

Digging Out of the Heart of the Mountain:

Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous finally steps back into the spotlight

by [Jeremy Hart](#)

Way back in 1995, this humble writer ran across this weird album by a "band" of sorts called **Sparklehorse**. It claimed the unwieldy-yet-poetic title *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, and about the only other thing I knew about it at the time was that it was written and recorded by a guy who was friends with Cracker/ex-Camper Van Beethoven frontman David Lowery. Oh, and it had a creepy clown's head on the cover that haunts me to this day.

When I put it on the stereo, though, I was bowled over backwards. Out of utter obscurity -- although he'd brushed up against fame briefly in mid-'80s rockers the Dancing Hoodz -- the man behind the Sparklehorse name, **Mark Linkous**, had managed to craft something totally new, at least to these indie-rock-addled ears. The songs melded Linkous's high-pitched Southern pseudo-drawl/whisper with raggedy, chiming guitars, lo-fi noise, and hints of electronic fuckery to make their own unique, inimitable sound. The lyrics were trippy little song-stories about melancholy homecoming queens, keyboards made of horses' teeth, milking cows, and fires. It was weird, it was unexpected, it was catchy as all hell, and it was incredible.



Seemingly surprised at the sudden attention he received ("Someday I Will Treat You Good," one of the more "rock" tracks on the album, was even a college radio hit for a while, and deservedly so), Linkous ambled out of his backwoods home studio, and Sparklehorse turned from one guy throwing songs into the wind to a full-fledged musical project. He toured the globe, nearly died in a much-publicized incident in England involving either booze and pills or pills and pills (depending on which account you read), played with big-timers like Radiohead, Son Volt, and Garbage, and released two more full-length albums (*Good Morning Spider* and *It's a Wonderful Life*), three EPs, and a pile of singles and compilation appearances. *Wonderful Life*, Linkous's 2001 release, saw him edging more towards the use of electronics in his songs, hanging out with Adrian Utley of Portishead and enthusing about the possibility of his next album being almost wholly electronic. Things got derailed every once in a while, but they always seemed to jump back on track.

And then he vanished. Linkous retreated back into the secluded corner of the country from which he'd come, and Sparklehorse seemed dead as a doornail, with a lot of fans (this writer included) wondering what had happened. Was it over? Was Linkous gone from music for good?

Thankfully, the answer's "no." Five years later, he's returned with a new album, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*, which comes across as the most fully-realized psychedelic rock album Sparklehorse has ever produced. It's strange and beautiful, like what Neutral Milk Hotel might've sounded like had Jeff Mangum been raised on George Jones, or Guided By Voices if Bob Pollard had had a longer attention span (and dropped the fake British accent).

Beyond that, though, it's probably the most song-oriented album Linkous has done as well. Tracks like the elegaic "Morning Hollow," the shaking rock of "Some Sweet Day," or the sunburned bliss of "Don't Take My Sunshine Away" aren't disjointed or thrown-together but rather carefully choreographed and full-sounding. The end result is staggering, both a step forwards to a more "rock" Sparklehorse and a step backwards to the lunatic genius of *Vivadixie*.

Heartened to discover that Linkous and Sparklehorse hadn't fallen off the face of the planet (well, not for good, anyway) but had come back full-force, *Space City Rock* tracked him down to talk about where the hell he's been and what he's doing now.

Sparklehorse plays Wednesday, September 13th at The Proletariat (903 Richmond, Houston, TX. 77006), along with

Danny & the Nightmares.

SCR: Can you hear me okay?

Mark Linkous: Yeah, yeah. You can talk a *little* bit louder; I'm on kind of a shitty connection.

Yeah, it's kind of staticky. How're you doing?

Oh, not too bad.

Are you still home, I guess?

Yeah, I'm in North Carolina.

Is that where you live? I thought you were living in Virginia, for some reason.

Ah, I moved like three, four years ago.

That's cool. Where in North Carolina are you?

I'm in western North Carolina, like two hours south of Asheville.

Oh, okay; I've heard of that, at least. Never been to North Carolina, myself.

It's great. A lot of mountains, a lot of green...

