

- Sparklehorse -

::: Portsmouth, Wedgewood Rooms - UK- 01 October 2006 :::

Interview by [Aline Giordano](#)

If you are a regular reader of Uzine, you would have already guessed it... I turned up unannounced at the Wedgewood Rooms, Portsmouth. A few technicians were keeping busy... I looked around me and a chap came to me with a big smile on his face. I took the opportunity to introduce myself and asked if I could interview Mark Linkous. The chap who happened to be Sparklehorse's Tour Manager told me that Mark had not planned on doing interviews, but very kindly offered to ask the man himself if by any chance he would be willing to change his mind. So I sat and waited, and watched the preparations for the concert... I watched people walking back and forth, being relaxed, sorting out their gear, smiling at me, one member of the party had his little girl with him and they were having much fun checking out the xylophone. I thought that this must be the new clean world of Mark Linkous. The fact that I mentioned interviewing Vic Chesnutt and Richmond Fontaine certainly helped, because he came to greet me and agreed to do a short interview. I had prepared enough questions to last me an hour, but I had agreed for a 10 minute interview and I did not want to abuse Mark's generosity. In the end we talked for 25 minutes. As I'm writing up the interview, a few good weeks have passed since I met with Mark, and I can still clearly remember how Mark walked with his limp, how he slowly lit up his cigarettes and how gentle his voice sounded. He clearly had been through some very difficult moments in his life. I could hear and see the fragility of a man who was genuinely trying to clean up his act and recover from a bad depression. I started asking Mark about how their visit to the French Capital had been for Sparklehorse...

Mark Linkous: It went well. We did a couple of radio shows and a TV show (Canal +). I was really nervous about playing on television, but it came out well. That was good. Yeah. My band is really good. Instead of being teetering on the edge of falling apart all the time it's pretty solid. I don't know if that's what people want to see or not but it's kind of nice not having to worry that things are going to fall apart every night.

It's been five years since 'It's a Wonderful Life'. How did the idea of 'Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain' come about?

Mark Linkous: Some of the songs were written when 'It's a Wonderful Life' was done but, being pop songs they didn't fit very well with 'It's a Wonderful Life'. So I saved some of those for my next album which I figured would be more of a pop record. The record was called 'Fear of Pop' for a while because I had so much apprehension putting out so many pop songs. I'm better at doing slow music than pop music. It's hard to deconstruct pop music to make it sound interesting and compelling.

Do you think it's scary? Granddaddy make really good pop songs...They are clever at making good pop songs, do you think it's scary writing a pop song?

Mark Linkous: Not writing it, but making it into a record. It's hard. The reason why Granddaddy are so great at it is because Jason is a genius when it comes to recording and producing. He makes those records in his house and he plays everything, even the drums. I'm definitely not that agile and have that much foresight when it comes to making a pop record in the studio.

I think you have some really really good pop songs. Cow for example is a great poppy track.

Mark Linkous: The early stuff was easy because I had serious limitations. I had an eight track cassette recorder and one track was broken so I had literally seven tracks to record, and that can be really advantageous sometimes. And now I have 24 tracks! You really have to be disciplined and really know what you're doing. You can write good pop songs but then executing them can be tricky.

The more technology you have the more difficult it is to stay focussed on what you really want to do and say in one song.

Mark Linkous: Yeah. Instrumentally you're using part... I forgot what I had in my head.... It's not a good time to be

Mark looked a bit confused and I wanted to say well I know what it's like to lose one's thread, it happens to me, but words (cowardly) failed me so I moved on with my next question.

Now you're back with a new album which is being well received...

Mark Linkous: Good. That's a relief. I was really worried about that. I thought too much time had gone on and people had moved on. The reason why it took five years since the last album is because I would go to my studio and just sit and look at my equipment, staring at my stuff for 3 years until I could not pay my rent anymore. So I had to start recording an album out of necessity literally. I didn't want to do it for a while and I guess it started coming back. I had these ideas in my head how I wanted to sound like. I started working and someone sent me the Grey album (by Dangermouse). I had been listening to all the Beatles, later period Beatles stuff. I let the Grey album sit in my drawer for 6 months. After 6 months I finally listened to it and called Burton (from Dangermouse) and thought maybe I could hook up with him and try something. He came to my studio, we did a little bit of work and that's when I started to get excited again.

You did a lot of production work. Did you find it more rewarding than writing?

Mark Linkous: I think I was avoiding doing music. I worked with Daniel Johnston, Christian Fennesz, and Nina. Probably because I didn't want to face my own music. Plus I spent the last 5 years just trying to cope, having a very bad depression.

Mmm, yeah... You don't seem to have much confidence in what you do. And from our end, we think Sparklehorse produce exciting and imaginative pop music. We think it's great. And we were waiting in great anticipation for your new album. It is an honour for me to be here and my friends are looking forward to seeing you tonight. So don't give up please.

Mark Linkous: Ok.

Yesterday, I watched 'The Devil and Daniel Johnston' by Jeff Feuerzeig, have you seen it?

Mark Linkous: No haven't seen it yet. Is it good?

It starts weird. I didn't know where the director wanted to go with this. I thought he wanted to make money on Daniel Johnston's mental illness, which I thought was a sick idea. But actually the film portrays grunge bands of the time treating Daniel like some sort of

commodity or drug game, trying to push him as far as they could to the delight of all, including Daniel himself because that fed his compulsive need to be famous. The film shows that very few people apart from his family truly cared about him. It's good. It takes you in different emotional places. It portrays a man who is struggling with his mental illness, his different treatments, his relapses and how difficult it is for those who care for him.

Mark Linkous: Yes, that time was, just from having depression myself,... I've been on so many different medication types, but Daniel is obviously way worse. He has the manic part. I know that for years they've tried to give him the right combination of drugs to keep him from going off. He needs to exorcise women from the devil and things like that. I'm lucky, when I started working with Daniel he was fairly stable. They had finally found the right combination of medicines, where he could cope with people.

Have you kept in touch with him? Is he alright?

Mark Linkous: Yeah. He's better than I've seen him in a long time. He has a weird shake from the medication, but he played with us. Danny and the Nightmares opened for us in Texas. It was great, really great. I talked to Bill (his father) right before the film was coming out. They (Daniel's family) were trying to get it not be put out. They thought it had turned into some kind of exploitation.

It felt like that to start with but they flip the exploitation bit onto its side and manage to give an honest portrayal of Daniel and towards the end of the movie I felt good about the fact he went through the worst and is now safe with his parents. But there's a bitter after taste as to what the purpose of the movie really is. Are they trying to make fun of Daniel, trying to raise some cash? I'm still not sure.

Mark Linkous: That's the reason why we did 'Late Great Daniel Johnston: Discovered Covered', the covers album, to raise money for when Bill and Meg (his mother) die.

Yes, what's going to happen to Daniel when they're going to die? They're keeping him alive.

Mark Linkous: Yeah.

The song 'Sick of Good-byes', you said was inspired by a Robert Frank photograph...

Mark Linkous: Just the title. I don't know all of his photos, but I really like the mid period, raw ones when he was doing the Polaroid. That mid period it kind of strikes the same things in my brain that a lot of Daniel's music does. It's just raw emotions. It's hard to articulate.

There's usually an element of sadness in your songs... and you make sadness sound so gorgeous...

Mark Linkous: I try and make it that way. There's a surplus of ugliness in the world. If I'm here for any purpose, if I could somehow be a little bit of that percentage of the antithesis of all the ugliness, that's all I can do.

Your music manages that.

Mark Linkous: You're welcome.