

Sparklehorse isn't so much a band as it is something that happens in Mark Linkous's head. When he gets an idea, Linkous goes up to the spare bedroom of his rented farmhouse near Bremo Bluff, Virginia, and records it on 16-track DAT.

Visiting the soft-spoken, courtly Linkous on a flat winter day, the dogs swarm and wag, and his 1930s frame house - which was once used to cure tobacco - lets in little of the cool, glassy light from outside. Linkous, who hails from Virginia's Dickenson County, talks about his 1968 Charger, his '72 Moto Guzzi (an Italian touring motorcycle which looks like a giant cricket dipped in chrome), and his record collection (he's currently most fond of Palace, Guided By Voices and Pavement). Soon, he heads over to where he makes his Sparklehorse music, the first shreds of which you'll hear on his debut album with a mouthful- of-a-title, Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot (Capitol).

Linkous pops a tiny DAT tape into a black-lipped deck, settles back into his chair and lights a Camel. "I haven't listened to this since I finished it this morning," he says. "I'm kind of curious as to what it sounds like."

Linkous linked up with Capitol through his old friend David Lowery, formerly of Camper Van Beethoven and now head of Cracker. Lowery wound up producing and playing on Viva. But how will the Beatles' old label market the low-key, found-sound beauty of Sparklehorse, whose music is the very definition of contemporary indie rock? "That new head guy is pretty smart," Linkous says of Gary Gersh, who ascended to the Capitol throne after signing Nirvana to Geffen.

While Sparklehorse has gotten little live exposure in the U.S., it did tour the U.K. last fall opening for Radiohead, who requested the group after hearing a tape. "Good eating," he says of the tour. "Catered food. Guinness every night." A rock'n'roll tour seems about 180 degrees from Linkous's home life, which is spent mainly with his wife Teresa, his animals and his toys. As we take the Charger to a nearby store, Linkous opens her up on the flat stretches, fast enough to leave my last thought about 100 yards behind on the barely paved road. Along the way, the rural Virginia scenery is sparse but somehow pristine - kind of like Sparklehorse.

Linkous himself has his own definition for the music. "It's a fine line between genius and boredom."