You're going out on tour pretty soon, is that right?

Yeah; next week, rehearsal with the band begins for the first time.

Okay, so these aren't anybody who've been on any of the other albums or anything?

Actually, the drummer is my best friend from a long time ago, *has* been my best friend for a long time -- Johnny Hott. He was in a two-man band called House of Freaks, and he played on the first Sparklehorse album and then on the second album.

Alright, yeah, the name sounds familiar. I haven't looked at the credits of the first album in a while, so... Other than him, why is this a whole new crew?

Well, it's kinda *always* changed up.

That's always the way it works?

Yeah. If not for every record... Sometimes, a couple times, I've changed the touring line-up.

Really? Okay...

For each record, yeah.

So everybody has to learn the songs all over again, all new?

Yeah.

I was kind of wondering, actually, speaking of different records, why it'd been so long since the last one. It's been five years since *It's a Wonderful Life* came out, right?

Yeah. Well, um... For three years, I just... I enjoyed writing songs and singing 'em, playing 'em, but I sort of lost interest in recording the songs. And I guess it was just caused by sorta isolating myself and having a bad depression for three years. So not a lot came out of the three-year "vortex"; I just didn't *do* anything, until I couldn't pay my rent anymore.



Sparklehorse, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*

LINKS :

Sparklehorse

<http://www.sparklehorse.com/>

Astralwerks Records

<http://www.astralwerks.com/>

Capitol Records

<http://www.capitolrecords.com/>

Official Sparklehorse Myspace Page

<http://myspace.com/sparklehorse>

The Proletariat

<http://www.theproletariathouston.com/>

sparklehorse -- what kind of name is this?

<http://www.sparklehorse.org/>

Man...

I had to get a record. I had to attempt to get some kind of a record out.

So that's the reasoning behind the new album?

[laughs] To pay my rent, yeah.

That's kind of funny, because I remember reading a couple of interviews back around 2001 where it sounded like you had plans for a brand new album to be coming out not too long after. It was going to be more "electronic," and at one point you were talking about working with Portishead or something.

Yeah, that all kinda fell apart. I think I had convinced myself for a while there that people didn't really care anymore; it'd just been so long, they just didn't give a shit.

Well, I don't think that's the case...

Yeah, I've been surprised that people are excited and want to talk to me.

Yeah, definitely -- it's funny, because I'd actually been wondering if you had a new album out that maybe I hadn't heard of or something and then happened to see the note that you guys were touring. It was serendipitous, there.

That's good.

Since we were talking about the "gap," there, I was kind of wondering if the songs -- since you said you hadn't written anything in a while, hadn't recorded anything in a while, at least -- are these older songs, are they new songs, or...?

Well, they're both. There's a couple of songs... There's one called "Morning Hollow" that's on the album that was a "hidden" song on the *last* album, because it just seemed like song overkill. It was a little too long.

Yeah, there were a lot of tracks on that one.

And I sort of regretted that being such an obscure song, I wanted to put it on the new record.

Is that the one with Tom Waits?

Yeah, he plays piano.

I saw him in the credits and was looking around, thinking "where is he?," but then I realized it was the piano, not him singing.

And the instrumental at the end of the album, that was only on the vinyl. And that was another track that, after a while -- I don't really listen to my own stuff after I put the records out, but I always listen to *that*, and that's another one that I sort of regretted being so obscure.

The title track? Is that the one you mean?

Yeah.

I was kind of wondering where that one came from, actually.

Well, that was recorded in the sessions for the last album, in Spain -- recorded at Adrian [Uitley] from Portishead's, there. Polly Harvey was there... But that song, that's something that I recorded a guitar loop half-speed and fed it through three different amps, forgot about it, went home for the evening, and came back the next day and opened the soundproof room, and it had been going all night long. So I sat down at the piano and started building on it. That's how that was born, and it ended up being one of my favorite Sparklehorse "things."

It's sorta also inspired by another record that's been really inspirational to me, Gavin Bryars's record, called *Jesus' Blood [Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet]*.



I've heard the name, but...

