

Puncture  
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 by Richard Martin

go for a ride

the band: Sparklehorse  
 on the Guzzi: Mark Linkous  
 the scribe: Richard Martin  
 the terminus: nobody knows

Like a modern-day Van Gogh, Mark Linkous takes in the simple, barren countryside around him and recasts it as art. What Vincent did with paint, Mark must do with words, chords, and melodies, and he splendidly evokes the idyllic and mystical aspects of the rural south on Sparklehorse's debut, *Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot* (on Capitol). From his rented farm in Breemo Bluff, Virginia, an hour outside Richmond, Mark glances out at the cows and horses, or his motorcycle, or the sky, or the dream he had last night. The only nonrustic thing Sparklehorse's main man plucks from the domestic scenery is that mass of metal passing through the yard at 50 miles an hour.

"I love trains. I try to keep them out of my music because they're sort of a hack thing to write and sing about," Mark says, reminded of a century's worth of Chattanooga Choo Chos, Mystery Trains, and City of New Orleans. "You hear people like Hootie and the Blowfish or Soul Asylum talking about trains. I don't want to hear it romanticized anymore."

But Linkous, ever the Southern gentleman, indulges his interviewer with a reminiscence about a Woody Guthrie--like run-in with the ol' box-car blues. "That train track running behind the house, it goes all the way into Richmond," Mark says in his slightly lazy drawl. "One day, a couple of summers ago, I jumped it, and rode up in the coal car. I was goin' into Richmond, but it took a long time, and kept stopping. Then it went through this prison, with guard towers and all and I thought, 'Man, they're gonna see me on this train and think I'm a convict trying to escape. They'll shoot me!' I was terrified.

"I made it through the prison and into Richmond. But the train didn't stop. It just kept goin'. I had to jump off, and I busted my ass. I was totally black, covered in coal dust. I jumped off in a train yard, and I had to jump between trains to get to the street. I jumped through and I was standing right next to the train-yard guy. It was a strange moment. We looked at each other and nobody said a word. And I just kept goin'.

"I jumped over one train that had all these amphibious tank vehicles I'd never seen before and have never seen since. I think it was during the Persian Gulf thing. I got out onto the street and walked up to where [Richmond band] House of Freaks practice, to use the telephone. I walked by a car with two people in it. And I sort of averted my eyes, 'cause I thought maybe they were makin' out. Next day, I found out it was two people shot in the head. And that's my train story."

Mark's Southern hospitality extends to letting us in on the rather odd title to Sparklehorse's album, *Vivadixiesubmarinetranmissionplot*. "It's a bunch of words from a dream. In it, [Confederate] General Lee had a submarine, and I was swimming toward it. I heard an old-time band playing inside. That's where the title sort of came from."

The 16 tracks on *Vivadixie* spring from innocent observations or painterly interpretations. "Spirit Ditch" is sung by a dark character who could have migrated from a Faulkner novel. In the three-minute masterpiece, as overlapping guitar notes emulate the gentle flow of a woodland creek, Mark's

quavering voice relates, "Woke up in a burned-out basement/Sleeping with metal hands in a spirit ditch." At a moment when you expect a bridge or a ringing guitar solo to pick up the pace, a woman's voice funneled through a telephone recounts a dream in which seven-year-old Mark plays in the woods, falls down a hill, gets hurt. It's his mom.

Mark, now in his early 30s, remembers how it came together. "We were working on the song in the studio, and we'd left a space for an instrumental solo. I was like, 'Man, I don't want to do a fuckin' guitar solo.'

"Then I called home to check my messages and my mom had left that story. I put the mike up to the telephone, and it fitted perfectly. One of those great little accidents."

Other found sounds, loops, and electronic glitches lurk within and between tracks on Vivadixie, but the narrative pieces contain the imagery, insight, and thematic eccentricities (e.g., in "Saturday": "You play great keyboards on horse's teeth"; in "Spirit Ditch": "Horse laughter is dragging pianos to the ocean") that make this one of the most intelligent records to emerge from a major label in a while. He excels at both up- and down-tempo compositions, as snappy tunes like "Rainmaker" and "Heart of Darkness" balance reflective ballads like "Homecoming Queen," "Most Beautiful Widow in Town," and "Sad & Beautiful World."

"Literature is more of an influence on me than music. I don't listen to that much contemporary music, but I'm really into contemporary Southern authors," Linkous says.

Like Cormac McCarthy?

"Yeah, he's a God. And Pinckney Benedict. And a guy named Breece D'J Pancake. He didn't live very long, but he produced one book of really great short stories."

Mark's song titles often make literary references ("Weird Sisters"); the horses, green landscapes, and offbeat characters populating Sparklehorse lyrics are most frequently attuned to Pancake's bleak, detached stories, or even Will Oldham's Appalachia-induced songs, of which Linkous is a fervent fan.

But Mark Linkous isn't just a lonely figure who reads books and strums solemn guitar. He shares the farm with his wife, Teresa, and a battalion of animals. Mark describes his surroundings: "Big open fields. The people we rent from live in a mansion not too far from our house. They rent the fields to someone who raises cattle. Sometimes I can't record, when the cows get really loud.

"My wife has two horses, two lizards, and a couple of axolotls [salamanders]. We have a cat named Bob and three dogs--Barko, Otis, and Hank. They're really nice, but Barko has mental problems. I named him Barko because [crime writer] James Ellroy has a dog named Barko and I thought it was a supercool name for a dog."

