single from the album and I was adamant that it stay on the album the way it is (joined with "Chaos of the Galaxy") and not re-record it. Then I happened to meet, when we played with P.J. Harvey, Eric Drew Feldman (ex-Capt. Beefheart). He produced the last two Frank Black records, which I love. Those are two very underrated records.

So I mentioned this situation to him, and he was into producing (the track). He was talking about going down to Easley (Studios) in Memphis where some of my favorite Pavement and Guided By Voices and Cat Power records were done , so I ended up compromising and he produced a version (of "Happy Man") with me there.

Grip: I have to apologize to Capitol. I had been screaming to the world that it was their fault that Good Morning Spider hadn't been released last year in the U.S., but you say that it was your manager who had that idea.

Linkous: He had some rumblings that Gary Gersh, who signed me (to Capitol), was leaving and partially it was because we didn't want (Spider) to come out at the same time in the U.S. as Everclear and the Foo Fighters and all that stuff.

Grip: You wouldn't have gotten any promotion backing at all from Capitol?

Linkous: Well, we just didn't want to have to compete for their attention.

Grip: What are recording now? Are you recording something to sell on tour?

Linkous: Stuff for the next record, and some b-sides.

Grip: You put a great little EP out, Chords I've known, after your debut. Something like that in the works?

Linkous: I don't know. One thing I've wanted to do is release an EP of radio broadcasts that we've done. There's some really good live BBC stuff.

Grip: Sparklehorse has had considerable success in the U.K.! Tell me about that.

Linkous: I think I just caught on over there. Radiohead asking us to tour with them two or three times helped.

Grip: Had you known the guys from Radiohead?

Linkous: They heard our first album in an EMI limousine in Egypt. (Laughs)

Grip: Perfect place to hear it. Actually, come to think of it, Radiohead's stuff isn't really worlds apart from what Sparklehorse is doing, is it?

Linkous: Yeah. It's like this Rolling Stone review I just got that compares *Good Morning Spider* to (Radiohead's) *OK Computer*. I dunno about that. Radiohead said that their song "No Surprises" was kinda like their Sparklehorse song but (I don't hear it). I just don't think I can do the 'majestic pop' thing like they do.

Grip: You are using orchestration, though, on Good Morning Spider. Did you record the strings in your home studio?

Linkous: Yeah, except the tracks on "Pig" and "100 Sparrows" were recorded in London when we had a few days off.

Grip: Did you hire the string players or were they already on tour with you.

Linkous: We had them in the (touring) band— a cello player, Sophie, who also plays keyboard and Jonathan (Siegel, ex-Camper Van Beethoven) plays violin. It's nice because it's kind of like a little special olympics string section, a little out-of-tune. . .

Grip: Salvation army sound.

Linkous: Yeah.

Grip: Does it cost you more to take extra players like that on tour with you?

Linkous: No, not really. So much of my music is me, here, in the studio, recording so much where I play everything. So I end up having a budget where I can hire people to come in and play things I can't play, like the Violin. I can't tell you how many violins I've owned and then sold. I just can't play the violin.

Grip: Do you basically lay down basic tracks by yourself and then have people overdub parts?

Linkous: Well, yeah the majority of the time. If the song is going to have drums I just program the drum machine and try to make it sound as 'non-machine-like' as possible. Which is really easy to do.

Grip: Like a click track?

Linkous: Sometimes like a click track (**a metronome-like beat for a later drummer to follow**), or sometimes I'll completely record a drum kit with all the changes and everything and then lay a bass and build on top of that. See, what bands usually do is go into a studio and spend a week or two and record all their basic tracks. Because I have my own recording gear I can just go song by song (and layer). I think that's one of the reasons why my records sound sort of. . . varied. I get really bored with records where, you know, every song sounds the same.

Grip: Sometimes, as with Good Morning Spider, it's often hard to tell where your songs begin and end. It's like a radio where you are going from station to station. . .

Linkous: Yeah.

Grip: Your first album had a bit of that, too. Where did you record your debut album, Vivadixiesubmarinetransmission-plot?

Linkous: I recorded that on David (Lowery)'s 8-track cassette deck. We would record at the house and then he went on tour (with Cracker) and left it with me and I learned how to use the thing. It didn't have any outboard gear at all, just a compressor, so I think that's when I started liking 'dry' recordings. It made the sound so much more in-your-face. Everything today is so heavily laden with reverb or whatever— I've developed a serious aversion to reverb.

Then David bought the Sound of Music studio in Richmond and, I guess, I was the first real client in there. He and I would just work on stuff whenever he wasn't on the road, working through the night. Now you can't even book time in the place (laughs). David himself has to come out here (to Dilwyn) to record now.

Grip: There's a real Richmond connection to Sparklehorse. Most of the people on the record with you, and on tour, are from Richmond?

