

Walk around the stage of London's Bush Hall, through the dressing room, and there you'll find a small outside area, just big enough for a couple of chairs, a carton of juice and a packet of smokes. Here, Mark Linkous sits, a few hours prior to his performance as both the sole spearhead and one-fourth of **Sparklehorse**; DiS is his final interviewer of the day. We sit staring at an empty picnic table, light drizzle peppering the paving slabs beneath us and gently moistening our brows. Linkous looks slightly weary, almost certainly spent from answering the same ol' same ol' as part of the promotional circus that surrounds the release of his latest album, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*. His body harbours an old soul, one that perhaps wasn't born at the right time of humankind; the Millennium left him behind, the individuals that comprise the iPod generation could be comic book characters for all he cares.

He can sigh majestically. When he utters not a single word, the silence is stirring and laced with the semblance of some substantial meaning. Specifics are lost in the non-conversation, facts forsaken for rosy tints and tingling nostalgia.

Dreamt For Light Years... arrives five years after the last long-player to wear the Sparklehorse name proudly across its sleeve, 2001's *It's A Wonderful Life*. That arrived as three of four to date: *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* saw the light of day – although with such a title it's a wonder it ever squeezed through the door and into said illumination – in 1995, and was followed by *Good Morning Spider* in 1999. Linkous has suffered a multitude of health-related ups and downs in the eleven years since that mid-'90s debut: without elaborating too much, he almost died during a UK tour for *Viva...*, and *Dreamt For Light Years...*'s gestation coincided with another period when Linkous was again unwell. But such issues appear to be behind our protagonist: although visibly tired – he says as much almost as soon as we meet – he seems in good health. The smoking aside, obviously.

Dreamt For Light Years... seems more upbeat, a little easier on the listener's emotions, than the record that immediately preceded it; certain songs seem tailor-made for daytime FM, crunched-out chords every bit as crisply captured as a stadium-filling pop-rock band. The album was recorded by Linkous at his own studio, relocated in the early '00s to the mountains of North Carolina. This is where he lives, a solitary man with nature on his doorstep. There can be no doubt such isolation breeds loneliness, but one gets the impression that Linkous can feel lonelier still in a city like London: people, fans, they think they know him, but it's not even a certainty that he knows himself anymore.

After all, where does Mark Linkous stop and Sparklehorse begin?

You've been undertaking a lot of promotional work for this particular album, sitting and answering a lot of what must be the same questions: how's it been for you?

I get really tired. I mean, no offence, but it takes a lot out of me to play every night, and the travelling. I don't mind doing, like, one or two [interviews], but when it's like five... my head starts to melt.

Do you accept that it's just another part of the process, though?

Yeah. I'm grateful and flattered that people care, because I thought for a while that people had moved on, that it'd been too long and they'd forgotten about it – who'd ever want to talk to me about music again? But, a lot of people do, and I'm grateful that they do.

That must be nice: to have a prolonged gap between records and find that people are still keen to hear it, and receive and review it really well. I think it's been really well received.

It has? I pay no attention to those things. If I read something bad, it'd just kill me. I shouldn't care, so therefore I don't read anything, so then I don't know. Hopefully I won't accidentally pick up something and read something terrible.

Do you feel it's necessary to explain your music, your art?

No, and the whole thing seems abstract to me. My perception of my music seems irrelevant to me, y'know? I wouldn't want to know the details about anyone's music that I really admired.

Do you like that individuals can interpret your music differently, from person to person?

Yes, I do. I find that more intriguing. It's like I've loved Daniel Johnston for a long, long time, and for the longest time I'd never saw his face. What it is, about that, is that it's compelling, the mystery...

And did seeing Daniel, after a long time, alter your feelings towards his music at all?

I was surprised... I still had this image of when he was really skinny and working in McDonald's. I thought that'd be how he looked, but of course he doesn't. But, um... I'm sorry...

I was going to mention Daniel Johnston, actually, as you put together an album of cover versions a few years ago, didn't you? (The album in question being 2004's Beck- and Bright Eyes-starring *Discover Covered: The Late Great*

Daniel Johnston. Not that Johnston's dead, but anyway.) Is he an artist that you can relate to, seeing as you've both overcome particular obstacles to create your art?

Well, I loved his music from the first time I heard one of his cassette tapes, and I didn't know anything about him at all. Only later on, when I was talking to other musicians who had worked with Daniel, was I told about his mental problems. And that's how I met him – I did want to work with him (Linkous produced Johnston's *Fear Yourself* album) but I had apprehensions about that, so I had my mother call this number that I had beforehand, to see if it was his number. So my mother and his mother, Mabel, began this correspondence for ten years, writing to each other about their sons before Daniel and I ever met. It was great, because Mabel used this stationary... Daniel's father, Bill, was a fighter pilot in the Flying Tigers ([link](#)). You know, the planes with the tiger mouth painted on the front, and they have stationary with those planes at the top. So that was really cool. So we actually didn't meet until a few years ago. I produced a record of his before the tribute record, and after *Fear Yourself* the guy that owned the record company that had put it out had this idea of me recruiting bands to cover Daniel's songs so that we could set up this fund for him, so that when Bill and Mabel pass on... when they pass on, there's really nobody that can care for Daniel, and he needs assisted living. So that's why that record exists, and why I was just, kinda, pretty ruthless about asking who could do it.

