

livewire's one on one

Sparklehorse's musical brain trust Mark Linkous



Mark Linkous

Interview with Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous

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Livewire's Martha Berner caught up with Sparklehorse's musical brain trust Mark Linkous before their recent Chicago show to discuss his recent tour, revolving band personnel, the recording process of his fourth and latest Sparklehorse effort, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, as well as why not to rely on the mail when working with Tom Waits.

Photos: Sarah Alair

Livewire: It's been five years since Sparklehorse released its last studio album. What have you been up to?

Mark: I did some other stuff. I mixed a couple of Daniel Johnston albums, produced one of Nina Persson's albums, lead singer from The Cardigans. I did a thing with Christian Fennesz in Europe.

Livewire: I read on your website that you're rebuilding your studio, Static King. How's that coming along?



Mark: Trying to [rebuild it]. The heart of the studio is the mixing board and it was built in 1969, the parts that work sound incredible. But it's really big and there're a lot of parts, so not all of it works. But, yeah, I'm trying to get it going.

Livewire: On the new album there's a track that was recorded with Tom Waits during the *It's A*

Wonderful Life sessions. Was that your first time working with Tom Waits?

Mark: Yeah, that was the first time we'd worked face to face. We had done some stuff through the mail before I went out to California to work with him. Actually, I sent him the master tapes on a little four-track recorder and he did his parts, and the machine that we worked on got lost in the mail. That was the first time we'd worked together, the sessions for the last album. He played the piano track that's on the new album.

Livewire: So the tracks that got lost in the mail, were those for *It's A Wonderful Life*?

Mark: No, that was actually for a track during...I guess that was my second album *Good Morning Spider*. That was the thing we were working on via the mail. That was to be on *Good Morning Spider*.

Livewire: Was working with Tom Waits one of those moments in your career where you thought "Wow! I've got Tom Waits working on my stuff!"?

Mark: Yeah. I still can't believe that it actually happened.

Livewire: Right now you're on tour in a nice, big bus. What was touring like back in the early years?

Mark: Well, we actually did a van tour before we did this one, which is a pain in the ass. I'm actually gonna do a van tour in Europe. The sound guy has this thing called Stars Of The Lid, I'm doing the solo thing and he's gonna do sound for me and open as Stars Of The Lid. We're touring in what they call splitter buses, where they're like a quarter the size of a tour bus. The only reason I have a tour bus right now is out of necessity because we just play so often that we don't really get that many hotel rooms. It's almost physically impossible to tour with this many people and play night after night and not have a tour bus.

Livewire: I noticed that you've worked with a lot of different people recording your albums. Does your touring lineup change as well?

Mark: Yeah, it usually changes. One of the advantages of me being Sparklehorse is that every album, or more often than that even, I can change the lineup, the touring entourage. For instance, the guy who's playing drums and pump organ, he's been my best friend for twenty years. He's played on all my albums, the first album, but I could never get him to tour. He just agreed to tour with me very recently. This lineup in particular, they're all really, really good players. It's kind of different now, a lot of times in the past it was always teetering on the edge of disaster all the time, and now it's pretty solid.

Livewire: The point at which you decided to be Sparklehorse, instead of Mark Linkous solo artist; what was that decision like for you and why did you decide to go on as Sparklehorse?

Mark: I guess an aversion to being known as a singer/songwriter. I wanted to avoid that at all cost. Plus, there were other people that I was really into, like Smog, and Palace, and Palace was always Will Oldham to some degree.

Livewire: The new album, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, is being likened more to your earlier albums, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* and *Good Morning Spider*. Was the recording process also more similar to these albums than *It's A Wonderful Life*?

Mark: Well, with *It's A Wonderful Life* I specifically tried to avoid using guitars wherever possible and have the album be as orchestrated as possible with symphonic instruments. Therefore, a lot of the pop songs that I had written didn't really work right, songs like "Shade and Honey," and I forget what else. But I had a few pop songs written during that time that just... every time I tried to include on that album they just stuck out. So I had a few pop songs saved for what I knew would be my next album that would be more of a pop record. So I guess it's just that there's more pop songs on this record, and also there's probably four or five songs that I played everything on and recorded and mixed it all at my own place, kind of like the old records. Especially *Good Morning Spider*, which I played almost all the instruments on.

Livewire: This leg of touring wraps up in a few weeks. Do you think you'll continue to tour pretty heavily for this album?

Mark: I don't know how long I'm home for, not very long, and then I'm going through Europe to do the solo thing for a while. I might be going with a full band to Australia to do something over there. So, it seems like

it's not winding down yet.

Livewire: Is touring something you enjoy or is it more of the job for you?

Mark: I used to not enjoy it that much; it was almost a necessary evil. For a long time I felt really guilty about making entertainment out of it. But I did that for so long that this time I guess I said to myself 'I'm just gonna let myself enjoy it'. I guess in a way I've tried to just consciously distance myself from the lyrics enough to not feel weird about singing them night after night in front of people.

Livewire: So the intimate nature of the music made you feel like you were cheapening what it was for the sake of entertainment? Selling out on what the art really meant to you?

Mark: Yeah. Exactly.