

SPARKLEANDSHINE

Sparklehorse's debut album Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot generated as much press for its unusual mix of melancholic, country-tinged rock music as it did for the unusual title. Their new album, Good Morning Spider, may have a more subdued title but it should now make them household names.

Story by Desmond Sampson

Sparklehorse photographed in London by Bryce Pincham

In the 40 or so years since rock 'n' roll thrust its pelvis into the public face, few albums have come close to matching Sparklehorse's sparkling debut Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot. Upon its release, the album instantly entered into rock folklore as a slightly skewed, country-tinged guitar rock album, in the process giving the towns Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch in Wales and New Zealand's Taumatawhakatangihangakaouaotamateapokaiwhenuakitanatahu a run for their money as arguably the longest and oddest names ever.

It was sort of inspired by a swordfish trombone," shrugs Mark Linkous, Sparklehorse's lyric writer and vocalist, between drags on his cigarette. "I had a dream," he continues, when pressed. "I dreamt of a fictional submarine that General Grant built during the American Civil War. I was swimming towards it and inside there was an old time band playing. And the music was refracted and distorted by the water and it sounded great. It's like Tom Waits said: 'The best music is your neighbour's coming through the window because it's sort of not what it is.' It's more impressionistic."

Linkous' explanation, delivered without any real hint of facial expression because his eyes are shielded behind his sunglasses, makes it impossible to discern whether his reply is the ranting of a drug-addled madman or it's simply him taking the piss. When he subsequently reveals the source of the equally distinctive title for their intensely anticipated follow-up album, Good Morning Spider, it seems that perhaps he is deadly serious after all.

"It's the title to a song we recorded instrumentally," Linkous explains. "We started it on the harmonium and added cello to it. Then I took the track home and put some samples from steam engines on it and they just sounded like a spider building a web, so I decided that should be the title."

Linkous' response partially accounts for Sparklehorse's strange song titles and distinctly warped lyrics. In fact, occasionally, listening to their songs is like being a voyeur sifting through the cluttered junkshop of Linkous' mind, especially on oddities like Little Bastard Choo Choo or Ballad of a Cold Lost Marble on Vivadixie. Alternatively, on tracks like Homecoming Queen and Most Beautiful widow in Town on their debut or Chaos of the Galaxy/Happy Man and Hey Joe of Good Morning Spider, sometimes it's like being swept along by the soundtrack to a rather peculiar and moving film.

"With my music, I'm trying to articulate how there's film that's blank in my brain and then, by having music pass through it, you kind of develop this celluloid in your head," explains Linkous. "The hard part is then trying to make it come out of your hands and onto paper so that it tells a story. I'm not always very good at doing that."

It's an unusual perspective but it also gives some insight into Linkous' beguiling and idiosyncratic compositions. Unsurprisingly, because of the odd subjects in his songs - spiders, sparrows and junebugs all get a mention on Good Morning Spider (there's definitely an interest in various critters on the album) - and his joyless vocal delivery, Sparklehorse have consistently been dubbed weird and melancholy.

"I don't think we're weird," counters Linkous in his broad Virginian twang. "And so long as they don't mean melancholy in a bad way, that's okay. Actually, somebody told me yesterday that Good Morning Spider was more open and moody than the first album, so that's good because when I listen back to the albums after they're finished, I always find there's too much rock on it, which bothers me. Anyway, I think it's really dangerous to take yourself too seriously."

On Good Morning Spider, it's quite obvious that Linkous doesn't take himself too seriously. Although he ponders life, death and spirituality on Saint Mary (singing: 'When does the sky turn into space and air into wind')