

INTERVIEW

Mark Linkous



By Scott Gordon January 16, 2007

Mark Linkous has struggled with the constraints of the pop song for more than a decade as the main force behind Sparklehorse, racking up fan-collaborators ranging from Tom Waits to Danger Mouse along the way. While his most-anticipated album right now is the Danger Mouse team-up (they've dubbed themselves Dangerhorse for that project), his 2006 release, *Dreamt For Light Years In The Belly Of A Mountain* (which includes three Mouse-produced tracks) makes it clear that Linkous' real strength is in his own imagistic songwriting and restless imagination. On the eve of a U.S. tour, Linkous spoke with *The A.V. Club*, appropriately leading off with why he hates his own shows.

The A.V. Club: What are you working on right now?

Mark Linkous: I had done some stripped-down versions of my earlier songs that I was touring with, and the record company said something about wanting to release a live record. And I hate live performances so much. I'm trying to dig some stuff out of my master recorder to give them, from the last tour. They're mostly older songs. There's a couple songs from the new album that are gonna be on it. I think they're all from Copenhagen and Amsterdam.

AVC: Why do you hate live performances?

ML: I hate the sound of my own voice. It's just up there, sort of naked and exposed. Live is hard, because on my records, I play almost everything on a lot of stuff. In a live situation, I can't control everything. I use two different microphones. One is just clean, traditional sound, and the other one is basically a cheap cassette-recorder microphone that goes through a distortion box to emulate my voice on the record. That helps some.

AVC: Does that make you anxious, with a tour coming up?

ML: Yeah, it does. It worked pretty well in Europe and the UK. I haven't really done a proper U.S. tour in a long time. I guess I did four or five dates before we went to Europe, and they went a lot better than I expected to.

AVC: What are you hoping to get out of the tour?

ML: On the American part of the tour, for this record, I just want to let it make me feel good. I blocked that out for so long. I think maybe I felt guilty for making this into entertainment. I don't know how to describe that really well. On this tour, I really want to actually have a good time for a change, and not feel guilty about what I'm doing, playing these songs night after night for people.

AVC: How's the Danger Mouse collaboration coming along?

ML: I'm not really sure where the thing is going to go as a whole. I really like *The Grey Album*, it's really one of my favorite things, so I guess I'm trying to pick up there with this pop thing. I'm trying to inject whatever kind of pop thing I do, and I'm trying to pull out more of his pop-slash-hip-hop vibe.

AVC: Before you worked with him, had you previously had any interest in hip-hop?

ML: Yeah, some of it. Real specific stuff. I'm not sure if there's a specific genre for that slowed-down stuff—Dr. Octagon, stuff like that. Especially the production on a lot of that stuff. Even the Top 10 R&B and hip-hop stuff, there's really few elements in that music, and it's so wicked, some of it.

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AVC: Any hip-hop records that you've liked recently?

ML: Shit. I'm so not up on new stuff. I really like the Q-Tip record, that's probably five years old now. There's this band called Clipse?

AVC: It seems appropriate that you'd like Clipse, because they get such a stark sound from The Neptunes' production.

ML: I really like that guy's production a lot. I thought a few years ago of trying to seek out Pharrell, just 'cause I liked his sounds so much. That shows how out of it I am in the music scene. I had no idea he was, like, the biggest producer in the world.

AVC: Did you try to bring anything new into your music on this record?

ML: I intentionally wanted to have more backup vocals on this one, just "ooh"s and "aah"s, and there really wasn't anyone else around that could do it, so I just experimented a lot with varying the speed on the recorder to make my voice higher or lower. A lot of the background vocals are just me. I really wanted to have obvious, glitchy-sounding edits that aren't really possible with tape and a razorblade, like the last little bit of "Don't Take My Sunshine Away."

AVC: There seems to be a tension on this album between loss and hope.

ML: I hope that [all my records are] hopeful. I think one of the reasons that it took so long for me to get going in America and get recognized is, a lot of people just saw it superficially and thought it was just dark and depressing music. I think in the UK, right off they saw the optimism and the hope in my music.

AVC: Maybe people are projecting onto your music the things they know about your life, like your struggles with depression and your near-fatal overdose.

ML: I don't know. I've thought about that, and I hoped that it wasn't true, but I think it probably is to some extent. I've been a huge fan of Daniel Johnston for years, and I think if there was a person that I turned on to his music, I probably did say, "Yeah, he's manic-depressive and spent a lot of time in a mental institution." It's just human nature, I guess. Maybe people were drawn by that sort of thing, then really got into the music and forgot about the dark stuff.

