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## Homecoming King: An Interview with Mark Linkous

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By Hilary A. White on Friday, 18 March 2011

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*The following is a 2006 face-to-face interview conducted by Hilary White with Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse.*

*Linkous took his own life this time*

*last year following a long battle with depression and addiction. He was highly regarded as a collaborative and visionary artist and producer, and his death came as a blow to his many fans and admirers. This is the first time this interview has seen the light of day.*

The stooped posture and slightly knock-kneed gait of [Mark Linkous](#) is unmistakable on Camden Street. Hands rigidly stuffed in the pockets, Virginia's dark star is peering through the window of a closed café. He points across the road to a certain over-priced convenience chain hopefully. "I'm pretty fussy about coffee," he sighs. We decide it's worth a go and cross over. One posh-vending-machine-coffee-in-the-bin later, and we are in a side street café. Throughout our conversation, he fiddles restlessly with a pack of Gitanes, opening and shutting the flap at one end, threatening to pull one out. His voice is a Southern drawl, but never slurred and always distributing emphasis evenly, if quietly. Behind his thick framed glasses is a courteous calm that I initially mistake for heavyheartedness, a connection I make myself in reference of the recorded few hours of rich, melancholic spells the man has cast on the world during his ten year career. He's actually mercifully chilled-out.

Linkous is just out of bed. It's 4.30 in the afternoon, and last night his group [Sparklehorse](#) played the first of two sold-out nights in Whelan's. His first visit in four years saw Dublin screaming approvingly between songs which ranged from lo-fi fragility to fuzzed stompers. It also saw the main man smiling and uncharacteristically at ease throughout. He cites the Wexford Street muso haunt as his favourite venue to play, and that it "felt like coming home in a way". For Sparklehorse, you see, has had a long love affair with Ireland, beginning with a fascination for ceol traidisiúnta, through to his friendship with [Gemma Hayes](#) and, of course, the fans, who he insists were on board "since day one".

This four-date Irish jaunt signposts the long-awaited arrival of fourth LP *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain*. The record has had the critics 'turning Japanese-ee', and has

already been ingested by the fans, who roared most of the choruses last night. Later, he will reflect, with shameless modesty, that the crowd response on this tour has been unexpected and a great relief. This is because despite his gushing audience and the habitually excellent reviews that greet his every release, an indefinite hiatus ensued after 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life* due to Linkous' crippling depression. A more accurate title would have been *Hid for Five Years in a House on a Mountain Somewhere in North Carolina*. He still retains a glimmer of shade behind the eyes. Maybe that's what I was picking up.

Two key factors, he tells me, got him back into the studio again. "Part of it was just the necessity to survive. I mean, I couldn't pay my rent. And then I started liking it again," he claims. The second factor was the new sonic lease-of-life hydrated by a guest producer and surprise Sparklehorse fan.

"When I wasn't coming off my mountain for months at a time, that was a product of the serious depression. And I think that one of the things that helped me out of it was working with other people, y'know, like Dangermouse (yes, him). I hadn't worked for a long time when we started talking and he just said 'don't be surprised if you see me in your studio next week'. I was just like 'oh fuck, what am I gonna do!' I didn't think I could articulate on tape what I had in my head. He helped with that."

**Can you tell me any more about the proposed collaboration (that would become 2010's *Dark Night of the Soul*) between the two of you?**

(laughing) "No, I'm supposed to call him to make plans about when we're gonna start doing it! Some are Sparklehorse songs that I had for this album that I just couldn't sing; they were out of my range. So I have a couple of pretty catchy pop songs and I'm hoping to pull out more of his hip-hop stuff. Bring the pop thing to his hip-hop thing, y'know, and then maybe have guest singers, like have Nina [Persson, Cardigans singer] sing some, or Polly [Jean Harvey], or Beth [Gibbons, Portishead singer]."

