

# Sparklehorse Interview (long)

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Here's a transcript of my interview with Mark Linkous. It looks better in print than it's gonna sound on radio. It was late afternoon but he sounded sort of sleepy and fragile, and spoke very...very...slowly... I'm sorta glad it was pre-recorded so I can edit out the long silences... !! Can't wait for the gig on Monday.

Cheers - Sophie

- Mark, welcome to Australia, how are you enjoying our weather?

Um... well... I haven't really been outside...

- Can we start off by talking about the process of recording Good Morning Spider in your home studio. What sort of setup do you have?

It's a fairly basic 16-track digital studio, and I just start by the old-school method, sitting around with an acoustic guitar and writing a good song and then recording it. I guess the difference is, when I go to record it, I try to make it interesting - but the construction of it, the writing of it, is really traditional as far as structure goes.

- You've sometimes spent many months working on one song, does your perspective on a song change over time?

Not really. I mixed "Painbirds" off and on for two years, but my perspective doesn't really change that much. Maybe perceiving things as needing to be more minimal, rather than more elaborate.

- Do you feel that you stay truer to the aesthetic that you want to achieve producing yourself, rather than taking them to an external producer?

Yeah, the majority of it...for instance, the song "Happy Man", I was really bored with it, and I made it sound like it was coming through an AM radio on the album, but so many people at the record company thought it should be a single, so I compromised - but compromised in a way that was still able to retain a lot of the integrity of the song. Then I collaborated with Eric Drew Feldman who produced the first two Frank Black records -- he was also in Captain Beefheart. I went down to Memphis, to a studio that I'd been wanting to record in, that the last two Pavement records were recorded in, some Cat Power records, Guided By Voices records. I'll compromise in a way where I can trust someone, someone I respect, rather than working with someone who's been recommended to me by some industry person, y'know.

- Do you have to affect a critical distance at some point, to shape the original song into the finished product?

The deepest that I ever perceive the song as a finished product is if my friends are gonna think it's cool. A good way of judging myself is if I think it's gonna sound good in five years.

- When you listen back to the albums, do you have an awareness of how far the songs have come from their conceptual beginnings?

Not really... I mean, it starts and ends with me. On the majority of stuff, I play everything, unless it's cello or violin or something. It begins and ends with my brain... I think it's because I'm so isolated, I'm not affected by other people's ideas.

- I've read that your dreams are a great source of inspiration for you... does music tap into the subconscious for you?

Yeah I think so... I think that dreams and feelings and wants and wishes are a little more simple and more prevalent in your subconscious than they are in your conscious state. In the conscious state, there's so many details of the world, you're bombarded by so much miscellaneous junk.

- Does your rural lifestyle help you to be in that inner space - being away from the city?

I guess so, I mean I've lived in the city... I've often wondered that if I moved... I was gonna move to Spain... and I wondered if stylistically my music would change... I think it's just something that you carry with you... I'm not sure if it has a whole lot to do with your environment. I mean, a lot of it does have to do with environment, but more of it has to do with how much of your environment that you absorb.

- You spoke earlier of a sense of isolation - would you experience the same sort of isolation if you were living in, say, Los Angeles?

Yeah but when I lived in LA I was pretty isolated... I lived in a van and didn't really go out much... I was pretty isolated there, too.

- You did time over there on the alternative-rock circuit with your previous band the Dancing Hoods. Is Sparklehorse a kind of attempt to break out of that whole american-pop-group paradigm?

I gave up on all that when the band I was in moved to Los Angeles. We were trying so hard to get signed, and I just quit and came back home and just gave up on all those aspirations of being a rock star, pop star, whatever. The business... I was so fed up with the business... I just let go of all that bullshit, and that's when I started making good music.

- How do you accommodate the business side of it now - dealing with record companies, music journalists, people like that?

Well, that's absolutely the hardest part of it, trying to deal with all that. I always thought that when I started making Vivadixie, I wanted it to come out on Matador or Drag City. Being on a major label and being stylistically, vaguely in the same category of a band that is able to "rock", like the other big rock bands, it's a sort of a curse in a way. The record company is inevitably going to pick the most obvious pop or rock song.

- Are you able to get around that now, though?

