

FRIDAY, JULY 30, 2010

Steven Nistor interview



American musician **Steven Nistor** performed on the breathtaking new *Danger Mouse* and *Sparklehorse* album. *BobbySix.com* talks to him about how the album was put together, the legal wrangles that followed and the loss of his friend, Mark Linkous:

"One night, I went to see Gnarl Barkley play and, after the show, Danger Mouse wanted to know if I was available to play on a Sparklehorse record. I was freaking, since I'd been a fan for about ten years, but I kept my cool and said, 'Uh, yeah, I think I have some availability.' Ha!"

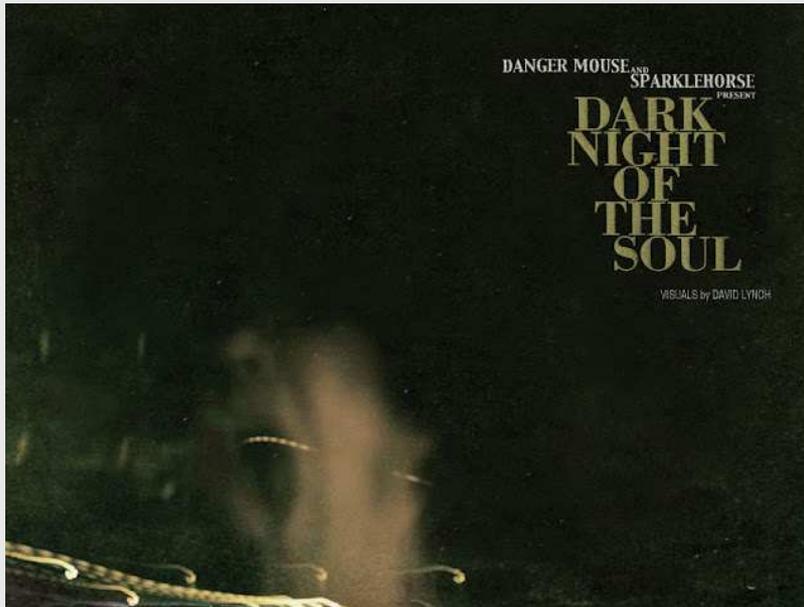
And so came about Steven Nistor's involvement with the recently-released *Danger Mouse* and *Sparklehorse* long-player, *Dark Night of the Soul*. The record is a hugely ambitious project with each track seeing not only the coming together of *Danger Mouse* and Mark 'Sparklehorse' Linkous, but also collaborations with The Flaming Lips, Julian Casablancas, Frank Black, Nina Persson, James Mercer, Gruff Rhys, Iggy Pop, Suzanne Vega, Vic Chesnutt and Jason Lytle. Oh, and not forgetting that none other than David Lynch provided artwork and a vocal or two as well.

To indie fanboys, this will surely conjure up images of Nistor downing shots with Iggy Pop, partying with Wayne Coyne and sneaking off for a crafty smoke with Gruff Rhys, but the truth is far less hedonistic. "Unfortunately I didn't meet any of those people until the album was finished," Nistor admits. "If you look at the credits it looks like I was jamming keyboards with The Flaming Lips. As much as I would have liked that to have been a reality, those decisions were made well after I laid my parts down. People have asked me 'What's it like to work with David Lynch?' and I have nothing to say because I [first] met him at the Gallery Opening for the record in 2009!"

The album - epic, beautiful, cinematic; at times melancholy and ethereal, elsewhere impish and punky - lands on shelves this July after over a year of legal wrangling with the record company. For a time, it seemed that it would never see the light of day. Nistor though, who played drums and keys on most of the tracks, had no idea that, behind locked doors, wars were being waged over its release. "I knew *nothing* of the legal stuff that surrounded the album," he shrugs. "My brother sent me an NPR article, a year or so later, about the whole thing saying, 'Did you play on this record?' Up to that point I had *no* idea what happened to the tracks after I left the studio. At that time I thought maybe an album called *Sparklemouse* or something would come out."

