

# Ghost of His Smile

An unpublished interview with the late Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse.

BY [DON HARRISON](#)



This conversation with Mark Linkous was conducted following the 2006 release of Sparklehorse's fourth full-length CD, "Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain." The Virginia native and his band had just come off a tour of the United Kingdom, selling out three shows in London, and were about to embark on a two-week tour of Spain and Portugal.

During the 45 minute interview, the soft-spoken singer and songwriter was frank about the personal demons that were plaguing him, but seemingly hopeful and optimistic about his career and future musical challenges. He even cracked a joke or two. "It wasn't enough to buy me a new car," he relayed with a snicker when asked how well his third album, 2001's "It's a Wonderful Life," had sold.

Linkous also spoke about his continued collaborations with DJ Danger Mouse, who helped on some of the new album's tracks. Sparklehorse and Danger Mouse would

eventually start a project that became the controversial “Dark Night of the Soul,” finished in early 2009 and mired in legal hassles that have only been recently resolved; the disc, which contains appearances from many different collaborators, from Black Francis to director David Lynch, will finally see release this summer. “We’re going to make a Danger Horse record,” Linkous said with audible excitement, displaying a rare hint of giddiness.

**Style:** You are living in western North Carolina now?

**Linkous:** I kind of found this place by accident. A friend of mine from high school had some property out here and I visited and just fell in love with this area.

Is it out in the middle of nowhere?

Very rural. I’m way on top of a mountain. It’s just beautiful. Looking over a beautiful valley, really tall mountain.

Do you have your recording studio there at home, the way you did when you lived in Bremono Bluff?

No, I have a little house on a top of a mountain, but in this little town, over the mountain range, I rent a warehouse and that’s where my studio is.

Why did it take so long to release the new album? Were you moving or in some personal flux?

I guess so. A little of both. I’ve had depression a long time but it’s gotten really bad. Between the last album [“It’s a Wonderful Life”] and this album ... like three years I just quit.

You couldn’t write songs?

I just ... when you get that bad, I think you can’t do anything except sleep. And I got to where I just lost interest in working, or doing anything really. I still occasionally like going into my studio and writing a song on my guitar but I kind of lost interest in recording it. The songwriting really slowed down, but I don’t know. I guess when you get in that state you start thinking things that aren’t true -- I just didn’t think I could record what I heard in my head, I didn’t think I could articulate what I heard in my head. And it was really tough recording this new album.

Really? It doesn’t sound like it.

I think part of that is because there are a lot of pop songs on it. I guess this being in a dark place like that and coming out with pop songs is kind of strange thing.

Maybe you were trying to make yourself feel better.

I think so. And I think the record is kind of optimistic. I knew how laborious it would be at the time ... and they were pop songs, and that makes it even harder for me. Because I sort of know how to do pretty atmospheric ballads and sparse pretty stuff like that but pop songs are strange [territory].

Did collaborating with other people, like DJ Danger Mouse, help?

That helped. That was sort of the turning point. I had really totally isolated myself and stopped talking to my musician friends, my friends, anybody, but my manager and people around would send me CDs of bands and songs that I might find interesting, or people I might want to collaborate with. My manager sent me "The Grey Album" by Danger Mouse [an acclaimed but legally controversial CD that combines samples from the Beatles and Jay-Z]. ... I think out of desperation I went back to what I consider to be the pinnacle of pop music, the later-period Beatles.

Your stuff on this new record does sound very Lennonesque.

Yeah. Good. I was listening to a lot of that stuff to save me, inspire me.

Were the Beatles big in your childhood? Or did you discover them later?

Growing up, I was big into the Monkees. My first day in school, there's a picture of me with a Monkees lunch box and a Monkees T-shirt. I really loved the Monkees and I would hear Beatles stuff on the radio, the earlier stuff, but it wasn't until later on when I hung out with other people that I got into them. The guitar player from the Damned was the guy who turned me on to the Beatles. When I lived in New York, I worked for a record distributor. I was way into punk rock and was a huge Damned fan. I invited them to the record distributor to visit and take some records home. And Capt. Sensible asked me if I had ever heard "Tomorrow Never Knows" off of "Revolver." He played me that and "It's All Too Much." And it blew my mind, it opened up this whole thing.

Wow. Were you also into Jay-Z?

