

Sparklehorse: Mark Linkous Finds The Natural Cure

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Some guys just seem to thrive on bad luck.

Ten years ago, Mark Linkous—a.k.a. virtual one-man folk/pop band Sparklehorse—didn't merely have a near-death experience. He literally died for two minutes, after carelessly mixing Valium and antidepressants and passing out in a crumpled heap for 14 hours. The loss of circulation in his legs laid him up for months and crippled him for life. Only recently was he finally able to remove one of the leg braces he's been saddled with since his accident. But Linkous made art from bedridden tragedy: 1999's *Good Morning Spider* and 2001's *It's A Wonderful Life* revel in the beauty of everyday existence and the natural world he'd been forced to examine up close. Linkous didn't wallow in his misery; as soon as he was able, he hit the touring trail, sharing his deeply personal observations from a wheelchair.

Had the clouds finally parted to beam some radiant rays into the Sparklehorse camp, a 200-year-old Virginia farmhouse where Linkous lived and recorded? Not exactly. It's taken five long years for his feathery follow-up, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain* (Astralwerks).

"For a while there I got in a really bad state of depression and just could not work at all," says Linkous in his loping Southern drawl. "I'd always had bouts with it, but after the last record came out and 9/11 happened, it just triggered a lot of bad shit. A lot of people started dying around me, and I really thought it was the end of the world—Revelation—and no one else knew it but me."

There had been a few upbeat moments: playing bass on last year's *Danger Doom* album and producing a 2001 solo project by the Cardigans' Nina Persson. "But basically, I was rock bottom for three years straight, just a paralyzing vortex of depression," says Linkous, who was raised Baptist and is all too familiar with the book of Revelation.

What did his depression-era days consist of?

"Nothing," he says. "Just looking forward to being unconscious again and sleeping, with the possibility of having happy dreams. And you can stay in bed all day, stay in bed until you can't pay your rent and don't even eat food: You eat crackers, just enough to subsist on."

Thankfully, friends recognized Linkous' physical and mental deterioration. He now shacks up with his faithful hound dog Charlie on a North Carolina mountaintop, surrounded by raccoons, rabbits, squirrels and an occasional black bear or two. Linkous is back in touch with nature, having mounted bird feeders for the finches and jays, and nectar dispensers for the local hummingbird population.

"There are timber rattlers up here, too," he says. "The first time Charlie got bitten by one, the fang marks were so big and so far apart that it could've been nothing else. With the help of anti-venom and a big vet bill, he survived. I've been hunting that snake for ages now. I'm gonna make a belt out of him."

The Smoky Mountains, Linkous believes, were the best panacea ever prescribed. He started writing music again, and the subject matter on *Dreamt For Light Years* turned out decidedly Thoreau-ish in theme: See song titles "Mountains," "See The Light," "Shade And Honey," "Don't Take My Sunshine Away." Most songs are delivered in Linkous' patented sky-blue warble and framed by gorgeous, elaborate acoustics. Some tunes, such as "Ghost In The Sky," gallop along on rock-anthem electric-guitar work. Tom Waits makes a brief appearance, as does *Danger Mouse*. It seems as if Linkous now wakes up each morning smelling the life-affirming coffee.

"Well, first a Camel, then the Maxwell House," he admits. "But I swear, I kinda thought that people had forgotten about Sparklehorse and didn't give a shit anymore and had moved on. But in the last couple of months, it just seems like that's not really the way it is. So that's inspiring: The fact that people haven't given up on me is amazing. I'm really looking forward to touring and playing these new songs for people."

But right now, the man is happy to have regained his ability to see angels dancing on the head of a pin, happy to walk outside his cabin and stare up into the sky.

"It's absurd and sad that I have to remind myself to look at the mountains and appreciate them and the clouds every day," says Linkous. "But if you're not careful, you can fall into the habit of taking things for granted that simply shouldn't be taken for granted."

—Tom Lanham