

Mark Linkous: Viva Vintage

By Andrew Dansby

"I've been procrastinating, been moving around," says Mark Linkous about the three-year lag between Sparklehorse's last album, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and what will be its fourth, due later this year. In that time, Linkous relocated to North Carolina, where he has a new home and a new studio. There he's recording a cut for a Daniel Johnston tribute before turning to his own record. Linkous has some time booked at Tarbox studio in New York, but more as a motivational maneuver than anything. In work, as in conversation, he doesn't seem inclined to hurry things, and he hopes to christen the new setup with his next recording sooner rather than later. "I finally settled down," he says. "So I guess it's time."

HARP: How's the new studio coming along?

Mark Linkous: Well, I bought this console that's been a major pain in the ass. It's called a Flickinger. It was hand built by this crazy genius guy [Daniel Flickinger] in '69. I was told it was in working condition when I bought it, but it wasn't. It looks like something from *Star Trek*. The toggle switches look like they're from B-52 bombers. They only made 70. So mine's down here and I sorta nurse it along. But it sounds amazing.

HARP: Any idea where it came from?

ML: It was built for this studio in Chicago; T. Rex and Bowie recorded on it, and [it was used on] all the Ohio Players records. The first record I bought was an Ohio Players 45 that was recorded on it, "The Funky Worm."

HARP: You once mentioned an old plastic microphone you found in a dump. You ever put it to use?

ML: Yeah, I use that a lot. That recorded one of Tom Waits' tracks ["Dog Door"] from the last record. And for this [one] Daniel song, I used the really nice Neumann microphone right along with the mike from the dump. I got a clean vocal track and a dirty vocal track.

HARP: Have you found any new notable garbage?

ML: I found this old thing called a Hammond Solovox. It's from the '40s, like an early synthesizer. It was designed to attach to a piano to play solos. It has little mini keys on it and its own speaker box. It sounds really cool, like a theremin sometimes.

HARP: Do you have a go-to amp?

ML: There's this old Gibson that a preacher gave to me that has this belt-driven echo thing in the back of it. It's called a Vanguard. It has two 10-inch speakers and that weird echo thing. I've had it for a long time but just finally got it working, so it hasn't been on any of the records yet.

HARP: You seem to play doctor as much as chef.

ML: Yeah, a lot of this old junk I've acquired, I'm finally getting it fixed and seeing what it sounds like.

HARP: Any other good gadgets?

ML: I found a pump organ, and I've been using it a bit. These Swedish guys made this thing called a Machinedrum; it helped with lot of the drum tracks that I started for this album. I don't really like messing with the computer that much, so this drum machine sort of does it.

HARP: Do you still find good hardware cheap?

ML: Not so much, with eBay. Almost anybody with junk goes there. I did find this old man recently, he used to build his own electronics and he went to school with Bill Putnam, the guy who developed all the Universal Audio stuff. I found some old ham radio guys down here who built their own equipment. Sometimes these old guys know what they have but they'll let it go for nothing. But I'd feel guilty not giving them something. It's the young people that say they have a collector's item. That gets on my nerves.

HARP: Do you have a favorite guitar?

ML: Yeah, this guy down here who runs a gas station/pawn shop had this Harmony Rocket from the '50s. I'd never really played Harmonys much, but the pickups are great; it ended up being my main guitar. I bought one from a farmer in the parking lot of a Fuddrucker's restaurant for \$200. There's another from the '30s. I just keep buying 'em. These DeArmond pickups just sound awesome.

HARP: You've done the production on all three Sparklehorse records; how did you learn the trade?

ML: It was trial and error from the four-track days. Which is kinda cool, because when you start with four-track and you go to eight- and then 16-, you kind of appreciate every track. There's something to be said for 48-tracks, but that seems to do my head in, you know? I'm trying to keep to 16, because that's all that's working on this Flickinger.

HARP: So is the studio near your home?

ML: No, the studio is in an old warehouse in town. I live way up on the top of this mountain. I got trapped up there by a bear not long ago. I didn't wanna fuck with him; he was a big one.

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