

Mark Linkous: It's a Wonderful Life

By Trevor Kelley

Two years ago, as far as Mark Linkous was concerned, Sparklehorse was through. After spending nearly a decade penning albums that were critically acclaimed but commercially redundant, Sparklehorse's lead songwriter and more often than not, lone member, had given up. He'd abandoned recording a fourth album, *Dreamt For Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*, (soon to be released on Linkous' new label, Astralwerks). He'd lost the desire to perform live, which left him unable to pay his rent. And then there was the depression. Every morning, Linkous says, he'd wake up thinking, "Fuck, I'm still alive."

Things weren't supposed to turn out this way. Back in the early '90s, Linkous was one of the most promising stars of the Alternative Nation—a genuine artist who had more to offer than background music for chugging smart drinks at Lollapalooza. Sparklehorse's debut, 1995's *Vivadixie* *submarinetransmissionpilot*, even produced the radio hit "Someday I Will Treat You Good," and was hailed by *Rolling Stone* as one of the best albums of the year. Things were looking distinctly rosy. And then, while touring Europe with Radiohead shortly after *Vivadixie*'s release, Linkous overdosed on an ill-advised combo of anti-depressants, Valium, booze and heroin in a London hotel room. As a result, he spent weeks in hospital, was declared clinically dead for two minutes and almost had his legs amputated in the process. Sadly, the incident not only halted the band's growing momentum but also served as a heavy indication of things to come.

Sparklehorse's next two albums, 1999's *Good Morning Spider* and 2001's *It's a Wonderful Life*, were commercial flops, despite the latter boasting high-profile collaborations with Tom Waits and PJ Harvey. The band's longtime label, Capitol, couldn't find a way to break either record and soon Linkous all but disappeared. The singer now admits that his mental state began to fray over the next four years and that he was convinced that "the world was coming to an end." Eventually, concerned friends moved Linkous from his home state of Virginia to a piece of property they owned in rural North Carolina.

The house that Linkous currently calls home is so high up in the mountains that if he wants to drive anywhere, including the studio where he ended up recording much of *Dreamt For Light Years*, it takes about an hour. It's remote proximity, however, didn't seem like a hindrance when Linkous arrived in North Carolina a few years back—at the time, he'd become so crippled by depression and addiction that he genuinely believed he'd never release a single note of music again. But things changed significantly last year when he began working on Sparklehorse's new album with Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton, of Gnarls Barkley, Gorillaz and *The Grey Album* fame.

When Burton arrived in North Carolina, Linkous was still in terrible shape, but he credits his time with the 28-year-old producer for turning him around. Linkous is now healthier than he's ever been, and is set to collaborate in the next year on separate projects with both Burton and Austrian electronic artist Christian Fennesz. He may have spent much of the last decade in despondency and despair but Linkous finally seems ready to succeed—not only for himself, but for anyone who's ever lived a life as bleak as his. "I talk to a lot of people," Linkous says calmly, "and some people out there have had similar experiences. I'm not going to act like I'm so valiant that I'm doing it all for them, but that does help."

HARP: Let's start at the beginning. When did you know that you were going to be a musician?

MARK LINKOUS: Well, at first I wanted to be a motorcycle racer. I've ridden motorcycles since I was six, but when I was eight I saw Johnny Cash on television. That's when I wanted to be a musician.

HARP: Is it true that you were in a motorcycle gang as a kid?

Not really. I guess that I was a mascot for a motorcycle gang called the Pagans. I don't know why they tolerated a young kid hanging around them. They were pretty badass. The Hells Angels guys wouldn't fuck around with the Pagans. They were just ruthless. The guy that I hung out with the most, Chico, he got thrown out of a car going 60 or 80 miles an hour for fucking up a meth deal.

HARP: Did you ever do drugs when you were a kid?

No, not in my teen years. It was just pot and beer. I didn't get into hard drugs in my teen years.

HARP: It seems like there was this general idea that the incident in London in 1996 was an act of rock star hedonism. Was it?

The thing in London, a lot of it I don't actually remember. I had a big bottle of Mexican Valium that I had been taking for a while [and] apparently there was other stuff involved that I don't remember doing—there was a belt in the sink. I wasn't really addicted to pills. I had a heroin problem for a long time. I would go through spells of doing it every day. I've been trying to stay away from it for 20 years.

HARP: At that time Vivadixie actually seemed like it would allow you a few minutes of mainstream notoriety. Was there ever a point where you thought you would be famous?

