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## The Wonderful World Of Sparklehorse

By **Kate Bredimus**

*A band that's not really a band. A band that's a man. A man, his land, his dogs, his motorcycle, his studio, and his music. Welcome to the strange and wonderful world of Sparklehorse's Mark Linkous.* Out of Richmond city limits on Route 60 the scenery slowly changes from strip malls and car dealerships to schools and private residences. The roads begin to wind, rise and fall. Fields and woods swallow up buildings, automobiles, sounds. A final turn at a gray mailbox, a drive down a winding dirt and gravel road through the woods, past a panting pit bull flashing a guilty smile, up to a old farmhouse partially hidden by trees. The house is prefaced with a dilapidated blue pickup truck besieged by weeds, a motorcycle, and a rusty 1967 white Mercedes with a pair of legs hanging out of the back seat. The legs are wearing dirty jeans and brown boots, and they belong to **Mark Linkous**.

Linkous is the reticent and enigmatic man behind the dubious entity [Sparklehorse](#). Sparklehorse isn't really a band besides Linkous there are no absolute members, only musician friends who collaborate on albums and tours. And sometimes there's only Linkous, but we are getting ahead of ourselves

"Hello!" we chime, but our voices sound muffled in the stillness.

Out of the back seat a shaggy brown head appears, surprised. Linkous looks for a second like he's been jarred awake from a dream, as he slowly pulls himself up from the guts of the car. After introductions he excuses himself to go hunt down the pit bull we passed earlier, hopping on his motorcycle and leaving us in the care of Otis the Dalmation. Then he's back, dogless, soft-spoken, and a little shy.

Linkous is home in Enon, Virginia, for a few weeks before embarking on yet another quick tour of Europe in August. He's just returned from a stint in England and Ireland in support of his new album, "It's A Wonderful Life," to be released in the U.S. on August 28.

Born and reared in Southwestern Virginia, the man in person appears to be a far cry from the European rock star many claim he is -- tall and lanky, loosely clad in a rumpled T-shirt and bedraggled cowboy hat. His words are glazed with easy Southern drawl.

Linkous, a self-confessed "bad kid" who spent his youth "hanging out with pagan motorcyclists," is the son and grandson of coal miners on both sides, and his label, [Capitol Records](#), eats up this factoid with relish. "Yeah, they play up the rural bullshit that I sit on my porch with a shotgun," he says wryly.

The idea amuses him, but it also hints at the mercurial contradictions of Mark Linkous. Whatever

pains he takes to live as an uncomplicated rural recluse offer only the thinnest guise to his titantic presence in the realm of millennial rock.

Beyond his house is an old spider-infested shed looking to be of little consequence. But inside that ramshackle room are the nerves of the Sparklehorse operation. The shed is known as **Static King Studio** , and it's where parts of "It's A Wonderful Life" were recorded. In here are Linkous' 1970's Japanese drum machine, an old wire recorder that he had rebuilt, his samplers, synthesizers, and a whole slew of other obscure musical fossils that allow him to create his textured, fuzzy, and disjointed rock.

"It's A Wonderful Life" marks a different approach to recording by Linkous. "I didn't want to be in charge of everything. I didn't want to keep contributing to the Special Olympics of rock. I wanted to learn more about the production side." With pressure put on the musician by "a guy with a calculator" at Capitol, Linkous opted to recruit some musical luminaries he had met in his travels. Contributing to "It's A Wonderful Life" are England's gritty guitar-playing chanteuse **PJ Harvey** , The canary vocals of **The Cardigan's** frontwoman **Nina Perssons** , and the iconic and inimitable singer/songwriter **Tom Waits** .

Linkous is resigned to the fact that inquiries about what it was like to work with those artists will be the most traveled line of questioning by interviewers. "I was lying at first to Rolling Stone," he laughs. "I told them that PJ Harvey was really a local banjo player named Phinius J. Harvey, and that it wasn't Tom Waits, but his brother, Ron, who works at the Target in Richmond."

