

It's a Sad and Beautiful World
 by Bronwyn Trudgeon
 reprinted apologetically from RipItUp

If Mark Linkous - the man in the saddle of this year's best new pet, namely Sparklehorse - takes a wee while to reach the phone when I call him, it's perfectly understandable and totally fine by me. For one thing, he's still on the road to recovery as a result of an unusual accident he befell in January, which cost him the use of both his legs for what he figures will be at least another year. For anyone who hasn't heard the story, it seems Mark fainted in a hotel room, knocked himself unconscious on a piece of furniture on his way down, and lay with his legs trapped beneath him, with their circulation cut off, for 11 hours before he was found. That aside, I decided I had fallen in love with him on the strength of Sparklehorse's debut album, Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot, and being kept hanging on the telephone seems trivial in comparison to the wondrous conversation I am anticipating. The there is the matter of the lovely lady who keeps getting on the phone to inform me Mark's on his way.

"He's just gonna get in his chair and run round to the other phone," she tells me. Time passes. "He'll be right here," she assures. Some more time passes. "Ah prar-mise he's coming," she 'prar-mises', "Ah swear." Now I've fallen in love with her as well.

Finally, Mark himself gets on the line. His softly spoken Southern drawl sets my heart a meltin', and I want to go and live on his farm in Bremono Bluff, Virginia, with him and his wife Teresa, their three dogs, two horses, one cat, and however many turtles he owns, and maybe even the occasional visit from his Mom too. Sometimes this job can be so goddamn beautiful.

It seems my call has found Mark in another hotel room, this time in Detroit, where Sparklehorse are on tour with Cracker (whose Bob Rupe provides the voice on Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot's '850 Double Pumper Holley', incidentally).

I take it you're fighting fit?

"Well, with the exception of my accident, yeah, I'm doing pretty good... Well, actually, I have a cold. I have a virus or something."

How's the recovery from the accident been?

"Well, it's gonna take a long time, because I lost the muscles in my legs that keep your feet straight, so I have to train my other muscles to compensate."

What do you have to do today?

"Well, it's gettin' kinda late... today's actually about 9 O'clock," Mark chuckles (it's only about 1PM where I'm sitting). "I think we're just gonna hang out here in the hotel room and maybe rent a John Woo movie or something. There's really not much street activity in Detroit. It's sort of a depressed city."

Like most overnight success stories, Mark's hardly happened overnight. He used to play in a band called Johnson Family, who

later became Salt Chuck Mary.

Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot's most recent single, 'Someday I Will Treat You Good', can trace its heritage back to this period of Mark's musical career. He was then in a band called the dancing Hoods.

I figured it must feel kind of strange for you to be constantly referred to as a new man on the music scene, when you've actually been part of it for sometime now.

"It doesn't bother me at all to be considered a new person on the music scene. I would prefer not having a past actually, [as opposed to] being known as the lead guitar player for a now defunct pop band. I'd rather just be from nowhere."

Have you found the attendant business of rock and roll has steeped up massively for you with Sparklehorse?

"Yeah, just having to meet people that are affiliated with the record company, like regional reps. Now there's a lot of doing interviews for cable access. Between doing all that stuff, it doesn't leave a lot of time for writing when you're on the road. We have a day off today so I might be able to get a little in."

You seem to have kept your finger pretty firmly on the style side of things, as far as your album artwork and videos go. Is it important for you to keep your own stamp on those things?

"Yeah, 'cause just like the music, I have a picture in my head about what the artwork should look like before I ever took the photographs. I wanted to convey a certain image, sort of a documentary feel, sorta like the album, I wanted it to look like a strip of film in a way. So, I have really tried to keep close reins on the artistic side as best I could. And the video, we did our... Have you seen the EPK?"

Yeah, I have, it's fantastic.

(Sparklehorse's electronic press kit is shot like a low budget foreign film. It details a Catalonian Maiden's desire that 'the Sparklehorse' may someday cross the ocean to play at her wedding, or perhaps her father's funeral, and a French Woman's lack of desire for Americans. Cinematic high points include a chain smoking, kind of panda-headed human helping out with the narration. I strongly recommend you lobby your local music television station to screen it in its entirety for your plentiful pleasure.)