AVC: A few years ago, you told an interviewer you were trying to get over your fear of pop. Have you succeeded?

ML: A lot of that I base on, "Is it still going to sound interesting and fresh to me in five years, am I going to be embarrassed by this in five years?" It's easier for me to do stark, moody, pretty stuff, and I have all this pop stuff inside me, but it's a lot more dangerous, and pop is just apt to sound contrived and sort of pedestrian if you're not careful.

AVC: When you're collaborating with different people on different tracks on an album, do you try to control how all those tracks will sound next to each other?

ML: I guess I don't really think about until the end until the end, when all the songs are recorded. On [Sparklehorse's 2001 album] *It's A Wonderful Life*, when there were a lot of guest musicians, I didn't want to put all the songs that [PJ Harvey] sang on all together, and the same with Nina [Persson, of The Cardigans]. It just depends. The people that play on my records, I don't really dictate what I want them to do. I guess they're all fans in a way, so I guess inherently they just know the right thing to do most of the time.

AVC: Why have you ended up doing so many collaborations?

ML: I never did it as a conscious thing. When I started putting out records and touring, I just met people. I never really intended for *It's A Wonderful Life* to have all these guest artists on it. I would meet people and we'd get along and I'd say, "Hey, do you want to do some recording or play on this song?" Because I live so remote, if I'm going to collaborate with anyone, it would [always] be a long-distance thing, so it didn't really matter if it was Tom Waits in California, or Adrian [Utley] from Portishead, in Bristol.

AVC: Does it bother you when people expect a certain thing out of a collaboration and complain when they don't get it? Some reviewers said they could barely tell Tom Waits was on the song "Morning Hollow," but presumably there's a reason you thought it was worth having him on that track.

ML: There's a fairly interesting story behind that song. I recorded a string section in Brooklyn, and I used this really cheap plastic microphone that I found at the dump, because I wanted the string section to sound really old, almost like maybe it was a record that was found on the beach, buried in sand and really scratchy. I went out to record with Tom and have him play on that record. I wanted him to play piano, but I wanted it to sound aged and scratchy and warped, and fit with the string section. While I was out there, I found an ad for a wire recorder from the '40s. Before we used tape, people recorded on stainless-steel wire, in the '30s and '40s, so I found one of those machines for sale, thinking that it would be the perfect thing to record his piano part with. I did it, and it sounded fantastic. The fidelity on this old, old recorder is amazing. In the end, I had to run his piano track through a computer to make it sound old.

AVC: Do you spend a lot of time looking around for equipment like that?

ML: Yeah, just to, I guess, try to make sounds that are intriguing, that you've maybe never heard before. I'm by no means very good on the laptop, but I guess you know that I used brand-new technology and old stuff too, and it's just a juxtaposition. Something's really intriguing about old, creaky sounds. It almost triggers other senses than the aural sense. Sometimes if I hear a certain sound, it'll almost trigger a smell. It could make me see frames of film in my head.

AVC: On a lot of your songs, you play the optigan, a '70s-era keyboard instrument that uses celluloid disks. Is that hard to maintain?

ML: Yeah. The disks are a real pain in the ass to find. They're expensive, but I actually discovered a way to copy the disks. So I've been lucky enough to borrow disks that I didn't have from people and copy them and send theirs back. The optigan disks are just kind of floppy, celluloid records. [Optigans] are pretty hard to maintain, and they're usually broken when you find them, because they're really antiquated '70s technology. It's a bunch of belts and pulleys and old turntable technology that keeps that thing running.

AVC: Do you bring instruments like that on tour?

ML: No, I thought of bringing the optigan on tour, but the whole thing is so precarious. It would be a disaster to rely on that thing, so I usually sample it. I don't try to replicate the records live. The way we play them, it seems like it just comes out interesting, to me. I've been really lucky with this band. Everyone is such a good player. I can almost sit back and have a good time playing and touring now, just knowing that the performance is not teetering on the edge of disaster all the time, like it had been a lot in the past. I don't know if that makes it more compelling for the audience, or if they'd rather see me teetering on the edge. It's hard playing in front of people. I never told anybody that I was a good performer. I think I can put out good records with good songs. Performing for people is a whole other thing. A lot of people can do it and they're great at it, and they just flip the switch and they're the performer. I really envy that, and I wish that I could do that.

AVC: What have you found about touring that you *do* like?

ML: I like talking to people in the audience. A lot of times after the shows, after I've chilled out for a few minutes, I go out and talk to people that stay behind and linger. When people tell me that the records have helped them through hard times, I think that's really nice. That makes me feel good.