This afternoon Linkous is willing to broach the subject with less mischief. Of his friendship with Waits he says, "Someone told me Tom was a fan, and that his kids stole my record off his stereo. So I sent him another one with a letter, and we kept writing back and forth."

The caliber of musicians collaborating with Linkous has done very little to recognize him in America. Europe, however, is well aware of Sparklehorse. Today alone Linkous has been busy with telephone interviews from nine different English publications. His recognition overseas is due in part to the band's high profile touring with hi-fi rockers **Radiohead** . He treads the subject carefully, saying only, "They're all really good people, and they're all smart. It's not often you go into a rock band's dressing room and they're all reading books." The two groups rarely discuss music when together. "We mostly exchange books. We visit occasionally when they're here. I just miss hanging out with them."

Here Linkous' wife, Teresa, pulls up in the driveway, and he breaks the news to her about their runaway pit bull. "Shit," she sighs. The couple has been married for more than 10 years. They met in Los Angeles, where Linkous and his motorcycle bud and longtime collaborator, drummer **Scott Minor** , had gone to seek out a record deal. But for Linkous, L.A. was "the loneliest place I've ever been in my life. We were in the armpit of the music industry. All we ever wanted to do was get signed and be rock stars. I lived in a van by the ocean. I would just get fucked up and stay fucked up, and nothing that would make you feel bad could get to you." But the struggling musician soon reached a breaking point. "I was close to just giving up and walking into the ocean," he says. "Then I heard Tom Waits singing 'Jesus Blood,' and it saved me."

Linkous returned to Richmond, a bit wiser, and began to record with **Cracker's David Lowery** . "David had just moved here and didn't know anybody, so we hung out a lot. He would record with me and then go on tour with Cracker. Tapes started circulating through David, and eventually got to **Ween** 's management, who sent them to the president of Capitol Records. In 1995 came Sparklehorse's first Capitol release, "vividixiesubmarinetransmissionplot," and the first of many European tours.

And then, one evening, Linkous died.

In 1996, while on tour to promote "vivadixie," Linkous overdosed on prescription anti-depressants in a London hotel room and passed out with his legs pinned beneath him for 14 hours. When paramedics tried to straighten his legs, Linkous suffered a heart attack and could not be revived for several minutes.

His recovery was a long and tortuous one, lasting 12 weeks in St. Mary's Hospital in central London. On a good day he learned that they wouldn't have to amputate his legs. On darker days he wondered if he would still be able to write songs. "I just kept thinking, once I get back to my dogs, the South, the country, everything will be so much better." Eventually Linkous was able to resume the tour, with braces on his legs and a frightening reminder that "Time can careen by at a blinding pace."

He pulls a cigarette out of his pack of Camels, rips off the filter, lights it and pulls a long drag. Is he changed forever by the experience? "Well," he exhales, "It reminded me of what I already knew anyway. If there's anything profound I learned, it was like the movie, 'It's A Wonderful Life.' I didn't realize how important the first record was to people until I almost died." By the end of his stay at St. Mary's, the walls of his hospital room were papered with cards and letters from thousands of fans telling him how much his first record meant to them. "It was amazing," he says.

Coming from these experiences, the title of his new album sounds tongue-in-cheek. "It is a little bit ironic, but some of it's not. If there's anything it's about, it's struggling to find the things that make it wonderful." He brushes aside some of the grass we're sitting on, and points. "It's hard to sit and see this microscopic world. An ant taking food to its queen."

Much of Linkous' songwriting is rife with the same attention to nature. In the album's diaphanous title track he sings, "I'm full of bees who died at sea," and then, "I'm a bog of poison frogs." Horse's heads, apple beds, tiger's hearts, yellow birds, spiders, trees, suns, and stars make up the album's restless dreamscape. "I don't know what it's about or where it comes from," Linkous says. "It's trying to find something innocent that existed a long time ago." But Linkous sings of a world that is as broken-hearted as it is beautiful. The wrenching wistfulness of "More Yellow Birds" is subtle in its anguish, as Linkous whispers against a keening violin and lap steel, "Please send me more yellow birds for the dim interiors."