"Yeah, me and drummer [Scott Minor] did that, and we just love that. And the video for 'Hammering the Cramps', we had a really good time doin' that one too. Since the EPK and the 'Hammering the Cramps' video got such a positive response, [Capitol] gave us a little money and let us do sort of the rock 'n' roll video for 'Someday', which we tried to do. [Neither Scott nor I were satisfied with the finished results, and Capitol wasn't either. In the end they asked us to send them everything we've ever filmed, and they hired an editor to put it together. That's what you see.

"It's hard for us to do a true music video. It seems like the agenda, stylistic-wise, for a music video these days has to be lightning speed edits. It would seem people don't have the patience for long shots, and they just have a very short attention span. Both Scott and I are big fans of Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog, the long, beauty shots."

Is that one of your dogs we see in the 'Hammering the Cramps' video?

"Yeah, that's Otis. She was our first pet, we've had her for about eight years. We have a dog named Barko, who has mental problems... dog mental problems," he chuckles. "Then we have an old hound dog we picked up called Hank."

There are a lot of doggy and horsey references on the album. Are these in homage to your own animals?

"Well, there's also references to turtles and birds, and things like that. Livin' where we do, I'm surrounded by so much nature, and that has so much to do with this music that it finds its way into the lyrics often."

Was 'Sad & Beautiful World' inspired by a viewing of Down by Law?

"Yeah, definitely."

Have Roberto Benigni, or Tom Waits, or Jim Jarmusch called to thank you for stealing the line so well?

Mark laughs: "Well, Roberto Benigni is quoting a Walt Whitman poem, so I'm borrowing from Walt Whitman."

How about the Richard III reference that opens the album - 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse' - in 'Homecoming Queen'?

"It's a Shakespeare line I heard out of context. A lot of times I'm far more inspired by literature than music. Like, I'll pick a Henry Miller line and just make a whole song out of it. A long time ago I heard a David Bowie song, 'Sorrow', the first line is [sings]: 'With your long blonde hair and your eyes of blue...' Then later I heard a fairly obscure Beatles song called 'It's All Too Much', and in the middle of an instrumental sort of jam, Lennon goes [sings again]: 'With your long blonde hair and your eyes of blue.' I thought 'Man, that is so cool, that Bowie took that line and just made a great song. I always thought that was so cool. It's sort of in honour of my heroes in a way.'"

Where is the recording of the woman relating a dream about her son in 'Spirit Ditch' sourced from?

"[Cracker's] David Lowery [credited as David Charles for his production and playing on the album] and I had left a section of the song open for some type of instrumental solo section. He was away on tour, and I was in there, messing things up basically. I didn't want to do a guitar solo, and I was bored, so I called home, and my mother had left that message on the answering machine. So, I called back, got the mic' set up, and stuck the mic' up to the telephone."

Is she talking about you?

"Yeah, the cool thing is, we both say, 'I woke up', at almost the same time."

I noticed Village Voice managed to come up with a label for your sound and style - 'dreamism'. Do you think that fits, or would you rather they didn't bother?

"I don't mind them coming up with some kind of title for a style. I mean, a lot of my songs are inspired by dreams, dreams are a

topic often in my songs. But I think they may be referring more to the sound, sort of the feel of the whole style."

The album title gives the impression of covering a lot of bases. What was your idea when you put that huge moniker on it?

"That was also inspired by a dream. I dreamt General Lee had a crude submarine of war, and I was swimming towards it, and I could hear an old timey band playing inside of the submarine, and the music was sort of distorted. The music just sounded all weird, and how the music sort of metamorphosises when you hear it from a different place, it just sounded strange being submerged."

As much as I would have liked to Mark about his dreams all day, the clock told me our 'time's up' interruption was imminent. Reluctantly I prepared to sign off by asking if "the Sparklehorse" planned to cross the ocean in this direction at any stage. I was pleasantly surprised to discover Mark was one of the few foreign musicians who knew we weren't located in Australia without having to be told.

"I don't know of any specific plans as of now, but I would love to go there. When I was in hospital I saw a documentary on New Zealand, and I can't wait to go there. It just looked like a beautiful place, the terrain was very severe, and it seemed so picturesque and beautiful. I can't wait to come."