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SPARKLEHORSE: Back In The Saddle Again
Story by Colin Helms

With his latest, Sparklehorse mainstay Mark Linkous finds gentle beauty on the other side of pain.

Five years ago, Mark Linkous nearly died. He then spent over 12 months in a wheelchair, struggling with chronic depression and a crippling reliance on painkillers, and subsequently found, or so the story goes, that he couldn't remember how to write songs anymore. This year he's found the means - credit spiritual rebirth or the blackest sense of ironic humor - to not only create his most affecting Sparklehorse recording to date, but to brazenly dub the album *It's A Wonderful Life*.

"If I've learned nothing else, it's that I should at least try to notice one little thing every day," he offers. "Whether it's not getting eaten by a bear, or seeing a little kid smile at you on the street. Before I go to bed I say 'I'm glad I didn't wake up dead today.'"

The infamous day Linkous nearly woke up dead - the aftermath of a night in a London hotel room during which too many Valium and antidepressants were consumed - may have put a damper on Sparklehorse's output in the time since, but it seems to have changed Linkous's life (and life-work) for the better. *Wonderful Life's* scarred and cracked sonic façade strongly resembles that of 1995's *Vivadixiesub-marinetransmissionplot* and 1999's *Good Morning Spider*, but it's a gentler, somehow lighter collection, populated by horse heads and tiger hearts, fat babies and yellow birds. Polly Jean Harvey, the Cardigans' Nina Persson and Tom Waits counter his haunted whisperings with vocal and songwriting contributions that lend new emotional texture to his shimmering barnyard hallucinations. Linkous's eccentricities are intact, but he's happily conceding to outside influences.

"On this record I didn't want to be in charge of everything all the time, I didn't want to have everything be my idea and me playing everything, and me being behind the console the whole time. I [had been] limiting myself, wasn't really progressing aesthetically," he notes.

In addition to the helping hand of Linkous's admirers, part of his forward movement on *Wonderful Life* can be credited to both a change in recording environment and the people manning the boards. Unlike his past releases, which Linkous largely recorded by himself in his backyard smokehouse-cum-studio, *Wonderful Life* was recorded in upstate New York, Brooklyn and Barcelona, with the help of producers Dave Fridmann (Mercury Rev, Mogwai) and John Parrish (PJ Harvey). For the typically reclusive Virginian it was a considerable change, but one he found unavoidable - especially after his main advocate at Capitol Records, label president Gary Gersh, had left the building.

"Gary left Capitol, and the guy that replaced him really didn't understand me at all," Linkous laments. "I never even met the new guy. He came to one of my shows and left. Anyway, he kicked all of these bands off the label and then kinda gave me this guilt trip like, 'Well consider yourself lucky. You're not getting dropped, but we really don't want you to make another record in your smokehouse.' They wanted me to use a producer and everything, which I wanted to do myself anyway. So that kinda pushed me over the hump and I went ahead and did it, and I'm so glad it happened."

Despite the happy accident that was Linkous's foray into the world of big studios and somewhat big-name producers, he recounts one recording experience that wasn't so positive. "I learned a big lesson with [the 1999

Sparklehorse single] 'Happy Man.' That was before my contract changed. I was making records at home and keeping the rest of the money. It was never really a lot, but enough to go to the dentist and buy motorcycle parts. [Capitol] wanted to have 'Happy Man' remixed for the radio, if nothing else to spend \$10,000 to have some hotshot modern rock remixer put his validation stamp on it. So they got this guy, Jack Joseph Puig, and I was like, all right, this is a test. I'll spend \$10,000 of my money. I'm not going to buy this motorcycle I've wanted my whole fucking life and we'll see what happens. And it fucking died in the water. I was out 10,000 bucks, and I let this guy remix my song who represents everything that I despise in the music industry. I will stab myself in the head with a steak knife if I let, you know, those people that listen to KROQ in the control room [again]."

Having taken the requisite step toward catering to commercial radio's fickle tastes, Linkous seems content to focus on expanding his scope as a musician and producer (he produced Persson's forthcoming solo debut), and simplifying the way he approaches his work. "I have racks full of shit in the smokehouse in my backyard. It's that kind of thing where the more you have the more it weights you down. Just like the more motorcycles you have, the less you ride," he laughs. "And I have a lot of motorcyces."