

# Sparklehorse

**Sparklehorse interview**  
with Mark Linkous  
by Adam Selzer

On a farm somewhere in Richmond, Virginia, next to the house in an adjacent annex, Mark Linkous (aka Sparklehorse) is wiring up his 16-track studio. He has released two records on Capitol, *vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* in 1995, and the long anticipated *Good Morning Spider* in February of 1999. Most tracks on the first record were recorded at Sound of Music (David Lowery's studio) and others were done by Mark at Static King, his home studio. The recordings are very inspired, utilizing unconventional vocal sounds, manipulated drums, and sound samples while maintaining a cohesive feel that contains a mix of creative pop and more sparse, beautiful slower songs. On *Good Morning Spider*, Mark decided to record it all himself and invested a couple of Tascam D88's, among other gear. I called him while he was still setting up his studio at a recently inhabited farm. We talked for about an hour and when I was transcribing the interview, I realized that his demeanor was very important to what he had to say and how it should be interpreted. So please, if you will, insert a soft spoken, very humble voice with a sweet southern drawl to get a bit closer to what actually transpired.

**Are You playing all the instruments on your new record?**

On most of the songs I do. I had a couple of days off in London on one of our last tours so I went into Church Studios and recorded the drums for "Pig" and "100 Sparrows."

**Did you play the drums on those recordings?**

No. My drummer Scott Miner did those. He operates the sampler a lot live and plays keyboards and all sorts of stuff really.

**So you recorded your new record at home, is that right?**

Yeah, I have two Tascam D88s.

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photos by: Danny Clinch

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## Was Capitol hesitant to you doing it on your own?

With producing it myself? Well yeah, we had to trick them into it.

## It seems like your recording aesthetic is so important to the outcome that they would have to agree to it, it wouldn't be Sparklehorse any other way.

Well, the first one was produced by me and David Lowery [Cracker, Camper Van Beethoven]. He's producing Counting Crows and all this stuff now, but I wanted to produce this myself anyway.

## Did you learn a lot from working with him?

Yeah, the way I started was David would come out to my house with this Tascam 688 cassette 8-track and we would record stuff. Actually, that's when the original version of "Sick of Goodbyes" and "Happy Man" were recorded, without all the radio noise. So they were recorded even before the first record but I've done a lot to them since then. Then David would go away on tour with Cracker and I'd just have his machine out there with nothing but a compressor. By not having any access to any outboard gear I got really used to just using a compressor and eventually started not liking reverb on anything.

## Yeah, I don't hear a lot of reverb in your recordings. It sounds like you got quite a few different keyboard sounds on the new record.

I wanted this record to be more keyboard based than the last one, just soundwise. There's a lot of Optigan on there. I have a couple of Wurlitzer organs that are kind of messed up and that's why they sound good. I have a Magnus Cathedral organ, it's a fancy Magnus in a wood cabinet with a tube amp in it. I also have just little Casios... the only pro keyboard I have is one of those Roland JV heads but you've got to get so inside of those things to make them sound not so shiny and pro.

## What are the string sounds you have on the new record? Are any of them real?

Yeah, a lot of them are real. Usually things that I can't fake, like violin or cello I'll have someone come in and play. The cello is someone we toured with, her name is Sophie. And the violin was played by Melissa from my brother's band.

## What band is that?

Spike. They're a Richmond band.

## So, when did you realize that your recording aesthetic would have so much to do with the way the song is perceived?

I guess I got really tired of pop music when I was living out in Los Angeles, just being in bands for so long that were trying to get signed. I was ready to totally give up on it, but I was totally re-inspired, and it saved me by some Tom Waits records that someone turned me on to. The Island records. Also, Daniel Johnston's homemade tapes. I just spoke to him last night for the first time which I'm very excited about. I was so intrigued by that stuff. The field recording, just document stuff, Daniel's aesthetic, and the junk yard vibe of Tom Waits. I wanted to make pop records that sounded as cool as Tom Waits records. He was actually supposed to be on *Good Morning Spider* but he called me the day after it was mastered.

## That would've been great. Maybe for the next record.

Definitely for the next one. I was just going to have him sing over the telephone.

## Do you usually track things over and over or do you try to capture things more spontaneously?

Well, sometimes I'll program the drum machine or get some kind of rhythm thing going like on "Hey Joe" - that's just a little Casio SK-1 with a sampler in it. It distorts pretty much any sound you put into it. I'm just making a sound into the mic there. So I like the foundation to start with something interesting, not just a drum set with reverb and a compressed snare. Everybody's records sound like that.

## Do you envision how the song is going to sound recorded when you're writing it?

Not specifically. The aesthetic I imagine in my head, but not specific sounds in an aural way. I think I picture them more in a film way, and how someone will be affected by them. What kind of film is it going to inspire in their heads.

