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### Sparklehorse- Out of the Blues

Interview with Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse

By: Bob Lovik

It was nice to step out of the cold Edinburgh rain on Victoria Street and onto the warm, blue Sparklehorse tour bus. I was led up the steps by the tour manager, past rows of bunks, to the back lounge where in the corner of the circular sofa sat a quiet, tired-looking Mark Linkous. I noticed an ashtray on the table and a half-full pack of Gitanes. I muttered something about how the new smoking band here in Scotland has led to lots of people like me having to stand in the cold rain to get a fix. Mark didn't seem to notice as he stood up and shook my hand with a 'Nice to meet you'. 'Can I get you anything?' I was taken aback by this question wondering how many times a journalist had been asked by the subject of a rock interview if they needed anything. But then again, that's the kind of guy Mark Linkous is, polite to the core, a rock and roll gentleman and I began to think that he actually would have gotten me a cup of coffee had I asked. As we talked, he sat cross-legged, smoking a cigarette and speaking in a soft, thoughtful country voice. He has spent the better part of the past five years on his farm in the Virginia mountains being a self-proclaimed recluse. The more we talked, the more I got the impression that he was happy to be back out in the world, sharing his thoughts and music with his fans again. A bit of reclusivity helps the creative process, as he says, but too much can turn you into a banjo-picking Deliverance type. Fortunately, Mark Linkous seems to know how to find that balance...before going off the deep end.



Dreamt for Light Years...(EMI)



### **You just played the Empire in Belfast last night, how'd that go?**

It was nice. I don't really like big venues. That's about the size I like. I don't like to be any bigger than that. It was good. The audience was great.

### **I noticed that you're doing a lot of European shows. How do you like touring in Europe compared to the US?**

I used to hate touring in the US because I guess they didn't get it for so long it was a hassle. They would always be talking. They wouldn't be quiet during the quiet songs but it seems to have changed all of a sudden. Before we came here we did two weeks worth of dates in the South and ending in New York and all the shows were sold out and the audiences were great. They stayed quiet during the quiet songs and during the loud songs they were screaming they're heads off.

### **How does it feel to be touring again, supporting your first new album in five years?**

I was kind of terrified to tour at first because I hadn't toured in so long. I think I lost a lot of confidence but the band that I'm touring with now, the touring band is so good I don't really have to worry about much. I'm not so frightened anymore. And most of the time it's actually fun playing.

### **Do you like touring or is it something you feel you have to do because you have a new album out?**

Yeah...it always seemed like something that was just part of the job, you know, that I had to do. And I never really enjoyed it that much. The first couple tours I had a good time. We played really small places but then we started playing bigger places and I started feeling disconnected from the audience. But now on this tour, for instance we played two nights in Dublin at Whelans, where I started and it was great.

### **What songs are you playing from the new album Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain on this tour?**

Well, we change the set up. We change the set every few nights or so but we're doing "Some Sweet Day", "Shade and Honey", "Don't Take My Sunshine Away", "Getting It Wrong"...we're doing like seven songs from the new one. Not every night...we just do like two or three songs from the new album every night.

### **You worked with Dangermouse on Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain. he produced four songs on the new album. How did you hook up with him?**

Um...well...I quit working for awhile and think I was just so depressed I quit...sort of lost interest in the whole thing so I started trying to listen to music that was inspirational like later period Beatles stuff and then someone sent me, I think my manager sent me *The Grey Album* and I just threw it in a drawer and didn't listen to it for a long time and when I was listening to that Beatles stuff I just put it in out of curiosity one day. I don't know why. I didn't know anything about it. All I knew was that someone mentioned it was Beatles samples. So I put it in and I just loved it. I love the Beatles and I love a lot of

slowed down hip-hop, like Octagon, I guess the old school stuff, so I really loved that, *The Grey Album*, and I got in touch with him and he ended up being a big Sparklehorse fan. He said maybe I'll come to your studio next week and there he was.

### **You two are also going to work on a project titled Dangerhorse, what is that going to be like?**

I don't know. There's a few songs that I've written for this album (*Dreamt*) that I couldn't quite sing, it wasn't in the right key for me to sing but I think I would like to have maybe one of my girl singer friends sing instead. So, it may be some pop songs that weren't on my album that I'd like to have a female singer sing and I would prefer to bring out more of his hip-hop background. Instead of it being more pop let the hip-hop thing be the basis of it and try to fuse whatever my pop thing is into it.