Indeed, even once the recording process had started, the corkscrew-haired musician was in the dark about exactly what shape his hard work would eventually take. "At first all I knew was Mark [Linkous] was writing lyrics and music around some sample ideas that *Danger Mouse* had, so I figured it was a *Sparklehorse* project, to be 'produced' by *Danger Mouse*. When you're being hired to be in that kind of situation, you don't really ask a lot of questions. After a week of playing some really cool stuff with

them, I didn't hear anything for about four or five months from Danger Mouse or Mark, so I figured, 'Well okay, I hope they have something they liked.'"



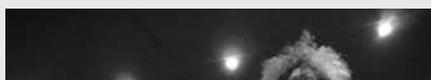
When Danger Mouse did get in touch again, he told Nistor that he had "four or five different projects going on," and that he wanted him to be involved in all of them. "That summer I was playing a bunch of different instruments and sometimes I didn't know whose project it was. I really had no idea what the concept for *Dark Night of the Soul* was going to be, let alone which artist I was playing for. This was certainly no fault of Danger Mouse, but my own laziness. I just wanted to play."

So, at Danger Mouse's studio, Nistor continued to contribute to an album that he knew little about, collaborating with artists he had never met. Yet, in spite of such vagueness, he was still very much involved in the creative processes. "Danger Mouse is hands off at first; wanting you to try and come up with an idea that he didn't think of. Then if it doesn't seem to be working he'll get more involved in shaping the drum or piano part. He and Mark had a sort of scrapbook of musical ideas based around a riff, a sample or a keyboard sound and they would let me jam along it."

As is the way with most recording sessions, at times it took a whole lot of head scratching for things to come together. "Sometimes you hit on an idea that takes off right away, other times you've missed it completely and you need some direction. And there are all shades in between. The song that instantly comes to my mind is *Pain* [featuring Iggy Pop]. I'm pretty reserved when I collaborate, especially behind the drums because I don't want to make myself the focus. Mark kept asking me to be 'wilder' and 'crazier'. He wanted me to do a lot of fills and make it flashy and kinda funny. So I'm in the drum booth thinking I'm getting there and the track stops. Now, Mark was one of the most polite people I've ever met and didn't like to impose himself, so when he entered the booth from the control room I got a little nervous. He sat next to me and said, 'Steve, you're a really good drummer. You're probably too good for this song. Pretend you're playing by yourself at the junior high talent show.' I laughed but could tell he was serious, and that little piece of advice completely opened me up to what he was going for. The next take I played is the take you hear on that song."

Since the record was completed, it has been surrounded by tragedy. Vic Chesnutt, who performed on it, died in December 2009. Then, in March of this year, Mark Linkous took his own life. "He was a really sweet guy. He had a vicious sense of humor. But you could tell he was in a lot of pain, emotionally."

Posting on his website shortly after Linkous' suicide, Nistor said: "The heartbreak and disappointment come and go but I just try and remember the time I spent with him." And now, a few months hence, he is able to look back on his friendship with a smile. "My memories of Mark are completely positive. There are also some that are really funny. When we were working on what was going to be the next Sparklehorse record at Steve Albini's studio, we were staying at the apartments they have there, and me and my girlfriend were rooming next to Mark. Steve has three or four cats and they would sneak into our rooms if we left the doors open. One night Mark was trying to go to bed and, from what I could tell, the cats kept jumping into bed with him and wouldn't leave the room. And you know how cats are when they figure out they're annoying you? They sort of mess with you even more. So we're trying to sleep next door and we keep hearing this Virginian accent screaming, 'Geee-yet! Geee-yet!' Mark was really soft-spoken and didn't raise his voice much, so it was really kind of funny. We were trying not to laugh too hard while this went on for 45-minutes."





Two Steves: Albini and Nistor

With *Dark Night of the Soul* finally in the shops, what's next for Steven Nistor? "I've been recording bands in my studio, as well as recording drum tracks for others via email, and I'm just getting started on my own record, which I'm very excited about. It's going to be drum-centric, 70's style. I've also been doing tracks for Daniel Lanois, as well as tracks for Alison Krauss/Robert Plant that Lanois is producing." And as if that weren't enough to keep him busy: "I'm doing a show, playing drums for Brian Blade, which I'm really, really excited about. Hopefully that will lead to more live stuff with him. It's really kind of crazy and exciting... playing drums for the best drummer in the world!"