

King Of The Wild Frontier

He lives on a 400-acre farm, comes from a family of coal miners and drives 15 miles to buy cigarettes. So why is Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous such a revered figure? ponders Stuart Maconie. And why is David Gilmour his biggest fan? "Heck," he shrugs, "I'm just a redneck who likes to read books."

The passing crowds on Westminster Bridge think they have him sussed. A tourist. And he does look the part, it must be said: ostentatious, patterned shirt, white Stetson, Sony camcorder trained on Big Ben. When he speaks, it's with a slow, Virginian drawl. "This here film is for my granny back in America. She's 90 years old and she's never left the state of Virginia." He says this not with embarrassment or contempt for a European sensibility, but with a discernible trace of pride.

But Mark Linkous is no hick, no Cletus the slack-jawed yokel. True, he lives far from the jabber of the entertainment world, on a remote 400-acre farm in Fluvanna County, where Big Brother, Anne Robinson and Fred Durst are merely a distant rumour, deep in the rural south of America's mountain and coal country.

But he can also claim to be perhaps the world's coolest rock musician, fêted and adored by his peers and revered by a global cult. A man around whom dark myth and barely disguised awe have circulated for years. One internet site is devoted solely to the literary and cultural illusions in his elliptical and ambiguous lyrics; Baudelaire and Milton here, The Exorcist and Night Of The Hunter there, and, of course, a smattering of Cormac McCarthy and Tom Waits.

But he's genially dismissive of all this. "Heck, I'm just a redneck who likes to read books," he shrugs, not entirely convincingly.

THOUGH THE touring band is a quintet, Mark Linkous is the creative nucleus and driving spirit of the band Sparklehorse, whose third album proper, *It's A Wonderful Life*, is out now. Its predecessors, 1995's *Vivadixiesubmarine-transmissionplot* (the title refers to a particularly lurid dream of Linkous) and '99's *Good Morning Spider* are amongst the most lauded alternative releases of the past few years. Defining Sparklehorse's haunting, melancholic music is not easy, but it does share a constituency with

some other of America's most interesting new bands. It has the symphonic scope of Granddaddy, the medicated solemnity of Low, the intimate loveliness of Lambchop. It's *A Wonderful Life* also cements Linkous' reputation as the musician's musician, featuring contributions from Tom Waits, PJ Harvey and Nina Persson of The Cardigans, whose new album he's also produced.

It's this unrivalled reputation amongst the glitterati that brings him to London on this occasion. Tonight he's appearing at the Royal Festival Hall at the invitation of the main act, David Gilmour, and as part of the Meltdown festival. "I loved Pink Floyd. I did a cover of *Wish You Were Here* once. But still I'm not sure why he's asked me," grins Linkous. "D'ya think maybe he's lost his mind?"

Virginia, Linkous' home state, is home to God-fearing good old boys like creepy TV evangelist Jerry Falwell and hawkish senator Pat Robertson. It is Western country, celebrated in John Denver's glutinous but accurate *Take Me Home Country Roads* as "almost Heaven", home of "mountain mamas" and "miner's ladies". There are more Waltons than wannabes here and Linkous likes it that way. "Where I live now [in the Southern corner of the state down by Tennessee and Kentucky] is very remote," he says. "I don't really have neighbours and no-one knows what I do for living. It's a 15-minute drive to buy cigarettes. I hang out with farmers ▶"



"I think you'll find we've managed quite well without Roger Waters." With Number 1 fan David Gilmour.

Chris Taylor

Sparklehorse

◀ and I like it. I go on long motorcycle rides and explore places that seriously look like Deliverance. The town nearest to me just got their first red light a couple of years ago."

The Linkous family are true Virginians. "I come from a line of coal miners. My grandfather dug coal, my father digs coal and all my uncles are coal miners." As a child, Linkous loved the "severe, stark landscape. I practically lived in the woods, exploring or racing dirt bikes on these flat patches where the strip miners had been; it looked like God had grabbed an axe and taken a slice out of the mountain."

As a child, he also absorbed the influence of bluegrass and Johnny Cash, though it was Alice Cooper that obsessed him in his early teens, a fittingly anti-social hero for a disturbed kid.

"When I was 13 or so, I kind of went crazy," says Linkous. "My dad got out of coal mining and bought some gas stations in Northern Virginia, but then he and my mom split up and I kind of alternated between them and became a little



"I was very low. For a long time I felt the only reason journalists wanted to talk to me was because I was the guy who nearly died."

wild. I got into Zeppelin and Alice Cooper, grew my hair and started to hang out with a motorcycle gang called the Pagans."