## Your records are very visual in that way.

And in the context of a whole album, imagining the album is a galaxy and the songs are planets. Some of them don't orbit correctly and some of them are a little bit off axis.

## How did you decide what kind of gear to buy for your studio?

Joe Henry, do you know him? My manager managed him and I talked to him over the phone. He had a couple of these [Tascam] DB8s. It seems like everyone had ADATs. I didn't really want to have those. I'm not too crazy about Alesis stuff anyway so I ended up getting the Tascams. I didn't get the total low end equipment. I got the mid range stuff. I mean, the nicest piece of outboard gear I have is one of those Distressers.

## Who makes that?

Emperical Labs. I think because I use compression as an effect more than anything else it works really well. You can hit it harder than any other compressor I've ever heard.

## What other pieces of outboard gear do you have at your studio?

One of those Joe Meek things, the Meek box.

## Do you like it?

Not really. I think I'm going to send it back and get some kind of remote for my Tascams. I have an Ampulator, it's a tube amp rack thing. An [Alesis] Quadverb, a Midiverb, a TL Audio valve interface thing. It's pretty basic. Every year I want to try and add on to the studio. I'm trying to work it so I can get my advance so I can get more gear and start working. I really need to get some decent mic preamps.

## It seems like a lot of your sounds are direct into the board.

I guess the only time I use a mic is for singing and acoustic guitar. With the electrics, I started to go direct out of necessity for fear of not waking up my wife, so I kind of got used to that. If I want it dirty I just run a stomp box in between the guitar and board. The sound - I love it.

## How are you getting that trademark vocal sound that appears so often on your records?

That kind of distorted, or aloof sound? I started by using toilet paper tubes over SM57s and just cutting them to different lengths and experimenting with how far you put them on.

## Are you distorting them at the board?

Sometimes. That's one reason I want another mic preamp is because I can't distort the pre amps on this Mackie board that I have. But the old [Mackie] 1604 was really nice because you could slam it twice. A lot of times I'll sing through a mic and run the mic through a little micro amp with a speaker built in. I think it's a Boss or something, it's old. I've never seen another one. I'll sing through that and then mic that. Or sing through one of those battery powered Marshalls.

## Those tiny little amps you can hook on to your belt?

Yeah. And then I have a whole box of just shitty microphones I just experiment with.

## Those seem to work well if you really put your mouth right into them.

Yeah. Sometimes I'll get in there and slice apart the diaphragm with a razor blade.

## How do you record your vocals when you're going for a clean sound? What kind of mics do you use?

The best mic I have is an [AKG] 414. I think it's fairly unforgiving. I want to get a really good mic for the next record. As much as I like the cheap Radio Shack mic, I'd love to get a Neumann or a Rode. And a good tube preamp. I'd really like to hear those Manley things, they look so cool.

## Oh, the Vox Box. Yeah. I called Manley about those the other day. They list for \$4000.

I figured they were.

## That's way out of my range right now. What kind of Mackie board are you using now?

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The 24 channel, 8 bus. I got it because I could try to keep everything modular. I could get another (Tascam) D38 and get an expansion thing for the board.

**Are you running out of tracks?**

I'm trying to be disciplined enough to keep it at 16 tracks.

**Do you end up experimenting a lot, layering, and then taking things out, or do you keep most of what you track?**

No, I do a lot of punching in and out. I don't really ride the faders much when I mix. Sometimes there will be a couple of different instruments on one track but I kind of arrange it when I'm recording.

**Are your doubled vocal sounds actually doubled or a lot of times do you use a delay in the opposite channel?**

The majority of the time its two vocals.

**They seem so exact I was convinced it was a slight delay.**

I want to try that live. I was just listening to *Good Morning Spider* the other day on headphones and there is quite a bit of that on there so I'd like to figure out how to do that live. Have the sound man do it, I'm sure he could. Just split the signal or something so it's hard panned.

**It seems like there are more pop songs on this record compared to the last one. Was that a conscious decision or did it just happen that way?**

I intentionally saved "Happy Man" and "Sick of Goodbyes" for this album because I wanted to establish my style as being something other than pop. More like "Spirit Ditch." I wanted the first record to really establish that style, then I thought it would be more safe to do some more pop songs on the second record.

**It seems like it would be the other way around.**

Well, there are still a lot of quieter, more deconstructed songs on the new record.

**Sure. Songs like "Saint Mary" and "Sunshine". Is that a Mellotron sample on that song?**

No, its the flute sound on this Roland. I'm always trying to emulate the flute sound of a Mellotron.

