

INTERVIEWS



An Interview with Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse

**Cult miserabilist "always looks this tired".
He escaped a rampaging bear just to get here**

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Sparklehorse is Mark Linkous plus whoever he wants to work with. Since 1995 he has turned out a bare three albums but two have been stone classics and the third merely excellent.... Tucked away in his mountain cabin much of the time, Mark produces music that is both entirely his own and often quoted as a touchstone by other, younger musicians. It was a treat to get to talk to someone who has had so much effect on so many people whilst going his own way. July found Sparklehorse touring the UK. Having just finished a series of support slots for Beth Gibbons, the band were playing a few headline dates. Mid-afternoon, Mark had just got up, after a rough night and appeared looking very groggy. Shambling in his very tall, gangly and stiff-kneed way to some strong coffee and a cooling fan, Mark offered up his thoughts.

Vanguard Online: I remember from seeing you play before, that tours seem to have different styles. Is that deliberate?

Mark Linkous: I think it's because Sparklehorse can be me and anybody. I think I'd get tired playing with the same people. Scott's always been the drummer and right hand man but I always try and change every band.

What is Sparklehorse about for you? Is it a live thing or a studio thing?

I used to think that it was all just the recording that was important but now it's obvious that hundreds of people come every night to see me play it seems really important to try a little harder. When we play out now I don't get wasted and fall down - I think a lot of people miss that!

When you start out with an album is there a shape to the album or is it every song you have lying around at the moment?

I know what the album is going to be. The last album (Wonderful Life), I think I put too many songs on there. I didn't know where to stop. The next one, I think, is going to be way more up-tempo pop songs. Basically, what could be seventies AM pop radio songs. I'm going to record them with construction and sounds you've never heard before and make it very interesting pop music. It's going to be a lot more electronic.

Particularly in the last album, I hear a sense of wonder in everyday things.

Something that echoes the recent work of the Flaming Lips.

I think when you get to be the age of me and Wayne you have to start looking for shit or you're just going to get bored and take a course in accounting or VCR repair... You have to start looking for all these little things that make a difference.

I was listening to the three albums before I came over here and I was surprised that Vivadixiesubmarine... was from as long ago as 1995. Do you hear your influence in younger bands?

With Granddaddy, I think we steal from each other all the time. It kind of freaks me out if I read that sort of thing. I don't read music papers. If I'm on tour and they're laying around, I'll look at them and I've read a few reviews where they mention Sparklehorse in comparison with new bands. It made me feel bad, like a veteran or something.

How serious is your music?

Things can get so heavy that sometimes its good to just forget it for an hour. It's so serious that let's just make a joke of it till we're dead. We're all going to die, so 'what the hell', drink up.

What part does music play in your life?

If I listen to music I listen to people like Friction Fanatics, like Lap Top Music, which just sounds like insects having sex. It's interesting stuff.

Mark's tour manager turns up with some cigarettes for him. Mark's disappointed to find he couldn't get unfiltered. We study the HUGE health warning on the pack. *Yeah, alright, I know. I'm going to die.*

Some of Sparklehorse's music is optimistic, some a real sense of downer. Is life

happy or sad?

I guess that's what it's all about, trying not to be sad, but unfortunately it is sad. Just taking things for granted. Everyday just flies by and it's gone and that's it. I waste most of my days. Time is precious and it's gone before you know it.

What are you doing when you're not touring or recording?

Usually sitting in my house on top of a mountain. I got trapped in the house by a bear a few weeks ago. A big black bear and I couldn't go out for a few hours and that was a good day - getting trapped in the house by a bear.

What you do when you get trapped by a bear?

Just watched him until it got dark and I couldn't see him anymore. He was in my pickup truck, going through the trash. I had to let the dogs outside to go outside and pee and I had to take the gun out with me because the bear would have killed the dogs. One of my dogs is really old and deaf and can't hear anything.

It's like some Steven King movie! Whereabouts is this then?

The Smoky Mountains.

I guess there's not a lot of chance for cross fertilisation with other musicians, tucked away like that.

Oh, there's a lot of musicians down there. Mostly country and bluegrass musicians. I don't really have friends who are musicians. I have friends who hunt. Guys that come over the house and they're covered in deer blood.

How does that work, living in two different worlds?

Up on the mountain where I live, it's so high that I can get a great radio station for about ten minutes from Chattanooga, Tennessee. So for about ten minutes everyday I hear a lot of new music. The other day it was Granddaddy then the Delgados.

Mark goes on to tell me about Bluegrass music and what names to look for.

How come so much voice treatment?

I think because I've never enjoyed the sound of my own voice very much. I'm just trying to manipulate it like any other instrument. Sometimes it just needs to be manipulated or treated for it to fit right in the song or it just sticks out like a sore thumb.

How do you find it working with other musicians? Is it hard to translate your vision to someone else performing it?

It's not so hard touring now because I recorded all the backing tracks we're playing to with Scott. Live it's not really that much of an issue because there's only three people on stage.

Do you lose much spontaneity that way?

It's not hard to change the setlist because everything's on the computer. There's never been much spontaneity in Sparklehorse - you know, jamming, improvising.

Some musicians - Frank Zappa had a hard time finding people who could play things exactly as they wanted. Are you happier just overdubbing yourself instead of relying on other musicians?

Yeah. Ninety percent of the time I'll just do it myself. On the next record I'm using the same recording machine Portishead use. I'm just going to send copies of the RAM memory to Adrian and say 'if you hear strings on this or you want to make any input at all...'. It'll make it different, not like on the last record where I'd say (and I can't help it) 'play it like I'd play it' - that's stupid. I'm just going to send him the tapes and I won't even have anything to do with it. 'Just do what you would do.' He's a great string arranger. Shut my mouth and see what comes out.

Do you have an intention in your music? A purpose?

Yeah. I think it's to get people to notice all those little things. I'm sure I'm as guilty of just letting things pass by.... One intention is to keep from going crazy but trying to make it so other people feel lighter after they've heard it or after they've come to see the shows. Even though it seems like it's really dark music, it's still hopeful. So many people told me it helped them through hard times.

Are you actually enjoying the touring? Because you're looking really tired.

I always look this tired.

Do you enjoy touring?

Most of the time I do. Sometimes I don't. It's an obligation. I told people I make good records but I never told anybody I was a good entertainer. I'm not an entertainer at all. It's more about just a bunch of people waiting in a room together and if I can connect with the audience then we're all just there hanging out. It's a lot better than trying to entertain then like I'm Tom Jones or something.

And, with that, it was time for Mark's soundcheck.

If you'd like to know what happened that evening - see our gig reviews page.

