

## SPARKLEHORSE INTERVIEW & ARTICLE

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 SPARKLEHORSE INTERVIEW - MARK LINKOUS  
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"SPARKLEHORSE WIELDS ITS MAGIC..."

"I live on top of a very tall mountain" Mark Linkous explains to me in his soft spoken voice, on the phone from his home in North Carolina. "It's really cold here." Mark Linkous is founding member of the innovative band Sparklehorse, who's been around for a while. In several years, a number of albums were somewhat prolificly put out. But since 2001, and the album 'It's a Beautiful Life', there's been a lull and now with great welcoming, Sparklehorse once more delights its fans with a recent new album, 'I Dreamt of Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain.'

My great friend Serendipidity introduced me to this wonderful band that to me stands alone and sounds like no other. Pretty unique in this day of endless formulaic rock bands and band members with pretty hair cuts and sound alike styles often gracing the covers of forefront music magazines. Not this band! As I tell Mark later in the interview, Sparklehorse seems to belong to a 'tribe' of underrated and true blue musicians whose work continuously imbues quality and substance. At a cd swap party years ago, Sparklehorse's album 'Good Morning Spider' landed in my possession. Upon listening, I was instantly mesmerized and captivated. It was with great excitement and anticipation that I recently purchased this new album.

It took me a few listens to get into the album as I recognised a slightly different quality than what I was used to and expected from this band. The album soon grew on me and it became an almost daily ritual to begin and end days with a little trip through the land of this album, often accompanied by coffee in the morning and candlelight at night. I find I don't need to be in any particular mood to listen to this album. I can appreciate its subtle beauty at any time. I've come to almost jokingly call this album an 'indie rock chillout' album due to the warm, fuzzy, cosy feeling it often seems to impart.

This album seems to me to convey a sense of 'earth magic' overall. Mark explains, "I've been living in the country most of my life. I grew up in Virginia and I spent alot of time outdoors as a kid. Outside everyday in the woods in the summertime and when I grew older, I was on dirt bikes in the woods. Then I moved to New York for a while [as an adult] and then to California for a while. Then I moved back to the South and to living back in the country. I love being remote and kindof isolated. There's bears up here on the mountain, and rattlesnakes and everything." This seems to really come through the music of Sparklehorse in references to nature in many of the lyrics.

Much has been publicly made of the fact that Mark recently hooked up creatively with hip hop producer, Dangermouse. "There's alot of hip hop that I really like, especially production wise" Mark explains. "There's alot of sounds, even on top 40 stuff... There's not many elements but some of the few elements that it does have are just wicked! Drum sounds especially. I really like alot of that stuff." "For this record, I'd been listening to alot of Beatles anyways, specifically the mid to late period Beatles. And then someone sent me that Grey album...I think it was my manager...and I didn't listen to it for the longest time. When I finally listened to it, I loved it!" Then referring to Dangermouse, he continues "Then we were on the telephone together a few days later, and then a few weeks later he showed up at my studio door. We did a little work together and he ended up working on 3 or 4 of the songs on this album."

Asking about his future music style direction, Mark says that "We're doing a record together [right now]. I think some of it might be a little more hip hop than what I've done alone. And I'm doing a record with one of my favorite musicians, Christian Fenez, this year also. Alot of the music I listen to is pretty abstract electronic music and Christian is my favorite. Oval and Microstoria and things like that. I like some stuff too with beats like Boards of Canada and all that. I lean more towards that than indie rock. I don't really know too many indie rock bands...if you told me their names...."

I mention that he seems to like collaborating with other artists, thinking of Nina Persson of The Cardigans and PJ Harvey in the past. "Ya, people that I've met since I started putting out records..along the way. There'll be a song that I've written and a part that I think of for them...and usually they'll say ya and come to the studio. I've been really lucky with people that I've met and some people that have just been sortof heros."

We talked about what I perceive as the fluidity of songs on this record and how albums are better that seem to take you on some kind of journey. "I've been really inspired by records that reminds me of a place and time or music that makes me feel like...the equivalent of how a film documentary makes you feel. I've always admired and tried to make records that almost sound like

documentaries. It's hard to really articulate that" is Mark's response.