**Yeah, I love the Mellotron but there is no way I'll ever have one so I'm trying to find a way to get a sound as close as possible. I borrowed this mid size Casio and the flute sound was the closest thing I've come across. Just put a little tremolo or vibrato on it, or other effects just to tweak it out a bit.**

Well, I just went to Memphis and recorded a song with Eric Drew Feldman from PJ Harvey's band - he produced Frank Black's first two records. I wanted to go down to Easley because I like the sound of those records done there by Pavement, Guided By Voices, Cat Power... and also I knew he had a Mellotron. So I took my little 4-track

down there and recorded this waltz with just Mellotron and Wurlitzer electric piano. I'm trying to get PJ Harvey or Nina from the Cardigans to sing on. Its kind of this country waltz thing. I've never played a Mellotron that wasn't sort of shaky and fucked up, and his is pretty fucked up so it came out really nice.

**How do you like recording at a regular studio that that as opposed to your house?**

It was alright. One thing is that I wanted to learn more, especially about mic'ing acoustic drums so I paid a lot of attention. The drummer is the guy from the Frank Black records. He's actually the drummer on the Hansen record and his day job is drumming for the Donnie and Marie show so he was dying to rock. I liked it alright. Easley is cool, Sound of Music is cool. I'm sure in every city there is a decent recording studio that isn't too sterile.

**Does David Lowery still run Sound of Music?**

Yeah. Its grown quite a bit and gotten a lot better. It certainly hasn't evolved into any kind of sterile studio.

**Do you still do a lot of stuff down there?**

No. I did one song there. I'm not too crazy about the board down there.

**So tell me some recording tricks you've been using lately.**

Well, I have this Hohner tape echo that's really nice if you use it as a return on another channel and just peg the preamp on the return. Its kind of fucked up anyway because its an old tape echo. A lot of that is on "End of Sunshine." Its kind of a weird sound, like on that PJ Harvey record *To Bring You My Love*, it kind of sounds like a distorted bass guitar going through a little Marshall with a low battery, and then being played through a disc man with low batteries. The signal is just struggling to even get through. I've always been blown away by that and I kind of found a way to fake it here. I don't know how that guy Flood does that.

**Did you just stumble across that or did you conceive the idea in your head?**

It's usually accidental. I just built my studio on the farm we just bought - it has a little building that's just big enough for my studio.

**So its separate from the house?**

Yeah. I can actually play through amplifiers and sing. The first time you called the other day I was actually wiring it up. Two or three things I actually wired up wrong and it just sounded amazing so I wrote it down.

**Were you wiring a patch bay?**

Just wiring the entire studio. I would fuck something up, have something too loud or wire something wrong and it would just amaze me.

**Do you think you'll keep recording this way, on your own, or do you have any desire to do a full studio record?**

Not an entire record. I'd like to keep adding on to this studio every year. Not have a whole lot of

stuff but just get some nicer gear. Maybe get rid of some of the Alesis stuff. But I would love to go into a studio with that guy Flood or someone like that. There are some producers that I just love what they do. I'd like to do a song or two with people like that.

**Have you had a chance to hear the new Tom Waits record yet?**

No, I didn't even know there was one?

**Its not out yet, I haven't heard it either.**

That guy is even more low tech than I am. I was asking him about Kurzweil things and he didn't know shit! But he told me how the Optigan worked - I didn't know about that.

**Those run on discs, right?**

Well, they run on big LP sized floppy discs. I thought they had a stylus on each chord button but they're optical sensors.

**Is Capitol pretty much letting you do your own thing now?**

Well, I had some pressure to give them a song that they could "take to radio". They thought that "Happy Man" would be a great single but I was really opposed to changing it. We reached an agreement to keep it the way it is now on the album and then I would go down to Easley to record a more radio friendly version of it. I don't even know if it will be available commercially.

**I remember a few years ago there was a collaboration 7" released under the guise 'A Loose Confederation of Saturday City States'. How did that all come about?**

David [Lowery] introduced me to Vic [Chesnutt] and I wanted to go down there, he was down at Keane Studios. We just went in there, hung out, drank whiskey and recorded. That's about all there was to it. Vic is on my new record, on that song "Sunshine." That's him on the telephone.

**Do you think you'll ever work with him again?**

Oh yeah.

**It seems like you two are a good pair to work together.**

Yeah, he's great. Did you see him on Conan O'Brien the other night?

**No, but I heard he played with Lambchop.**

Yeah, there was about twenty people on stage. It sounded amazing.

Vic is starting to get his studio set up. He just bought the house next to his- I can't wait to see it.

**He's going to put a studio in the new house?**

I'm not sure. He got a really good deal on this old Victorian house. They've been doing work on it for quite a while.

**So who is playing in you band for your upcoming tour?**

Scott Minor has always played the drums for me. Jonathan Segal, who used to be in Camper Van Beethoven, is playing violin and guitar and some keyboards, and singing a bit. ☺