For one of alternative rock's most notorious recluses, he gets very gregarious in the studio, operating a revolving door system not dissimilar to Queens of the Stone Age. In particular, one kindred spirit has adversely affected Linkous' life and music; Tom Waits, who has guested on two Sparklehorse records, is a friend and admirer.

**Would you like to see yourself in his shoes eventually? You must view him as the one to beat.**

"Yeah, I would like to be seen in that way. I love everything that he's done but specifically the Island records; Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, Bone Machine. That was the roadmap for VivaDixie. I mean, I heard him playing that Gavin Bryars [English avant-garde jazz guru] song..."

**Jesus Blood Never Failed Me Yet?**

"...yeah. When I was living in Los Angeles years ago and was ready to give up on music, I heard that song, and thought, well maybe I can make beautiful music like this. So that song sort of saved me when I had given up. And then I started thinking, maybe I can make pop records that sound as interesting as his records."

I ask him about the recording environment, conjuring up images in my head of Waits and Linkous tapping radiators with animal bones in a cob-webbed attic.

"I think he had to get to know me for a few days before I could go to his house. But it was just like

a normal evening with friends who would eat pizza and watch movies.”

A little crestfallen, I leave the matter of rock’s smart-set queuing up to work with him, and turn to that process which seemingly guarantees his albums being mentioned in the end-of-year lists. His touch and dexterity is as at home in the studio, producing albums for the likes of Daniel Johnston and said Cardigans singer, as it was starting out playing lead guitar in the Dancing Hoods or wielding every instrument to record Good Morning Spider. Such a long time of inactivity may have allowed for something of a new perspective on his art once the dust had settled.

### **What have you learned about music during your absence?**

“I stopped reading as much when I stopped working. I quit doing everything, including reading, and I found that took away lyrically. That’s one thing I think isn’t up to par on this record, compared to the older stuff when I was a pretty voracious reader. I’ve discovered they’re not as sharp.”

### **I want to bake a song in my kitchen. What three ingredients do I need to start with?**

(smiles) “Well, I think a structure, a melody and lyrics. The structure, even for Sparklehorse, you could go back to the seventies and pick out a Bread [US soft rockers] song, or a Neil Young, or any seventies AM pop radio song. I guess that pretty classic structure of verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus-end. Then your melody. I usually come up with the lyrics last. That’s how I make ‘em.”

### **So you don’t necessarily start with a concept or a feeling?**

“No. After I have the chord structure and the melody, that bit starts automatically. How I envision a song sounding at the end of the day. And then sometimes I record and start subtracting.”

Now he is fiddling a bit more with that cigarette pack. The handle of his espresso cup gets swivelled incessantly on the saucer. Over ten years ago, Linkous clinically died for four minutes as a result of what doctors like to call “misadventure”. It resulted in temporary wheel-chair confinement and a continual need for leg braces (hence the gait). The incident has been well documented and he is, understandably, reluctant to irritate healed scars. I am asking him how he deals with the intrusive stirring of the interview process, especially for a person who has had such a troubled life history. Can it be therapeutic, I wonder aloud.

“Talking about depression and things like that, it’s easier to just tell it than to make up some story or bullshit. And then I’ve had people come to me many times after a gig and tell me how a song helped them or a record helped them. I dunno, if the depression thing is more open, then people who’ve had it, and had problems with sadness and think that it has to be only bad... I think it takes some of the weight off if you know there’s other people who feel the same way you have. It’s one of the basics of alcoholics anonymous or somethin’ like that; the knowledge that there’s other people in the same boat.”

It’s been half an hour or so since I met the Tim Burton-esque apparition in the street. I ask if he’s seen the Al Gore movie An Inconvenient Truth. “That’s some scary shit,” he deadpans. We get a tap on the window. It’s sound check time and there are still a few power problems to sort out. The mellow Virginian asks if I got enough materiel, tears the filter from his Gitane and promises that next time he comes back he will do his best to set out some time to “just chill out”. With that, he buries his hands in his pockets and ambles back across the street, stopping briefly to check if the way is clear.

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