

Sparklehorse

by Chip Midnight

Mark Linkous, the man behind the Sparklehorse name, recently returned to his farmhouse in Virginia from Australia where he performed at the Big Day Out Festival with, among others, Marilyn Manson.

"I'll have to say," Linkous says in a lazy southern drawl, "I was pretty impressed (with Manson) just for the full-on glam thing. I have a little more respect for it now. I was totally into Alice Cooper when I was a kid and it's sort of the same thing."

Although Linkous grew up listening to one man in black (Alice Cooper), it was another man in black that roused his interest in becoming a musician and would later influence the way he wrote songs. "Johnny Cash had a TV show," Linkous recalls. "He was all dressed in black. The show would start with his back facing the camera and he'd swing around and say, 'Hi. I'm Johnny Cash.'"

"That's what got me into music."

Somebody recently wrote that if Mark Linkous lived in a big city like New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, the world would be sick of hearing the wonderful praises of Sparklehorse. Fortunately, Linkous is pretty happy where he is and has shunned the notoriety that a move to the city may bring. "I really don't consider living in the city anymore. I've done it and I have to live in the country. I just can't deal with city life."

The country life seems to agree with the songwriter. He recorded most of the new 17-song Sparklehorse album, *Good Morning Spider*, in the house that he and his wife rented on a plantation in Richmond, Virginia. Since that time, however, the two have moved 33 miles up the road to a 400-acre tree farm where Linkous has been working on building a new recording studio. "It's out in the middle of the field behind the house," he says. And he says one of the advantages of having a studio on his property is that he "can go out in the field and see what a plowing disc sounds like for a symbol."

"If I'm inspired by a Wm. Wenders film or something, I can come out and record right then rather than renting a week in a studio and going in with a band and doing four days of basic

tracks and overdubs," he continues. "I think the standard formula for making a record makes a lot of records sound same-y or boring. I'd rather have them sound like galaxies where every song is a different planet."

Being spontaneous allows Linkous to experiment more than the average musician does. This experimentation can be found throughout *Good Morning Spider* as Linkous used a number of different traditional and non-traditional instruments in the recording. Included in some form or another on the new CD is a Wurliizer organ, a Toys R Us "Yackback" sampler, and a Hohner tape echo, in addition to the many keyboards that Linkous had at his disposal.

"I have a lot of cheap, little keyboards and this octagon thing and this synth module that has a zillion different sounds in it," Linkous says. "A lot of the keyboards I got at thrift stores. I have a little Casio Sk-1 that has a built in sampler. My favorite microphone I found at the landfill. It was on a CB base station. I've got these wireless intercoms from the '50s from an auction from a dentist's office."

To date, Sparklehorse, like some of Linkous's favorite performers (Smog, Palace, Cat Power), has had more success overseas than in America. And while it hasn't really bothered him in the past, he admits, "It'll be nice to be popular over here because I kind of get tired of taking that plane ride to England. That's getting kind of old."

Ironically, the song that offers the strongest radio potential, "Happy Man," is completely unusable in today's American "modern radio" format. The song opens with merry-go-round style keyboards that slowly fade into radio static. Imagine driving and trying to tune in a radio station that just won't quite come in. As Linkous sings, the song fades in and out amidst static and, two minutes into the song, is completely drowned out for a few seconds as the keyboards come back. With a little under two minutes left in the song, it's as though you've driven closer to the radio transmitter and, all of a sudden, the song comes in crystal clear.

"That's exactly what I wanted it to be like," Linkous admits. "It's a really old recording. I think I maybe sabotaged "Happy Man" on purpose because I thought the record company was going to make it a single. I would rather something like 'Sunshine' be a single. 'Happy Man' kind of sounds like everything on the radio. Who needs that?"

As it turns out, PJ Harvey's bassist Eric Drew Feldman, who has also played with Captain Beefheart, Pere Ubu, and Frank Black, was a fan of "Happy Man" and convinced Linkous to take another shot at the song.

"I was totally against re-recording it," Linkous says, but Feldman "really wanted to produce it. And he wanted to do it down in Memphis, where some of my favorite albums were recorded . . . He brought the drummer from the Frank Black records who is also the drummer on the Hanson record. He's also the drummer on the *Donny and Marie Show!*" The song, which is now "radio-friendly" according to Linkous, may wind up being used as a single after all.

As our conversation comes to end, Linkous tells me that he feels like a fraud when tours. "I enjoy recording and hanging around at home," he says. "Touring is just part of the job. It can be fun sometimes. I like playing with my band. Most of the time I'd rather stay home and watch *American Movie Classics.*"

Published: February 15, 1999