

Sparklehorse Ghosts in the Machine

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Photo: Jonathan Segel

By Roman Sokal

The antiquated telephonic connection could not have been any more idyllic. It was as if the voice of Mark Linkous was a ghost when speaking from a noisy truck stop near his rural West Virginia abode. It is the same sonic aura that adorns *It's A Wonderful Life*, a masterpiece of dark and light psychedelic poetic pop (including appearances by PJ Harvey, Nina Persson and Tom Waits) where sounds of static and doppler shifting give an illusion that your stereo is receiving fragile signals from the past, and beyond.

Linkous elucidates his modus operandi that created this subjective effect using out of date sampler-like technology. "Certain sounds inspire pictures and feelings. Replay organs seem to have such a distinct kind of wheezy character to them. Mellotrons and Optigans — they sound real but they sound a little damaged so you sort of get that nostalgic aesthetic where something is kinda scratchy. Optigans were a cheaply made mini-shrunken down organ; you put this celluloid disc in that gives a bunch of different styles, everything from guitar and organ or big band. We figured out how to copy the discs and make a low-resolution copy of the waveform and we started getting these weird short-wave radio broadcast signals coming through the drum section, like when you search between stations. One of the Radiohead guys gave me — actually, I stole it — he had a four CD set of unidentifiable codes that don't exist anymore. It's something that has always been intriguing to me about hearing these alien signals — imagining where they are originating from. It's a mystery."

Also enlisted for service was an electromagnetic wire recorder. "I wanted Tom Waits' piano to sound as old as the strings I recorded with this plastic reel-to-reel [microphone] that I found at a dump. I wanted it to sound like a record that was found in a barn — old, eerie and far away." Linkous had discovered that a pre-recorded wire came with the apparatus, and he decided to use what was on it in the wobbling waltz "Babies On The Sun." "It was the lady I bought it from — it was her as a child reading some letter about a dog she found." The results are eloquent and chilling, sublimely suiting Linkous' ongoing fascination with animals in his lyrics.

If the lights ever went out in West Virginia, Linkous would still be vulnerable to inspiration of the haunting kind. "I smelt honeysuckle the other day, and it reminded me of playing frisbee with this girl in high school, and then she went into the Air Force — and I never heard from her again."