### **What do you think he brought to the songs he produced ("Don't Take My Sunshine Away", "Getting It Wrong", "Return to Me" and "Mountains") on the new album?**

A lot of sounds that I heard in my head that I couldn't really articulate, that could really only be done with computers. He was able to realize these linchy sounds I heard in my head. And also some editing stuff that you can't do with tape and a razor blade. He was just real good at listening to the whole scope of a lot of master tracks and grabbing the guitar track for one song and putting it into another song.

### **I noticed you used a lot of arcane key-board-like instruments on the album. Take the optigan (as well as the chamberlain, vibraphone and the pump organ to name a few more), is that something you've always used?**

Yeah...it's something I've been searching for for years. Every time I was around one, I would record it and sample from it until it would catch on fire and then I would leave and try and find another one. But I finally found one five or six years ago that works.

### **There can't be too many of those around?**

No, there's not that many around. I finally found mine in a charity shop, for \$15. The really hard thing is to get the discs. Do you know the way it works? It has like celluloid, discs, floppy discs and each disc has a style of music on it, like Champagne music which is kind of like jazzy, lounge-type sounding music. You put that in and hit a button and it plays a band playing a riff in A or B or whatever. You can put it in upside down and it'll play backwards. It's kind of a magical instrument.

### **I heard that you did most of the recording for the new album at home, by yourself.**

Probably four or five songs.

### **Do you like to operate like that?**

Sometimes I do, yeah. Sometimes that's the only way I can operate. I think this time it just happened because I had just cut myself off from the rest of the world so much. I was a recluse and that's what came of it.

### **Did being a recluse provide you with good inspiration?**

No...I like being in the country but I think you can cut yourself off too long and go crazy. You know, crazy man lives in the mountains with a long beard and a bunch of dogs.

### **...sits on the front porch with a shotgun.**

Yeah...that's it.

### **Your words come across more like poetry than rock lyrics, like they could stand on their own without music. How do you combine the music and the lyrics?**

I usually, inadvertently, the writing process is always stayed the same. Almost every songwriter would sit around with an acoustic guitar and come up with a pattern and then a melody for that pattern. Then a lot of times I'll record the track. I'll kind of start seeing it and hearing it my head the way it should appear and sound at the end of the day. And then, just me being lazy and procrastinating, I wait until the track is recorded to write the lyrics. The music comes first, the melody comes second and then the lyrics usually come last. A lot of that is because they're so difficult for me and I'm so picky about

lyrics. I put it off until the last minute.

### **Who is in the touring band this time around?**

My bass player, her name is Polly Jean Brown. She was in Giant Sand. The keyboard player, he plays guitar and sings, his name is Chris Michaels. He's from Mississippi. My drummer is my best-friend for twenty years, Johnny Hott. I have a great band.

### **Is it the first time you've toured with this line-up?**

Yeah...

### **Tom Waits plays piano on "Morning Hollow" on Dreamt...**

That was recorded during the It's a Wonderful Life sessions. I'd left off that song, not because I didn't like the song but when I tried to include it on It's a Wonderful Life, they're were too many slow songs. It just made the album too long. Then I found out a lot of people weren't aware of that song so that's why it's on this record.

### **Do you have a favourite place to play? On this tour for example?**

Oh yeah...Whelans in Dublin. I've played the Olympia before which is a much bigger place with a sit down audience. I didn't connect with the audience there so I asked to play two shows at Whelans this tour instead of one night at a bigger place. There's something about the audiences and the people in Dublin. They just loved it. They're very quiet during the quiet songs...or sometimes they'll sing. The first night at Whelans there were a lot of songs where I didn't even sing an entire verse. The audience just sang it all.

### **Do you like that?**

Oh yeah.

(At this point the tour manager politely knocks on the lounge door and pokes his head in signaling an end to this interview).

### **I guess it's time for me to get out of your hair.**

Yeah...I gotta do a bunch of computer email bullshit now.

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➔ For more information on Sparklehorse see [Sparklehorse Web site](#)

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