Not really... I think the only lesson I've learned is to never release anything that I wouldn't be proud to perform on TV, or hear on the radio.

- Well you've been able to do some side projects too, though - I loved that Loose Confederation of Saturday City States thing that you did with Slow River - tell me about working with those guys - Vic

Chestnutt and Lambchop?

David Lowery and I just drove down to Athens for a weekend, got drunk and recorded, that's about it really. Vic's on "Sunshine" - he was supposed to play on the album, and he rang and left a message that he couldn't, he had to do something else, so I put the message on the record.

- Have you heard the new Lambchop album?

No... I really only buy, like Palace records, Smog records, Cat Power.

- Do you like the new Smog record?

The last one I heard was Red Apple Falls.

- He's just released a new one, it's beautiful.

Oh I'll try to find it. I heard that it's been recorded, and I've been trying to get my hands on it but haven't been able to. I love his stuff.

- How did you first link up with David Lowery and the whole Camper van Beethoven/ Cracker gang?

When I lived in Los Angeles, I met him there, I'd been a big Camper fan for a while, and he moved to Virginia about the same time that I returned. He didn't really know anybody, so we sorta hooked up, developed a friendship. I haven't seen him in probably over a year, he's been touring with Counting Crows or something like that. I don't really see him anymore...

- How do you account for your popularity in Europe? Are you aware that the Americans are jealous that Europe & Australia got the record before they did?

I feel more like they're indifferent about it. They're just not even aware of it. I mean we can sell out a 2,000 seat club in London, and then go to Washington DC and play to like 20 people. I have no impression of the United States other than indifference.

- Why do you think that is?

Basically, I think that British, European, Australian audiences are smart and perceptive. It's not completely the Americans' fault, it's more what they're exposed to. The way the music industry is in the United States ...it's really... measly.

- Tell us about your touring band...

It's my original rhythm section, Scott the standup bass player and Scott the drummer. I call them Scott 1 and Scott 2... actually I call them Scott 3 and Scott 4... Jonathon Segel who used to be in Camper plays violin and guitar, and sings. Sophie plays cello and guitar and sings. This is the first ever five-piece I've toured with.

- What's the relationship between the touring band and what you do in the studio - do you see them as complementary?

There's a couple of songs from Good Morning Spider... we had a couple of days off in London and recorded the drum tracks for "Pig" and "Hundreds of Sparrows" - there's always an inspiration from a tour, if I write a song on the road and the band plays on the song... but when I record it, I'm completely on my own.

- How do you prepare for the touring process with the band?

They come to my house and we rehearse for two days and fly out, basically. Sometimes we tend to do more motorcycle riding than rehearsing.

- I've heard that you've got a thing for motorcycles, was that part of the whole rock'n'roll iconography when you were growing up?

(Laughs) No, I grew up on dirt bikes, it was really isolated, we rode motorcycles on strip jobs, the whole bad-boy thing didn't really affect me at all. It was more just a feeling of freedom...

- Is that typical of the rural american experience - that longing to escape?

Yeah... when I grew up, growing up in the south, in the country, that's all I wanted to do... to escape. To go to New York and be in a punk rock band. A band like the Sex Pistols... After a while, after experiencing urban life, all I wanted to do was get back home, be in the country again.

- I guess you've come full circle...

Yeah... yeah... I guess so.

- And you've got quite a menagerie of animals at your place, I hear?

(Laughs) Yeah, quite a few critters. Two horses, five dogs, two cats... I think that's all...

- Do they all get along okay?

No, not all the time. The horses kinda terrorise the dogs, I mean the dogs kinda terrorise the horses. Usually in the evening, the horses run around and make a lot of noise, and it freaks the dogs out, and the dogs start barking, and the cats freak out...

- So it's not always so tranquil and idyllic at the Linkous household?

(Laughs) Not always.

- What are your impressions of Australia so far?

It seems very... bright. A lot of direct sunlight. I guess I've only experienced the festival sites, which I'm sure is not a really accurate representation of Australia.

- Wait till you've played a couple of pub gigs, you'll get more of a sense of what our nightlife is like, anyway.

Yeah, that's what I'm looking forward to. Yeah, sleazy bars. Yeah.