I did—for five minutes in the hospital in London. They started playing "Someday I Will Treat You Good" heavy on the radio in America, and when I got home from the hospital, someone had called me and said, "You've got a song in rotation." I thought, "Great maybe it'll happen."

HARP: Do you wonder why it hasn't?

Sometimes I do. But I don't crave it. I wish that things were easier in my life—there's a lot to be said for going to the dentist whenever you want.

HARP: Nowadays your records only sell 50 000 copies and you tour intermittently. It seems like it would be hard to eke out a living doing Sparklehorse.

It is really hard. But then again, almost everyone I talk to knows five people who are huge fans. So sometimes I do think, "If so many people know my records, why is it so hard for me to eke out a living?" I did a tour opening for R.E.M. a year or so ago in stadiums. I remember talking to one of the guys in R.E.M. and they were like, "One day you'll have this." Man, I don't want to ever play stadiums. I don't want that at all.

HARP: When did you start recording the new record?

Umm... God... Shit, man. [pauses] That whole time frame is kind of a big vortex. I got really depressed and didn't do anything. I did some tracks up at Tarbox [in upstate New York] but I don't remember when that was. It was probably 2003 or 2004. I don't know. All I remember is that there was snow.

HARP: What would happen when you would try recording your new songs?

I had no interest in recording at all. There was something about preserving it forever—I had no interest in doing that. That's the side effect of [my] really bad depression. I thought it was silly. I really thought the Earth had had it and was trying to fling us off. After 9/11, a lot of shit happened. People started dying. It was just this string of stuff. People close to me died. There was a murder recently, that didn't help much.

HARP: Who was murdered?

[Linkous friend and House Of Freaks' singer] Bryan Harvey and his whole family got murdered on New Year's Day. It was a freaky, random, fucked-up thing. They caught the people that did it, but they had already killed, like, 10 people.

HARP: When you say that you can't remember recording sessions that happened in the last five years I can't help but wonder if you relapsed.

Oh yeah, that was the reason my friends wanted to get me out of Virginia. I was relapsing bad. In [North Carolina] I didn't know any dealers or anything. When you're trying to stay clean, there are some great advantages to proximity—or non-proximity.

HARP: You said that things really changed when you began recording with Danger Mouse. What interested you about working with him?

Well, people send me CDs all the time. I forget who sent me The Grey Album but I loved it. I've always liked certain hip-hop and R&B because some of the sounds are so wicked. I have an affinity to some hip-hop stuff. So I think I had written my manager and asked her if she knew who this Danger Mouse person was, and she got in contact with his manager and he ended up being a big Sparklehorse fan. So that's how that started. He came here to Carolina, and we just hung out. A lot of stuff was already recorded but [Burton] would take, for instance, a guitar track from a different song that was in a different key, import it into his computer, fuck with it, transpose it, turn it upside down, filter it, and lay it back into a chorus of another song. Just wicked stuff. We're doing another album.

HARP: Really? Another Sparklehorse album?

No, it's going to be a proper (collaboration). Danger Horse, I think we're going to call it. I'm really excited to do a true collaboration with him.

HARP: You collaborated with Tom Waits on It's A Wonderful Life and he also plays piano on Dreamt For Light Years. What's your relationship with him like?

Well, we don't talk every day. We're still in touch. We're not that close but we still communicate.

HARP: There's a story floating around that when he first contacted you about It's A Wonderful Life you had to get really drunk before calling him back.

I did, yeah. [laughs] I was terrified. I didn't get really drunk. I just had to have a little Wild Turkey in me before I got the nerve to dial the number. I still get nervous when I talk to him, but I'm not as intimidated as I was the first time.

HARP: The other day while doing research for this interview I typed your name into Wikipedia. One of the first items that came up is that you have a chemical imbalance. The second is that you almost died of an overdose.

I don't know where the "chemical imbalance" came from. I've been on every kind of anti-depressant that there is, but I don't know if I have a chemical imbalance or not.

HARP: It must bother you that people constantly associate things like overdoses and chemical imbalances with you.

It used to. For a while there every journalist, whether it was on paper or live on the fucking radio, would ask me about my accident [in London]. I got a little tired of it. But it doesn't bother me now. People just have a natural sense of morbidity and I try not to fault people for that.

HARP: Do you ever wonder how you'll be remembered?

I did for a while when I was really depressed. I thought that It's A Wonderful Life was the last thing I would ever make. But now I don't really think about it. The record is coming out on Astralwerks and everyone there seems so

enthusiastic. So many people are looking forward to it and are so excited about it that I don't dwell on that. I'm just glad that people didn't forget me."

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