

Six years in the saddle on a Horse with no shame

Sparklehorse are confusing and uncompromising. Which might be why P.J. Harvey and Tom Waits work with them

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Cultural careerists have been moving to Los Angeles since the 1920s, enraptured by the city's film and music industry. Arriving as teenagers, they line up to find success - only poverty and exploitation block their way.

'I couldn't stand that city,' fumes Mark Linkous, vocalist and principal songwriter with Sparklehorse, who fled Los Angeles in the mid-Nineties, having arrived there himself from Virginia. 'I thought it was corrupt and diseased: an evil place that would rob you of your soul. I didn't want to make the concessions that people wanted me to make. I don't write singles, or radio-friendly songs. So why would I continue to live in a city where everyone is defined by their need to be famous?'

Linkous sits upstairs in the wonderfully gothic Gore Hotel in London - a building that looks as if it has been transplanted onto the land scape from a Bram Stoker novel. 'I'm a homely kind of guy,' he says, sipping Glenmorangie and Cola. 'I hate those rock-star trappings. I thought I was being forced to compromise as a musician in Los Angeles. And I didn't want to do that.'

Over a six-year career, Linkous has proved himself a reluctant pop star - purposefully sabotaging his music with added interference and static. He plays virtually all the instruments throughout his recordings, but prefers the anonymity of Sparklehorse, his group's name. His debut album - *vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, released in 1995 - was a maudlin collection of atmospheric ballads and Pixies-influenced pop songs. The record beguiled critics with its gothic, Southern overtures: arriving, it seemed, as a musical homage to the South's great literary writers, Cormac McCarthy and J.T. Leroy.

'I was influenced by their writings,' says Linkous, who remains a close friend of David Lowery, the alternative singer-songwriter who first found cult fame in the late Eighties with Camper Van Beethoven, then later with Cracker. 'David could do anything he wanted to,' says Linkous. 'I've always thought he's capable of greatness. The South has always inspired a lot of stereotypes with regards to history and music. People get bogged down in trying to conjure up images of the Mississippi Delta. I wanted to make music that looked beyond that and said, "Hey! There's something else happening here as well."'

1998's follow-up, *Good Morning Spider*, further emphasised his stubborn take on the popular idiom - Linkous blemished his usually sonorous vocals with a variety of distorted vocals. 'That was supposed to confuse anyone who thought I'd make a mainstream record,' he laughs.

1999's six-track EP, *Distorted Ghost*, however, proved that the uncompromising streak could often work against him. The mini-album - full of unremitting, clanging percussion sounds and hoarse vocals - now stands, when compared to his other work, as a folly reminiscent of Lou Reed's career-ruining *Metal Machine Music* album from 1975. 'You thought it was difficult to listen to?' laughs Linkous. And, with a thin smirk etched across his face, he leans back to pull at his cigarette.

Sparklehorse's forthcoming record, *It's A Wonderful Life*, featuring an array of special guests - Tom Waits, Polly Jean Harvey and Nina Persson of the Cardigans - sounds a more concerted effort at mainstream acceptance. And the album finds Linkous revisiting the semi-acoustic territory that characterises all his best work. Recorded in full at the Virginia home to which Linkous moved after he fled Los Angeles, *It's A*

Wonderful Life marks him as a Southern oddity who is relatively unconcerned with the grand themes that normally govern all country-influenced music.

'You can't do those kinds of songs any more,' he says. 'Y'know, the ones where you talk about growing up as a rebel, or as an outlaw. Let's face it - those tracks were done by Gram Parsons 30 years ago. And they still can't be beat. So what's the point in trying? I'd only sound like a derivative of everything else that has come before me.'

He continues: 'I'm not part of any movement.' It's a recurrent theme throughout Linkous's interviews: his desperate need to separate himself from his peers. 'People say I'm kind of alternative country for a while. And that sometimes annoys me: so I'll go out and make a record that sounds different just to prove them wrong. Music can be so dumb in the US: I've always been more interested in Europe anyway.'

With that, Linkous snorts loudly, rises from the sofa and makes his way across the room for a photo shoot. 'Don't compare me to anyone,' he says. 'Cos I'll probably do something completely different next time.'

It's a Wonderful Life is released on Parlophone on 11 June