Linkous: When I moved back here after living in Los Angeles (for a time), I moved to Richmond 'cause I had friends there and, yeah, I guess most of the musicians on the first record are from Richmond. Scott (Minor) has been in it from the beginning. He used to live in Richmond but he lives in Brooklyn now. So, now, the band is totally scattered: Jonathan lives in Los Angeles, Sophie and Scott in Brooklyn. . . we usually all get together about three days before a tour and rehearse

Grip: You told me before that you were planning on rehearsals with your band for a tour. Where are you going?

Linkous: I don't have my itinerary, but pretty much all over. The first date is in North Carolina.

Grip: Are you going to play D.C. or Virginia?

Linkous: No.

Grip: Whoa!

Linkous: Some of the worst gigs of my life have been in D.C. and Virginia.

Grip: Like, where?

Linkous: At the Boathouse, opening for Cracker.

Grip: Yow! I could've told you about that.

Linkous: And in D.C., playing at the Black Cat. We'd just come off of selling out a 2,000 seat hall in London and we travelled back home and played there in front of 10 people.

Grip: This was recently?

Linkous: Yeah.

Grip: D.C. is weird. It seems like you either have to be a big national star or you have to be one of the town's "elite" bands and there's nothing in between.

Linkous: I think, like, half the people there were guys from Fugazi.

Grip: Diggin' on you?

Linkous: Yeah.

Grip: Well, that's something at least.

Linkous: Yeah. I think if we did play Virginia, anywhere, we'd play the Tokyo Rose.

(Mr. Linkous did perform a special Va. solo gig soon after this interview, at Charlottesville's Tokyo Rose, to benefit the WTJU 91.1 Rock Marathon, and played an in-store at Plan 9 Records in Richmond on April 23. —Weenie Ed.)

Grip: Here's an obvious one. Who are your influences?

Linkous: Well, first and foremost, Johnny Cash. He had a television show (on ABC) when I was growing up and that television show inspired me to play music. And, of course, growing up in Southwestern Virginia and hearing bluegrass music. That got me into George Jones and Tammy Wynette and then to... The Monkees, Alice Cooper to Led Zeppelin and then I was totally into Punk Rock. I was way into punk.

Grip: Were you in a punk band?

Linkous: Yeah, I guess we were, like, the first punk band in Charlottesville. We were called The Sinners and we used to play this place called Poe's and I remember it was upstairs and we had to carry our amps up the stairs. Cool club, though, people would shoot guns in there and stuff. . .

Grip: Guns?

Linkous: Yeah. We would play those places before I was really old enough to be in there. We would play Ramones songs. And Blondie. Stuff like that.

Grip: Did you have your own songs?

Linkous: We had two songs. I was always, like, the lead guitar player so. . . I would always try to learn Jimmy Page parts and then I saw the Sex Pistols on TV and said, 'fuck, man I can do this.' It was so cool and so basic. . .

Grip: What was Charlottesville like in those days?

Linkous: Well, it wasn't like it is now. That's for sure. Of course, you always had to deal with somebody yelling 'freebird' and stuff like that. I don't know how long

you've been in Charlottesville, but I remember when (radio station) 3WV would smash 'punk' records on the air, like Elvis Costello's first record and stuff, and nobody. . . WTJU was, like, the only place where you could hear the Pistols on the radio.

Grip: Yeah, it's funny that Charlottesville has this really rich radio market now, with WTJU and WNRN, and then radio in other parts of the state is going to hell.

Linkous: Yeah, it's awful. I dunno, I don't get the WNRN station at all. It just sounds to me like (NRN) has the same playlist as every other college radio station out there. Everclear. . . oh boy! I'll be impressed when I hear Cat Power on WNRN.

Grip: Maybe late at night. Not at drivetime. So you like Cat Power, eh?

Linkous: Oh yeah, I love her stuff.

Grip: Have you ever met her or worked with her?

Linkous: No, I'd love to. I have been very fortunate to know and to work with people I've admired. Like Tom Waits. He's working on one of my songs now.

Grip: Oh wow. Which one?

Linkous: "Bloody Hands" Kind of a waltz-y thing.

Grip: Is it for his next record?

Linkous: No, it's for the next Sparklehorse. It was supposed to be on (*Good Morning Spider*) but he missed the deadline for the mastering date. He called me the day after we'd mastered the record (laughs).

Grip: Any projections for the next record, how it's going to sound?

Linkous: Well, since I've been able to get away from the house and make some noise, I dunno, some of it sounds like it's gonna rock.

Grip: That's good.

Linkous: One thing we recorded sounds like Atari Teenage Riot.

Grip: Of course, you could've had the opposite reaction and gone out to the cow field all introspective and acoustic?

Linkous: Ah, well, there will be slow stuff. I mean, that's what I'm good at and that's what I think people who like Sparklehorse appreciate us for.