You managed to attract quite a starry cast, with Eels and Bright Eyes, Tom Waits and Beck...

And they were happy to do it. Tom [Waits] said that he had wanted to do '*King Kong*' for years, and the song that I did with The Flaming Lips ('*Go*'), when I started thinking about it, the second verse sounded like lyrics that Wayne (Coyne, Flaming Lips singer) would write anyway.

I suppose that a lot of people pick you up on the five-year gap between albums, but it's not like you've been lazy – you've been producing records, as well as assembling the Daniel Johnston covers album...

I've been kinda busy.

And you relocated your studio, too...

Yeah, I moved the studio. It's in North Carolina now – it's really, really beautiful there, and I live way up in the mountains. They're called the Smokey Mountains (the Great Smokey Mountains National Park), because it sort of has its own weather system there. It'll be like this (it's overcast in London), and twenty minutes later the sun will be out, and then it'll rain again, and then the sun will come back out, and you can smell the soil... there are creeks, there's water running everywhere. There are bears.

And it's a good environment to work in?

Yeah, it is. I found it by accident. At the time I was not feeling very well in Virginia, and friends – old, old friends – were trying to get me out of that Virginia state of mind or something. It's beautiful there – there's this mist on the mountains and it looks like they've been on fire. It's beautiful...

And did you draw inspiration from these surroundings while writing *Dreamt For Light Years*...? I mean, everything is influenced in at least some way by the environment that it's produced in, but...

Yes, it is, and in a good way. I am closer to nature there than I ever was in Virginia, but I have been trapped by a bear in the house, for real. And my dog's been bit twice by rattlesnakes.

Really?

Yeah... it's very expensive when they get bit, as the anti-venom is like a thousand pounds every time, and he's been bitten twice. So I was pretty pissed off, and went hunting rattlesnakes. I killed one, to get revenge. I was gonna make a belt out of it, or a hat band... I had all this anger, but after I shot it I just felt awful. They released fifteen-thousand of the fuckers not far from where I live, for some reason. Why you would want to populate the countryside with Timber Rattlers, I don't know. (*It turns out that the snake in question, crotalus horridus or the Timber Rattlesnake, is endangered in eighteen US states, hence the repopulation. Its venom is also less dangerous than that of other rattlesnakes.*)

Well, there's very little that can hurt you here. You might trip over a hedgehog, but there's nothing that'll bite you too badly...

(Laughing) There's nothing that can rip your head off.

So how long does it take for you to get homesick for your misty mountains?

I'm already pining. One of the bad things is that I just isolated myself there – I would go for long periods without leaving the house, and without coming down from the mountain, for months. And then things would get crazy in my head, and I'd get really depressed and not work for ages. But I would like to have an apartment in New York or London or somewhere, where I can go occasionally to socialise with human beings.

And you're on the road for how long now?

Until November, and we're going all over the place. Our first gig was in Athens, Georgia, and our last gig will be in Athens, Greece. We're going to the Netherlands, we've already been to France. I don't think we're playing Italy, but we're going to Spain, and Greece, and maybe to Japan and Australia later on.

Do you get excited by touring at all?

Yeah. I did do a little tour between albums with The Flaming Lips, where I'd just play three songs. For a while I was really terrified about going out and playing again, but the people I have playing with me are so good. The drummer is my best friend of twenty years, Johnny, and he's played on my records since the beginning although we never really got to tour together before now.

It's quite strange that people have this idea that Sparklehorse is just you, when it's clearly a unit, a band. There must be a lot of fun moments when you're travelling around.

Yeah, Johnny's been a friend for a long time, and Chris (guitar, keyboards) is from the south, so there's three southerners. Paula (bass)'s a friend of a friend, Howe Gelb. She has a child with Howe Gelb and used to be in Giant Sand. I was really terrified at first, but it's been going really well. I think the audiences have been happy.

Do you speak to any attendees after the shows?

Yeah, but I get a little self-conscious sometimes, when my friends are there. There were some Portishead people there last night, but to talk to people is the most important thing. You can tell they're sincere when they say that my music has helped them in difficult times, or through really bad times. That happened a couple of times last night, and happens fairly often. That might be the most important thing, if you get down to it.

Evidence of a real, true connection with people must be far more rewarding than selling so-many-thousand records in whatever week?

It is, it really is. I heard this album is doing okay in the chart, but I'd much rather talk to someone after a show and hear what they think.

Finally, and I suppose this is something that's particularly key in situations like this, and at shows: where do you draw the line between Mark and Sparklehorse, the man and the musician? Can you switch from one 'mode', if you like, to the other just like that? Or is Sparklehorse so deep within you that there is no difference?

I think before I play and before I talk to people I feel a sense of foreboding and dread, but when it starts – when it's actually happening, the show – before I know it, the set's over. I dunno, it's weird. There's this sense of terror...

Do you come off stage and not remember the last hour and a half?

Yeah, usually it feels like we've only been up there ten minutes. Unless it goes really badly – then it feels like forever.