

Life's Not So Bad After All

Reoccurring dreams have always played their part in Sparklehorse lyrics. So do 'Birthday cake eating dogs', 'Bees who died at sea' and 'Little fat babies' mean we can expect more of the same from new album *It's A Wonderful Life*? We asked the man in the saddle, Mark Linkous, to fill us in .

Six years have passed since the dream-inspired *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot* was released, during which time Mark Linkous, the man behind the Sparklehorse moniker, has had his fair share of misfortune. Stories of near-death experiences have all been done before, and are all but exhausted. 1998's *Good Morning Spider* was littered with references to his adversity, including a whole song dedicated to the nurses who led him down the road to recovery. That's all in the past, though, it's now 2001, Linkous has re-mounted his trusty steed and the outcome is the rather splendid new album *It's A Wonderful Life*. Although he admits to it being a favourite film of his, the album has no direct reference to the classic 1946 film starring James Stewart. "If you put out a record and called it *Let It Be*, it doesn't necessarily mean anything" he advised us. Despite staying true to his fondness for musical experimenting (the Optigan, electronica and variously tuned guitars are once again present), the first thing you notice about *It's A Wonderful Life* is its unavoidable feeling of warmth. From its contrasting green and orange sleeve to its string-laden orchestration, the album has all the comforting characteristics of a heavy blanket on a cold evening. Personal friends PJ Harvey, Nina Persson (The Cardigans) and long term inspiration Tom Waits have been drafted in to add weighty contributions, and although Linkous, ever the perfectionist, is "Not completely satisfied" with the finished product, *It's A Wonderful Life* could turn out to be, quite literally, one of the year's dark horses.

Click on the track title to hear a 30-second clip

It's A Wonderful Life

Recorded at Linkous's own 'Static King' studio, the song has all the characteristics of a lullaby thanks to its use of orchestron and xylophone. Typical, almost cryptic lyrics include Linkous admitting to being "The dog that ate your birthday cake". Is it dream inspired?

Mark: "I never had a dog that did that, but I've always kinda liked that image". "Although since writing it, the guy who did all the artwork for the album, his girlfriend did have a dog that ate her birthday cake when she was seven". "Since then I've heard of another case too, so it's quite a common thing – birthday cake eating dogs". "I don't remember how much of the album was inspired by dreams – or daydreams".

Gold Day

The first single to be lifted from the album, and is the first track to feature guest vocals from The Cardigans vocalist Nina Persson. The song sounds as if it's being sung to someone in particular.

Mark: "It's not really about anyone, although I tell people that it's about them in particular".

Piano Fire

Earmarked as a future single, and a standout track on the album, largely due to its mid tempo and enchanting harmonies with Polly Jean Harvey. "I can't seem to breathe with a rusted metal heart / I can't seem to see through solid marble eyes", the pair almost plead to each other.

Mark: "I asked her [Harvey] if she'd play on the record and she said "sure", we'd played together on a European tour, so I already knew her". "Working with Polly was great".

Sea Of Teeth

The title alone paints quite a terrifying image, though the song itself is very gentle and portrays a much calmer image of drifting on a calm sea, gazing up at the stars.

Mark: "The title makes me imagine the sound it would make – billions of clicking teeth, or waves of billions of clicking teeth".

Apple Bed

Again, featuring Nina Persson on vocals, Apple Bed is one of the album's most poignant moments. "Please, doctor please" beg Linkous and Persson, for what exactly we don't know.

Mark: "We played with Nina in Sweden and then kinda lost touch for a while". When we went up to Brooklyn to record and the violin player [Joan Wasser] said, "Nina says hi". "I had her cell phone number, so I called her, invited her down, and she was down an hour later singing". "I can't tell you what we're asking the doctor for".

King Of Nails

Heavy samples play over a simple drum and guitar pattern. "I shut my eyes and killed the cock, when the sun came knocking" sings Linkous. Would those lyrics imply that he's not much of a morning person, then?

Mark: "Er...No, I'm not". "I don't really know how to describe my lyrics or music, I think it's more important to me what it means to other people, or what other people think of me". "I'd love to be able to write good, run-of-the-mill, everyday songs – that would be nice". "The way I do it is a pain in the arse, 'cause it takes forever".

Eyepennies

Essentially, another basic tune, but it's the delicate piano playing of John Parish that really sets the mood. If Apple Bed didn't tug at the heartstrings, then this certainly will. Harvey makes her second

appearance on the album, and subsequently adds a powerful element to the song. Includes the Wizard Of Oz inspired lyrics "Lets all rise / The monkeys will fly", while "I will return here one day / And dig up my bones from the clay" suggests that Linkous has afterlife beliefs. Is this so?

Mark: "Yeah that's true, and the flying monkeys is just something that has always been a terrifying image, because of the film".

Dog Door

The black sheep of the album, Tom Waits contribution is obvious as he growls lyrics back in response to Linkous. One of only two songs on the album where he shares writing credits, so how does he feel about collaborating with his hero, and is he really like the character he portrays in his songs?

Mark: "Yeah, I mean I'd have to say that everything about him is completely genuine". "It was great to work with him, but terrifying as well, but I mean, not like the flying monkeys". "He's always been an inspiration and when I think back about actually meeting him, it seems like a dream or something".

More Yellow Birds

A delicate, slow paced song that paints an image of a couple on a desolate beach. "Is your jewellery still lost in the sand?" enquires Linkous. He also goes on to ask, "Will my pony recognise me in hell?" Of all the songs on the album, this is the one that sounds most like being based on a real life experience.

Mark: "The album took about a year to write, we finished it in February and this was the last one written". "The beach stuff is true, but the pony stuff is just, well, not true".

Little Fat Baby

After already mentioning horses and ponies in the course of the album, it's now the turn of another four legged friend to make an appearance. "He got dragged by a donkey, through the dirt and the myrtle, but he was once a little fat baby". It's unclear, though, whether the Little Fat Baby is Linkous himself, a friend or another imaginary figure. This is another song that demonstrates the wonderful use of strings.

Mark: "This was the other song, besides Dog Door, that has a co-writing credit. Some of the lyrics were written by Vic Chesnutt [long-time Sparklehorse collaborator], and taken from a song of his called Myrtle".

Comfort Me

A toe-tapping tune that features a drum machine and a Moog. References to being on a lake and on the moon suggest that this was another dream-inspired song.

Mark: Well, there has been reoccurring dreams, and I think if there's any kind of theme on this record, it's of living underwater – trying to run underwater.

Babies On The Sun

From its crackling beginning, it's the kind of sound you could expect to hear after finding an old gramophone player in a long-forgotten attic. A sleepy-sounding song, which perfectly draws the album to a close.

Mark: "This is probably the third version of the song that we recorded, we did a version in Spain and I was just never satisfied". "Finally I found this organ, the Optigon, which comes with these celluloid discs, it only cost ten dollars but it's like a whole song machine". I always really liked the lyrics for the song, but was having trouble with the rest, so finally I used the organ to piece it all together.

Interview by Gavin Hilzbrich

It's A Wonderful Life is released on Monday 11 June. Linkous will then take his band on the road for a short tour, which takes in visits to Glasgow and Manchester, before making an appearance at this summer's V2001 festival. Tickets for both shows are available [here](#). Sparklehorse are also on the bill at this year's Meltdown Festival at the Royal Festival Hall, where they will be supporting David Gilmour, playing his first solo gig in London for ten years.