

Sparklehorse Signal to Noise full interview
by Tim Thompson

Rick's Café: Considering that your music crosses genres, your band's line-up is always changing, and that in addition to be a songwriter and musician, you're the producer, how would you explain what you're trying to accomplish to someone who's never heard your music before?

Mark Linkous: I guess I just try to work with the varieties of all this stuff that I'm influenced by, whether subliminal or obvious - all kinds of music. Sometimes it doesn't come through. Sometimes I just envy bands that do kind of one thing, that doesn't change that much. Sometimes I envy people for being like that. It's kind of a pain in the ass to be consciously, violently different. Maybe it's just that I have a short attention span.

RC: Would you consider Sparklehorse a band or are you Sparklehorse?

ML: I guess it's more a collective and I'm the person with the final fingers on the fader. I didn't want to play everything again, because I pretty much did on the first two records. So, on the last record I just got a lot of friends to play on it. And this one it kind of went back more to the way I did it on the first two records. I played most everything, with the exception of the drums and stuff, which Steven from the Flaming Lips played on a few tracks.

RC: You toured with the Flaming Lips, which are one of my favorite bands ever. What was that experience like?

ML: It was great. It was really... just... fun being around those guys, touring with them. It was just two of us, just me and Scott [Minor] on drums. Scott played drums and I just played the guitar and sang. We had done a tour like that in Europe, in England, that kind of form, that duo line-up. It worked okay. With the Lips, it turned out really cool.

RC: What is your process of creating? Do you write everything before you go into the studio and bring in people to play with, or do you create as your recording?

ML: Every song starts really basically, with just a guitar and a melody or some melodic idea. Structurally it's always pretty consistent in that its traditional songwriting. I guess the thing is just to make kind of normal songs just be interesting, you know. Maybe get sounds all gnarly and stuff, if you can create that sort of, in an aural way, a tactile sound or emotion or whatever. It's really hard to articulate. I just try to capture the sounds in my head, though 90% of the time it doesn't make it to tape like that.

RC: When you bring people in to record with you, like on the last album when you had over a dozen people record with you, do you have everything charted and conceptualized before you start or do the musicians bring in their own ideas?

ML: Oh, everybody did their own thing. I mean, if it wasn't sounding like I wanted it to, I coached people. But everyone pretty much did what they wanted to do. And, again, if I didn't like it later on, I'd just leave that fader down. It wasn't really conscious. On the last one, when we went to Barcelona, it was never like I said "I want John Parish,

Polly [PJ] Harvey and Adrian from Portishead, but it just kind of happened like that. It wasn't really planned. Scott and I were going to go to record in Spain and John was available and John knew Polly and I knew Polly and it just kind of happened. It was all sort of accidental. On this one, I really didn't want to have a lot of famous people on it. It seemed to overwhelm the last record. Everyone wanted to talk about what it was like to work with Tom Waits or whatever. For this one, with the exception of Steven and a laptop musician I know named Christian Fennesz, an Austrian glitch producer. Other than that, there hasn't been a whole lot of collaboration like there was on the last one.

RC: When you're in the studio, what do you find to be the most powerful tool that you use? What's the most important tool for you to have to finalize your creation when you're producing?

ML: I guess it's anything that gives me the ability to, even just a little bit, make that picture of the sound in my head make it through the mixing board into the tape recorder. I think it's being able to articulate what I'm visualizing.

RC: So whatever allows you to accomplish that is a necessary tool. When you visualize music, is it pictures or colors?

ML: It's like both. It's like slides of film and textures. It's really hard to explain. But, basically, it's just trying to get what's in my head onto tape and the ability to pull that off sometimes is what I try for.

RC: Is there any one album that you think you've accomplished that more than others?

ML: Probably the second one, *Good Morning Spider*. I played almost everything on that record and it was very labored over. That was probably the best example of that. But I didn't want to do that again, so I intentionally got lots of people to play on the last one and with this one, I kind of split the difference.

RC: So you're refining your process of creation and with every album it evolves?

ML: Yeah. I definitely try to keep things changing and hopefully evolving and metamorphosing into interesting directions.

RC: Is there any one song that you've written that stands out as being the best representation of what you saw in your head?

ML: Yeah. The one I'm working on now. And there's a few on this one, though I can't even tell you the titles right now. I did some stuff with Dangermouse. And there was a lot of things he did with re-sampling. He did some stuff that I've never really been exposed to before, where he'd take specific elements that I had on tape, specific tracks or images or whatever, and grab them from a part of the song that I didn't play and import it into his computer, fuck with it, make it sound like it's really small, and reinsert in a different place where I wouldn't have done it. But his head, being in the hip-hop sort of thing but loving the Beatles at the same time... that was really cool to collaborate with someone like that. But between Dangermouse, Christian Fennesz and Steven just being a great rock drummer, I think there seems to be some really cool, diverse elements on this one.

RC: What was it like working with Dangermouse? What is more of a collaborative thing?

ML: It was a collaborative thing. He was taking, most of the time, things I recorded, you know, multi-tracked, and played it for him. I'd give him all the tracks, and he'd take bits, move it around, manipulate it and put it back in. He did 4, maybe 5 tracks on this new one.

RC: Well, if your songwriting process is fairly organic and fairly traditional, do you find it difficult to take what you've done in the studio and translate it into a live performance or does it come fairly natural?

ML: No, it's always hard. It's always really hard. Whether it's with people playing with a specific backing track or stuff done on a computer, it's always really hard.

RC: What advice would you have for a songwriter trying to produce their own music? What's a good first step?

ML: I guess just getting it down. I used to say "Buy a 4-track," but these days, you can pretty much have a multi-track studio on your desktop. And the next step is getting it out there so people can hear it. Things have changed so much in the last 10 years on the internet, everything's just so much easier to do. I mean, really - just record it and get it out there.