

Sparkling once more

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BY JIM DeROGATIS POP MUSIC CRITIC

- The myth that artists must suffer to create meaningful work has long been the most damaging ever foisted upon rock 'n' roll, and it's led to a long, sad list of talents who've self-destructed much too soon. Mark Linkous, the singer-songwriter and cult hero who's recorded four brilliant albums as Sparklehorse, knows this all too well.

"It's one of the reasons I'm apprehensive about talking about depression," Linkous says in his languid drawl. "But it has gotten to be too much of a drag doing interviews and beating around the bush." Now, when he's asked why "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain" is the first Sparklehorse album in five years, he answers directly: He was suffering from a depression so deep that he couldn't bring himself to write or record for three years.

"Maybe I had just become too much of a recluse for too long and convinced myself that I couldn't do it anymore -- that I couldn't write good songs and I couldn't make interesting records. Most of it was just having depression really bad. So when people started asking me, I just started coming out with that, thinking that maybe it would help people or inspire some people to get over their own depression. But I was really apprehensive about talking about it for that reason -- maybe some people would think that this was necessary to make art, instead of an obstacle to it."

Tracing the arc of Linkous' career, it's easy to see why he'd be concerned about being portrayed as "the long-suffering artist." Signed to Capitol Records in the mid-'90s on the strength of a demo, he released the critically acclaimed Sparklehorse debut "Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot" in 1996, scoring a modern-rock hit with "Someday I Will Treat You Good," and landing high-profile tours opening for Radiohead and R.E.M. While on tour, he passed out after mixing Valium with prescription antidepressants, and wound up partially paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair for several months.

Linkous chronicled his surgeries and his recovery on the 1998 album "Good Morning Spider," and followed that with another strong effort in 2001's "It's a Wonderful Life." Often described as Southern Gothic or the darkest strain of alternative country, the sounds on the latter weren't nearly as uplifting as the title suggested, but things did seem to be looking up for him -- until the bout with depression that delayed the release of his fourth album.

Relocating from his native Virginia to rural North Carolina and slowly recovering his ability to make music once again, Linkous recorded "Dreamt..." in his own home studio, initially playing most of the instruments himself. (On the current tour, Sparklehorse is completed by guitarist Chris Michaels, bassist Paula Jean Brown, drummer Johnny Hott and pedal steel player Matt Pleasant.) As in the past, however, Linkous also attracted contributions from some impressive guests, including Steven Drozd of the Flaming Lips, who drummed on "It's Not So Hard"; Sol Seppy, who added backing vocals to "Please Don't Take My Sunshine," and one of his heroes, Tom Waits, who added piano to "Morning Hollow."

Linkous' fragile, introspective tunes convey emotional depths that are rarely heard even from the most revered songwriters, and his peers recognize that. Another who contributed to "Dreamt..." is producer DJ Danger Mouse (Gnarls Barkley, the Good, the Bad & the Queen), and he enjoyed the experience so much, the two have already begun collaborating on a new album; Linkous jokes that they might call the project "Danger Horse."

"I'm not sure exactly where it's going to go yet, we're still just experimenting and trying to do different things."

Linkous is clearly enjoying the attention that "Dreamt..." has garnered; he's happy to be performing live again, and he's looking forward to recording a lot more and in a more timely fashion. "I don't believe that I don't have anything to worry about anymore," he says. "But I do think that I established enough confidence, song by song, until I got a record together, and that it hauled me out of the hole. I think that I have enough confidence since I did the record to keep from slipping down into the vortex again and not being able to keep my head above water.

"I'm not saying I'm safe now -- that I might never be depressed again -- but it's not as dangerous as it was. You know, there's a great line in that show 'Deadwood,' where Calamity Jane says, 'Every day, you have to figure out how to live all over again.' Well, that's how I feel."