I really like Jay Z. As far as production goes and sounds, a lot of the current R&B and hip hop sounds great. I really love that stripped down hip-hop stuff. I guess I got the "Grey Album" and listened to it at a perfect time. Danger Mouse and I just started talking. And like a lot of the other people I've collaborated with, I would never have guessed [he was a] Sparklehorse fan but he really was. He came here to my house. He said, "Don't be surprised when I show up at your house next week." And he showed up at my house next week. He worked in my studio for awhile and we just started talking and I articulated to him that the stuff I was hearing in my head I wasn't sure I could produce on tape. And I know that a lot of that can be done on a laptop.

Are you tech-savvy?

I'm pretty old-school analog.

What about the Sparklehorse live band? Do you have the same band?

No. The drummer I was working with for a long time, Scott Minor, lives in Nashville. He's got a good job now. I've got a girl in the band now, Paula Jean Brown. A fellow from Mississippi named Chris Michaels is playing guitar and keyboards. And my best friend of about 20 years is on drums, Johnny Hott.

Johnny is, of course, the former drummer of House of Freaks. There's no good way to ask this so I'll just ask: How are you two doing after Bryan Harvey's tragic death?

Well, I think going out and playing music together has been really good for both of us. I don't know. ... Almost every night we get two encores and we sell the place out in Europe but sometimes it's just amazing. ... You can just feel the ghosts all around the air. Therapeutic may be too strong a word but it's been good. We put the music out there and it continues on around the earth.

You were kind of a de facto member of House of Freaks for a time, weren't you?

For a very short of period of time, toward the end of House of Freaks, they were experimenting with different things for recording during their last album, "Invisible Jewel." It's a good record. We all lived out in L.A. at the same time and I remember going out and seeing House of Freaks play when there were four or five people in the audience and I was one of the four or five. We had connections because we all came from Virginia, and Johnny Hott and I really got to be friends. I remember going to see them play and being really amazed at both of them. ... And just touring with Johnny now, almost every night I think, "I never thought I'd ever be able to play with him."

You sold out your recent stint in London. Why has it been harder for Sparklehorse to gain acceptance in the United States?

I don't know. Maybe from the beginning, the U.K. really sort of picked up on the record and around that time a lot of people [in the U.S.] who heard the record didn't listen hard enough or didn't listen deep enough, they just thought it was dark and depressing, but the people in the U.K. appreciated it right off the bat. They saw it as I intended it to be in the first place, kind of optimistic and hopeful music. I don't know, but they got it right off the bat.

Here's an abstract question: When you are writing and recording a song, who are you trying to impress? Yourself or the audience?

Basically I do it for myself. But I imagine myself hearing it and it being someone else.

And a lot of times I'll judge things I do in the sense of if I heard it and it was another artist, I'd say "Damn, I can't believe they did that."

Of your recordings, what's the one thing — album or song — you're proudest of? Probably specific songs from the records -- "Sunshine" [off of] "Good Morning Spider," maybe "Saturday" from the first album, "Gold Day" from "It's A Wonderful Life." Maybe something like "You are my Sunshine" from the new album ... sort of pop songs that could be taken out of context and they could almost be 1970s AM radio songs by someone else ... like they were performed by Bread.

Oh, there are some great Bread songs.  
I love them. I'm a Bread freak.

Is there a feeling you are trying to convey when you write?  
Intimacy. I've never used a lot of reverb on my records. This started from the first album not wanting to wake my wife up by recording in the middle of the night, and instead of mic-ing the guitar, it would go straight into the recorder. There's no air anywhere when you do that. Like a direct line ... Reverb. ... I think sometimes it distances, to me it muddles things around. I started out not having any gear at all, just microphones and a tape recorder and guitars, I had open space in my farm house but I didn't have any outboard gear to electronically create that kind of stuff. So the sound developed that way from a lack of recording gear.

Then it became an aesthetic.  
Yeah. I really liked the sound of that a lot -- not so much a wall of sound but every instrument was important. That came out of learning on a four track [recorder], each track you use has to be efficient and be purposeful.

Have you ever been "produced" by some other producer in a big modern studio?  
I've gone into situations like that where I was going to have someone co-produce me, like Dave Friedman, but it ended up me just being protective about everything. ... Maybe that's why I haven't gone beyond cult status. With this DangerHorse thing we're doing, I want to let myself be open to that. I like everything that Danger Mouse has done and my every intention is to let myself be produced and see what we come up with it. And hopefully it will be something that has never been done before, kind of a melding of whatever my pop thing is and [the] hip-hop thing that he did with the "Grey Album."