

THE 'HORSE WHISPERER

If you go out to the woods today, you just might run into Mark Linkous from SPARKLEHORSE. KIM PORCELLI holds the flashlight

Kim Porcelli



"I couldn't record up there for ages after I saw that Blair Witch movie!" Mark Linkous draws in a whisper-soft, sloe-gin Southern-gentleman murmur. He's talking about Static King, the converted one-room smokehouse deep in the Virginia woods where much of his grisly, spooky, beautiful third album *It's A Wonderful Life* was born; and truly, this writer must report that to hear a six-foot-six native Virginian in a cowboy hat tell you he is afraid of the dark is a hilarious and beautiful thing.

"I kept imaginin' stuff out in the field," he murmurs, "and every time there was some animal around, every time a branch snapped, or a horse went Ppppph! I'd be jumpin' out of my skin."

Mark Linkous, Sparklehorse's gentle rider, is the last man on earth you'd expect to get skittish from a case of the deep-rural heebiejeebies. Surely *It's A Wonderful Life* – a fragile, mould-mottled and ultimately transcendent song-cycle of death and life, swarming with ghost-babies and insects, frogs and birds and ponies, the benevolent spirits of the dead and the not-yet-born – surely this is all the proof we need that we've nothing to fear from the mysteries of the natural world, or what Linkous' hero Cormac McCarthy called the outer dark.

If darkness had a sound, it might be this. Linkous is the happy possessor of a menagerie of creaky outmoded acoustic instruments and proto-samplers – the optigon, the orchestron, the chamberlin – which he has been collecting for years and speaks of with a trainspotter's glee ("...And they're so cheaply made! So they always sound really woozy, and cranky... you can tell I love all that wheezy old stuff"). Their dusty-lunged bellows and straining pulleys definitely add to the Southern-gothic dream-quality Sparklehorse have always had, if never so much as on *Life*: each song a dreamscape, every lyric rural and gentle but distorted, Dali crossed with Andrew Wyeth. But this isn't all hundred-year-old noises and ghost-spotting: for every mordant, rueful whisper (the Nina Persson duet 'Apple Bed'), there's a raging prairie dust-storm (the PJ Harvey-assisted 'Piano Fire') or a Perfect Pop Moment (the ravaged Cormac McCarthy-ish deserter's anthem 'Comfort Me,' in which a woman drowns herself while "the breath-robbin' lightning/Is making diamonds of rain", followed by the best pop chorus of the year).

Of course, after an initial dalliance in the mid-'90s with the LA music industry, Linkous almost didn't bother with any of it.

"LA was just... I don't know," he shrugs darkly. "It's like you were right in the... armpit of the music industry. I just got sick of the whole business. I just gave up, stayed fucked up all the time. But, I lived in this part of LA, where you could just walk into the sea. Into the rain and the storms. And just the strength of it, and the..." He trails off. "That's what made me not quit. Just walkin' to the ocean. Really changed everything. But yeah, it was terrible. After LA, I just kinda gave up all that stuff, bein' a rock star and all that, just gave it up and moved home.

"In fact," Linkous squints, "when I did eventually start playin' again, it was with a bunch of guys, in the livin' room, playin' Irish jigs, and reels and stuff. And then suddenly, I started playing my own stuff again. That was really great, actually: just walking away from LA, all the bullshit, and giving up, and moving back home, and... God, just playin'. And the songs started to fall out of me.

When I had no expectations anymore," he finishes. Then he grins. "So that's good."

Maybe a resultant bullshit detector is the reason Linkous was able to coax performances of amazing humility out of his indie-glitterati collaborators – or, certainly, the reason he's utterly non-starstruck about their contributions. Well, except for Tom Waits.

"I really wanted to work with him, for ages," Linkous remembers. "And I did make contact. But I was scared at first. I needed a whole bottle of whiskey to talk to him, at first. But then, one of his handlers," he enunciates mischievously, "told one of my handlers that his kids stole [first Sparklehorse album] Vivadixie... offa his turntable, either because they liked it, or 'cause they were tired a hearin' it, and," he cocks his head with the smallest of grins, "suddenly we were talkin'."

"And he's great," he breathes in wonderment. "I mean, it seemed like a movie to me. Havin' him in studio. Doing a take, and askin' me if that was good or not. And I'm sayin'..." (adopts deranged, starry-eyed expression; nods maniacally) "Uh huh!"

Do you think that most people realise that it's a wonderful life?

"I mean, that's..." he begins. There's a long silence. "Wow. I mean, I envy you, cos that's something I've tried – something I do try to do. I mean, I've been puttin' huge energy into tryin' to think like that. Instead of bein' stood up, like... in a bar... Instead of waking up the majority of the time, and thinkin', Awright. Let's get fucked up. I just try to wake up and say: not let's get fucked up, but: Shit, what's with all that beer drinkin'? Ya freak! It's such a good world, stupid."