

featured: interview 



Sparkle and Shine

the band: **Sparklehorse**
the label: **Capitol Records**

He's got to be taking the piss. I'm not quite sure where, but somewhere along the line I'm certain that **Mark Linkous**, the enigmatic frontman of alt-country pioneers **Sparklehorse**, is taking the piss. In the past, I'd always assumed it was in his life-not-worth-living persona, something which the title track to his latest album seems to confirm: *'It's a Beautiful Life'*. Having spoken to the man myself, I'm beginning to wonder whether it actually is the new music that's the act.

Certainly as he portrays it, life as a successful musician in a five-star hotel does indeed barely seem worth living: *"It's driving me fucking crazy. You can't even open the fucking windows here. I don't know how people can live without air blowing."* And, as he later points out, life in his native country doesn't seem much better: *"I'm so isolated where I live in Virginia, out in the country. I don't really have any friends. I don't socialise. It's more intriguing to me to go into what animals think. They seem like more than people-I feel I communicate better with animals, even in a non-verbal way. When I do hang out with people, I usually hang out with the guys at the gas station, the farmers. The only musicians I know are ones I've met touring."*

It's little wonder, then, that when he does not meet such people, he makes the most of it. Like with **PJ Harvey**, **Tom Waits**, **Nina Persson** and **Dave Fridmann**, all of whom guest on the new album. For the first time, when talking about people at least, Linkous seems almost enthused: *"It's been great. Without Tom Waits, there wouldn't be Sparklehorse. I was ready to walk into the fucking sea when I heard him on the radio. And I love Polly's stuff. We opened up for her and I asked if she'd play on my next record. She said yeah. I'm still quite surprised these people said yes. All along I was denying they were the real people and they were impersonators and there were going to be lawsuits flying around."*

Fortunately not. Not only do they all appear, but they help make his most consistently successful record yet. The album may lack a clear standout track, a *'Someday I Will Treat You Good'*, a *'Pig'*, but this is by no means a totally bad thing. Linkous certainly doesn't think so, at any rate: *"I think this is my best record. And if not the best, it's certainly the most cohesive one. A little less schizophrenic. A lot calmer. But then there were a lot of rock songs planned at one time, we just never got round to releasing them. I've learnt to judge better on this record and not include things that I'd possibly later be embarrassed by. I used to think that **Pixies** type rock was an ideal expression, but now I just feel more comfortable in this style I've settled into."*

If the demise of these most explicitly angst-fuelled moments in his music, combined with much tighter production, give an impression of things getting easier for Linkous, it's clearly a false impression. The painbirds are still here, they've just grown up a bit: *"A while back I was panicking that I was capitalising on depression, but I realised that sadness doesn't have to be a fault. If it inspires people to think, or to feel, I know I'm doing something right. If it means a lot to 10 people it means the world to me."* Taking the piss or not, it means the world to us, too.

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