To tame him, he was sent to live with his mountain man grandfather. "He was a real Virginia miner. They used to have donkeys that pulled the coal trucks and one wouldn't do what it was told, so my grandfather punched it and killed it stone dead. He was very strict, but he never laid a finger on me. And when I wanted my first good guitar, a Gibson, the next morning there was \$300 on the kitchen table."

Next Linkous fell under the phlegmy spell of English punk and new wave. "It kind of made me stand out," he says. "Everyone liked Black Oak Arkansas and Lynyrd Skynyrd and I liked The Fall and the Sex Pistols. I was a freak. Passing rednecks would jump out of cars and beat me up. Until I bought me an ex-army greatcoat and sewed two machetes into the lining."

Eventually, Linkous formed a band and moved to LA. "It was quality pop music. It was OK but it was such a depressing experience. We were on the verge of getting signed so many times. I lived on the beach and I was just about ready to walk out into the ocean." What saved him was a chance encounter with Gavin Bryars' mesmeric modern classical landmark, Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet, featuring the vocals of Tom Waits. Something in the music's time-worn, antique spirituality appealed to Linkous in a way the hucksters and poodle rockers of LA couldn't. He returned to

Virginia to wash dishes, paint houses and, naturally, dig coal, while putting together what would become Sparklehorse.

The journey from there to here has been far from easy or uneventful. Buoyed by the response to the debut record, Linkous came to Europe in '96 and opened for Radiohead – longtime supporters of his. It was on this trip that the defining moment of the Sparklehorse story to date occurred.

In his London hotel room, Linkous accidentally OD'd on prescription anti-depressants, Valium and alcohol. He passed out on his bathroom floor, lying unconscious for 14 hours with his legs folded awkwardly beneath him. When he was discovered by paramedics who straightened his legs, the surge of accumulated toxic fluids gave him a heart attack. As if this wasn't bad enough, his legs had suffered potentially irreversible nerve damage. Linkous spent 12 weeks in St Mary's Hospital, London and a further year in a wheelchair. He still wears ankle supports and will do for the rest of his life.

The resulting album, Good Morning Spider, was imbued, felt many critics, with the despair and morphine-induced torpor of the

times. But, in fact, of the 17 tracks, only two (one of which was St Mary's – a tribute to the medical staff at that London hospital), had been written post-accident. Slowly, most of the physical scars have healed but the mental ones have been slower in receding. "I was very low. For a long time I felt that the only reason journalists wanted to talk to me was because I was the guy who nearly died."

Apart from the slightly gawky John Wayne gait that is the legacy of that black night, Linkous now is a picture of scuzzy health. As we sit backstage at the cavernous RFH, Linkous tinkering with the settings on one of the many hand-me-down instruments that create the Sparklehorse sound, a famous head appears around the door. It's David Gilmour who, out of his mind or not, is indeed a Sparklehorse devotee.

"My wife and I have been playing your album to death. Just one thing though. Next time, couldn't you put the vocals a bit higher in the mix for us oldies? Standing next to a speaker stack for 30-odd years has ruined my hearing."

THE ALBUM that's been "played to death" chez Gilmour is It's A Wonderful Life, a gorgeously eerie continuation of the Sparklehorse journey through the heartlands of American country and blues, via some very dark and twisted byroads of modern avant-gardism and lo-fi. It forms the basis of the truncated set the band play tonight, received with commendable patience and tolerance by the diehard Floydheads who clearly aren't utterly steeped in musical lore and history: when, in a moment of jaw-dropping brilliance, Gilmour plays Syd Barrett's Terrapin for what must be one of the few times in three decades, most of the crowd clearly have no idea what it is. And still they warm to the creepy Southern Gothic that's Linkous' stock in trade.

At the "gold-passes only" aftershow gig thrown by Gilmour at the inaccurately named People's Palace restaurant, Nigel Planer, Salman Rushdie and a bevy of broadsheet hacks are in evidence, but Linkous is not. Perhaps he's doing some more editing on his granny's souvenir video diary. Earlier he explained, "We're going on to Belfast next. I hear they've been having trouble there. Maybe I shouldn't film much. Might not be a nice thing for her to see – '...And this is a cop on fire, granny'. She'll worry about me when I'm over here in case someone shoots me." He pauses. "But, hey, if I can not get shot in Fluvanna County, I can not get shot anywhere." □