Sound of Music's **Miguel Urbizando**, who provided the drums for that track, says "Music is Mark's vehicle of communication. He's leading you into the portal of his mind. A lot of people think "Oh, this is about me. He understands me.' The reality is that he doesn't understand you at all. You understand him.

"As a musician you just let yourself be guided by him, by his ideology. It's pretty unreal." "I would love for emotional music to be popular," says Linkous. "I had this conversation with Tom Waits. I said 'Why don't they release "Sea of Teeth" on the radio? I played it for a girl friend and she cried.' He said, 'You can't have women crying on the way to work.'"

The album's breezy sweetness is often countered with static, abrasive guitar fuzz, bubbling bleeps and gurgles, electronic bird sounds, "old wheezy keyboards," and even the voice of a little girl from the 1940's found on an wire recorder.

"To keep it interesting for me I like to have a lot of sounds going on," Linkous says. "But you have to be really disciplined about what you record.

"I recorded Tom Waits' piano part on the wire recorder. But it sounded so clear we had to put it through a computer program to make it sound like it had been dug up out of a fire. And the strings on that song were recorded with a mike I found at the landfill."

Sparklehorse's quirky instrumentation and alien arrangements exclude the band from any commercial airplay here in the United States. And to Linkous that's just a shame. "I tried to make

'Gold Day' [his duet with Nina Perssons] a single, but something more interesting than just guitar and drums." Using an optigan, mellotron, and a sampler to create a throbbing, bubbling rhythm, the song is ebullient and clever, yet still too curious for radio.

"I thought if I couldn't contribute to the music industry in a positive, interesting way, then I wouldn't. I'm not looking forward to playing in the U.S. because nothing's changing. I've always been more appreciated in Europe. The music scene isn't as futile. Maybe the people are smarter. Whoever runs the music scene here assumes kids aren't as smart as they are.

"I sing a line from a Mercury Rev song in one of my songs, and all over Europe people would recognize it and go wild. Then I sang it in a show at Woodstock, their hometown, and the crowd had no reaction."

It's been three years since Linkous played in Richmond, and he doesn't miss a thing. "We tour the world and we get taken care of. Last time we were here we played Alley Katz. There was no air conditioning and only one can of warm Guinness. It was miserable. I have no memory of playing that gig. If I never play Richmond again I'd be fine ... but I'll do it for [Plan 9](#)."

Sparklehorse will bring its lo-fi, crackling and spectral soundscapes to Plan 9's 20th Anniversary Celebration this Sunday, this time with **Margret White**, **Al Weatherhead**, **Kendall Meade**, and **Scott Minor** providing the keys, violin, bass and drums.

Carrying Sparklehorse back to Richmond is a loyalty to Plan 9, and the performance of local band [Denali](#), whom Linkous will join in the studio to produce a few tracks for an upcoming album.

Wandering around the overgrown backyard the thirtysomething country boy seems little like an international rock star.

"If I were I could afford to have someone cut my grass," he smiles. Two of his horses, King and Scout, wander over and nudge him as we stand there. "I don't ride them," he tells us, "I just like the way they smell."

Standing here in this rustling, tangled, and bug-bitten world is like falling through the looking glass into the visceral verdure of a Sparkelhorse song. Linkous is eyeing his Mercedes, and though he's too polite to say so, it's obvious he'd like to knock off with all the music talk, and get back to tinkering. Reluctantly we pull ourselves out of our sticky, green reverie and head back to the house. Teresa and a few dogs (still no pit bull) come out to join in the goodbyes.

As we bounce back down the road in the truck, stereo blaring, Linkous' ghostly and wavering voice whispers, "It's a wonderful life ..." imparting so much hope that for the moment we will believe him.