



SPARKLEHORSE

An Interview with Mark Linkous by Alexander Laurence



Mark Linkous first came to make music under the name *Sparklehorse* when Cracker's David Lowery left his eight-track recorder at Linkous' Virginia home while he went on tour. Linkous recorded many of the instrumental parts for his debut album himself. While the single "Someday I Will Treat You Good" managed to attract media interest, most of Linkous' songs were perhaps too reflective to gain much popular attention. Sparklehorse's fan base in the US is growing with the release of *It's a Wonderful Life* last year. He is already a staple with the indie crowd and is immensely popular in Europe.

Soon after his debut, Sparklehorse's brand of acoustic alienation began to impress critics in the UK and the US alike. Tragically in 1996, after a London gig opening for Radiohead, Linkous took a few too many Valiums and collapsed in his hotel bathroom, trapping his legs

beneath his body. He was found twelve hours later, by which time he had suffered a heart attack and caused bad damage to his leg muscles. Despite fears that he would never recover, Linkous has since made steady progress, performing from a wheelchair with his band.

A quantum leap was made with their excellent second album, *Good Morning Spider*, and the six-track *Distorted Ghost* EP, released in February 2000. Then *It's A Wonderful Life* came out in the summer of 2001 and was on every critic's top ten list. The album was written by Mark Linkous in Virginia, but recorded in Spain and upstate New York. With this record, Linkous worked with producers Dave Fridmann and John Parish. Fridman has recently been accredited to revitalizing the careers of Mercury Rev and The Flaming Lips with his lush production skills.

This time out, longtime drummer Scott Minor (a Williamsburg local) contributed to the album as did PJ Harvey, Nina Persson, Adrian Utley, and even Tom Waits supplying a rare guest appearance.

Mark had just finished a short tour (less than ten dates) of the USA when I met him at a cafe in Venice, California early this year. He was very quiet and polite. He currently lives in Enon, Virginia.

AL: The song "It's A Wonderful Life" is like a Walt Disney song. It is so happy and cheerful. Is it supposed to be ironic?

Mark: In a way. I got fed up with people in America thinking that my music is morose and depressing and all that. That song is like a "fuck you" to journalists, or people who are not smart enough to see what it is. But in the end, it was more about how everyday, you should pick up something, no matter how minuscule or microscopic it is, and when you go to bed, you can say I was glad that I was alive to see that. That's really what it's about.

AL: What is it like living in Virginia?

Mark: I live in a big, old farmhouse. There's no town. There's nothing there. There are a lot of animals and motorcycles. It's quiet. It's the antithesis of Los Angeles. It's an hour from Richmond. Richmond is the biggest city in Virginia. Where I am, there's nothing but farmers. Country people.

AL: Where does your family come from?

Mark: They really come more from Southwestern Virginia, from Dickinson County. Where the Stanley Brothers are from.

That part of Virginia is really different. There's a corner where it meets Kentucky and Tennessee. The mountains are really steep. People rarely leave. They are born and they die there. My father is still down there. He's a coal miner. Both of my grandfathers were coal miners down there as well.

AL: In Enon, what are people's reaction to technology and urban cities like?

Mark: My relatives have never been to any cities. My father has a computer and a digital camera. Down there computers are common. My father is amazed that he can take a photo of himself with his two boys with his digital camera and plug it in to his computer.

AL: What does your family think about what you do?

Mark: They never really understood it until I stopped having to borrow money from them to pay rent. They understand it now that I travel all over the world to play music. They

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understand now why I do it. They taped it when I was on Craig Kilborn so they could watch it the next day. One of my brothers taped it for them. They don't stay up that late.

Matthew Shipp

AL: How long have you been playing in Europe?

Mark: Since about 1996, when the first record came out, and Radiohead offered to tour with us. I had heard the song "Creep" and I thought that they were all right. That was the only song I had ever heard. After I toured with them, I thought they were one of the greatest pop bands.

AL: What were your recent tours like?

Mark: We played mostly in Europe, in the UK and Ireland. We toured the West Coast of the USA for two weeks. We also toured New York. We did some secret gigs. We did one in Brooklyn, one in Manhattan, and one in Hoboken.

AL: Since Scott Minor lives in Williamsburg, was there a desire to play there?

