

King of the hill

Mark Linkous revives his Sparklehorse

By MICHAEL ALAN GOLDBERG | February 20, 2007



MOUNTAIN SOUNDS: Linkous has made a comeback from drugs and despair.

"I got so down on myself mentally that I thought, 'Well, it's been five years and people have moved on . . . ' — that it wasn't that great a thing to begin with," Sparklehorse mastermind Mark Linkous says in his unruffled Southern drawl over the phone from a tour stop in Arizona. "I didn't think anyone would come to these shows. I figured the venues would be half-empty, and it hasn't been that way at all."

Indeed, a week later, the Showbox Theater in Seattle is near capacity. Swooning abounds — eyes-closed swaying greets the quartet's sometimes spectral, sometimes raucous ruminations on isolation, death, frustration, and hope encased in bewitching, dreamy country pop. Darkness and light are woven together as nattily as Linkous's black-and-white cowboy shirt. If not exactly bubbly, the singer/guitarist does sport a satisfied grin on his face for most of the set — a departure from the well of despair, paralyzing depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and utter lack of artistic confidence he'd fallen into. Linkous's afflictions had dated back to Sparklehorse's 1995 debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* (Capitol). But they got particularly bad after 2001's lush, mordantly titled *It's a Wonderful Life* and the subsequent tour.

"I think it was a combination of feeling guilty about making a living doing this and turning it into entertainment. I would never let it actually make me feel good. Doing the music in the first place, like almost all art, was an outlet to keep my head from exploding, and then turning it into a traveling road show where you perform to people night after night after night . . . it seemed like it corrupted everything."

Retreating to his mountaintop home in North Carolina, Linkous battled his demons while piecing together Sparklehorse's fourth album, last fall's *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain* (Astralwerks). Multi-instrumentalist Dave Fridmann and drummer Steven Drozd help define the album's skewed melodicism. But there's also a spare and riveting collaboration with Tom Waits ("Morning Hollow") that features former Dambuilders violinist Joan Wasser, and a handful of the disc's dozen tracks were co-produced by Danger Mouse, who upgrades Linkous's fondness for scrapyards and lo-fi electronic experimentation. The album has the expected ghostly, melancholy ruminations, but at

times it's downright cheerful. Indeed, the opener, "Don't Take My Sunshine Away," is one of the most upbeat songs Linkous has written.

The now clean, somewhat happier Linkous says the reception he's received from fans and critics has made it easier to stay out on a tour that comes to the Paradise this Monday. "I was just like, 'Fuck it, I'm gonna try to enjoy it this time.' I know the audience pretty much consists of allies of mine; they know what I've been through, they know what it's all about, so I don't feel embarrassed singing those songs in front of them because I feel like they're with me."

He's looking forward to another collaboration with Danger Mouse (a project they're calling Dangerhorse), and he intends to work with Austrian electronic experimentalist Christian Fennesz later this year. But he has no intention of altering his lifestyle: after this tour, it's back to the mountain. "I'm pretty much a recluse. And maybe when you live that way it's easy to lose sight of what's reality. But I still like living in the country, walking around in the woods all day. I think I'll always live in the country, but I'm trying harder to stop convincing myself of things that aren't true."