1971. He recorded an old man in sort of a poor area, I think, uh, an old man singing a religious song -- just like a few lines in a religious song. And he looped that for about forty-five minutes and the music studio-slash-dance studio in London that he was working at at the time. So he was looping this thing and recording it, and he went out for coffee, to get some coffee or something, and came back a half-hour later, and all these people around were just *mesmerized* with this old man. They were crying... It was powerful. And he took that loop and built on it, and it just becomes, it starts as this really small, fragile thing, this old man's voice, and it just builds and builds into this beautifully orchestrated music. It's always been really important to me.

Wow. I can kinda see the resemblance, there, definitely. I have to admit, I was a little bit surprised that the new album ends with sort of a low-key, ten-minute instrumental thing.

Yeah...

I know you're still living in the same sort of area, but the album seemed to me like it's... While I was listening to it, I kind of had this feeling like it was *less* backwoods, almost? Most of the other albums have some sort of a country feel, at least a little bit.

Yeah.

And I didn't really get that off of this one. I didn't really know if that was intentional or just kind of happened that way, or...?

Well, I think it kind of happened that way. I think it's kinda odd that I'd been going through this fucked-up mental state and came up with all these *pop* songs. I don't know how that happened... I think maybe -- not really *consciously*, but -- maybe trying to avoid that whole "alt-country" thing, that connotation that got put on me, there, I think for no other reason than I wear a cowboy hat in pictures. I guess I was just listening to more...listening to a lot of Beatles, for some reason.

Ah... You may not like it when I say this, but that was what was going through my head as I was driving around today, listening to this CD. I was thinking, "man, this could be some of the Beatles' more psychedelic stuff, easily."

No, that means a lot to me, 'cause that's what I was listening to, specifically -- the later, more psychedelic stuff. Being in that hole, and people were trying to bring me out of that hole by sending me music that might be inspiring or whatever. I got the Dangermouse *Grey Album* -- I didn't know anything about it, who it was, anything...

What did you think of it?

I *loved* it. I really loved it.

Is that why he ended up working on the album, from that?

Yeah. 'Cause there's a lot of aspects of the hip-hop stuff that I really like -- the stripped-down quality, and there's just some fucked-up sounds that you couldn't get away with on pop music. So I just really, I was going through the big Beatles phase, and I dunno, it just really hit me at the right time. So I just started talking to him, and he was a big Sparklehorse fan, so he just came to my studio, and we had a good time, spat out some stuff.

What kind of stuff did he *do* on the album? Did he just kind of produce it?

The first song, a little bit on the second song. He worked on "Mountains."

I mean, was he throwing in drum beats or something?

Yeah, some of it; he did reprogram some drum beats. Mostly we had to work with some stuff I had already tracked, so I was just playing multitracks from various songs. He has a really *keen* melody to grab an instrument -- let's say a guitar melody on the verse of one song -- and fuck with it in his computer and turn it over backwards, set it on fire, and put it in the chorus of another song. And have it sound like it's meant to be there, consciously, like it was there from its inception.

That's a pretty good trick, yeah.

Yeah, he just really took it apart with his laptop.

Do you think you might do something like that again later on?

Yeah -- we're actually doing a proper collaboration record in December.

Really? Wow, that's fast.

I think we're going to call



it "Dangerhorse."

[laughs] I like that; that's nice.

Yep.

I know the reason for coming back now is sort of the more "material" stuff, but are you glad you're back, I guess?

Yeah, I am.

That's good.

Honestly, I really didn't think people gave a shit. I'm just really surprised and grateful that people care enough to hear from me.

Well, it's definitely an honor to be able to talk to you, that's for sure.

Thank you.

I remember your first album was one I heard back in college, even, and I remember listening to it and thinking it didn't sound like anything I'd ever heard before. It was a nice feeling.

Great.

Although I have to admit, I was wondering how you'd managed to replicate all that stuff when you do live shows. Especially now, I guess -- I dunno; that's probably gonna be kind of difficult.

Yeah, it's not that easy. Maybe that's why I change it up on tour. I don't know how I'm gonna do it this time, 'cause I haven't really played with anyone in my new band except my drummer. So who knows? It's a mystery to me, too. *[laughs]*. **END**