

# Sparklehorse conquers the Flickinger

Mark Linkous returns to scene and brings along a new instrument

ANDREW DANSBY, Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

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After a five-year hiatus, Mark Linkous, also known as Sparklehorse, returns with a new album, *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. Photo: Timothy Saccenti Photography / HC

Mark Linkous, the man who records beautifully eerie Southern gothic alt-rock under the band name [Sparklehorse](#), conquered the machine.

The machine is a Flickinger console, a soundboard made in 1969 by [Daniel Flickinger](#), a guy Linkous calls "a mad genius."

Only 70 were made, and only a handful exist today. Linkous bought and installed one in his North Carolina studio, only to find it wasn't in working order.

He calls it "a wicked piece of gear," and says it's not completely restored yet. "But I got it working to where I could squeeze an album out. Parts of it worked fantastic."

That album is *Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain*. Like Sparklehorse's three previous records, it's dreamy at times, agitated at others.

It's guitar rock with digital embellishments and the occasional odd wood-and-wire instrument, a cool, creepy intersection of Radiohead and Dock Boggs.

It's one of the year's most rewarding albums to spin repeatedly, unfolding in different ways with each listen.

The fault-riddled Flickinger was only partially responsible for *Mountain* being Linkous' first new recording in five years. But it's a fitting metaphor for what was going on with Linkous — a soft-spoken, introverted artist — at the time.

"I got in a bad hole," he says, "depression-wise. I couldn't get out for three years. I lost interest in recording. I still liked writing my little songs, singing them alone. But that was the end of it. I lost interest in recording them. I thought people didn't care."

That statement underscores just how deep Linkous had retreated. His studio is deep in the Carolina mountains ("It's pretty isolated where I work," he says, "I don't know many people around here."), so it's not unthinkable that he didn't know that fringe rock musicians treated his last album — the lush, equally gorgeous *It's a Wonderful Life* — with awe and reverence, like a bizarre, backwoods *Pet Sounds*.

It's not the first time Linkous' creativity has butted heads with his depression. There was a near-fatal collapse in 1996, the result of taking too many Valium.

Not surprisingly, he's not inclined to talk much about that, especially since it was an unavoidable topic while promoting 1999's *Good Morning Spider*. But he's more open about the demise of his first band, the Dancing Hoods, a group he grew to despise to the point where he decided to quit making music.

He credits his creative rescue to hearing *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. The piece was created by English composer [Gavin Bryars](#), who took a recording of a tramp singing the song's title over and over, his voice bruised and out of tune. Bryars looped the vocal, added a slowly swelling orchestral score, and for the finale, had [Tom Waits](#) duet with the tramp's voice.

It is a contemplative and moving piece of music.

Linkous credits the song with bringing him out of that early funk and inspiring him to start Sparklehorse in the mid-'90s. He went back to it again while frozen on the new album.

He says the title track, an epic song that closes the album, was the result of writing "words on little pieces of paper and shuffling them until I came up with a title I like."

"It would be pretentious to say my song was similar to (*Jesus' Blood*), but I felt a similar emotion, a similar connection."

Linkous is now out on tour and, for better or worse, away from his mountain hideaway.

"I haven't toured with this band," he says. "So I'm pretty much terrified. I don't know if I'm looking forward to it so much as I'm terrified by it."

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