This led us to the topic of the album cover of 'I Dreamt of Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain.' I personally would choose it as number one album cover of 2006. Mark says he loves that image too, and says that it was a poster for an in-store that he did for a record company in California, once. "I just knew 5 years ago that that image was going to be my next album cover. There's little, subtle references in that artwork to my other albums as well. The clown in the centre is from my first album."

When I mention that in one of my favourite songs, 'Shade and Honey', that I love the line "If you was a horse..." Mark explains that for him, he often finds that it can be alot easier with pets and animals to establish relationships, citing his beloved pet dog. "Sometimes it's so much easier to show affection and communicate in a way that's not hung up by language." I explain in great detail why the song 'Mountains' is my favourite on the album even attempting to imitate the repeating guitar riff that seems to me to go almost backwards in a lovely way. Of course, I also have to mention that in my grade 7 public speaking contest speech I also used the lyrics/verse of 'Twinkle Twinkle little star' and find it to be amusing in that song. He said that he almost didn't include this song on the album, not being sure if it was good enough or not. (Course I'm aghast at the thought because to me it's almost like the apex of the album and sparkles absolute delight at every listen.)

The album ends on an unusual note with the title track, 'I Dreamt for Light Years in the Belly of a Mountain.' Unlike the rest, I find it almost disturbing in a pretty way, exuding sadness and sometimes almost reminding me of a funeral. "That instrumental piece is heavily influenced by a piece of music that's been my favorite for a long, long time. By Gavin Beyers, called 'Jesus Blood Never Failed Me Yet'. It's a 45 minute piece of music where in the early 70's he recorded this hobo on the beach in Brighton, England, singing this little religious song. He taped it and looped it over and over and built this beautiful orchestral thing behind it where it starts from this sparse, subtle thing of this old man's voice and ends in this beautiful, articulated, flowering, metamorphosing orchestration."

I ask Mark about the scratchy quality often perceived in his guitar work and music. "Partly probably because I never really learned to record things properly. Since I began doing records, I've always recorded by trial and error. Alot of times or sometimes when I have a song, and if it sounds maybe trite or boring or pedestrian or contrived (if you're not careful), so alot of times I try to affect things [music/songs] or make them sound like they've been buried in the sand for ten years and then discovered by someone and played on a record player." I ask if he also often uses distortion on his voice and vocals. "Ya, it's the same thing. Sometimes I like my voice clean and unaffected but alot of times I like it when it sounds like it's been, I don't know, transmitted via some satellite or something." We both laugh and I remark that "That's where the spookiness comes from!" I use the term spooky in the complimentary way used by Neil Young's former, longtime producer Dave Briggs, referring to that indescribable quality that only some music has. To me, the music of Sparklehorse is not only that, but often exudes almost enchantment and bewitchment as well.

Mark reveals that in a vague and not concrete way, the present album title partly refers to the 5 year period between this recent album and the previous one. Rather than ask more specifically about this, I instead ask him about the element of discomfort and whether it's present for him, much as it probably could be for many and most artists, while in the creative process. Mark affirms that there definitely is that, but especially for this latest album, since alot of it ended up being written as pop songs. "It's easier for me to do open, sparse, kindof spooky ballads. I write pop songs pretty naturally, and it also comes pretty naturally for me to deconstruct them and make them sound cool to me. But sometimes pop songs can't be deconstructed. You can only do so much with them. When you've got a song and it's traditionally written and structured...[gives example]. On my last album I tried to keep as many guitars out of the picture as much as possible and just keep things orchestrated and use more orchestral instruments. On this record, I had more pop songs and there's only so much you can do without bringing, literally, guitars into the picture. It's hard to make pop sound interesting, to me."

So after a 5 years hiatus, Sparklehorse will soon be on the road touring again, much to the glee of avid fans. Asking what we can expect, Mark tells me that in the past he thinks that maybe because of things people have read or heard, sometimes he's felt that some have gone to see his live shows just to see him "fall apart or fall off the edge. Alot of times when I've toured in the past my shows were tinkering on the edge of disaster. I think alot of people were compelled toward that sortof thing. But I have a really good band now and it's pretty tight! We're doing alot of songs from all the different albums. So I hope people aren't dissappointed that I'm not going to be sortof teetering on the edge of collapse all the time!" [much laughter]