Mark: When I go to New York these days, I feel more comfortable in Brooklyn than I do in Manhattan. I like Brooklyn. I like Williamsburg and I wanted to play there. When I lived in New York, I lived out in Long Island.



AL: You started working on this record about two years ago?

Mark: Yeah. I have a real bad concept of time. The guy at Capitol who had signed me left. The new guy came and wanted me to work with a producer. I said that I have a real short list of producers that I am willing to work with. There are only a few American records that I have liked the production of recently. Most of them were coming out of Tar Box like Mercury Rev and The Flaming Lips. And Mogwai.

AL: Why is that? What is it about the studio and upstate New York?

Mark: I think it has to do with the studio and Dave Fridmann himself. He is the guy who owns it and engineers and plays at Tar Box. He was in Mercury Rev for a while. He was the bass player. I was apprehensive about working with anyone, and Jonathan Donahue from Mercury Rev said that Dave Fridmann is a great collaborator. So that's what we did.

AL: Did you start writing the songs on a four-track?

Mark: It kinda varied. Some songs were recorded in three different studios. Some I would start at home, have a drum machine. Take those tapes to Brooklyn. Replace those drums with real drums that Scott played. Have cellos and violins playing. Take those tapes to Tar Box. It was kind of all over the place. There was also the stuff that was recorded in Spain. I ended up taking those tracks back to Tar Box too and making some overdubs and remixing.

AL: That was with John Parish. How did you meet him?

Mark: I met him when I played with Polly Harvey. Basically I liked him as a person. He produced good records. He was someone I knew I could work with. I had most of the songs written. There weren't specific parts for people to play. I just had the idea to go to Spain. I would be the lead singer. Polly would play guitar. John Parish and Adrian Utley would play on it. We had pretty much the same line up for the songs "Eyepennies" and "Piano Fire."

AL: You have all these other bands like Portishead, The Cardigans, and PJ Harvey on this record. Was the idea to have a supergroup?

Mark: No. It was just from the last three or four years of touring and meeting people. I liked their stuff. I didn't want to make this record in my shack. My studio is literally a one room shack. I didn't want to get tunnel vision, so I wanted to work with other people. I didn't want to play every instrument on every song. I didn't want to be behind the control console the whole time. I wanted to have other people's brains and input involved. I was worried that it might alienate the fans. When I played people early mixes of the song, they assured me that it sounded like Sparklehorse. All the people I asked to be on the record, like Polly and Tom Waits, they are big fans. We are all mutual fans of each other. Everybody knew what to do.

AL: How did you work in the studio with Tom Waits?

Mark: I did this one song that wasn't very good. I sent him a tape so he could do his part. He did and he sent it back, but it got lost in the mail. That was a big loss. That led to doing "Dog Door." I had done the music already but was having difficulty with the words and melody. It was more like a dirge than a pop song. I called Tom. I said "I have this cool sounding track, but I can't finish it. I wonder if you want to take a shot at it?" I sent it to him. He called and said "Yeah, come out here. I got something." I flew out and went to his studio.

AL: The new album "It's A Wonderful Life" is more subtle and quiet. It doesn't have anything like "Pig" which is just like a hard-core punk song.

Mark: I did record some tracks like that. I decided not to use them. I didn't think that they were very good. They didn't seem to fit on the record. Maybe I'm not meant to do those types of songs. I can leave it to Guided By Voices. My next record might be a total rock out record.

AL: Did you play in punk rock bands when you started out?

Mark: I was in the first punk band in Charlottesville, Virginia.

AL: What did it sound like?

Mark: The Buzzcocks. It was punk rock but it was melodic.

AL: The record "It's A Wonderful Life" is being released as an LP by Devil In The Woods. It will have the bonus track

"Maxine." Why is that not on the CD?

Mark: Yeah. "Maxine" was inspired partly by when I lived out here in LA and I heard Tom Waits play this old Gavin Bryars tune "Jesus' Blood." It's 45 minutes long. It's a loop of an old man singing a religious hymn. It was partly inspired by that, and also this band I started getting into called Godspeed, You Black Emperor. It's a ten minute instrumental that very subtly builds. I thought it should have been on the original record, but the American label thought it was inappropriate. By that time I was tired of arguing. It's on the EP for "Gold Day." It's on the vinyl edition. As long as it appears.

AL: On this record you don't have those big choruses that everyone can sing along to.

