

Straight from the horse's mouth..

Sparklehorse chat to Roofdog

In American indie circles, Sparklehorse have the coolest sneakers, the best record collection and the weirdest fireside tales to share; metaphorically, at least. With 1998's *Good Morning Spider*, they rocked out, took a deep breath and folked out, then bowed out. And now, three years later, the follow-up has arrived... *It's a Wonderful Life*, set for imminent release in these shores. So Roofdog caught up with Sparklehorse frontman Mark Linkous to swap gossip on music, optigans and bears in the woods...

Words: Karl Cremin

Mark Linkous, the driving force behind Sparklehorse, sits quiet, if a little uncomfortably, in the sparsely-lit lounge of his hotel. The raucous laughter of a clutch of red-nosed businessmen spikes the air. We swiftly move out of earshot, and Mark sits down to enjoy his drink; a marvellous concoction known as a *White Russian*, containing coffee liqueur, vodka, and the magic ingredient; milk, sitting awkwardly at the top of the glass. The drink is stirred, the milk dispersed, and the conversation begins.

In essence, it was 1998's *Good Morning Spider* which really brought Sparklehorse to a wider audience. A varied, mysterious and satisfying album, it veered haphazardly between skull-scalpingly fuzzed-up rock songs and mistily whispered folk tunes, setting the hippest chins wagging in the process. And now, after three years of eagerly beavering away, Linkous is back with *It's a Wonderful Life*, the latest chapter in the frightening, fascinating and magnetically attractive world of Sparklehorse.

"Compared to the other records aurally," Mark begins, "all the noise, and little documentary-style bits in between the songs, are now contained *within* the songs." He peers out nervously from beneath the peak of his baseball cap and gently lets us into a secret; "I erase twice as much as you hear on the record. I have this terrible fear of a bear getting me in the woods and someone doing a retrospective of all my master tapes, so I get rid of all the evidence!"

Though it still finds its home in the lo-fi values of the previous albums, *It's a Wonderful Life* was something of an extravagance to make, with luminary Mercury Rev/Flaming Lips producer Dave Fridmann taking up production duties for some of the tracks. Mark continues; "It was a great record to make; I was very selective with the people I wanted to work with because I didn't want to record the entire album at home again, and there weren't really that many US records that I could listen to; but *Deserters Songs* and *The Soft Bulletin* were two that I could, and they were recorded in the same studio."

The record also boasts a smattering of guest appearances, with PJ Harvey, Nina Persson (of Cardigans fame) and Tom Waits all contributing, although Mark, typically self depreciating, can't fathom why. "It was great; I asked them to play on my record and they did, I don't even know why they said yes!" Perhaps it was because of **Good Morning Spider's** ability to frighten and tranquilize in the space of a song only three years previously. But what gems lie in wait on the new album? Mark smiles; "**Sea of Teeth** would be one of my favourite songs from the new record; it was the first song that was not recorded entirely by me and it was really inspiring. It was the first thing I record at Dave Fridmann's studio, and he was the first person I have collaborated with for a long time." He ponders on some other collaborations that have been on his mind. "I'd love to be on a Will Oldham record. He was s'posed to come to record at my house and then he cancelled, and I haven't talked to him since."

Sadness aside, **It's a Wonderful Life** once again features the Sparklehorse hallmarks of a veritable toyshop's worth of gadgets lining up to be played; dusty old instruments, mashed up tape loops, senile synths and sci-fi wave-generators are all a vital part of the carnival, including Mark's personal favourite, the Optigan. His face breaks into a smile. "An American toy company made it in the seventies, but they used sixties turntable technology. It's this home entertainment organ, with belts and pulleys and wheels and all this antiquated mechanics." He swoops his arms onto the table. "Here on the right you've got four different organ sounds you can have, and on the left you've got your chord buttons... and instead of like a usual Wurlitzer or other organ, the chord buttons play recordings of actual bands playing a style of music, and those are on celluloid discs. You'd have a disc that says er, moody guitar, or something like that, and stick it in there, and sometimes a lot of them are very cheesy, so if you put 'em in upside down they'll play backwards. On the new record, I've used samples on **It's a Wonderful Life**, and **Babies on the Sun**."

Speaking of the sun, the summer also promises a rare festival appearance from the band, at V2001 in August. His dislike of trawling the festival circuit has been well known, and explains a conspicuous absence from the outdoor arena, but a return to Britain marks the latest in a little love affair Mark has for the UK, one of his favourite places to visit. "I miss London whenever I'm not here," he says. "UK audiences are different from those in the US". He ponders once more, cap still tugged firmly over his brow. "Audiences here are generally just more perceptive; more appreciative."

Ladies and gentlemen, the Sparklehorse parade is back, and indeed it *is* a wonderful life.

So get ready to appreciate.