

Free the sound inside

POP MUSIC

Mark Linkous, a.k.a. Sparklehorse, finds ways to let it all out, even in bad times.

February 08, 2007 | Chris Barton | Times Staff Writer

If there were a degree-of-difficulty scale for measuring music careers, Mark Linkous probably would lie at the opposite end of the spectrum from, say, Katharine McPhee.

Since he began recording under the name Sparklehorse more than 10 years ago, Linkous' short list of challenges has included a longtime struggle with depression, a drug-related accident in 1996 that briefly left him paralyzed and, most recently, the loss of a close friend and collaborator when House of Freaks' Bryan Harvey was brutally murdered with his family at the start of 2006.

His calf muscles destroyed as a result of lost circulation during his overdose, Linkous now wears leg braces to get around, but the damage from Harvey's death still casts a dark shadow. "It was horrible," he says by phone from Austin, Texas. "If it would've happened early on in the record, I don't know if it would've ever gotten finished."

Luckily, much of album was complete, and Linkous dedicated the long-delayed "Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain" to his departed friend. Released five years after his acclaimed "It's a Wonderful Life," the new record is an extension of Sparklehorse's unmistakable sound. Behind waterlogged and otherwise distorted vocals, Linkous spins vivid tales of love, sorrow and nature -- surreal fairy tales wrapped in production where otherworldly noises wash over everything from fragile, bittersweet ballads to deconstructed fuzz-rock.

"A lot of times the songs are finished and there's usually more deconstruction going on than layering on tons of tracks," he says of his recording process. "There's certain sounds, and I guess they're often antiquated sounds, but they have so much character sometimes. They remind me of colors or smells or something."

Based in a small town in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, Linkous kept busy with numerous other projects between albums, including a live collaboration with laptop artist Christian Fennesz and various production duties with other artists such as Daniel Johnston. But most of the delay could be attributed to a familiar demon: himself.

"I've had problems with depression for a long time, and it just got really bad for three years. It was this vortex I couldn't climb out of," he explains. "I think probably a little confidence is what helped, and that confidence was music. Just getting a song down, one at a time, that I felt was decent."

WORKING inside his converted warehouse studio, Linkous got back on track with the help of a seemingly unlikely source: "Grey Album" mastermind Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton, who co-produced four songs on the new album. Though most commonly associated with more dance-oriented projects like Gorillaz and Gnarls Barkley, Burton was a longtime fan and eager to learn whatever he could from Linkous, whose mercurial recording process often mirrors his own. As a result, it's surprisingly difficult to separate the Danger Mouse tracks from the rest of the album, which, for Burton, was exactly the point.

"He's not like anybody I've ever worked with, and probably won't be. I just didn't want to get in the way of that Sparklehorse sound," Burton explains. "A lot of times if I work with people I try to put my sound or my thing towards it, and this was definitely one situation where there was enough of his influence in what I do that I just stuck to those things."

Though Burton is reluctant to delve into specifics of their sessions, the chemistry was such that both artists have started recording for a new, stand-alone collaboration that's been informally dubbed "Dangerhorse." Neither cared to speculate further about the project, but for Linkous it all comes back to freeing the sounds rattling inside of his head, one way or another. If those can be born as a result of outside help, such as Danger Mouse's digital editing chops on the fuzz-metal guitar solo that crashes into album opener "Don't Take My Sunshine Away," all the better.

But despite recording with other guests that included the Flaming Lips' Steven Drozd and Tom Waits, Linkous' favorite resource may be the gear he finds buried in classified ads and thrift stores around the country. A few acquisitions he's most excited about are a monstrous vintage Flickinger console that recorded gold records for the Ohio Players and a freakish organ-turtable hybrid made by Mattel in the '70s called an Optigan. Though unpredictable to work with, both played a part on the new album.

"There definitely are [ghosts] in these old machines," Linkous says. "One of my favorite guitars just has this smell to it, it's like an old attic. It belonged to an old woman who only played it in church."

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