Mark also has his share of friends in the South. Vivadixie features contributions from Love Tractor's Armstead Wellford, ex-Silos member and Cracker bassist Bob Rupe, and ex-House of Freaks member and Cracker drummer Johnny Hott. Of the current Sparklehorse lineup, drummer Scott Minor and guitarist Paul Watson recorded as well, while standup bassist Scott Fitzsimmons joined post-Vivadixie. Camper Van Beethoven and Cracker producer Dennis Herring worked on a few tracks at Bad Animals in Seattle, and a certain other member of Cracker played bass and helped record, produce, and mix much of the album at his Richmond studio, Sound of Music. This is none other than David Lowery, listed in the credits as David Charles.

Why the pseudonym? "I think because he didn't want people to automatically

associate me with Cracker," Mark says of Lowery's input.

Lowery's presence is apparent on the supercharged pop of "Someday" and the off-kilter banjo-and-accordion song "Cow."

But while the former Camper Van frontman deserves some credit for helping shape the Sparklehorse sound, Linkous is not exactly a rookie himself. His first brush with rock stardom came as a guitarist in the Dancing Hoods, a late-80s post-New Wave band who recorded two mediocre albums for Relativity Records. The group dislodged him from his native Virginia, bringing him to New York and later California, where he made the crucial connection with Lowery.

"I met him in Los Angeles because I was a big Camper fan. He moved to Richmond around the same time I moved back here. He didn't know anyone here, and we became really good friends.

"I was in a band called Salt Chunk Mary, just a Richmond pop band, and after they broke up I started writing differently, sort of approaching music a different way, trying to stress subtleties -- the air in between the sound." David Lowery was there to help. The most obvious Lowery-influenced song in Sparklehorse's repertory appears on the Slow River/Capitol EP Chords I've Known; "Midget in a Junkyard," a bouncy, mandolin-powered instrumental, brings to mind one of those early Camper tracks that sounded like Russian folk musicians trying to play bluegrass.

Lowery and Linkous also collaborated on a Slow River seven-inch with Vic Chesnutt and Lambchop's Paul Niehaus and Kurt Wagner. Going under the nom de guerre A Loose Confederation of Saturday City States, the quintet convened in Athens, Georgia, in April 1995, for a one-off weekend recording session that yielded two southern-gothic tracks. "[David and I] had gone down there to visit Vic," Mark recalls. "He was in John Keane's studio, and was real depressed about some stuff he'd been working on, so we started recording ourselves. We set up and grabbed guitars and organ and stuff, and just wrote the songs real quick and recorded them. That was it."

The association between Chesnutt and Linkous has taken on surreal overtones. First, they became label-mates at Capitol -- rather odd considering their seemingly uncommercial songwriting. Then Mark suffered an accident that obliged him to undertake Sparklehorse's first cross-country tour in a wheel chair -- an effort in which his friend Vic Chesnutt has, of course, notably preceded him.

Mark's injuries resulted from a fall just prior to Sparklehorse's going out as openers on Radiohead's 1996 European tour. After playing a warm-up gig in London with the Tindersticks, Mark returned to his hotel and, according to a press release, "mistakenly cross[ed] prescribed anti-depressants with some common sleep aids to counteract nasty jet lag. He blacked out, fell down and ended up in a very precarious and uncomfortable position, trapped beneath his full body weight for 12 hours.

"Because of his state, Mark contracted rhabdomyolysis, which results in severe muscle and nerve damage. It's a condition that can affect marathon runners and drunks or drug addicts, and in Mark's case, it also led to a heart attack.

"When I got to the hospital, I flatlined for a couple of minutes, and they shocked me and stuff," Mark says, a few days before leaving Bremono Bluff for Sparklehorse's US tour in May. "It was fucked up. They had to do nine operations on my legs.

"Now I don't even remember going to England. I lost a lot of memory." He spent nearly three months in St. Mary's Hospital in London.

"I was fuckin' homesick to get back and it's great being home. I still have a lot of pain in my feet and in my legs, but it's great to be home with the dogs." In late spring, Linkous took Sparklehorse on the road opening for Cracker, fronting the band from his wheelchair. When I saw them at one of the first dates, in Portland, the lanky singer, decked out in an antique suit and a recl cowboy hat, was helped onstage by two roadies. He sat gingerly in his wheelchair, rolled up to his place in front of the two-mike set-up, and picked up a Gibson hollow-body guitar. Downtempo numbers like "Sad & Beautiful World" took on an even more dirgelike pace, and he skipped rockers like "Cow" and "Heart of Darkness" altogether. His legs looked flimsy and thin, but he could control his feet enough to hit the pedals. On the briskly paced "Tears on Fresh Fruit," Linkous closed his eyes and strummed furiously. He seemed reserved between songs, but it looked as if playing, wheelchair or no, appeased him.

Another release for Linkous while his legs are somewhat out of commission is that he can ride his beloved 1972 Moto Guzzi, which he says looks like an "old World War 11 bomber."

Actually, I can ride a motorcycle better than I can walk. The motorcycle is my balance. If I'm standing or walking without a cane, I have to hold onto somebody. I can't move my toes, and toes are so important for balance.

The motorcycle came in handy when it was time to form a band, too. Mark met Scott Minor while the drummer was riding one of three Moto Guzzis he owns. And guitarist Paul Watson has a BMW bike.

When the members of Sparklehorse trade in their bikes for a tour bus, Linkous will revert to a wheelchair. Luckily, his friend Vic Chesnutt was willing to share his expertise: "He warned me not to flip over backwards and bust my head."

And if Linkous keeps up his therapy, he may be out of the wheelchair and back on his feet by the time Sparklehorse leave to play summer festivals in Europe.

While it would seem that the band that rides together stays together, Mark makes no bones about the fact that Sparklehorse is essentially his creative project.

"We're a touring band," he says of Minor, Fitzsimmons, and Watson. "Next year, Sparklehorse could be me and four midgets with kazoos."