

Found sounds

Sparklehorse come back to life

by Jonathan Perry

Nothing -- not a guitar, not a voice, not his dog Sweet Pea -- is safe from Mark Linkous's fetish for the strange. Even those acquainted with Linkous through his musical alter ego Sparklehorse might be taken aback by what greets them on his answering machine: a guttural, growling, industrial sawing noise that's a trifle disorienting and disconcerting but mostly funny. "Oh, that's the dog snoring," the 34-year-old explains, picking up the phone in his farmhouse in Andersonville, Virginia (he grew up in Richmond). "I was trying out my Doctor Sample."



For a guy whose performing credits on Sparklehorse's new *Good Morning Spider* (Capitol) include such sundry instruments as a Mattel Optigan, concertina, and a Speak and Spell toy, this predilection for scrambling the everyday isn't a big surprise. What's more remarkable is that the follow-up to Linkous's 1995 Sparklehorse debut got made at all. And that Linkous was alive to make it. After all, the guy died three years ago. Really.

Linkous's demise came at the end of Sparklehorse's European tour for *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* (Capitol), an album that mixed head-buzz bursts of Anglo-pop with pastoral stretches of slo-mo dustbowl folk and the kind of rainy ballads Lou Barlow might write during one of his downcast days. In the events leading up to his brush with the reaper, Linkous says he had been mixing "a whole lot of Valium" with "a whole lot of anti-depressants." He reportedly keeled over in a hotel room and was discovered 14 hours later, still unconscious, his legs pinned underneath him. When doctors attempted to straighten his legs, it triggered a heart attack. And until they revived him a minute or so later, Linkous was dead.

"I don't even remember flying over there to London," he recalls. "I just remember waking up in St. Mary's hospital with fucking tubes coming out of my nose. I was pretty out of it for three months. They told me at one point that my legs were going to have to be amputated."

Doctors ultimately were able to save Linkous's legs, though he now wears leg braces. That hasn't kept him from supporting *Good Morning Spider* with a tour that brings him to the Middle East next Friday. His band includes cellist Sophie Michalitsianos, former Camper Van Beethoven multi-instrumentalist Jonathan E. Segel, drummer Scott Minor, and bassist Scott Fitzsimmons.

The cinematic scope of *Good Morning Spider* and of the images that flicker through tracks like "Painbirds" and "Saint Mary" are reflections of what Linkous's life has been like the last couple of years. A sense of fragility haunts the album, though his worst fear turned into the inspiration for moving songs that shimmer with a troubled brilliance. "I was really scared that when I technically died -- which I guess I did for a

few minutes -- the part of my brain that gave me the ability to write songs would be damaged."

The only damage to the songs on *Good Morning Spider* was inflicted intentionally by Linkous himself. His favorite album cut, "Chaos of the Galaxy/Happy Man," might have been a straightforward pop song had he not filtered its otherwise catchy-as-hell chorus through what sounds like a shortwave radio and recorded the vocals to suggest he's singing from an underground airport terminal.

He's less happy about "Sick of Goodbyes," one of *Spider's* least skewed songs. It was written years ago with Cracker frontman (and transplanted Virginian) David Lowery, and it first appeared on Cracker's *Kerosene Hat* (Virgin) in 1993. The Sparklehorse version is now being peddled in the UK as *Spider's* first single. Linkous says it's "a misrepresentation" of the album. "People don't want to stick their necks out and take a chance on something different. Radio programmers like 'Happy Man,' but they think it's been sabotaged. So I guess I need to play the game a little bit but find a way to retain some integrity." The compromise will be a more radio-friendly version of "Happy Man" remixed by Captain Beefheart alumnus Eric Drew Feldman.

For a guy who once headed to LA with dreams of rock mega-stardom, a rural existence on the margins of pop isn't quite what Linkous imagined for himself early in his career. "When I was a kid, all I wanted to do was escape. But in moving back here [to Virginia], I've come to appreciate different things, like the holes and rests in our music. You know, the other night, I listened to a cricket for an hour. That's the thing I'd like to contribute -- making people remember those sounds."

Sparklehorse perform next Friday, April 16, at the Middle East. Call 864-EAST.