Mark: They do. In Belgium, there are six thousand kids who know every word to every Sparklehorse song. They know every Grandaddy and Flaming Lips song too. I can put out the microphone and the audience can sing the whole song there.

AL: So in America you are looked at as some weird eccentric act?

Mark: Mostly. It's not so bad. For instance, when we toured with Mercury Rev in Europe, I started singing parts of Mercury Rev's "Holes." The lyrics fit in perfect with one of my songs "Spirit Ditch." In the second verse, I would sing the lyrics to "Holes." Everyone would go nuts in Europe. Then I did it here in their hometown and no one noticed.

AL: You are working with Daniel Johnston?

Mark: I am producing his record right now. It's almost finished. It was great. He came up for five days. He had twenty-eight songs. I just taped him singing and playing his piano. Or singing and playing his guitar. Sent him back to Austin. We did it at Sound of Music in Richmond, Virginia. Me and my engineer did a bunch of overdubs and orchestrated the whole thing.

AL: You worked on the "A Camp" record with Nina Persson. What was that like?

Mark: That was a great record. It is number one in Sweden. The single and the album. I am not boasting because I worked on it, but the songs are great. Nina has a beautiful voice. I heard all the songs before I had ever done anything. I tried to talk her out of having me produce it. I thought that I would fuck it up. But it came out really good.

AL: What do you think about this focus on "Roots Rock." Many magazines claim you and a few other bands to be part of this movement.

Mark: I don't read any magazines. I am really inspired by really old balladeers. Stuff that was recorded down in that part of Virginia. Old women singing these old songs in their living rooms. They were recorded in the 1940s and 1950s. Did you see "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

AL: Yeah. I have the CD it right here.

Mark: Is "O Death" on there?

AL: Yeah. It's Ralph Stanley.

Mark: I am a distant relative of Ralph Stanley. I am inspired by that sort of stuff.

AL: What about Irish Folk Music and Tinker Music?

Mark: Yeah. When I lived here in Los Angeles and I gave up on music. I moved back to Virginia and started to play traditional Irish music with people. I was fed up with the music scene. It was so nasty out here. That was the height of Glam Rock. Bands like Poison were supposed to be important. Now I can come back and visit and appreciate aspects of it. I like all types of music. I like everything from Kool Keith to Guided By Voices.

AL: Do you have any hobbies? I hear you're into Kung Fu?

Mark: I don't know who wrote that. I ride motorcycles. I grew up riding bikes. But now I just ride in the street. I like old motorcycles.

AL: When I think of your songs, I think of being alone and listening to them on headphones. I start seeing these films. Are you inspired by old movies?

Mark: I wanted the songs on this record to be like these glass balls that they put on graves in Ireland. I wanted this record to sound like those balls look. Like you could reach into it. See all the stuff floating around inside.

AL: When I am dreaming sometimes, I have this tune in my head. It's like the greatest song I ever heard. But I don't remember it as much when I wake up. Does that happen to you?

Mark: All the time. I have heard these blockbusters in my dreams: number one hits. Oh yeah. Always gone. Luckily Capitol leaves me alone.

AL: Do you believe in any religion? I know you had an accident a few years ago.

Mark: Not after that. It never caused any religious awakening. I have always remained sort of agnostic I guess. I believe that there is a God but I don't believe that it can be explained or understood. Whether you are evoking a higher intelligence like God or nature, it can be seen as the same thing. In West Virginia, there are snake handlers. They are a different level. It's very inspiring. Whether it's religion or anything that could do that.

AL: Are there any new bands that you have played with that we should be looking out for?

Mark: There's this Irish girl named Gemma Hayes. I thought she was awesome. She opened for us in Ireland. She will be a big star someday. It's sort of folksy but it gets really loud. She plays her acoustic guitar through a distortion box.

AL: What are you doing for the rest of the year?

Mark: I am going to sell some recording equipment and get some new stuff. Some portable recording equipment. I am going to go to England and Ireland and Holland and West Virginia. I am going to record in different locations. That's how I'm going to do my next record. I am going to start next month. Sometimes it's hard to think and write at home. I have a notebook of words and lines. I start playing and see what happens.

AL: Any advice for younger people who want to do music?

Mark: Buy a 99 dollar four-track and record some stuff and put it out on the Internet.



-- Alexander Laurence